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SERMONS THAT GO TO WORK:
HOW PREACHERS APPLY SERMONS TO THE
WORKPLACE

BY

ROBERT J. TOORNSTRA

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE
FACULTY OF COVENANT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

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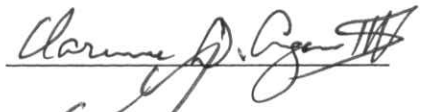
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Abstract

Christians have difficulty applying their faith in their daily vocation, in part because the sermons they hear fail to connect to the needs they face in their workplaces. Preachers often do not understand the challenges faced by their congregants in their work, and so preachers have difficulty applying their sermons to the working lives of their congregants. Although there is a growing body of literature on the topic of vocation, the evidence suggests that there remains a significant gap between the pulpit and the pew when it comes to applying sermons in the workplace. In order to better to become more effective at applying sermons in the workplace, preachers must understand how to translate a robust biblical theology of work to the everyday needs faced by their listeners. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore how Christians apply sermons in the workplace.

Three research questions guided this study: 1) In what ways and to what extent do Christians apply sermons in the workplace? 2) What difficulties do Christians face in applying sermons in the workplace? And, 3) What factors help Christians to apply sermons in the workplace? This study was designed as a qualitative study, employing a semi-structured interview protocol with eight diverse individuals from a variety of professions. Each individual self-identified as a professing Christian who consciously tried to apply sermons in their workplace. The data was analyzed using the constant-comparative method.

The findings of the study demonstrated that listeners genuinely desired to apply sermons in their workplace, and while they often do hear things that are relevant at work, there are specific steps that pastors can take to equip their listeners to better apply

sermons at work. The study suggests three ways pastors can do this. The first conclusion is that pastors must find ways to incorporate a robust theology of work into their preaching in a way that identifies with the experiences of their listeners. The second conclusion is that preachers must consider how to incorporate a theology of vocation into the broader ministries of the church. Finally, the study concludes that preachers can be encouraged in that sermon application is usually a long-term, formative process.

To my parents, Bert & Janet, who first taught me the value of hard work;
And to my wife Amy, who has been a faithful co-laborer with me, for the sake of the
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Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION.
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Chapter One

Introduction

How does preaching go to work? The sermon has concluded, and congregants begin to file out of the sanctuary – a stay-at-home dad, a project manager for a Fortune-500 company, a retired couple, a handful of unemployed folks, and a mixed multitude of graduate students, firefighters, nurses, musicians, and sanitation workers. Some wear white collars or blue collars, others carry titles, and more than a few are carrying wounds from workplace hurts and disappointments: promotions that slipped away, discord among coworkers, fulfillment that is perpetually delayed. Will that morning’s sermon go to the office, the studio, the classroom, or the family room?

A volume of literature suggests a need to engage faith in the workplace. Dr. Amy Sherman, director of the Center on Faith in Communities, observes that most people can identify “the brokenness of the world and the desperate need to advance justice and shalom. But we need to learn how to better steward our vocational power to advance the common good, and to offer a foretaste of the justice and shalom that God’s kingdom promises.”¹ She calls on pastors to help “their congregations think theologically about vocation...[and] to remind people that Sunday is indeed connected to Monday....”² Interestingly, it is not only those in the Christian community who are calling for the integration of faith and work. Michelle Stevens, a columnist for the United Kingdom-

¹ Morgan Jones, “Calling All Callings: An Interview with Amy Sherman,” *Christianity Today*, January 2012, 65.

² *Ibid.*, 66.

based human resource journal *People Management*, points out, “Indeed, public discussion in the US is now shifting to the role faith plays as the foundation for ethical business practices.”³ Writing in the respected business journal *The Academy of Management Perspectives*, Karen Cash and George Grey report that the need to apply personal faith in the workplace is not limited to the demand for ethical business practices. They explain, “Human Resource professionals report dealing with increasing numbers of employees with problems that seem to cross the lines between the spiritual, personal, and professional.”⁴ The search for significance and purpose in the workplace, they suggest, “is intensified by concerns over such workplace realities as technology and the restructuring of organizations.”⁵

If experts in the realm of business and human resources recognize the need to bring religion into the workplace, can the same be said of the broader church community? Or, to return to the original question, does the sermon go to work? Do congregants who diligently listen to sermons preached each Sunday apply them to the needs presented in the workplace on Monday? Are preachers who are faithfully striving to proclaim God’s word each week making clear connections with their congregants who spend the bulk of their time in the working world? How are sermons helping congregants face life’s challenges when they clean teeth, teach fractions to third-graders, or paint houses?

³ Michelle Stevens, “Religion: The Last Workplace Taboo,” *People Management*, February 1, 2013, 33.

⁴ Karen C. Cash and George R. Gray, “A Framework for Accommodating Religion and Spirituality in the Workplace,” *Academy of Management Perspectives* 14, no. 3 (August 2000): 125.

⁵ Ibid.

Problem Statement

Miroslav Volf, professor of theology at Yale University is pessimistic about the extent to which Christians engage their faith with their work. He laments, "Given the paramount importance of work in both liberal and socialist economic and social theory, it is remarkable that in our world dominated by work, a serious crisis⁶ in work had to strike before church bodies paid much attention to the problem of human work."⁷ Ben Witherington III, New Testament professor at Asbury College, echoes Volf's concern and lays the blame at the feet of theologians throughout the ages. He writes, "It will perhaps surprise you to discover how little theologians have actually discussed work. In fact, the first modern, full-dress theology of work does not seem to have been written until the 1950s which I find astounding considering how much of our waking hours are consumed by work."⁸ If Volf and Witherington are to be believed, the vast volume of literature on both economics and theology offers little to bridge the gap between work and faith.

