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## TOWARDS A CHRISTIAN ETHIC OF WORK IN SOUTH AFRICA<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

This paper draws on the academic field of Christian ethics and focuses attention on an ethic of work within the South African context. Key terms such as 'an ethic of work', 'a work ethic' and 'ethics at work' are discussed in relation to varied experiences of work. The issues of why one ought to work and what constitutes 'good' work are discussed with reference to current ethical and economic challenges. I argue that a Christian worldview, or understanding of reality, provides a much more credible contribution to an ethic of work than either a materialist view of reality or a system of patronage.

Recently I read a historical novel set in Wessex – what is today southern England. This was part of the Saxon kingdom of Alfred the Great in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. It was a time of war, brutal violence and suffering. Contrary to the violent culture and religion of the Danes, Alfred saw it as his calling, his work, to create a land in which justice, peace and prosperity were central features. In the historical note at the end of the book, Cornwell (2011:334) wrote this of Alfred:

He was, by any measure, a most intelligent man, and he was also a good man. ... Alfred wanted a kingdom where the people of each market town would want to defend their property and their king because their prosperity was the state's prosperity. He made a nation to which people felt they belonged because the law was fair, because effort was rewarded and because government was not tyrannical. It is not a bad prescription.<sup>2</sup>

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1 An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the opening of the Faculty of Theology at the University of the Free State, South Africa in January 2012.

2 See also Pollard (2005).

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Alfred's Christian faith had an impact on his attitude to his people and the way in which he acted. Given the difficulties Wessex continued to face and the striking differences between that context and ours, what struck me about this passage was that this ruler combined intelligence with goodness and that he did not separate his prosperity from that of his people. His rule was legitimate because justice and effort rather than corruption and entitlement were rewarded.

What is it that most people, whether in 9<sup>th</sup> century Wessex, or 21<sup>st</sup> century South Africa want for themselves, their families and their country? Is it not to be defended from corruption, injustice, incompetence, violence and policies that threaten the future of their country? Did not they hope for work, homes, food, health and education for their children? Did not they (and do not we) want to live without fear and with a sense of hope and purpose?

My aim in this paper is to discuss the links between a Christian ethic of work and the challenges of the South African workplace. Within this context, where some are employed, even over-employed, and many more are unemployed or under-employed, this is a vital theme. In particular, *different* experiences of work, the issues of *why* one ought to work and what constitutes “good” work are discussed. Several biblical texts relevant to the various dimensions of an ethic of work are noted to highlight the importance of this theme, although space does not permit a detailed discussion of the literary and social contexts of these scriptural passages.

In what follows, definitions are provided of Christian ethics, an ethic of work, employment and the context of work. Thereafter, varied work experiences and the issues of why and how one ought to work are examined with reference to the particular economic, social and environmental challenges facing South Africa. In this latter section, I contrast a Christian ethic of work with a materialist world view in which “growth” and “need” are often confused. A materialist view of reality is one

which elevates the importance of material things such as money, possessions and status, above that of people and of people-centred values such as love of neighbour, the wellbeing of the whole community, and concern for the poor. When material considerations enjoy priority such values will be undermined, and a materialist economy will inevitably be an unjust one (*Economic Justice in South Africa: A Pastoral Statement*, 75).

Nürnberg (2011:61-64) speaks of the distortions of “acquisitiveness and irresponsibility”, huge budget deficits, the commodification of all of life, easy credit, corruption and crime. A Christian ethic is also compared to

the system of abusive patronage now common in many African countries. Patronage (or clientism) can be defined as a an extreme, unethical version of group loyalty and the unethical promotion of one's family, ethnic group or political supporters at the expense of other members of the population (De Sardan 1999; Guest 2004:110; Kretzschmar 2008:89). Hence, patronage leads to the abuse of power and the looting of public resources. In the final section of the article, I consider when work is "good".

## 1. CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND WORK

### 1.1 Christian ethics

Christian ethics is concerned with good, right, true and loving relationships with other people, just interactions within society and the appropriate utilisation of the natural environment. Christian ethics can be defined as a reflection on what is right, good, true and loving based on a moral vision of who God is and God's purpose for the world. This moral vision is derived from God's revelation, theological tradition and our experience of God. It ought to lead to the formation of Christian character, community and action.

This understanding of ethics incorporates both personal and social ethics. In a context of work, respect for others and the value placed on both social justice and concern for the environment are aspects of an ethic of work. The scope of ethics in the workplace is broad and it incorporates personal, family, church, community, social, environmental, and global matters. Hence, over many centuries, numerous elements of Christian ethics, including social and economic ethics have been developed.

