

Why learn and why work?

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We need to think carefully about what we do, what we put our energy into. If we claim to serve God, and want to avoid deep feelings of hypocrisy, we need to do those things that we are sure God wants us to do. So what is the Christian justification for our daily learning, and what is the Christian justification for our daily work, including our teaching?

Three Biblical principles.

1. **‘Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.’ Colossians 3:17**

The combination of ‘whatever’ and ‘everything’ in this verse covers all that we do, including our learning and working. Certainly Paul thought that we should do our daily work for the Lord, even the humble work of the slave:

Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ [Colossians 3:23,24].

We serve Christ in our daily work, because of Christ’s universal role in the universe.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together... For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross [Colossians 1:15-20].¹

Honouring, praising and serving Christ the creator and sustainer of the universe needs more emphasis in our thinking and our worship. It is essential that whatever we do in any area of life, we should do whole-heartedly, consciously serving the Lord Christ in the action.

Some pastoral comments:

- If we are not sure that we can serve Christ in doing any action, we should not do it.
- If we are sure that we can serve Christ in doing any action, then we should do it intentionally to serve Christ.
- Regarding things we do as ‘neutral’ is dangerous in the long term. If we are not confident that they serve Christ, then we may more easily do them in a less than Christian way. And they will have the effect of giving us a deep feeling of

¹ See also John 1:1-5

hypocrisy, which will have very bad long-term consequences. This is especially the case if there are some actions that we do in which we are confident that serve Christ, and other actions in which we do not have that confidence. It is a particular problem when we feel that major investments of time and energy don't serve Christ.

- If we do not intentionally serve Christ in a major life activity, then we will adopt other sinful motivations, with disastrous consequences.

It is perhaps relevant than Paul's advice in debated issues is that 'whatever does not proceed from faith is sin' [Romans 14:23], and that when discussing our evangelistic lifestyle, he wrote 'So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God' [1 Corinthians 10:31].

We are told in Ecclesiastes, 'Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might' [9:10], and that it is good and fitting 'to find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils' [5:18]. Even though there is frustration built into all human activities, 'God keeps them occupied [in their toil] with the joy of their hearts' [Ecclesiastes 5:20].

So, in this context, we need to be fully confident that God regards learning and working as activities that Christians should and can do in the name of Christ, for God's glory.²

2. We are created to love to learn.

Calvin famously began *The Institutes*³ with his definitive statement: 'Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists in two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves'.⁴ 'Ourselves' here is not an introspective study of the individual human, but a study of humanity, created, fallen, and restored. And creation is both the work of God, and also the place in which humanity is set by God, and which shares the same story of creation, fall, and restoration. The desire to know wisdom about God and ourselves has been implanted within us by God. So Calvin wrote,

For we see implanted in human nature some sort of desire to search out the truth to which man would not aspire at all unless he had savoured it. Human understanding then possesses some power of perception, since it is by nature captivated by love of truth.⁵

This love of truth is the deep desire to know what is true about God, about ourselves, and about the universe made by God. And if we are always learning, then God is always teaching.

[God] revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe....the Lord began to show himself in the visible splendour of his apparel...he shows his glory to us, whenever we and wherever we cast our gaze...this skilful ordering of the universe is for us a sort or mirror in which we can contemplate God, who is otherwise invisible.⁶

² Learning includes life-long learning in every area of life. Working includes all the work that we do, subsidized, paid, and unpaid, personal as well as public

³ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, [ICR]. This is his summary of Christian theology. I use Calvin in this paper, because of his great insights into our topics.

⁴ Calvin, ICR 1.1.1 [That is Book 1, Chapter 1, Section 1.] In the case of Calvin's Commentaries and Sermons, the reference will be to the passage of Scripture on which the comment was made.

⁵ Calvin, ICR 2.2.12

⁶ Calvin, ICR 1.5.1

Those who have learnt to learn [by learning the liberal arts] have clearer perceptions of reality of what God has done.