Widely-respected homiletician Haddon Robinson argues that this lack of theological reflection on work is producing dire consequences in both the pulpit and the pew. Robinson contends, "Does selling insurance, running a laundromat, driving a cab or delivering mail matter to God? Judging by our preaching, not much."⁹ But, just how

⁶ The crisis to which Volf is referring to is a general dissatisfaction that he argues many people experience in their work.

⁷ Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 69.

⁸ Ben Witherington III, *Work: A Kingdom Perspective on Labor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2011), xi.

⁹ Haddon Robinson, "When The Sermon Goes To Work," in *The Art & Craft of Biblical Preaching*, ed. Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 677.

accurate are these assessments – and how acute is this gap? Doug Sherman, president of Career Impact Ministries, and William Hendricks, president of The Giftedness Center, studied the relationship between preaching and the workplace and found the results alarming. They polled two thousand professing Christians, asking them specifically, “Have you ever in your life heard a sermon, read a book, listened to a tape, or been to a seminar that applied biblical principles to everyday work issues?”¹⁰ After collating the data, they reported that “more than ninety percent said no.”¹¹ The church has neglected to articulate a theology of work, and consequently, congregants have a difficult time applying their faith in the workplace.

Similarly, John Knapp, founding director of the Frances Marlin Mann Center for Ethics and Leadership, reiterates the seriousness of this problem. He states of his research, “No respondent could recall a sermon or lesson at church that specifically addressed business or workplace issues, though several cited teachings on more general topics (e.g., love forgiveness, tolerance) that could apply in a variety of social settings.”¹² Knapp extrapolates from his data, suggesting that this chasm between pulpit and pew wounds the parishioner. He writes, “Our research discovered a widely held perception of clergy as disinterested in church members’ work lives.”¹³ Drawing on his interactions with Christians in the business world, Robinson argues that Christians in the workplace

¹⁰ Doug Sherman and William Hendricks, *Your Work Matters to God* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1987), 16.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 25.

¹³ John C. Knapp, *How the Church Fails Businesspeople and What Can be Done About It* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2012), 24.

“...respected their ministers and appreciated their dedication, but they also felt that their pastors were out of touch with them.”¹⁴ It would seem that church members want their preachers to understand their work and to preach sermons that are relevant to the needs and concerns they encounter in the workplace.

In their book *Church on Sunday, Work on Monday: The Challenge of Fusing Christian Values With Business Life*, researchers Laura Nash and Scotty McLennan draw attention to this widespread desire, stating, “Christians are looking for ways to live their Christian beliefs and values at work, as they do at home and at church,... yet even deeply faithful Christians in business tend to feel a strong disconnect between their experience of the church or private faith, and the spirit-challenging conditions of the workplace.”¹⁵ The realm of church is, unfortunately, viewed by many as divorced from the realities encountered by believers in the workplace. Acknowledging this disconnect, Miroslav Volf calls for the church to address these workplace realities. He states: “...Christian organizations will need to rely on careful theological reflection on the complex issues related to work. In protestant circles, such theological reflection is, however, in short supply.”¹⁶ In other words, according to Volf, the church has yet to articulate a theology of work that can be passed along to its congregants and applied in the workplace.

However, all the theological reflection in the world will serve no purpose until it is aimed at a specific goal. That is, any theological reflection that the church may do is of little value if it does not help the congregation fulfill the God-ordained purpose of work.

¹⁴ Robinson and Larson, *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, 677.

¹⁵ Laura Nash and Scotty McLennan, *Church on Sunday, Work on Monday: The Challenge of Fusing Christian Values with Business Life* (San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 2001), 5.

¹⁶ Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 6.

Volf stresses, “Since a theology of work has normative ethical implications, its task is not merely to interpret the world of work in a particular way, but to lead the present world of work ‘towards the promised and the hoped-for transformation.’”¹⁷ A theology of work, fully developed and properly applied, can help Christians play their part in the outworking of God’s goal for creation.

What role, then, might preaching play in developing and applying a theology of work? Widely-respected church planter and theologian Tim Keller sees great potential. In his textbook on church-planting and cultural engagement, he urges the church – and one can’t help but believe that these words are directed at preachers – to “disciple our people to work in the world out of a Christian worldview.”¹⁸ Similarly, Andy Stanley, founding pastor of North Point Ministries, describes the urgency for preaching that is relevant to the needs of those sitting in church on Sunday morning:

There are husbands teetering on the brink of unfaithfulness. Wives whose schedules are unsustainable. Couples who are drowning in a sea of debt. Teenagers who are there because their parents forced them to come. Young men who have been told they are gay. Young ladies who have been told their worth goes no further than their physical beauty. There they sit. Silent. Waiting. Hoping. Doubting. Anticipating.... This is the world we have been called to address.¹⁹

Although Stanley does not specifically mention work here, he revisits the importance – and the potential – of sermons that apply the scriptures to needs in all areas of life, including work. He continues, “At the end of the day, I want the people in my congregation to trust God with every arena of their lives: family, finances, career,

¹⁷ Ibid., 83.

¹⁸ Tim Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 332.

¹⁹ Andy Stanley and Lane Jones, *Communicating For a Change* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2006), 89.

relationships, everything.”²⁰ Stanley clearly pushes for sermons that speak into the realm of work.