### 1.2 What is an ethic of work?

Essentially an *ethic of work* deals with the question of what constitutes "good" work. This basic question can be broken down into a number of subsidiary questions such as, what work ought to be, why one ought to work, how one ought to work, when one ought to work, and who ought to work.<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I focus primarily on different experiences of work, *why* one ought to work, *how* one ought to work and what constitutes "good" work.

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3 Questions as to when one ought to work and who ought to work (which include a focus on retirement, leisure, and children's work), are not discussed here. See Peschke (2004:675-791) for a broad discussion of ethics, work, property and the economy and the discussion on leisure in Volf (1991:133-141).

A *work ethic* is an aspect of an ethic of work and has come to mean dedicated, hard work. A Christian work ethic takes the form of gratitude for God's grace and gifts and a motivation to love and serve God, other people and the world. Some people may be motivated by a work ethic, but not one that is recognisably Christian.

Another related term is that of *Business Ethics*. It deals with why work in a business context ought to be ethical and how ethical policies and actions can be advanced in a business context, at personal, company and international levels (Rossouw & Van Vuuren 2010).

### 1.3 Work and employment

Through work, we interact with others and the physical world. Work gives practical expression to what we perceive to be the purpose of our existence. It is the way in which we endeavour to meet our needs, care for others, articulate our creativity and express our sense of identity and purpose in life. Work involves physical labour, emotional involvement, and mental endeavour. It is always dependent on the contribution of others and on the physical universe. In the words of Peschke (2004:677),

Work is a rational human activity through employment of corporal or spiritual powers for the maintenance and unfolding of a person's life, of society and of the world at large.

In short, work needs to be defined very broadly as it is multifaceted in nature.

Work includes paid employment, but extends beyond it. Thus, an unemployed shack dweller will work with effort and dedication to build a house out of what is to hand to provide a home for his family. Or, a retired person will work on a voluntary basis as an accountant for a church, NGO or local municipality. This is not to deny the vital importance of earning a living by being employed, rather it is necessary to see work as being essential to our sense of humanity and community, and not restricted to paid employment. Work involves deliberate actions that focus on achieving a particular aim, whether this is to clean a house or clean up a corrupt government department. If work is seen only as paid employment, the unemployed are regarded as having no value in those societies that admire only financial success.

The very term "employment" is complex. One may speak of those who are *employed* by others, for example by the government or in the mining sector. Or those who are *self-employed*, such as informal traders or those who have started medium-sized businesses. In the South African context where there are relatively few skilled workers and many professionals and

trained artisans have emigrated, some are *over-employed*. Such persons work long hours in order to get unrealistic volumes of work completed. Where significant profit margins are expected within a “mean and lean” workplace paradigm, such individuals may continue to work in exploitative work conditions for fear of joining the ranks of the unemployed. Dedicated doctors and nurses work long hours, often under huge stress. Some workers, due to a strong sense of responsibility, may even take on the work of lazy, inept or corrupt colleagues in order to deliver a good service.

Also significant are the many people who are *under-employed*. This group includes some who are employed one or more days a week. It also includes occasional and seasonal workers. For this group, and the *unemployed*, life is a daily struggle for survival.

In the first quarter of 2012, it was estimated that the unemployment rate in South Africa was 25.2% (Trading economics 2012). A discussion document released by the Department of the Treasury in February 2011 states

About 42 per cent of young people under the age of 30 are unemployed compared with less than 17 per cent of adults over 30 (National treasury 2011).

Elsewhere, a figure of 72% unemployed persons aged less than 34 years was quoted (*Sunday Times Review*, 11 March 2012, 1). Three-hundred million Africans are already suffering from malnutrition and the continent faces a “youth bulge”. It has been estimated that by 2025, 23% of people who are younger than 25 years will live in sub-Saharan Africa (Mills 2010:46, 136). Many of these young people may wish to work, but cannot obtain employment and do not have the ability or opportunity to create work for themselves. The economy cannot presently grow fast enough to absorb these huge numbers of people, nor can the environment sustain them.

Finally, the problem facing Africa, especially in terms of the ‘youth bulge’ is not simply unemployment, but the lack of skills at all levels (Mills 2010:310).<sup>4</sup> In South Africa, the lack of scientific knowledge and technical skills among the unemployed, and the on-going problems of inept educational management, unwise policies and indifferent teaching in many schools exacerbate the skills problem.

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4 In my view, Mills does not pay sufficient attention to how economic growth can be balanced with sustaining the environment. Nor is enough attention paid to the positive and negative roles that religious faith plays within the African context.

