

Workplace and Kingdom: God's Call in the Marketplace

Core Question: How can churches present a whole-life theology that encourages Kingdom-focused ministry in the workplace?

Introduction

It won't be a shock to many of us that in 2016, the Census showed that forty-three per cent of Australians are working forty hours or more each week. Another nineteen per cent are doing between thirty-five and thirty-nine hours. With sixty-two per cent of Australians spending over thirty-five hours at their place of work, it is remarkable that there is very little teaching in churches about such a significant element of our lives. In 2017 the Lausanne Movement released a report on the Role of the Church in Wealth Creation. In this report, it was noted that churches have often neglected the role of everyday work – what the report calls “wealth creation”. One of the foundational questions that the report asked was how the Church is to be involved in “inspiring, commissioning and releasing” people to create businesses that provide jobs and bring a redemptive influence to the community. For the purpose of this talk, I will extend that question to how churches should inspire and send people into *all* workplaces, as business owners and employees. There are two ways that I will answer this question. First, I want to give us a greater understanding of God's purposes in the workplace. In order to do this through a whole-life perspective, we will look at the theology of Irenaeus, a theologian from the second century A.D. Using his theology as a framework for how to be faithful workers, we will then consider how churches can equip, commission, and send their people to be faithful workers who transform the community.

The Purpose of God in the Workplace: His divinity in our labour

It might seem strange to go back to 180 A.D. in order to talk about the workplace, but such is the nature of theology. Sometimes the best lessons are learned from those who have lived out their lives in a very different context, but who have taught lessons that last throughout the ages. I don't expect that we are all master historians, so a brief summary of Irenaeus and

his theology is in order. Irenaeus was born around 120 A.D., we're not sure of the exact year, quite possibly in the city of Lyon. He eventually became bishop of that same city and made quite a name for himself as a theologian speaking out against the heretics of his time. Looking back, we can see some problems with his theology, but he stands as one of the first to develop an understanding of the New Testament Canon and, unfortunately in the eyes of Protestants, one of the early advocates of the idea of apostolic succession. What interests us about Irenaeus is his doctrine of Recapitulation. That is a conference topic all on its own, so I will give the briefest summary. There are some excellent resources out there if you want to read more about it.

Irenaeus presents what I call a "dependent anthropology." Humanity was created for the purpose of knowing God and participating in His glory. While God is self-sufficient, we have an intrinsic need to be in relationship with Him, and we can only find our life's purpose and value in serving Him. When sin entered the world, it was revealed that we did not have a true grasp of the knowledge of God, and we live with a devastating separation between us and God. Irenaeus taught that when Jesus came to earth, his goal was to recapitulate, or repeat, every stage of human existence. He was born as a baby, he lived as a teenager, he became an adult, and (in Irenaeus' mind) he also became an old man. His death was also necessary, for all human beings die. In all of this, he lived as the last Adam, fulfilling God's requirements where we could not. So he was a pure baby, a sinless teenager, an obedient adult. Everything that was lost in our Fall, he restored. Those who put their faith in Christ begin to return to the ideal life that was in Eden – participating in God's divinity. Irenaeus writes, "But we do now receive a certain portion of His Spirit, tending towards perfection, and preparing us for incorruption, being little by little accustomed to receive and bear God; which also the apostle terms an earnest, that is, a part of the honour which has been promised us by God."¹

What Irenaeus presents is a beautiful picture of the relationship between God and humanity, between salvation and the very nature of existence. But what does this have to do with the workplace?

¹ *Against Heresies*, 5.8.1.

When we think about salvation, we usually see it only as something done *to* us. Christ lived and died to bring us into relationship with the Father, and as a result we become more like Christ. Human nature doesn't enter the picture much except if we want to emphasise how sinful we are. To Irenaeus, however, human nature is the direct focus of Christ's mission. We're not simply released from our sins, we are brought into a participation in God's existence. We don't become God, or gods, but we do await a glorified life. We do have eternal life now. Those are things that rightly belong to God alone. In Irenaeus, this participation in the divine must impact every part of our lives. If Christ is the ideal human, and our sin has denied us the ability to be like Him, then the more we look like Christ the more human we truly become.