Dan Doriani, vice president and professor of theology at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri is optimistic that preachers can indeed help congregants apply sermons to every area of life, including the workplace. He states, “Teachers²¹ can overcome these challenges by fostering dialogical communication.”²² He clarifies what he means by “dialogical communication” when he writes, “Preachers must exegete the congregation as well as the text. To exegete the congregation is to know its heart, its status before God. Preachers should take the joys and troubles of their congregation to the Bible.”²³ It is imperative for preachers to “take the joys and troubles” of their congregations to the Bible. In doing this, preachers can engage the workplace needs of their congregants.

Congregations yearn for pastors who understand the needs and difficulties they encounter in the workplace. They want to take the truth of scripture as it is explained in the sermon and live it out in the workplace, but churches are only beginning to rediscover a robust theology of work, and preachers do not yet seem to be preaching sermons with content that may be applied to the workplace. If preachers are going to craft sermons that connect with the needs of their working congregants, they must begin by meeting them where they are. Preachers must enter the world their congregants inhabit and recognize the “joys and troubles” they face in the working world, the needs and challenges that

²⁰ Ibid., 97-98. Emphasis added.

²¹ Although Doriani here uses the word “teachers,” it should be clear that his counsel applies to anyone who has the task of bridging the gap between the biblical text and the contemporary world.

²² Dan Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing Company, 2001), 36.

²³ Ibid., 37.

await them on Monday morning, and the questions and ambiguities they face as they seek to apply their faith in their work. Exploring how congregants apply sermons in the workplace will help preachers recognize the ways in which congregants are – and perhaps are not – making the connection between the realm of faith and work.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how Christians apply sermons in the workplace.

Research Questions

In order to study how Christians apply sermons in the workplace, the following questions were used to guide the qualitative study:

- 1) In what ways and to what extent do Christians apply sermons in the workplace?
- 2) What difficulties do Christians face in applying sermons in the workplace?
- 3) What factors help Christians to apply sermons in the workplace?

Significance of the Study

A study such as this one offers at least two significant benefits. The primary benefit of this study is that it will help to better equip preachers to apply their sermons to the needs of their congregants who are engaged in the workplace. As the researcher explored the ways that Christians currently apply sermons in the workplace, patterns of weakness in sermon application emerged, allowing the researcher to suggest corrective action.

A secondary benefit is for the congregants in the workplace. Specifically, this study contributes to a theology of work that has, to date, been weak. This study considers what the literature is currently saying about Christians in the workplace and synthesizes

some of these voices in a way that furthers the discussion. More broadly, this research can help Christians in the workplace if preachers learn to understand the challenges of the workplace and thus craft sermons which are more applicable. It is anticipated that when sermons are thus applied, Christians in the workplace will be able to do their work more fully to the glory of God.

Definition of Terms

Application: Application is the process by which the preacher articulates a response in a person's life that is called for in a passage of scripture, and in which the Holy Spirit changes the heart of the listener to make him or her receptive and able to carry out such a response.

Preacher: The preacher is the individual who is authorized by a Christian church or denomination to carry out the task of preaching. Such a person is usually recognized as one who has specific God-given gifts to carry out this task, and who has undergone at least some training in order to know how to properly interpret and apply scripture.

Preaching: Preaching refers specifically to the task of interpreting, explaining, and applying the meaning of a selected passage of scripture to a congregation in the context of public worship.

Sermon: A sermon is the content of the preaching – namely the public exposition of a given text, culminating in the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross, that ultimately calls for a specific response.

Telos: Taken from the Greek, the telos is the ultimate or end purpose to which something is aimed. In the context of work, the telos refers to the greater meaning behind the work,

a meaning that gives the work significance beyond the immediate rewards gained from completion of the task.

Work: As the researcher will show, precisely defining work may not be as simple as it sounds. More attention will be given to this concern in due course. For this study, work is defined as any task carried out by a person using their God-given abilities in order to advance God's creative purposes or his redemptive goals in this world. For the purpose of this study, the definition of work includes stay-at-home parents, since, although they are not financially compensated, what they do in providing a secure home for the nurture of children clearly fits the above definition of work. Although many of the insights here could apply to volunteer labor, volunteer labor is not specifically included under the umbrella of this study because volunteer work is considered to be another category of work. Time and space will not allow for consideration of this type of work.

Workplace: The workplace is understood to be a worker's specific location or environment in which he or she conducts their work.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to explore how Christians apply sermons in the workplace. To do so, the study will review the following four areas of literature: biblical literature that establishes a theology of work, literature that establishes a theological paradigm for work, homiletical literature pertaining to application, and contemporary literature related to workplace leadership.

A Biblical Foundation for Work

Researching the biblical foundations for work will involve listening to key biblical texts and the experts who study them in order to discern the biblical pattern for work. This pattern answers the following key questions: what are some of the elemental principles that Christians should be hearing from the pulpit and subsequently applying in their workplace?²⁴ What does the Bible specifically teach about God's design for work that will help Christians navigate challenges they face in the working world? Time and space will not permit a study of every biblical text pertaining to work. However, the researcher chose relevant passages based on broad consensus from established experts. These passages form a reliable, biblical perspective of work that can serve as a standard to measure what congregants should hear from preachers and apply in their workplace.

²⁴ It is assumed for the purposes of this study that authentic sermons are those that strive to explain biblical truth. That is to say that the purpose of the sermon is to draw out what the bible says, as opposed to offering general wisdom or advice to listeners.

When studying these key biblical texts, the author employs a narrative lens, which sees the Bible as one, overarching, true story.²⁵ The narrative lens emphasizes God's created purposes for the world, the damaging effects of sin, the work of Christ's redemption accomplished on the cross, and the hoped-for consummation of salvation, to be realized when Jesus returns. This creation-fall-redemption-consummation motif captures scripture's grand narrative arc and thus forms a worldview for understanding the Bible and much of life. For that reason, this pattern frames the following biblical view on work.