## 1.4 The contexts within which we work

What are some of the South African realities that a Christian ethic of work ought to address? A range of ethical issues is relevant to our society and especially to the economy. These include poverty, crime, violence, racism, the economic recession, corruption, unemployment, and poor service delivery, the growing gap between the rich and the poor, and the increased use of technology that replaces workers. Other key issues include the ownership, distribution and use of land, food production, environmental issues as a result of mining and industry, and different cultural perceptions of land, economics and work. Obviously, in this short paper, I cannot possibly address all these matters, nor can I offer detailed recommendations as to how unemployment can be addressed. But, it is important to note these factors as they form the broader context within which this paper is written.

## 2. DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES OF WORK

### 2.1 Work as positive and fulfilling

Work can be a positive experience. It can bring us intense joy, a sense of fulfilment and the satisfaction of a job well done. To provide for and protect one's family, to run a thriving business, to plant trees and use the timber, to produce a bountiful crop, to lay water pipes to a village, to nurse a sick person back to health, to engineer a bridge, to provide effective service delivery at a hospital – achievements such as these bring a satisfaction of their own. They are satisfying because they are expressions of the best of our God-given human skills and creativity causing us to be engaged in work that nurtures and serves others.

In the Bible, particular craftsmen and rulers were inspired by the Spirit of God (Ex 35:30-35; 1 Sam 16:13). Disciples, too, were given many different gifts by the Holy Spirit to use to honour God and serve others (Rom 12:3-8; 1 Cor 12-14; and Eph 4:11-16). This holistic understanding of human identity, abilities and purpose is a radical critique of the narrow view that human beings are just *homo economicus*. To speak of “economic man” only is to fail to take into account the needs of families, the network of positive relationships that ensure the stability of society, the broad ministry of the Church, the moral norms of justice, wisdom and compassion, and the fragility of the natural world (Nürnberg 2011:62-66).

Within a materialist, consumerist paradigm, in which the relentless pursuit of happiness, comfort, pleasure and wealth are emphasised, it

may be forgotten that difficult work can still be good work. The Apostle Paul (2 Cor 4:7-11) spoke of the sufferings he experienced in his work of Christian ministry,

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.

This suffering did not mean that his work was useless or his calling invalid; it was the price he was called to pay to achieve God's purpose for his life. Today's materialist society may look down on relatively poorly paid nurses, ministers of religion, or social workers, or those who on the basis of their faith work with dedication in difficult work circumstances. But, in the eyes of God, their work is valuable. Indeed, where would society be without "service" workers or those who do good work out of a sense of inner moral conviction?

## 2.2 Work as struggle

As all of us know, work can also be a source of great pain, struggle and suffering. In the biblical text dealing with the consequences of Adam and Eve's free, but deliberate act of disobedience we read:

By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return (Gen 3:19).

Some work is repetitive, exhausting or dangerous. The modern "rat race" of production, competition, and the insecurity, even exploitation, of contract work all take their toll. Ciulla (2000) has written about the promise and betrayal of modern work<sup>5</sup>. For example, she notes (Ciulla 2000:xvi & 161) that many have understood their identity in terms of their jobs, and trusted the corporations for which they worked to care for them, only to find themselves unemployed in a period of economic recession. An ethic of work is also related to social and economic ethics – we need to investigate how the goods of the world are acquired, used and distributed. Further, an ethic of work asks whether the social conditions under which one works and the remuneration one receives are fair (Peschke 2004:688-698).<sup>6</sup>

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5 Although I disagree in places with her view of Christians and work, her discussion of the modern promise and betrayal of work is masterly.

6 See Volf's (1991:46-86) discussion of the views of Adam Smith and Marx about the purpose of work, and work as alienation.

Within the contemporary South African context, the legacy of apartheid, social change and overly complex labour laws also affect what happens in the workplace. In particular, patronage and a sense of entitlement result in corruption and nepotism and/or cronyism. When the work of government becomes a struggle to maintain or gain power rather than to serve the people as a whole, no country can prosper. The people are systematically and ruthlessly dispossessed and the country's riches are plundered for the benefit of a small elite. Nor is this situation limited to South Africa. Following the removal of President Daniel Arap Moi in 2002, the hopes of Kenya were dashed within a few years when members of the government of President Mwai Kibaki fraudulently favoured their own ethnic group and gorged their fill on donor and government funds to the detriment of the nation as a whole (Wrong 2009:79, 183-204, 266-267, 317-329). They believed that it was "time for them to eat". This abuse of both donor funds and the wealth of the country in terms of land, minerals and timber, for example, has been repeated in many other countries (Mills 2010: 135-190, 258, 326).

