Faith and Work

Part 2 of 2: Integrating a Biblical Theology of Work in the Life of the Church
with Darrell Bock, Greg Forster
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Darrell Bock: You know what's really interesting as I'm hearing you talk is that there are words that our culture likes to lift up and make central.

I mean I'm thinking here obviously “liberty” is an important word and “freedom” and “choices” and that kind of thing. But there's danger in those concepts if they become strictly self focused. And a good theology of work connects you to the creation. It connects you to the Creator. It connects you to your responsibility to other people. So your description of steward is what made me think about this.

And in that connection with other people, and in that connection with the ideals of service and contributing, you set the framework for allowing work to speak positively into your life, whether it is making that widget that allows that brake to work, not only are cars safer, but lives can be saved.

Maybe it's another innovation that allows something as simple as a camera to work in a car so that when you back it up you don't run into the car behind you and do damage. There are all these little things that come with work, even a waiter or someone who is doing a service in the service industry. The way they deliver the food and the way they interact with the customers to make that a pleasant experience.

I was in a presentation recently by an executive of Chick-fil-A, in which they talk about how they go out of their way to make sure the people don't just come to have a meal, but there's an expression of appreciation for the fact that they've come to get chicken at Chick-fil-A, for which all the cows are grateful.

Greg Forster: Yeah, absolutely. [Laughter] And I think you've really put your finger on something important by drawing the connection to freedom, because I think we can forget that a moral character, and a cultural so individual moral character and also a culture, a public character if I may put it that way oriented towards serving others rather than serving ourselves is absolutely essential to any freedom worthy of the name and is in fact the precondition for keeping any freedom worthy of the name. That people who are oriented toward serving themselves and satisfying themselves will not stay free for long, because they will be at the mercy of those who can control the conditions for satisfying their desires.
If you believe that the way to have a good and happy life is to satisfy your own desires, to gratify your own wishes, you will be at the mercy of those who can make that possible for you. And you will lose your freedom very quickly.

If you have an orientation towards serving, others not only will you be liberated from control by others, but also in the long run that creates the only possible cultural conditions in which people can be given personal liberties, including all the personal liberties like freedom of religion.

We evangelicals are absolutely militant about freedom of religion. And I think we need to see the interconnectedness of a culture of service to others with all of our freedoms including freedom of religion. That we are going to lose we're going to lose the cultural basis of freedom if we don't have a culture that helps people see the way to have a good and happy life is to serve other people.

Now obviously we can't disconnect that from God and the gospel, right?

Darrell Bock Uh huh.

Greg Forster We don't want it to become a mere legalistic message, but integrated with reminding people where this comes from, reminding people who they're ultimately serving, which is God. To orient human activity towards serving each other rather than satisfying ourselves is the essential precondition of freedom, but also freedom is not worth having unless it is freedom for that kind of culture.

Darrell Bock Now let's turn our attention a little bit to pastors and what you do with them.

Greg Forster Yeah.

Darrell Bock Obviously we've set the ground work for why holistic discipleship should be talked about. Let's talk a little bit about what you see in the churches, and I'm kind of going to do hopefully a before and after.
Before we think about this and we think about what we generally see in the church and we've already alluded to this a little bit. We see this not being talked about very much or addressed directly and people being left to fend for themselves from Monday to Friday, that kind of thing.

What kinds of things does the Kern Family Foundation do to speak into that void and then what do you hope to see on the other end of it? If I were to paint a picture of what holistic discipleship would look like after having thought about this, what would you expect pastors to be doing on the other end?

*Greg Forster*  Okay, so the before and after picture.

*Darrell Bock*  Right.

*Greg Forster*  I think what we're concerned about in the before picture is that by and large many churches will speak about church activities as if that is the only way to serve God. And the moral message becomes very abstract and high level, "Be a good person," except when it comes to giving to the church and showing up at your Bible study

*Darrell Bock*  So be a busy bee in the pew.

*Greg Forster*  Right. Yeah, yeah, exactly. But then outside that context the call to live the kind of lives that honor God becomes very abstract and intangible. And the implicit message there is that church stuff matters more and is the real path to God, whereas the other stuff is something we put up with because we have to.

On the other in the after picture, we want pastors to talk about what people do all day and all week long as something that is service to God, service to neighbor, and the place where the life that honors God is lived. And that's not to the exclusion of church activities, but the people that I've spoken to who have been spending decades sort of pounding the table for this message, they often report that the big anxiety pastors have is if we do this, how will we get people into the Wednesday night Bible study? And how will we get people to give money to the church? We're barely making ends meet.
But their experience has been that when churches actually change their thinking and describe all of life and all the callings that are present in their congregations as service to God, they find that actually engagement with church activities and giving and all that stuff goes up not down, because people begin to see the church as something that equips them for Christian life 24/7. And when the church steps into that role of equipping people for life 24/7, rather than “getting people into the box,” as one of my pastor friends puts it. "We got to get people inside the box…” The church comes across as self-serving when that is the emphasis.