Genesis One and Two

The grand drama of Christian scripture opens with the simple, yet profound declaration, "in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth."²⁶ Genesis 1-2 proceed to unfold God's work, bringing the cosmos into being, one element at a time. These two chapters form the foundation upon which the Bible builds its theology of work because they contain God's commission to the human race to work²⁷ and because they establish God himself as a worker.

Merritt Nielson, in his doctoral dissertation on approaching work from a Christian perspective, draws out the significance of the first two chapters of Genesis. He notes, "God did not just think the world into existence, God worked at it. God created."²⁸ In

²⁵ For an insightful overview of this narrative arc of scripture, see Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), chapter 6.

²⁶ Genesis 1:1.

²⁷ See Genesis 1:2.

²⁸ Merritt J. Nielson, "God's Plan for Our Work: A Series of Topical Sermons Exploring How the Daily Work Can Be Shaped to the Dimensions of Faith" (D.Min. diss., Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2009), 10.

their book, *Your Work Matters to God*, Doug Sherman and William Hendricks take this a step further. “How does God view the notion of work? Without question, He regards it as very significant...because *God Himself is a worker*.”²⁹

What does this work, performed by God, entail? Nielson extrapolates that “God *separates* and *gathers*; God *makes* and *positions* what God creates in its proper place; God *makes* and *fills* what is made ... Finally, God see the work and blesses ...everything that is made as ‘very good’”³⁰ Thus, Nielson argues, God, in his creational work, does more than simply verbalize commands. God actively and purposefully constructs the universe, much the way a contractor might build a house or an artist might sculpt a masterpiece. The implications for human work are significant. Neilson continues, “Work is foundational to the reader's comprehension of the character and focused intentions of God. Planet Earth is a vast work site, and as God assesses the completion of God’s activity, it is all ‘very good.’”³¹ In other words, people cannot understand the purpose of work apart from God’s character, and people cannot understand God’s character without recognizing his nature as a worker.

Moreover, Lee Hardy, professor of philosophy at Calvin College, points out how God’s creative work did not stop with the material world or with the creation of human beings. Referencing Genesis 1:27-28, he writes,

In the Genesis account we read God created human beings in his own image and entrusted them with the task of carrying on the activity of creation, giving further form to the raw material of nature, actualizing the potentials tucked away in the

²⁹ Sherman and Hendricks, 77. Emphasis in original.

³⁰ Nielson, 12.

³¹ Ibid., 13.

world in a way which serves human society and at the same time glorifies God and his lavish benevolence.³²

God forms the human race, Hardy suggests, for the specific purpose of continuing his creative work.

Darrell Cosden, professor of theology at Judson University, develops this idea further. He suggests, “Humanity’s primary *purpose* for existing, to image God...means taking active responsibility for creation and shaping and reshaping it appropriately (ruling and subduing it) through our productive working activities.”³³ In other words, Cosden argues that God created human beings for the express purpose of reflecting his image, and humans primarily reflect their master’s image by working as their master works.

Tim Keller offers a helpful analogy, “We are not to relate to the world as park rangers, whose job is not to change their space, but to preserve things as they are. Nor are we to ‘pave over the garden of the created world to make a parking lot. No, we are *gardeners* who take an active stance toward their charge.”³⁴ British essayist and author Dorothy Sayers adds that work “should, in fact, be thought of as a creative activity undertaken for the love of the work itself; and that man, made in God’s image should make things, as God makes them, for the sake of doing well a thing that is well worth doing.”³⁵ Work, in other words, has intrinsic value because, in work, human beings are reflecting the image of God.

³² Lee Hardy, *The Fabric of This World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1990), 72.

³³ Darrell Cosden, *The Heavenly Good of Earthly Work* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 89.

³⁴ Tim Keller with Katherine Leary Alsdorf, *Every Good Endeavor* (New York: Dutton, 2012), 58. Emphasis original.

³⁵ Dorothy Sayers, *Creed or Chaos* (New York: Harcourt & Brace, 1949), 46.

Work, thus, has royal overtones. John Bolt, professor of systematics at Calvin Theological Seminary argues, “Our calling as God’s image bearers and vice-regents in creation [means] we are to be kings and queens in our work.”³⁶ Human beings, as image bearers, share in God’s character as a worker, in his authority over creation, and as co-regents in his world.

The Hebrew word contained in God’s imperative to Adam and Eve o “fill the earth and subdue it”³⁷ (כִּבְשׁ; KBŠ, “to subdue”) is forceful in nature. The word has royal overtones – suggesting that Adam and Eve were to master creation through their work. Andy Crouch, author and executive editor for *Christianity Today*, agrees, “The author [of Genesis]clearly intends us to grasp the extent of human beings’ responsibility—they are made to rule not just a few easily domesticated animals like cattle, chickens and goldfish, but the whole panoply of the animal kingdom.”³⁸ God gave human beings a royal responsibility.

Amy Sherman, senior fellow at the Sagamore Institute, draws attention to God’s authority and the authority with which he commissions Adam and Eve, saying, “In this ideal world [depicted in Gen. 1-2] we see God sharing power with the weak—because he shares it with humans.”³⁹ God undertook considerable risk by creating human beings as image-bearers for the purpose of continuing his work in the world. Human work would require the wise stewardship of power over creation. Viewed this way, work can be seen

³⁶ John Bolt, *Economic Shalom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian’s Library Press, 2013), 28.

³⁷ Genesis 1:28.

³⁸ Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 102.