Some who are competent and hardworking may never be promoted, while many who are politically connected are given work which they are not competent to perform. This prevents officials and departments from properly performing the work of government. Furthermore, honest, hard-working individuals from all race groups may be marginalised and victimised in the business or government sector by those colleagues who are corrupt and self-serving. Rather than displaying fairness and integrity, the attitudes and actions of the latter display malice, envy and insecurity. The effects of such behaviour are extremely detrimental to the wellbeing of the individuals and departments concerned. Hence, many people experience enormous frustration, even a sense of defeat and despair at work.

## 2.3 The futility of work

Brown (1996) has discussed the nature and importance of wisdom literature and compared the insights of the books of Ecclesiastes, Proverbs and Job. The book of Ecclesiastes contains a deep and disturbing analysis of many elements of life, including the futility of work. This analysis is as pertinent now as it was then, despite differences between that context and ours. As a text within the wisdom literature genre, it needs to be read not only historically, but also in a reflective, meditative way. The writer of this book (I will call him the Teacher)<sup>7</sup> tells us of his search for meaning.

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7 Qoheleth can be translated as teacher or collector of wisdom sayings (Brown 1996:121).



The Teacher argues that neither the pursuit of wisdom, family life, pleasure, nor work can *in themselves* provide complete meaning in our lives. Wisdom is indeed better than folly (Ecc 2:13), but complete knowledge is beyond human reach (Ecc 8:16-17; 12:12). Despite the efforts of the wise man, both he and the fool will die (Ecc 2:14-17). It is right and important to celebrate and enjoy the many pleasures of food and family (Ecc 2:24-26; 9:7-9), especially in times of great difficulty. But even these are not fully satisfying, guaranteed or of ultimate value (Ecc 5:13-17; 4:8). Hence, to base one's whole life on any of these fleeting realities is vanity, foolishness and absurdity (Ecc 9:11-12).

What then of work, can achievement bring happiness and meaning? Even work, the Teacher says is not enough,

What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun? ... What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun (Ecc 1:3, 9).

As they came from their mother's womb, so they shall go again, naked as they came; they shall take nothing for their toil, which they may carry away with their hands. This also is a grievous ill: just as they came, so shall they go; and what gain do they have from toiling for the wind? Besides, all their days they eat in darkness, in much vexation and sickness and resentment (Ecc 5:15-17).

I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me – and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity (Ecc 2:18-19).

What one has toiled for does not last and one's legacy of achievement may be unappreciated or even destroyed by the next generation (Ecc 2:20-23). This exposure of the futility of human activity

can make people stop and think. It can make them pause on the fruitless treadmill of their lives and wonder about the point of it all (Cooper 1998:14).

In short, work experiences can be very positive and fulfilling, but also difficult and even futile.

### 3. WHY WORK?

How can an ethic of work respond to these varied, practical work experiences and answer the question as to why one ought to work?

#### 3.1 To survive: work as a human responsibility

Work is a human responsibility, an obligation and a means of survival. The importance of work as a means of provision is stressed in the Bible. Adam is given work by God (Gen 2:15), and work six days a week from morning to evening is assumed in the Old Testament (Deut 5:13; Ps 104:23). In the book of Proverbs (6:6-11 and 24:30-34), the importance of work as a means of making provision for the future is stressed. Jesus works as a carpenter (Mk 6:3) and Paul as a tentmaker (Acts 18:3). Members of the early church are encouraged to take responsibility for their own welfare (1 Thess 4:10-12). By providing for their own livelihood, says Peschke (2004:681), such people guarantee “their independence and personal freedom”.

In Aesop’s tales (written c. 620 BC) we read the story of the ant and the grasshopper – the former worked to prepare food for the winter, the latter did not. When winter comes, should the ant feed the grasshopper when he is hungry? (I return to this point below). Even though in this tale industriousness is prized, industriousness alone is not enough. “Aesop worried that industriousness, when motivated by envy, can lead to theft or avarice and miserliness” (Ciulla 2000:10). Hence, issues of work raise moral challenges at the social level and in terms of personal moral character and motive.

In 2 Thess 3:7-10, Paul uses his own example to stress the importance of providing for one’s needs and not being a burden on others because of idleness:

For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone’s bread without paying for it; but with toil and labour we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you ... we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.