Indeed men who have either quaffed or even tasted the liberal arts penetrate with their aid more deeply into the secrets of divine wisdom...there is no one to whom the Lord does not abundantly show his wisdom...⁷

So the careful study of the universe brings blessing: 'For astronomy is very pleasant, but also very useful to be known: it cannot be denied that this art unfolds the admirable wisdom of God'.⁸

Indeed Calvin claimed that the ability to learn and invent is present among the heathen, for the Spirit's gifts are found in all humanity, both in arts and sciences, and in daily skills.

For the invention of arts, and of other things which serve to the common use and conveniences of lie, is a gift of God by no means to be despised, and a faculty worthy of commendation...the excellent gifts of the Spirit are diffused throughout the whole human race. Moreover the liberal arts and sciences have descended to us from the heathen...it is well known how far and how widely extends the usefulness of the art of the carpenter.⁹

These gifts come from God the Spirit.

If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonour the Spirit of God.¹⁰

So we should not despise these gifts, lest in doing so we despise God the giver of the gifts. Even when Calvin was commenting on Paul's comments in 1 Corinthians 1 about the futility of human wisdom in the saving plan of God, he was careful to defend the ordinary gifts of God which enrich human life.

Paul would not be so very unreasonable as to condemn out of hand those arts, which, without any doubt, are splendid gifts of God, gifts which we would call instruments for helping men carry out worth-while activities, Therefore there is nothing irreligious about those arts, for they contain sound learning, and depend on principles of truth; and since they are useful and suitable for the general affairs of human society, there is no doubt that they have come from the Holy Spirit.¹¹

For human learning, the use of reason, is worthy of honour, as it is the gift of God.

For what is more noble than the reason of man, by which he stands out far above all other animals? How greatly deserving of honour are the liberal sciences, which refine a man so as to make him truly human! Besides, what a great number of rare products they yield! Who would not use the highest praise to extol statesmanship, by

⁷ Calvin, ICR 1.5.2

⁸ Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis* 1:16

⁹ Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis* 4:20

¹⁰ Calvin, ICR 2.2.15,16, and see also ICR 2.2.17

¹¹ Calvin, *Commentary on 1 Cor.* 1:17

which states, empires, and kingdoms are maintained? – to say nothing of other things!¹²

Whatever part of the universe and its life we are studying, we should treat it with respect. For, as Randall Zachman shows us, for Calvin, the universe is the theatre of God's glory, the living image of God and the garment of God.¹³ This means that we should respect the evidence we are considering, and also receive it with gratitude. 'Let the world become our school if we rightly desire to know God.'¹⁴

What we see in the universe is the effect of sin, as well as the gracious work of God,

He shows how the creation has in hope been made subject to vanity... all created things in themselves blameless, both on earth and in the visible heaven, undergo punishment for our sins; for it has not happened through their own fault, that they are liable to corruption. Thus the condemnation of mankind is imprinted on the heavens, and on the earth, and on all creatures.¹⁵

Nevertheless, we still see the glory of God in our world:

Agriculture, but likewise all the arts which contribute to the advantage of mankind, are the gifts of God, and that all that belongs to skilful invention has been imparted by him to the minds of men... If we ought to form such an opinion about agriculture and mechanical arts, what shall we think of the learned and exalted sciences, such as Medicine, Jurisprudence, Astronomy, Geometry, Logic, and such like?... Shall we not in them also behold and acknowledge his goodness, that his praise and glory may be celebrated both in the smallest and in the greatest affairs?¹⁶

In all our learning, we are, in words attributed to the astronomer, Johannes Kepler, 'thinking God's thoughts after him'.