*Darrell Bock* Right.

*Greg Forster* And people are not motivated to give and get involved in that circumstance. Some specific examples and I wish I could give you hours of examples, but a few specific examples. Mention the workplace in your prayers during the service, again not to the exclusion of other things, but if you've got a congregational prayer in your service, why are we not praying for people's working lives in that part of the service? Bring that before God and let's pray about it and pray that our work will be something that honors and pleases God and serves our neighbor.

Another example and these are just examples and some of these different churches have different ecclesiologies and they might not this might not fit your your mileage may vary. This might not fit your ecclesiology. But many churches are when they get interested in this will adopt the practice of commissioning the laity to their work. The way we commission missionaries to their work.

*Darrell Bock* Oh, that's an interesting idea.

*Greg Forster* So I've talked to several pastors who have tried this. And they have really found it spiritually powerful. So one example, David Gill at Gordon Conwell Seminary talks about how in churches he works with they will once a month have a lay commissioning moment in the service and each month during the year they choose a different type of profession.
So one month it'll be health care workers. And another month it'll be commercial retail workers. And another month it'll be sort of safety services like police and fire and that kind of thing. And through the year they map it out and education. Through the year they map it out so that they've pretty much covered all the bases and nobody feels left out, because everybody has got one month of the year.

And what they do is they just ask everyone who works in that field to stand up, and the pastor just says, “We this congregation commission you to go do your work in this field to honor God and serve your neighbor” and talk a little about how that field serves people and glorifies God.

_Darrell Bock_ That's a great idea.

_Greg Forster_ I just think I've talked to people who say, "Well that doesn't fit with our ecclesiology." And I want to respect ecclesiological differences, but it just strikes me as a very good thing.

_Darrell Bock_ It's a variation of something that we do in the church that I'm at, which is a traditional bible church. And once a month we have the elders come up and just receive people for prayer. And we take ten minutes out of the service for people to come up and they share their requests. We pray with them while the congregation is singing and supporting them in prayer.

And then once that's the first Sunday of every month. And then the third Sunday of every month what we do is we have people come up with their birthdays and their anniversaries. And so if you celebrate a birthday this month or you're having an anniversary and we have them get up, and we get the women to confess how old they are. We have people say how long they've been married and that kind of thing. And what those little touches do is they take the service and they say, “This service is about life.” You aren't just coming here to hear a collection of ideas or be taught theology in the bible detached from life. It's very much connected to life.

And it strikes me that this is another possibility for that kind of time that can be very nicely integrated into a regular rotation of the service to make a point.
You know another idea that strikes me is that we often have personal testimonies about how people are engaged in this or that kind of ministry in the church as a way of encouraging people to participate. Well, what prevents you from taking that time and making it be about how people who have seen the integration of their faith at their work and make that the focus of the conversation.

Absolutely. One other example I've talked to a pastor who has incorporated this into new member intake. So when people become members of their church, the pastors and elders say to them, “We want you to see this church as equipping you and partnering with you in your work.” And so it's actually on the member intake form asking people what they do, what their work is. And then just to it's a framing moment when you become a member of their church.

They say, “We want you to view us as partners with you equipping you for your vocations.”

Now, I know of a church in New York in Manhattan, Apostle's Church in Manhattan, which has formed and I know Redeemer's Church, Tim Keller's church in New York does this as well. What they have done is they have formed some of their small group work around people who share the same jobs. So that when they come together they're [not] only praying for family needs and ministry concerns of the church, but they're able to share their common challenge in the workplace as part of their small group structure. And I thought that's an interesting way to go about it.

Faith and works small groups are actually much more widespread than many people are aware. And part of the problem is this is not the case in those churches you mentioned. But very often those faith and work small groups have been formed as sort of on their own, by the laity or by someone whose job is to cultivate that and it's disconnected from the rest of the church.

And one thing that I think is commendable about the churches you mentioned and some other churches that are doing this is that they are seeking to make that intentional, to integrate that with the whole life of the church so that it's not the lay people have their thing that's over in a corner and has nothing to do with what we do on Sunday morning.
Darrell Bock

Right.

