

Theology of Work: Eschatology, Co-Creativity, and the Pneumatological Impetus

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Abstract

In his 2001 monograph *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work*, Miroslav Volf helpfully draws together the doctrines of pneumatology and eschatology to reimagine “work” from a fresh perspective. Shedding traditional views with limiting concepts in relation to vocation and the Holy Spirit, Volf reimagines the scope of work set against an eschatological backdrop that allows not only for a lasting significance of human work, but also that “work” is to be understood as “cooperation with God” for the purpose of world preservation and ultimate transformation. Volf provides a solid foundation for the understanding of *transformatio mundi*, but it is the theme of “cooperation with God” or “co-creativity” with which this chapter engages more fully; specifically, how “co-creativity” across an eschatological backdrop is to be considered in light of the dynamic work of the Holy Spirit with the human agent. Drawing from Volf’s understanding of Christ as *eschatological*, the Father as *protological*, and the Holy Spirit as *pneumatological*, this chapter will seek to consider how “we” as humans are the “work” as “we work” through our work.

Introduction

In his 1991 monograph *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work*, Miroslav Volf helpfully draws together the doctrines of pneumatology and eschatology to reimagine “work” from a fresh perspective.¹ Shedding traditional views with limiting concepts in relation to vocation and the Holy Spirit, Volf reimagines the scope of work set against an eschatological

¹ Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 9–10.

backdrop that allows not only for the lasting significance of human work, but an understanding of work as “cooperation with God” for the purpose of world preservation and ultimate transformation. It is a fresh perspective with a clear view that the current work of humanity, as influenced by the Holy Spirit and set against the eschatological backdrop, highlights the possibilities of co-creativity (or “cooperation with God”) in the “new creation.” This is *transformatio mundi*. It is this theme of “cooperation with God” or “co-creativity” with which this chapter will engage, paying particular attention to the dynamic work of the Holy Spirit with the human agent. Drawing from Volf’s understanding of the Father as *protological*, the Holy Spirit as *pneumatological*, and Christ as *eschatological*, this chapter will more fully consider how “we” are the “work” as “we work”—specifically, how to understand “co-creativity” across an eschatological backdrop.

In what follows, I will offer a discussion on *transformatio mundi* as understood in light of the new creation, highlighting Volf’s premise of the importance of human work and its inherent value. This places Volf’s discussion on protological/pneumatological/eschatological as the foundation for discussing how human work, as co-creativity, can be understood not simply as an “end product” within the here and now, but as a “work that remains” as part of the new creation. It is from this point that the discussion branches off from Volf’s work, extending the conversation to consider the role of charisms as part of the co-creativity that contains both a here and now perspective and eschatological significance. To be sure, Volf does base his theology of work on a solid understanding of charisms as integral to the scope of human work; the key departure in this chapter is in understanding the eschatological significance in the development of the charisms themselves. Essentially, I ask how the cultivation of the “gifts” of the Spirit by the human agent in and through their work can be understood within a protological

pneumatological/eschatological framework as co-creativity.² I conclude that there exists a *plēroma* through which the “gifts” of the Spirit can be developed as the human agent engages as co-creator and that this expanse should be explored as a biblical imperative for present outworking implications and eschatological significance.

Father as Protological, Holy Spirit as Pneumatological, and Christ as Eschatological

Volf lays a foundation for a theology of work in part by drawing on the concepts of the Father as *protological*, the Holy Spirit as *pneumatological*, and Christ as *eschatological*.

In this way the “ultimate significance of work” can be discussed by questioning the “continuity or discontinuity between the present and the eschatological orders” and by “arguing in favour of understanding work as cooperation with God.”³ The understanding within this framework is that it is the protological Father who initiates/creates, the pneumatological Spirit who empowers/leads/gifts, and the eschatological Christ who reveals redemption as the exemplar of new things.⁴ As with the initiation of creation, the final consummation of the new heavens and the new earth is always retained as a work solely attributed to God. To that end, Volf argues that “through the Spirit God is already working in history, using human actions to create provisional states of affairs that anticipate the new creation in a real way.”⁵ That being said, the work of the human can only ever be understood as one of “co-creator” who builds on what has already been initiated. Larive explains:

The cocreator’s job can be divided into two aspects: *maintenance* of the cultural stock that has gone before, and *creativity* acting on the cutting edge of that stock. These aspects harmonize with the *protological* and *eschatological* aspects of the Trinity. The third aspect, the *pneumatological*, is concerned with how the created cocreator is equipped for the role he or she plays in creation.⁶

² “Gifts” are here understood in line with 1 Cor 12, Eph 4, Rom 12, etc. For more on this see Preece, *Vocation Tradition*.

³ Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 74.

⁴ I have borrowed this phrase “exemplar of new things” from Larive, *After Sunday*, 85, in which he apart from this phrase also refers to Christ as the “eschatological exemplar and promise of new things.”

⁵ Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 100.

⁶ Larive, *After Sunday*, 74. Emphasis retained.

In Volf's theology, the equipping for the role comes via the Holy Spirit given that any discussion about the new creation must include the "spirit of God" who is the "firstfruits" of the "future salvation," and the "present power of eschatological transformation," and the only mediator "through which the future new creation is anticipated in the present."⁷ Therefore, not only does the work of the human agent have intrinsic value within the here and now context, it can further be understood as being a work that remains as part of the new creation.

Transformatio Mundi and the New Creation

Foundational in Volf's theology of work is understanding the opposing eschatological models of *annihilatio mundi* and *transformatio mundi*. The former suggests that the current world will be completely annihilated before the coming of the new creation, which will happen *ex nihilo*. In contrast to this, the second model suggests that this present world will not end but will be transformed into the new creation via *creatio continua*. Volf has a distinct preference for *transformatio mundi*, as it is the only eschatological model that supports his conviction of the inherent value of human work and of its ability to serve as contributing in the new creation. In his thinking, annihilation is "theologically inconsistent" because "the expectation of the eschatological destruction of the world is not consonant with the belief in the goodness of creation" in which "what God will annihilate must be either so bad that it is not possible to be redeemed or so insignificant that it is not worth being redeemed."⁸ Therefore, *transformatio mundi* is the logically consistent concept that does not have the world ending in "apocalyptic destruction but in eschatological transformation."⁹ In this way, "the cumulative work of human beings have intrinsic value and gain ultimate significance, for they are related to the eschatological new creation."¹⁰ Via *creatio continua*, a continuity can be guaranteed

⁷ Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 102.

⁸ Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 90.

⁹ Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 91.

¹⁰ Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 91.

that ensures “that no noble effort will be wasted” but “rather, after being purified in the eschatological *transformatio mundi*, they will be integrated by an act of divine transformation into the new heaven and the new earth.”¹¹ Therefore, according to Volf:

The first and most basic feature of a theology of work based on the concept of new creation is that it is a *Christian* theology of work. It is developed on the basis of a specifically Christian soteriology and eschatology, essential to which is the anticipatory experience of God’s new creation and a hope of its future consummation.¹²

It is within this new creation that all of God’s purposes will come to an end, and therefore “a theological interpretation of work is valid only if it facilitates transformation of work toward ever-greater correspondence with the coming new creation.”¹³ As such, in light of this eschatological continuity, “the new creation is not simply a negation of the first creation but is also its reaffirmation” in which human co-creativity has been engaged, specifically through a pneumatological impetus.¹⁴ This aspect of Volf’s premise, that human work is done through life in the Spirit anticipating the new creation, offers a dynamic perspective on the continuing creative activity of the Triune God and God’s desire to engage with the human agent towards this end. It is a distinctive pneumatological theology of work set within an eschatological framework that stresses the role of *charisma*. Further, it understands that it is through the Holy Spirit that the human agent can engage with their unique gifts,¹⁵ along with skills, talents, and abilities, to produce work that will ultimately contribute to the new creation.¹⁶

Charisms and Their Expanse

For Volf, cooperation with God through the presence and activity of the Spirit should encapsulate every aspect of a Christian’s life. In relation to work particularly, he suggests that

¹¹ Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 92.

¹² Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 79. Emphasis retained.

¹³ Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 83.

¹⁴ Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 101.

¹⁵ Going forward, each time the word “gifts” is used in this manner, “skills, talents, and abilities” are also implied.