3. Our daily work is a way in which we love our neighbour

God blesses daily work with success [Deuteronomy 2:7,8:18, 15:10, 2 Corinthians 9:6-11], and the Bible teaches us to work hard and responsibly [Proverbs 6:6-11, 10:4,5, 12:24, etc]. God gifts us for our work, and allocates to us the work we should do:

each individual has his own kind of living assigned to him by the Lord... no task will be so sordid and base, provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God's sight.¹⁷

Our daily work is also a way we relate to our neighbours. Calvin wrote of our closeness to our neighbours,

Since he has stamped his image upon us, and since we share a common nature, this ought to inspire us to provide for one another. The one who seeks to be exempt from the care of his neighbour is

¹² Calvin, *Commentary on 1 Cor.* 1:20

¹³ See Zachman, Randall C. {2006}, *John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, pp. 231-242

¹⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, Argument

¹⁵ Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* 8:21

¹⁶ Calvin, *Commentary on Isaiah* 28:29, 306

¹⁷ Calvin, ICR, 3.10.6

disfiguring himself and declaring that he now longer wishes to be a man.¹⁸

The division of labour¹⁹ means that we serve others through what we do, and they serve us through what they do. To care for others is to express true and godly humanity. The best good works include our daily tasks of, ‘digging earth...sewing and tailoring,’²⁰ for by these we honour God and benefit our neighbours. The recovery of the value of ordinary daily work was one of the most striking features of the Reformation. Previously it had been ‘spiritual’ work which was honoured, while ordinary daily work was undervalued. Now daily work was seen to honour God. So Calvin wrote,

We know that the principal service that God requires of us is that we devote ourselves entirely to him...we will follow the vocation we have when we are called, without pride, ambition or envy. God takes delight in this....²¹

All human tasks should be an expression of loving our neighbour. Adam Smith wrote, from a different world-view:

It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.²²

Of course there are many good reasons to do work, and many good reasons to do paid work, including the income it provides.²³ And there are good reasons to choose to do one job rather than another, including the evangelistic opportunities that may occur. But in all of this, we ought to ensure that we can see how we love our neighbours through our work, do our work in ways that best express that love, however indirectly, and consciously think of our neighbours as we work, and pray that they will benefit from our work.

This good desire will produce tensions. We may work for an organization which has good aims but is not achieving them as effectively as it might, or not doing its best for its neighbours. Or it may serve some neighbours well [for example, the shareholders], and other neighbours badly [the customers, or the workers]. We may do good work in research that finally does not achieve the outcome we wanted. We may do unpaid good works in our community, which later wisdom discovers to have been less than productive. All human work is subject to futility by the judgement of God. But if we do not retain the motivation of loving our neighbour in our work, then we will limit ourselves to serving ourselves, and may take advantage of our neighbour. As Adam Smith pointed out, our neighbours will in fact benefit from our welfare: but our Christian calling is to increase that benefit, and work to increase it.

We are made in the image of God [Genesis 1:26-29], and the God in whose image we are made is revealed in Genesis 1 as ‘God the worker’. We are made in the image of God the worker, with the task of cultivation and to classification [Genesis 2:15,20]. The Christian

¹⁸ Calvin, *Sermon on Galatians* 6:9-11

¹⁹ Seen in Genesis 4:20-22

²⁰ Calvin, *Sermons on Galatians* 5:19-23

²¹ Calvin, *Sermons on Galatians*, 5:19-23

²² Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, chapter 2

²³ 2 Thessalonians 3:12

world-view has recently been criticized for promoting the abuse of creation.²⁴ As human beings are made in the image of ‘God the worker’, we should follow his example:

Your dominion endures through all generations. The LORD is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made...

The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing [Psalm 145:13, 15-16].

God wants to bless us. And God want make us a blessing to others; to pass on his blessing to others through us.

Three Biblical principles.

- 1. ‘Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.’**
- 2. We are created to love to learn.**
- 3. Our daily work is a way in which we love our neighbour**

‘Heavenly Father, please make me the person you want me to be, prepare me to do the good works you want me to do, and help me to do them.

I pray for my neighbours whom I will serve through my work today: please bless them, and help them be a blessing to others.

Please use me for your good purposes for this world. Please forgive my sins of learning and my sins of working. Please help me invest in my knowledge and skills for the sake of future service to others.

Lord Jesus Christ, I do everything today in your name, giving thanks to God the Father and glorifying him through you. Amen’

²⁴ See Lynn White, ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis’, *Science* 155 (1967), pp.1203-07.