If we take this lesson to heart, then we go into our workplace not as simple labourers seeking a wage, but as people seeking to participate in God. Through Christ, God is bringing all things into submission to himself. He wants to see all things submitted to his kingdom. Every day, we participate in this process. So, then, we have an opportunity to extend the Kingdom's influence within our field of work generally, and our workplace specifically. If we live our lives as if we exist to serve God and find our purpose within this service, then that should grant our work-life a distinctly Christlike shape. That shifts the two main approaches that Christians have towards work. It is no longer an endeavour to simply earn wages, because it is an opportunity to display the nature of God in the world. It also means that we do not have to feel like we are failing to be good Christians if we have not had "enough" explicit conversations about Christ. Intentionally living to display the Kingdom of God will lead people to ask questions about the way we live. One of the best ways to find gospel opportunities at work is to live a life that is markedly different from our fellow workers'.

Every workmate that we influence through the gospel and a Christian ethic becomes an influencer in a wider arena. What they learn from us impacts their family life, their friendships, their work ethic. It's a ripple effect of kingdom ethics. It is, in a sense, us showing others how human beings were created to live.

A pastor in Queensland has a program that he calls "Unofficial Chaplains." It's essentially the idea that in every part of our lives, we live as chaplains, providing love and support to those

around us whether we explicitly share the gospel or not. That's the principle that comes out of Irenaeus' doctrine in our workplace. So, then, as those that participate in the life of God, we seek to present His lordship and His love in our workplace.

The Role of the Church in the Workplace: Equipping and Sending

Generally speaking, the Church has not been effective in training and equipping its people to enter the workplace as Christians. We have tended to emphasise the "spiritual" aspects of life and ministry: preaching the gospel and giving our testimony at every tiny opportunity; the importance of prayer; the importance of overseas missions. None of these are wrong; they are, in fact, the foundations of Christian life in many ways. But it can leave the business person, the average worker, asking where they fit in. We need to remember that, for a lot of people, an explicit gospel presentation may cost them their job unless it's specifically asked for. A lot of Christians are asking if their job is just a hindrance to going overseas for missions. Personally, when I first became a Christian, I wrestled with these questions. I thought that I was failing to be faithful because I was working in the fast food industry instead of pursuing the mission field. I know that I am not the only one who has had that conflict. As Church leaders and as everyday Christians, we need to recapture the importance of the average person's job. Martin Luther is often quoted as saying, "The Christian shoemaker does his duty not by putting little crosses on the shoes, but by making good shoes, because God is interested in good craftsmanship." We need to recapture a sense of the importance of faithful work, particularly in light of Irenaeus' teachings.

So how does the Church – particularly elders and pastors - equip its people to live and work like this?

1. We should consider commissioning workers like we do school kids. Very often churches will take time each February to pray for school children, asking God to bless their studies. If we do the same for workers, we show that the workplace is important and should be prayed for. We also model for our congregation how to pray about their jobs.

2. We need to provide specific applications in our preaching to show how the text applies within the workplace. We spend most of our waking week in a job context, so teach your people how to apply the Scriptures within that arena. In addition, preach on the role of work. We need to teach our people about the biblical view of wealth, about how we ought to view work and vocation, about why we should devote so much time to employment.
3. We need to Intentionally seek to understand our people's job situations so that we can speak into them. Don't talk about how to avoid lying in business meetings if all your people are cleaners. Don't talk about being honest cleaners if all of your people are high-end executives. This includes, where possible, meeting our people in their work environment and getting to know the environment where they spend up forty hours of their week.
4. Churches should consider organising workshops to teach their people about the workplace. Invite Christian workers, both bosses and employees, to speak and tell their stories. Intentionally spending time doing this will help our people to take time to critically reflect on how to represent God in their workplace.

Throughout all of these activities – and there are plenty more that we could think of and adopt – there should be a continual acknowledgement that we work with people who do not know the saving grace of Jesus Christ. Irenaeus teaches us that as Christians, we participate in God's existence, becoming like Him as we become more human. Jesus is not idle, He is always at work, just like the Father. We too have work to do on this earth, whether that is in a secular workplace, in missions work, full-time ministry, or as carers of our families and children. Irenaeus' doctrine of Recapitulation helps us to see that these things are absolutely central to our Christian walk and not just distractions along the way. Churches have a responsibility – and a charge – to inspire, commission, equip, and send their people into the workplace as faithful witnesses of the glory of God. My hope and prayer is that our discussion today will have helped us see ways that we can pursue these goals, by the grace and power of our God.