³⁹ Amy Sherman, *Kingdom Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2011), 136.

as a gift, God graciously investing in human beings. Genesis 1-2 depicts a gracious God who shares his creative, sustaining, innovative, providential power with people who reflect his character so that they will share in God's creative joy.

Genesis 3

The first two chapters of Genesis establish work as a gracious bestowment from a master craftsman. Yet many do not experience work as such a gift, and Genesis 3 explains why many workers feel frustration instead of joy in their work. Discontent with what God has given them, Adam and Eve use their power not to subdue creation, but to attempt to put God beneath them. God subsequently pronounces a punishment upon them – a punishment that would gravely affect their work,

Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you will return.⁴⁰

People would now groan under the effects of sin as they reflect God's image by cultivating the earth. Yale theologian Miroslav Volf concludes, "The paradisiacal work of tilling and keeping became the exhausting and frustrating toil outside the Garden of Eden."⁴¹ Pastor, theologian, and author Tim Keller agrees and elaborates that the thorns and thistles of the curse are not limited to the literal weeds that infect the ground, but they represent how all work now exists under sin's curse. "When we remember that gardening is representative of all kinds of human labor and culture building," he explains, "this is a

⁴⁰ Genesis 3:17-19.

⁴¹ Volf, 127.

statement that *all* work and human effort will be marked by frustration and a lack of fulfillment.”⁴²

Thus, the shadow of sin now grossly distorts humankind’s purpose in life, the reason God created them. Keller enumerates the ways in which sin warps the nature of work. First, work becomes fruitless, as “We will be able to envision far more than we can accomplish.”⁴³ Second, work feels pointless because “Whether quickly or slowly, all the results of our toil will be wiped away by history.”⁴⁴ Third, people use work selfishly, and “It becomes a way to distinguish myself from my neighbor, to show the world, and to prove to myself that I’m special.”⁴⁵ Finally, work reveals idols because “In nearly every field of work, you will encounter a mixture of these sets of cultural idols.”⁴⁶ The fall of man in Genesis and how sins distort the reality of work helps people understand the present state of work.

Nonetheless, image bearers must not abandon their work following the events of Genesis 3. Work, though gravely distorted, continues to hold value in a fallen world. Drawing on her view that God’s commission to work is a form of power sharing, Amy Sherman observes,

This power sharing continues, even after the fall. Having thoroughly messed up our commission from God to work and tend the garden, we'd expect God to decide that this power sharing plan wasn't such a great idea. However, against that reasonable expectation, God surprises us. God does indeed cast Adam and

⁴² Keller, *Every Good Endeavor*, 89-90. Emphasis in original.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 138.

Eve out of paradise, but he does not strip power from them and does not retract their cultural mandate.⁴⁷

In short, there is both continuity and discontinuity between the pre-fall world and the post-fall world. Genesis 3 demonstrates that God's purpose for creation remains intact: he shares his power with his image-bearers that they might "actualize the potentials tucked away in the world."⁴⁸ But post-fall, sin will frustrate and distract from this pursuit with distractions, abuses, and pain.

Jesus's Ministry

In contemporary parlance, the "work of Jesus" is almost always assumed to mean the salvific work accomplished on the cross and applied to believers. But, as Tom Nelson, senior pastor of Christ Community Church in Leawood, Kansas points out, "The New Testament records Jesus spending only about three years in itinerant ministry, what we might refer to as full-time vocational ministry. But for the many years before that, Jesus worked as a carpenter."⁴⁹ If Jesus began teaching and discipling at approximately age thirty, he spent only a small fraction of his adult life in vocational ministry. If so, what did Jesus do for the majority of his life? Mark 6:3 and Matthew 13:55 shed light on Jesus' work and recount the same event. One crucial detail separates the two passages. Matthew 13:55 reads, "Isn't this the carpenter's son?" while Mark 6:3 reads, "Isn't this the carpenter?" The simplest reading suggests that Jesus apprenticed with his father then worked as a carpenter, and locals knew him as both the son of a carpenter and as a carpenter himself.

⁴⁷ Sherman, 136-137.

⁴⁸ Hardy, 72.

⁴⁹ Tom Nelson, *Work Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 88.

A carpenter's work was, in those days, somewhat different from the work of today's carpenters, as the Greek term has a broader semantic range than its English counterpart. Jesus was named a "*tekton*" (Greek: τέκτων), an occupation which would have likely included the usual carpentry work – erecting structures,⁵⁰ building tables, benches, chairs, doors, and window frames. His work would have also included skilled artisanship – building window lattices, farming implements, and perhaps crafting toys for children. Jesus' work could have also included masonry.

The question remains however, does this matter? If so, why does it matter? Tom Nelson rhetorically wonders whether Jesus' carpentry years were a poor "strategic use of the Son of God's extraordinary gifts of his important messianic mission."⁵¹ After all, even at the age of twelve, Jesus proved himself a worthy rabbi. No doubt he could have, had he been so inclined, spent a greater portion of his life preaching, teaching, and healing. Why did he spend so many years in the woodworking business?

Neilson pushes back against the notion that Jesus' carpentry years were less important than his years in active ministry. He asserts, "21st century believers have the ultimate Example – the most worthy model—for integrating faith and work. We look to the Word of God incarnated as Jesus the Carpenter."⁵² Jesus, then, embodies vocation.

Jesus embodies a life that is responsive to God's will, a life participating in God's

⁵⁰ There is some evidence to suggest that Jesus was perhaps involved in one of the major building projects of his day. The city of Sepphoris was located just four miles outside of Jesus' hometown, and it was the capital city of that region during the time of Jesus' life. Herod Antipas spent a great deal of money rebuilding the city during the time of Jesus' life, which seems to suggest that, if local workers were used, Jesus would have participated in the reconstruction of this city. If this is indeed accurate, it would be even more remarkable given the fact that Sepphoris was a city in Gentile territory, being constructed by the despised Roman empire. Jesus indeed crossed significant religious and ethnic grounds to participate in work.