¹⁶ Volf emphatically states that the main point of his book is “to call for a pneumatological theology of work based on the concept of charisma.” Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, viii.

as Christians perform their “mundane work,” it is the Spirit who empowers them to “cooperate with God in a manner that completes creation and renews heaven and earth.”¹⁷

The emphasis is not simply on an obedience to the call of God or in the service to others here on earth, but rather that human work itself has inherent value and can be identified as a co-creative cooperation with God in the anticipated *transformatio mundi*. This work that “remains” is not done by human effort alone but rather through additional cooperation with the Holy Spirit by engaging in unique charisms. Volf outlines:

When God calls people to become children of God, the Spirit gives them callings, talents, and “enablings” (charisms) so that they can do God’s will in the Christian fellowship and in the world in anticipation of God’s eschatological new creation.¹⁸

Volf makes a distinction between the “fruit” and “gifts” of the Spirit, indicating that the fruit of the Spirit “designates the general character of Christian existence” whereas the gifts of the Spirit “are related to the specific tasks or functions to which God calls and fits each Christian.”¹⁹

To be sure, Volf’s view supports Scripture and understands that the Holy Spirit gives gifts to each individual as he wills (1 Cor 12:11) and that the giving of these gifts is “mediated through each person’s social interrelations and psychosomatic constitution.”²⁰

That being said, these mediated gifts are not limited by any human or social construct constraints since it is the Spirit of the “crucified and resurrected Christ, the firstfruits of the new creation” who is giving them.²¹ In other words, the gifts themselves can be understood as having a dynamic and eschatological structure to them. This reveals a past/present/future understanding through which current human work can be viewed, but further provides a framework through which the “changing” nature of the human agent can be understood.

¹⁷ Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 115.

¹⁸ Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 124. Volf advocates the work of the Holy Spirit as work in the new creation by citing briefly three Scripture passages: Rom 8:23, 2 Cor 1:22, and Matt 12:28.

¹⁹ Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 111.

²⁰ Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 115.

²¹ Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 115.

Any historical development in the theology of work has always contained some level of understanding that the human agent is “changed” through their work (i.e., that there is some form of “sanctification”) and that through their work the communities in which they perform this work can also be changed.²² This understanding of the changing nature of the human agent aligns with an understanding of the doctrine of salvation, which includes justification, sanctification, and ultimately, glorification. Scripture reveals this past/present/future framework referring to Christians as those who are saved, are being saved, and who shall be saved: that Christians are in a constant state of *being* and *becoming*. For instance, Philippians 1:6 reads: “being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”²³ Taking this past/present/future framework alongside Volf’s understanding of the Triune God within a protological/pneumatological/eschatological framework presents a lens through which the appropriation by the persons of the Trinity can further be identified and considered. Within this framework it is understood that as initiated by the protological Father, humanity is created in the image of God, designed for an eschatological future, redeemed and reconciled via the Son, and conformed to the image of Christ via empowerment by the Holy Spirit. Going further and in relation to the development of the charisms, there presents a dual-framework in operation outlining the Christian journey: who a Christian is within the here and now compared to who they will become in the future must solicit a change in behavior, thought, and deed. Held together in tension, this eschatological reality embraces the here and now perspective. It allows for the dynamic relationship between the Holy Spirit and the human agent to be further revealed and identifies a Christian’s engagement with the dynamic

²² For more on the historical development of the theology of work see Griesinger, “Theology of Work,” 291–304; or Mackenzie, “Faith and Work,” 145–62.

²³ *The Holy Bible, New International Version*.

Holy Spirit who will empower, lead, guide, and open up a breadth of possibilities in the development of any of the charisms/gifts. Larive writes:

New creation's requirement to emerge from what was already there presupposes two pre-existing theological conditions: an original creation *ex nihilo*, requiring nothing precedes it except the Uncreated Creator, and, once that is done, a continuing maintenance of a creation that is in flux. It requires also some discarding of what becomes obsolete, undesirable or harmful. This function depends on God as the original Creator and continuing Maintainer, the acts of *ex nihilo* and *creatio continua* respectively, whose functions are foundational and protological but intertwined with the doing of new things . . .²⁴

Creation (whether *ex nihilo* or *continua*) must be “protological because it sets the boundary conditions for creativity,” and ensures that any engagement as co-creative agents can never surpass the limits of what God has already envisioned.²⁵ This understanding is presented in Ephesians 2:10 where it states that “we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”²⁶ Consideration of this verse in light of the present discussion immediately raises the question: What has God, the protological Creator, already “envisioned” to be included in those “good works”? Remembering that the protological action of Creator God carries within it an “unlimited” possibility of those works as understood and viewed through the concept of *plēroma*.²⁷

Larive, in his work *After Sunday*, theologically engages the concept of *plēroma* by understanding God as the “householder” who in caring for his *oikos* (household) does so from a position of fullness that is understood in contradistinction to scarcity.²⁸ Larive determines that scarcity is a social construct driven by a capitalist system and a market economy whereby success is to consume and maximize.²⁹ By distinction, *plēroma* is a

²⁴ Larive, *After Sunday*, 88.