But we also know that individuals may be willing to work, but be unable to find work due to their lack of skills or the fact there are not enough jobs to supply the needs of an ever-growing population (Against all odds 2012).<sup>8</sup> Larger macro-economic issues, such as the global recession and

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8 The television programme ‘Against all odds’ currently being screened on the eNCA (previously eNews) channel on Fridays at 8.45 written by Thinnus

increased mechanisation in the workplace, also play a significant role in the growth or reduction of employment opportunities. Thus, the stress on industriousness found in the Bible and Aesop's writing are vital, but need to be considered against a wider social background.

Thus, in the prophetic books such as Amos (2:6-8; 4:1-3) and Micah (2:1-2), poverty is not attributed to laziness. The prophets record the struggles of the poor against drought, crippling taxes, injustice and exploitation. Their poverty was not due to their lack of effort but rather due to economic and political injustices. In the Gospels Jesus tells many parables about the poor, the wealthy, money, land, work and taxes. For example, in one of the parables about labourers in the vineyard (Mt 20:1-16), even the workers hired late in the day were paid a full day's wage. Jesus recognised the importance of work and the responsible use of resources (Matt 24:45-51, 25:14-30; Luke 19:12-27), but he also empathised deeply with the frustration and despair of those who were willing to work but could not find work. For example, how can the countless unemployed men who stand on street corners all over South Africa, hoping for work, find employment?

The essential work of government is to ensure the welfare of its citizens and the country (*Economic Justice in South Africa: A Pastoral Statement*, 89). However, many key functions of government are suffering from severe lack of planning, executive capacity and corruption. These capacity problems are seen in the lack of delivery of services such as water, sewage, refuse removal, roads maintenance, police services, health care, welfare services and many others. In short, government is largely failing to do its work. Many have welcomed the government's recent plans to create work through large scale national infrastructural development or small scale municipal clean up and development projects. One hopes that such projects will actually be implemented and be labour intensive.

Two important exceptions to this lack of delivery and integrity can be mentioned. As promised in his 2010 budget speech, Minister Motsaledi has been overhauling the health care system to correct

wrong placements, wrong qualifications and wrong experience or level. [This will] allow us to ensure that hospitals are properly designated and the correct manager with the skills, knowledge and behavioural attributes is managing the institution he said (Motsaledi 2012).

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Ferreira and presented by Mpho Lakaje tells the stories of inspiring South Africans, including those who have found ways to create work and a future for themselves and others.

Also encouraging has been the fight against corruption headed by Thuli Madonsela, the Public Protector (Mail & Guardian 2012).

Even though business suffers as a result of wider economic forces and the inefficiencies of government, it is also open to criticism. The materialistic stress on profit maximisation, for example, is problematic. No one disputes that without profit a company cannot survive nor commit to further research and investment. But to idolise profit at the expense of social needs and environmental sustainability is simply short-sighted and foolish. Ongoing retrenchments, the increased mechanisation of work and the gap between the wages of highest and lowest paid employees remain a problem. What is needed, says Nürnberger (2011:59), is not “jobless growth”, but labour-intensive businesses, technologies and economic policies.<sup>9</sup> Finally, the creation of a super-rich class, whether white or black, must be questioned.

In short, individuals, families, government, labour unions and businesses need to adopt a holistic vision, a long-term strategy and to implement strategies that will ensure not only the survival of the people and the environment, but enable them to thrive.<sup>10</sup> What is required is political and moral will, clarity and united effort.

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9 Labour issues such as work productivity, what constitutes a living wage and whether a relatively low paid job is better than no work at all, need to be resolved. This article was written prior to the “Marikana massacre”; that event further highlights the complexity and urgency of resolving work-related issues in South Africa.

10 For instance, the Sunday Times newspaper has launched a series of articles on the theme “each one, hire one” and many studies have been done by government and other agencies. Also, Mills (2010: 32, 37, 54, 276, 279, 301, 304, 323, 328) provides detailed suggestions regarding means of promoting economic growth. These include: better leadership, reducing corruption and bureaucracy, economic and political reform, producing what others want to buy, innovation, flexibility, entrepreneurship, greater competitiveness, improved infrastructure, better skills, opening the economy beyond the elite few, improving roads, education and health, political legitimacy, security and giving people a stake in the future of the country.

### 3.2 Work as care and service to others

Human beings need to work not only to survive but also to provide for the needs of others, especially their families:

And whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever (1 Timothy 5:3-8).