Greg Forster

But so the churches you've mentioned have actually intentionally connected Sunday worship to these faith and work small groups where people can talk about their work more specifically. There's a barrier pastors will often say, “Well, I don't know the ins and outs of every profession. So I can't speak specifically to the plumbers and the doctors and the factory line workers and the landscapers and the stay at home moms and the this and the that.”

Well, you can't get into the details of all those professions. It's not the pastor’s job to kind of understand the ins and outs of every profession. But the pastor does need to help people interpret the meaning of their lives. And that means interpreting the meaning of our work. And then the people who know that profession can kind of pick up the ball from there, and say, "Okay, we who know," whatever our profession is, "How do we then apply this more tangibly?"

Darrell Bock

I think this is an issue of mindset. This is why I like what the Kern Family Foundation is doing, because they're helping pastors think through their mindset in these areas. And what I mean by that is, yeah I can't replicate what goes on in every job. But a good pastor is meeting with people regularly, having lunches with their leaders that kind of thing.

They can come if they ask they have the mindset they can come to understand and try and develop an understanding of what it is that the people in their churches are going through, what they're living through. We'll do it with a sickness. We'll do it with a family issue.

So why can't we do it in the area of work? That's just a mindset problem in my mind.

Greg Forster

Yeah, go have lunch with people in their workplaces. That I often see light bulbs going off over pastor's heads when they we go into homes to have lunch or to have dinner with people in their homes. We visit people in their homes. We go visit the sick in the hospital. Why don't we go have lunch with people in their workplaces? You'd be surprised how much you can pick up just from a visit like that.
That's right. And asking certain questions of people while you're having lunch about their lives where they're living. And then that actually can help the pastor cross the bridge, because what you get is the experience of life that can come through illustrations and through examples and that kind of thing which allows a pastor to salt and pepper their messages with where people really are.

So my own sense is that this is we train pastors at seminaries to do a whole lot of things and to think about a whole lot of areas, but if you don't have the category you're not going to go there. And so developing the sense of having the category and going there and thinking about going there, and in doing it with some intentionality that's how you kind of get over the hump.

So hopefully the after has these kinds of elements in it, sermons where we're talking about what goes on from 9:00 to 5:00. People who think about there's a subtle thing. There's another subtle thing I want to be sure we highlight in what's being said here. It's not just going to work to think about how can I minister the gospel to the person that I'm sitting next to, which is how most people think about being a Christian at their work is all about. It's about how I do my work Christianly.

Yeah, and I think the two things that we tend to fall into, one is evangelism narrowly understood. And the other is ethics narrowly understood. So yeah, don't steal from workplace, that kind of thing. Well, okay, yes don't steal from your workplace. YesThat's essential, right?

Ethical integrity is important, and sharing the gospel with people when opportunity arises is important. But understanding the work itself as an activity that we're made for and an activity that we are being restored for in our redemption is much deeper than that and will also provide the context in which ethical behavior and sort of sharing the gospel with people becomes much easier and much more successful.

Well, this has been a good introduction I think into holistic discipleship. This document, Theology that Works is an important introduction into this area. If someone wanted is it impossible for someone to get a hold of this piece from the foundation?
The Table Podcast  |  Faith and Work

**Greg Forster**  |  Yeah, we have our seminary network is called the Oikonomia Network. And that's a Greek word that means both stewardship and economics. And it reflects our desire to bring the idea of good stewardship back in our workplaces where the economy happens.

In the New Testament this word is used both referred to church stewardship and to refer to our activity in the workplace. So the website is called oikonomianetwork.org. And at that website the paper Theology that Works is there. And we have a number of other resources that people can check out.

**Darrell Bock**  |  Well, that's great. Well, what we're planning on doing beyond this one podcast is to actually systematically work through the sections of this document and kind of flesh out what is being expressed there both conceptually as well as practically ask, "All right, what does this actually look like? Or what might this look like?" To stimulate people's thinking in this regard.

So, Greg, I really appreciate your coming in to be a part of this today and to launch this initiative with us. We are thrilled about it and are looking forward to many more visits with one another. You probably won't always be here in Dallas. We'll probably have to do a little bit of Skype work since you're up there in Wisconsin.

**Greg Forster**  |  There's a section of the paper on technology. We can talk about that.

**Darrell Bock**  |  There you go.

**Greg Forster**  |  It's applied.

**Darrell Bock**  |  That's right. Well, we're looking forward to more interactions. We're certainly looking forward to the conference coming up. We just appreciate you taking the time to be with us and introducing us to this topic.

**Greg Forster**  |  Well, thanks for having me. I really appreciate it.

**Darrell Bock**  |  And we thank you for being a part of the Table where we discuss the issue of the relationship between God and culture.