⁵¹ Nelson, 88.

⁵² Neilson, 36.

redemptive mission. Jesus's redemptive work includes (in no small part⁵³) participating in a blue-collar, dirt-under-the-fingernails, thorn-infested but God-ordained world of work. Nelson agrees. He insists, "Jesus did not see his carpentry work as mundane or meaningless, for it was the work his Father had called him to do. I have a good hunch that Jesus was a top-notch carpenter and did top-notch work."⁵⁴ Jesus, by his lengthy engagement in the working world, validates work as valuable, and good.

Ephesians 6:5-9 and Colossians 3:22-4:1

In two parallel passages, the Apostle Paul explains how the gospel transforms work's nature and purpose. These two texts, while not identical, carry significant similarities. In each case, Paul addresses both slaves and masters. Some scholars argue that Paul's reference to slavery seems to offer tacit approval of a practice widely considered inhumane and in violation of the gospel. According to their reasoning, why would Paul not speak more forcefully against this practice? Curtis Vaughan, in his commentary on Colossians, answers why Paul (and the other New Testament apostles) spoke less emphatically against slavery:⁵⁵

The apostles, however, were not social reformers; they were first and foremost heralds of the good news of salvation in Christ. Then again, the church was a very small minority in the Roman world, and there was no hope that its stance on the matter of slavery would influence Roman policies. We should be careful to understand, though, that they did not condone slavery. Indeed, they announced the

⁵³ In fairness, it needs to be pointed out that the emphasis in the Gospels is certainly not on his carpentry work but on his redemptive work on the cross. Thus it is important not to overstate Jesus' working life, particularly at the expense of his redemptive work.

⁵⁴ Nelson, 90.

⁵⁵ The complexities of the topic of slavery in the Bible are significant, and beyond the scope of this study. The purpose in this examination of these texts is to seek insight specifically regarding the topic of work.

very principles (such as that of the complete spiritual equality of slave and master) that ultimately destroyed the institution of slavery.⁵⁶

In other words, Paul is more intent on showing how the gospel transforms societal institutions from the inside out – including how the gospel transforms work and workers.⁵⁷ In these two passages, Paul details the new ethic for Christians who live and work within the existing societal structures. The parallels between the first century slave industry and the twenty-first century working world are not total; however, there are principles that translate to employers and employees today.

In both Bible verses, the placement of the respective texts in their broader context informs their meanings. Paul's exhortations to slaves and masters follow on the heels of the gospel message. In the lofty words of Ephesians 2:8-10, Paul reminds the church, "It is by grace that you have been saved, through faith, and that not of your own, it is the gift of God, not by works." The Christian's significance, status, and standing with God is not found in their works – moral or otherwise – but in the accomplishment of Jesus. Yet, Paul continues, "for we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do."⁵⁸ These "works" are often assumed to be morally virtuous acts, such as showing kindness to marginalized people and caring for the sick. While Paul no doubt includes such good works, he may be expanding the definition of such good works.

⁵⁶ Curtis Vaughan, "Colossians," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Ephesians through Philemon*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 11 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 219.

⁵⁷ For a lengthy discussion of the topic of slavery in the biblical world, see William Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuality* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

⁵⁸ Ephesians 2:10.

Reminiscent of the language in the first chapter of Genesis, Paul points to God as the true worker, a master-craftsman who created the cosmos and redeems human beings for the purpose of work. In saying as much, Paul argues that God is slowly but certainly undoing the effects of the fall and restoring humanity's original purpose. This gospel principle is the foundation for the later exhortation on work. Human beings are God's work of art; in the workplace, human beings endeavor to live as God's works-in-progress in their daily work.

Paul emphasizes three specific instructions about work. First of all, Paul instructs servants to "obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ."⁵⁹ Even under the most oppressive circumstances, work is to be offered as a service to Jesus. Gene Veith explains, "In the workplace, whether on a road crew or in a corporate office, the passage from Ephesians applies as Christians live out their vocations: Subordinates must do their work as instructed by their superiors. In doing so, they find themselves serving Christ in serving their boss."⁶⁰ For the Christian, their true master is Jesus, and all work done for earthly masters ought to reflect their relationship with their heavenly master. Work is not to be done merely as a means to a paycheck, as a way to curry favor among others, or as a vehicle to attain status. Christians must work with an attitude of reverence and humility before God.

Second, Paul reminds Christians that God will reward workers, saying, "Work at it with all your heart...since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord

⁵⁹ Ephesians 6:5; the parallel in Colossians 3:22-23 urges slaves to "obey your masters in everything...with sincerity in heart, and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men..."

⁶⁰ Gene Edward Veith, *God at Work* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 73.

as a reward.”⁶¹ While Christians cannot earn gifts of any sort from God, God richly rewards those who approach their work as an offering to God. Conversely, Colossians warns believers that those who mismanage their vocational stewardship will be punished. “Anyone who does wrong,” cautions Paul, “will be repaid for his wrong.” Presumably, Paul is referring to masters who mistreat their slaves, but the principle could apply to those who are dishonest, lazy, unfair to their coworkers or employees. In his doctoral dissertation on preaching to working people, Robert Reimer summarizes Paul’s concern,

Work matters so much to God that it carries with it eternal consequences. What one does for a living counts for more than the here and now; it counts for the eternal. Each should work with a healthy reverence for the Eternal Judge who is keeping careful records of everyone’s deeds -- the One to whom someday we all will give an account.⁶²

Finally, the gospel changes the power structures in the workplace. Even though masters owned their slaves, Paul issues a gospel-based mandate to “provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.”⁶³ Those who hold authority are not free to do with it what they will, even in the most authoritarian structures. Veith interprets Paul’s words, “Bosses, in turn, must make their employees do the work they are supposed to do, but in the way they treat them, they must remember their own accountability to Christ.”⁶⁴ Authority in the workplace is to be stewarded in the manner of Christ, with humility, grace, truth, and love. No power in the

⁶¹ Colossians 3:24; the parallel in Ephesians 6:8 reads, “...you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.”