Here the work of parents is to care for their offspring, for instance, to provide for their material needs. Also vital is to facilitate the full intellectual, physical, spiritual, social and moral development of their children – all of which are crucial for family life and social wellbeing. In South Africa, increasing numbers of young, unmarried people are producing children and making use of child grants. There are many Bible passages that highlight the needs of the poor and the responsibility of those who are able to assist them (e.g. Deut 15:11; Jer 22:16; Rom 15:26; and 1 Corinthians 16:1-4). But irresponsibility and dependency, as we have seen, are never commended. The absence of proper parenting and especially the absence of fathers (either physically or emotionally) mean that these children are disadvantaged from birth and become a burden on society. To conceive a child is easy, but to raise a well formed child requires advanced human capacity and dedicated work.

Those who start a business or employ workers are creating work for others and thereby contributing to their wellbeing. Those that teach others skills that can assist them to find or create a job are serving others in a practical way. Farmers contribute hugely by growing food for the nation. Even though there are additional ethical factors to consider here, such as the ownership and use of the land, and the process of food production from “farm to fork” (which I cannot discuss here), the importance of this contribution must not be forgotten.

The ethical obligations of loving one’s neighbour and serving others are completely contrary to greed or avarice. Avarice is the relentless desire to accumulate beyond what can realistically be required for human need at the expense of the needs of others and the environment (Ex 20:17; Mk 7:22, Lk 12:15, Rom 1:29; Eph 5:5; 1 Tim 6:6-10; 2 Tim 3:2). This sin or vice is the crucial component that has led to the plundering of state assets and donor funds. This is not only an African malady. But, the lack of full democratic participation, and the proper functioning of parliament, regulatory bodies, the police, the judiciary and a free press in many African countries has meant that the “politics of the belly” has become rampant (Mills 2010: 233, 236, 243).

South Africans repeatedly hear that government officials indulge in extravagant parties, and treat themselves to huge salaries, luxurious hotel accommodation, expensive motor vehicles and overseas jaunts. Government employees are all too often motivated by greed, rather than working for the common good of the country's people, and apparently see no reason why public assets cannot be used for their own benefit (Kretzschmar 2010:579). As a result, instead of being exposed and repudiated, waste, gluttony, avarice and corruption are all too often admired and perpetuated. This self-aggrandisement is in marked contrast to Christian economic values that include a commitment to the common good, solidarity with others, concern for the poor, and the integrity of creation (*Economic Justice in South Africa: A Pastoral Statement*, 78-80).

Freedom and responsibility need to be combined. According to Nürnberg (2011:58), what is needed is a

... responsible society, a society that is aware of its embeddedness in the greater network on natural relationships; a society that uses its freedom to construct an equitable and sustainable system; a society in which all citizens have a chance to contribute and benefit equitably; a society where all participants are willing to pull their weight in the productive and administrative processes and to sacrifice for the common good.

The country of Georgia (northeast of Turkey) is an example of how corruption and entitlement can be reversed. In 2003, it was sunk in poverty and corruption. However, the country underwent a "Rose Revolution", one of the features of which was the firing of 80,000 corrupt State employees, especially from the "traffic" police. By 2005, it was ranked as having the "largest reduction of corruption" in all "transition" countries. Between 2004 to 2010, the percentage rate of poverty in the population was reduced from 52% to 22%. How did this happen? Because of "a deep social transformation – 'from a tradition of entitlement to a meritocracy'", according to President Saakashvili (Mills 2010: 315).

### 3.3 Work as an expression of our creativity

Part of who we are as human beings is to be creators of something. Whether we create works of art, music or literature, raise healthy and happy children, start businesses or agricultural ventures, or construct new buildings, it is important to who we are. Human beings are not simply machines or cogs in a wheel. Hence, work that crushes human dignity and fails to develop skill, competence and responsibility cannot be good work. The economic goal, then, is the nurture, development and contribution of

people, local communities, society and creation as a whole (Nürnberger 1999; Stassen & Gushee 2003).

Individual people and like-minded groups can give expression to their insights, knowledge, experience and skill to identify new ways of solving problems related to work and worklessness. Within a business setting, such people are spoken of as entrepreneurs; they see possibilities and develop businesses that provide goods, services and employment. But this spirit of innovation need not be restricted to a business context; it can be expressed in many other spheres of life.