²⁵ Larive, *After Sunday*, 100–101.

²⁶ *The Holy Bible, New International Version*.

²⁷ *Plēroma* is defined as “fullness,” “filling,” “fulfillment,” “completion.” “Pleroma,” *Strong’s Concordance*, 4138.

²⁸ Larive, *After Sunday*, 140.

²⁹ Larive, *After Sunday*, 140, 141.

“timeless truth” set outside such constraints.³⁰ The act of creation and creation itself testifies to the *plēroma* of God who has created in vastness and abundance rather than in scarcity. Further, that it is within this *plēroma* that the dynamic interaction between the Triune God and the human agent can additionally be understood. Most specifically for the purposes of this chapter, a *plēroma* can be evidenced in the relationship between the pneumatological Holy Spirit and the human agent, with whom the Holy Spirit engages dynamically throughout the Christian journey as they are drawn towards the *eschaton* of the new creation. I argue that this engagement is not simply for the purposes of sanctification, nor for the purposes—as understood in Volf’s theology—of work of *transformatio mundi*, but also in relation to the development of the charisms as undertaken by the human agent in and through their everyday work and that this carries an eschatological significance.

Circling back to the foundational starting point of a theology of work, Larive further develops the concept of *plēroma* in light of “good and godly work” by asking this question: What is it that others have that one can also have that is not subject to laws of scarcity?³¹ He suggests that the answer is found in considering the “skills and virtues” that are required and developed within daily life and work and that they are “internally related to the results they produce such that means and ends cannot be disconnected.”³² In other words, *how* a person works and *who* a person is while working directly impacts the end result of their work. He further argues that because skills and virtues are “internally related,” they are therefore “not subject to scarcity” as understood within a capitalist system and that “to possess a virtue or a skill does not mean that there is one less on the market.”³³ He concludes that good and godly work will be “ennobled by a divine *plēroma* that breaks through ordinary barter and

³⁰ Larive, *After Sunday*, 140.

³¹ Larive, *After Sunday*, 141. Larive understands “good and godly work” to be work that is done based upon skills and the virtues that have been infused with an “overarching power for moral goodness” (142).

³² Larive, *After Sunday*, 141.

³³ Larive, *After Sunday*, 141.

exchange,” and therefore any further development of virtues and skills towards “promoting goodness” is to be advocated.³⁴

Christians are not simply given gifts (along with skills, talents, and abilities) so that they can do God’s will in and through their daily work for the purposes of the “new creation,” as Volf suggests, but so that they can fulfill the promise of Ephesians 2:10 as they push towards the *plēroma* of the *eschaton*. In their co-creative cooperation with God and as they are drawn towards the *eschaton*, they are wrapped up in the dual process of sanctification and in the development towards the expanse of the *plēroma* of the gifts that they have been given. In this way, if human work as an end product can be viewed as co-creativity that will be a work that remains as part of the new creation, then it is logically consistent to suggest that the “means” to that end also becomes part of the new creation. Or more specifically, if “work” can be determined to be co-creativity, then the development of one’s gifts, skills, and virtues should also be considered as part of the new creation. Drawing from Volf’s already established premise, this is not too far a stretch and one that is a naturally intended consequence within his theology of work. Based upon this reasoning and logic, further implications and biblical imperatives can be drawn out.

Final Comments: Implications and the Biblical Imperative

Any cultivation by the human agent of the Spirit-given “gifts” that take place in and through everyday mundane work should be viewed as co-creativity. While it is the Holy Spirit who gives “gifts” as he determines, there continues to be a dynamic relationship between the Holy Spirit and the human agent in relation to those gifts that goes beyond the purposes of sanctification as deemed necessary for the making of a “holy” life. Instead, as understood against an eschatological backdrop and within the frame of the protological Creator, there

³⁴ Larive, *After Sunday*, 141, 142, 164.

exists a *plēroma* through which the “gifts” of the Spirit can be developed as the human agent engages as co-creator. Drawing from the concept of *plēroma*, and especially via the engagement of the human agent with the Holy Spirit, there remains the understanding that the potential development of those gifts is extensive. Further, and as understood within the context of work, the cultivation of those gifts has a direct influence on the type of worker/employer that will emerge and develop. Taking Volf’s understanding of *transformatio mundi* into consideration ensures that this development of the individual gifts will also be brought into the new creation. This line of thinking suggests that the human agent as co-creator can influence others for both the here and now and future implications through their everyday work. Therefore, “how” a human goes about their work matters; indeed, how the human agent as co-creator uses their gifts and the level to which they develop those gifts carries a lasting significance.