⁶² Robert P. Reimer, “Preaching to Career-Minded People” (D.Min. diss., Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2004), 151.

⁶³ Colossians 4:1; the parallel in Ephesians 6:9 reads that masters are to “treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.”

⁶⁴ Veith, 73.

workplace (or otherwise) is absolute; rather, authority is to be seen as a trust, managed with accountability to the true master, Jesus Christ.

Revelation 21

John's apocalyptic vision recorded in Revelation 21 may not seem to have much bearing on the topic of work. However, a closer look at this chapter reveals several key principles that are foundational to a biblical understanding of work. If the cultural mandate of Genesis 1 outlines the purpose of work, then Revelation 21 reveals the ultimate goal of work. Volf argues that people's view of heaven (as described in Revelation 21 and other places) determines their approach to work. He contends, "The question of continuity or discontinuity between the present and future orders is a key issue in developing a theology of work. The ultimate significance of human work depends on the answer to this question for it determines whether work has inherent value or whether it merely has instrumental value."⁶⁵ Revelation 21 offers a shape of the "future order" that defines a biblical framework of work. A number of key points emerge.

First, as John glimpses heaven, he witnesses heaven descending: "I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God."⁶⁶ In this context, God's redeemed and renewed people⁶⁷ from all times and places, gathered together at last, comprise the city of God. But rather than being whisked away from earth, God brings his city back to a renewed earth. Verse one and verse five explain, "I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away,"⁶⁸ and, "Behold, I am

⁶⁵ Volf, 89.

⁶⁶ Revelation 21:2.

⁶⁷ See Revelation 21:9b-10.

⁶⁸ Revelation 21:1.

making everything new!”⁶⁹ Heaven will entail (in part) God’s people brought back to this present world, a world that has gone through the process of total renewal.

Second, John’s vision is that of a city. God’s renewed creation will not only be a vast collection of people, but a city that presumably will be a hub of commerce, art, education, technology, cuisine, sports, and much more. John notes twice that the kings of the earth will bring “their splendor into it...the glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it.”⁷⁰ What precisely this splendor, glory, and honor will be is hard to determine. Matthew Henry offers his suggestion that “whatever is excellent and valuable in this world shall be there enjoyed in a more refined kind, and to a far greater degree.”⁷¹ Heaven, in other words, will include cultural developments spanning the ages. Thus, the Garden of Eden has reached its purpose. The untamed, uncultivated, untilled, unfilled garden has become a city. The *telos* of creation has been achieved.

Thus, if heaven will be a perfectly cultivated city and if the present world bears continuity with it, then work done in the present world will, in some way, last into God’s eternal future. Volf makes a clear application to the meaning of work,

...the results of the cumulative work of human beings have intrinsic value and gain ultimate significance, for they are related to the eschatological new creation, not only indirectly through the faith and service or sanctification they further, but also directly: the noble products of human ingenuity, “whatever is beautiful true and good in human cultures,” will be cleansed from impurity, perfected, and transfigured to become a part of God’s new creation.⁷²

⁶⁹ Revelation 21:5.

⁷⁰ Revelation 21:24 and 26.

⁷¹ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 2485.

⁷² Volf, 91.

Human beings, in other words, work as a means of anticipating the gift of God's renewed creation.

C.S. Lewis goes so far as to argue that it is a part of human nature to anticipate and strive for God's renewed world, even as people live in the shadow of a sinful world. Preaching a sermon during the early months of the second world war, Lewis asks the question, "Why should we – indeed how can we – continue to take an interest in these placid occupations when the lives of our friends and the liberties of Europe are in the balance?"⁷³ One answer, he suggests, is that "men...propound mathematical theorems in beleaguered cities, conduct metaphysical arguments in condemned cells, make jokes on scaffold, discuss the latest poem while advancing to the walls of Quebec, and comb their hair at Thermopylae...it is our nature."⁷⁴ In other words, says Lewis, "it is our nature" to seek the advancement of culture, from garden to city, even in circumstances that are overshadowed by apparent hopelessness, whether that hopelessness is a looming world war, or the shadow of sin itself.

A Theological Framework for Work

The following survey will examine the topic of work through a series of key theological loci. Taken together, these categories begin to shape a worldview of work. How people understand the end times, for example, will dictate their sense of purpose in the workplace; people's theology of sin will shape their sense of what is wrong, and what must be fixed, in work. For centuries, the dominant perspective on work, both in the church and in the dominant culture, has been rooted in a theology of dualism. Tim Keller

⁷³ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), 47.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

identifies this philosophy as one that “separates the spiritual/sacred from the rest of life.”⁷⁵ He notes that this worldview is rooted in ancient Greek thought, although it has continued in various forms through the Medieval, Renaissance, Enlightenment, and Postmodern eras.⁷⁶ In a dualistic worldview, work is of the secular, material (as opposed to the sacred, spiritual) world, and thus, it is unimportant at best or evil at worst. Cosden sees the importance of a fresh theology of work, saying, “Armed with our new theology, the task is to redefine or conceptualize afresh, what we usually mean by the word spiritual.”⁷⁷ Arriving at a new understanding of “spiritual” can, perhaps, begin with rethinking the nature of sin.