For example, the work of Wangari Maathai (2007:173) of Kenya who, together with the women of the Green Belt Movement, planted more than 30 million trees mainly in Kenya can be mentioned. She is an example of someone who with passion initiated a new movement, and inspired thousands of people to reverse deforestation, thereby caring for their families and the environment. Therefore, we must not forget that the life of a single person can make a difference in the world. Their work was an innovative and creative response to a dire situation of environmental degradation and human poverty. As the Dalai Lama puts it: "If you think you are too small to make a difference, try sleeping with a mosquito."<sup>11</sup>

### 3.4 Work as an expression of calling and charisma

In many sectors of contemporary postmodern society, people no longer have a clear sense of purpose or direction (*telos*) in their lives. If one sees the world as only a material reality, or focuses on short-term gain for oneself and one's family, ethnic group or supporters, why should one care for anyone else's wellbeing? Furthermore, a work ethic that has "gone wrong" can result variously in apathy, the pursuit of pleasure or leisure activities, or the frenzied seeking after self-realisation. It can also lead to one becoming a workaholic – having the hope that work itself can provide meaning to life (Volf 1991:129). Whereas those who adopt a purely secular and materialist view of reality may also identify the three aspects of work already discussed (survival, service and creativity), a Christian worldview or paradigm of understanding includes but extends beyond these to speak of work as an expression of our God-given calling and/or *charisma* (grace, spiritual gifts). Christians thus work to contribute to and participate in God's work of creation and salvation.

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11 [http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/570218.Dalai\\_Lama\\_XIV](http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/570218.Dalai_Lama_XIV) [Accessed 28 January 2012].

The notion of *vocatio* (calling) has long been stressed in Christian theology due to the emphasis within the Bible itself (e.g. Jer 1:4-10; Acts 9:1-19). Drawing on the teaching of St Benedict (480-550), Vest (2000:6) argues that even in a modern context, work needs to be thought of in terms of three elements: "Vocation, being called to what we do; stewardship, taking care of what has been given; [and] obedience, serving one another." In this way, work can become "a friend of the soul" because it is work done in God's world, by humans created to love and serve God and neighbour. Hence, the motto of the Benedictines was *ora et labora* – prayer and work. Even within a contemporary industrial and information age, who we are and how we work matters to God. Hence, every aspect of work is linked to faith in God, the stewardship of the whole of creation and care for others.

Both Luther and Calvin extended the understanding of calling beyond the religious work of the clergy (Volf 1991:105). All Christians and each type of work (with the exception of work that is clearly immoral) can be spoken of in terms of calling. But, Miroslav Volf (1991:102-109) argues that Luther's notion of calling is inextricably linked to a static, medieval view of the world, it does not take the alienation of work into account, is ambiguous, open to misinterpretation and cannot relate to the modern challenges of work. However, those who use the biblical concept of calling, like Vest, may disagree that *vocatio* is inextricably fixed to a distant social context, the doctrine of creation, or Luther's views.

Volf seeks to stress not creation, but pneumatology and eschatology (Volf 1991:ix, 113ff). It is the Spirit that gives gifts, skills and work (Exod 35:2-3; Gal 2:20, Rom 12:1-8) and the work of a Christian is directed not simply to work within the Church, but also to the re-creation and transformation of the world according to the likeness of Christ (Rom 8:18-25; 1 Cor 5:16-21; Col 1:15-20; Rev 22:12). This emphasis on charism he argues is more flexible and can relate to the ever-changing world of work. Volf (1991:114-115, 141-148, 157-201) argues that work must be done in *co-operation* with both God and nature, and it should lead not to the alienation, but the humanization of human beings.

In the history of the Christian tradition, there have been many people who have made a significant impact on their contemporaries. Not only prominent leaders, but millions of ordinary people have been motivated by a sense of God's calling and used their gifts to survive, help others, create, nurture, witness and innovate (Ellsberg 1997; Quinn 2002).<sup>12</sup> Their example can be emulated today.

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12 Despite the many small errors in this book, it outlines the impact on Africa of the lives of many Christians.



Also important in a discussion of a Christian ethic of work is *ethics at work* – the right way to work. This links moral virtue and character with work. Mills quotes these as “Weberian” human traits: “discipline, honesty, humility, high-quality leadership, and a social commitment to people” (Mills 2010:32). In fact, these are the Christian virtues upon which the so-called Protestant work ethic was built. They are important in the workplace since they reflect Christian moral character and respect for others. Work that is sloppy and uncaring reveals contempt for others who depend on your work, whereas work that is done with dedication, effort and commitment makes a statement about your view of God, yourself, the world and others. Hence, ethics practised in a work context leads to a *work ethic*; it is not simply hard work that is required (which can lead to “work-alcoholism”), but work that is dedicated to God, that serves others, and respects the value of the world and all its amazing creatures.