Scriptural engagement suggests as such, entreating the development of one’s gifts for the sake of the other. For example, Romans 12 encourages Christians to “offer their bodies as living sacrifices” and to “be transformed” given that “each member belongs to all the others.”³⁵ While this passage exhorts Christians to use their gifts towards their intended purpose, I would further suggest that there is an understanding that these gifts be developed towards the fullness of their expansive properties. For example:

If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.³⁶

Along the same lines, and with specific intention towards Christians serving the body of Christ, Ephesians 4 expands:

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all

³⁵ Rom 12:1, 2, 5.

³⁶ Rom 12:6–8.

reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.³⁷

In this instance, the roles given and opportunities for the development of those roles is set in the context of mutuality. It is an understanding that to meet the “shared needs” of others will require a “maturity” to be reached within the development of the roles listed. The expressed purpose of this is for the reaching of the “whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” In other words, to become mature to the full measure can only be done by meeting the needs of others, which in and of itself offers an expansive *plēroma* to move in and toward, since the meeting of the needs of others is itself an extensive endeavor. Here again, we can identify the concepts of “working” for the “body of Christ” within an understanding of *plēroma* as set against an eschatological backdrop. The reminder of 1 Corinthians 12 is that just as “gifts” are given in diversity; it can be understood that it is the “same God” who distributes these gifts, albeit via the appropriation of the Holy Spirit. This means that the God of creation who has “prepared in advance” a *plēroma* of “good works” has envisioned within this preparation the allowance of the dynamic Holy Spirit to engage with the human agent, offering an expansive possibility and potential for the development of those gifts. Larive supports this thinking by suggesting that it is the “eschatological promise of Christ” that is “beckoning towards the doing of new things (new creation).”³⁸ Going a step further, he challenges the thinking by stating that,

an eschatological Christ is a *temporal* phenomenon, not restricted to eternity, coming into the context of human history, leading with the exemplification and promise of new things and new creation, things and creations open for humans to accomplish in their work. Jesus did not postpone this fulfilment until the end of time but demonstrated it every day during his life . . . these demonstrations form the basis of the proleptic promise of the Christ-event. They are nothing more than exhibitions of how breakthroughs, large and small, are possible in an evolving creation that can be “stretched” for doing new things.³⁹

³⁷ Eph 4:11–13.

³⁸ Larive, *After Sunday*, 76.

³⁹ Larive, *After Sunday*, 76. Emphasis retained.

Therefore, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, such as in 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, and Ephesians 4, are not simply for a here and now engagement for the current community operating as the body of Christ but are also set against an eschatological backdrop. The gifts are not simply given for the purposes of human “work” that will lead to the new creation but can be further understood in terms of the Christian themselves as “being the work” that is continually renewed in the co-creation for the purposes of *transformatio mundi* and as the work that remains. As co-creators, humans do not create in isolation but in cooperation with God, understanding that human “creativity” is set in the context and bounds of God’s creativity and not outside of it—and that what “might” be possible is only possible because the protological Father and Creator God has already conceived of it.

This co-creation is only possible through the empowerment and gifting of the dynamic Holy Spirit, who leads the human agent towards the eschatological promise of Christ in which all things will be made new. It is within this context that the human agent can engage in co-creativity through the use and development of the gifts that they have been given. In addition, there is rich potential as the human agent, set against an eschatological backdrop and in dynamic relationship with the pneumological Holy Spirit, exercises their gifts: in and through their everyday work, a person can discover more of who they are via those gifts and who they will have the potential of becoming. Finally, it is only through their use that any person can discover the *plēroma* of the gifts for the here and now alongside the eschatological reality. As individual Christians work toward developing the gifts they have been given, within and for the purposes of their daily work, they will further discover and develop the Christian worker/leader they can become as part and parcel of their cooperation with God as co-creator. In this way, co-creativity set against an eschatological backdrop reveals that “we” become the “work” as “we work.”

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