According to Wolterstorff, the balance of a

rhythmic alternation between work and worship, labour and liturgy is one of the significant distinguishing features of a Christian’s way of being-in-the-world (in Volf 1991:139).<sup>13</sup>

For Christians there is a connection between prayer, the Sabbath rest, and work (Ex 20:9ff) (Manton 1997:3-20). Significantly, an Australian study

found that those who professed to be atheists or to have no religion at all tend to be less concerned about being useful, took less pride in work, wanted more holidays and felt exploited more often (in Volf 1991:219).<sup>14</sup>

Finally, the work of Christians does not depend on their efforts – ultimately, it is God’s work. This is how Archbishop Oscar Romero<sup>15</sup> put it:

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God’s work. ... Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us. We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realising that. This enables us to do something, and do it very well. It may be incomplete, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord’s grace to enter and do the rest. ... We are the workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future, not our own.

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13 From Wolterstorff, 1983: 147.

14 Hawtrey, 1989:17.

15 For the full version, see <http://slu.edu/prayerbook/2009/07/17/prophets-of-a-future-not-our-own-the-romero-prayer/> [Accessed 28 January 2012].

#### 4. CONCLUDING COMMENTS: WHEN IS WORK GOOD?

At the outset of this article, reference was made to the work of Alfred the Great. He was a great ruler because he sought to bring about a better life for the people of his realm. In the same way in which he combined intelligence and goodness in his context, wise leadership and an ethic of work can bring about genuine transformation in our context. This is the vision that Christians need to uphold in a context where materialism and patronage hold sway. What is needed is a re-orientation of the systems of meaning that govern socio-economic, political and economic decision making, policies and actions (Nürnberg 2011:60-64)<sup>16</sup>.

When is work good? Based on the foregoing, a number of conclusions can be drawn. First, work is good when employment conditions and wages are fair, and provision is made for human needs in a way that enables the thriving of others and the natural world – a balance between profit, people, and the planet.

Second, good work is performed when human beings, as individuals and communities, refrain from pursuing only self-interest and work together to serve others in their own society and across the globe. Christian and African ethics teach that a selfish life is not a truly human life at all.

Third, work is good when it is an expression of our human creativity. This creativity is the rich blooming of human capacity that brings beauty and hope to our world and results in innovative and wise solutions to the many problems that beset us.

Fourth, a sense of being called and gifted by God to make a contribution to the lives of others and the appreciation, protection, and wise use of all of creation is an expression of good work. Dedicated and honest work is vital in a continent marred by selfish and short-sighted materialism and patronage. A materialist worldview cannot explain moral conscience, motivate commitment to others except in terms of the “survival of the species”, or sustain a sense of ultimate accountability. The “politics of patronage”, in the form of ethnic, family or party allegiance or “paybacks” for past loyalty, is a dead-end street. The desire to remain in power is its focus, rather than encouraging an open debate on how to better meet the needs and legitimate aspirations of the country as a whole. Who we are and how we act is vital, since actions speak louder than words. What is required from all in the country is the political and moral will to

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16 See Nürnberg (1999) on the interface between prosperity, poverty and pollution.

pursue a future that benefits the country as a whole. A sense of hope and confidence, clear strategies and a united effort can unlock the willingness to commit capital and the required application of human skill and effort. But, this commitment is dependent on credibility and mutual trust.

Fifth, the need for a Sabbath rest is part of our created nature. When it is forgotten, the consequences are stress, mental illness, burnout, relational problems and all types of physical illnesses.

Sixth, good work is relational; it is performed according to God's guidance, alongside others, and within a world that is sustained by its Creator and Redeemer. As pointed out earlier with reference to the book of Ecclesiastes, work in and of itself has only relative value. It is only at the hand of God that we possess or enjoy anything at all, since all that we use in our work derives from what God has already created. All that has real meaning and permanence is hidden in the nature of God:

For something to have real permanence, real meaning, it must come from *outside* the world we can see, since we can see with our own eyes that *everything* under the sun has been subjected to frustration. So life can only have meaning if it is lived in the light of a God whose very nature is just and who will therefore bring everything to judgment (Cooper 1998:7).

In this world and the next, we are accountable to God (Eph 6:5-9). This motivates the believer to remain hopeful and dedicated, even in times of distress and disillusion. By recovering the vision God's intention of making us active participants in and wise carers of creation, abundant life can be experienced. Inspired by hearing the sound of children playing or by watching elephants drink as a blood red the sun sets behind the herd, we can remember that when one works for God, one's labour will not be in vain (1 Cor 15:58).

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*Keywords*

*Trefwoorde*

Ethics

Etiek

Work

Werk

Calling

Roeping

South Africa

Suid-Afrika