Theology of Sin and Work

While Genesis 3 outlines a narrative account of sin’s origin, a complete theology of sin grows out of a broader spectrum of scripture. Biblical writers describe sin, for example, as rebellion,⁷⁸ slavery,⁷⁹ idolatry,⁸⁰ adultery,⁸¹ lost-ness,⁸² alienation,⁸³ among others. Its scope is described as personal,⁸⁴ corporate,⁸⁵ and cosmic.⁸⁶ Sin, thus, has a

⁷⁵ Tim Keller, *Center Church*, 330.

⁷⁶ For an excellent survey of these various historical approaches to work, including the similarities and differences between these periods, see Part One of *The Fabric of This World* by Lee Hardy.

⁷⁷ Cosden, 104.

⁷⁸ Romans 8:7.

⁷⁹ Numbers 11:10-20.

⁸⁰ Ezekiel 4:14.

⁸¹ Hosea 11.

⁸² Isaiah 53:6.

⁸³ Ephesian 2:12.

⁸⁴ Psalms 51.

myriad of effects on work. Volf identifies alienation as the primary effect of sin, particularly as it relates to work, explaining, “[A]lienation from God, the fundamental form of alienation inevitably causes alienation in all areas of life – in relations of human beings to themselves, their neighbors, and nature.”⁸⁷ Tim Keller agrees with Volf’s assessment, suggesting that “at the heart of the Bible’s account [of what is wrong with the world] is the concept of sin: man’s rebellion against God and the resulting alienation from him.”⁸⁸

Keller nuances his position more than Volf, seeing alienation as a relational reality: humanity’s separation from God. The separation results in further sinful distortions that lie in the human heart, leading to corrupted practices of work. Keller suggests, for example, that alienation leads to four additional spiritual problems: work becomes fruitless, work becomes pointless, work becomes selfish, and work reveals idols.⁸⁹

Volf, on the other hand, views the effects of sin on the working world more simplistically. He ties all experiences of sin in the workplace directly to alienation. Alienation is not only the root cause of discord in the working world, it is the essence of the problems in the workplace. Volf notes that alienation causes issues such as child labor, unemployment, discrimination, dehumanization, and ecological abuse, and he argues further that these problems are also expressions of alienation. These two

⁸⁵ 1 Corinthians 5:6-7.

⁸⁶ Romans 8:19-22.

⁸⁷ Volf, 167.

⁸⁸ Keller, *Every Good Endeavor*, 84. Emphasis in original.

⁸⁹ Keller, *Every Good Endeavor*, chapters 5-8.

approaches may differ somewhat in the nuances they present, but Keller, Volf, and a near-unanimous slate of theologians agree that work is not what it ought to be. Consider some of the following expressions of brokenness evident in the working world

Off-Limits Work

Christians who seriously obey God's call in their lives cannot accept certain jobs that contribute to the world's alienation from God. Lester DeKoster observes that there are some "jobs on which the Lord does NOT depend, work which sullies culture with the grime of lawlessness, selfishness and greed – jobs which destroy rather than weave the fabric of civilization."⁹⁰ Veith agrees, pointing out that there are some jobs that are so incongruous with God's purposes in the world that they

...are not legitimate vocations. An abortionist is not loving and serving his neighbor, the child in the womb; rather he is killing his neighbor. Making or selling products that are legal but harmful is no vocation from God. Nor is making or selling products that do not benefit the neighbor – all of the legal scams, bogus medicines and wastes of money that there are on the market today.⁹¹

In other words, some professions so sharply oppose God's design for work that Christians cannot redeem them. Of course, not all Christians agree on which professions are legitimate. Those from a pacifist tradition, for example, would make the case that Christians should not become soldiers; others would see military service as a legitimate vocation. Despite disagreements about which professions belong on which list, such a list dividing legitimate from non-legitimate vocations exists.

⁹⁰ Lester DeKoster, *Work, The Meaning of Your Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian's Library Press, 1982), 29.

⁹¹ Veith, 66.

Painful Toil

Most earnest Christians experience work's brokenness not in work that would be deemed off-limits for Christians but in the difficulty faced in their legitimate work. Perhaps one of the most obvious expressions of sin in the workplace is that work is far more difficult than God's original design, and furthermore, work often does not deliver the results desired. Genesis 3 declares that that Adam and Eve would eat only through "painful toil; [the land] will produce thorns and thistles...by the sweat of [their] brow [they] would eat."⁹² Nelson summarizes the way that "sin entering the world and corrupting God's design has made the very nature of work itself harder,"⁹³ through realities such as "systems, technologies, economics, and structures we deal with every day...difficult people in the workplace...dog-eat-dog competition...government regulation...the constant threat of litigation...layoffs and reduction of workforces..."⁹⁴ Keller adds to this list, lamenting the way that "...the experience of work will include pain, conflict, envy and fatigue...conflicts with others in the work environment will sap your confidence and undermine your productivity."⁹⁵

Sadly, even when workers press through the adversity by working with hard-to-work-with people, by exerting themselves, by overcoming personal demons, the work can still fail to bear fruit. A product is scrapped at the last minute, just before it is set to enter the marketplace. A team of people work late nights and weekends putting together a bid for a construction job, only to find that the job has been given to a competitor, and the toil

⁹² Genesis 3:17-19.

⁹³ Nelson, 40.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Keller, *Center Church*, 90.

all seems to have been in vain. People make great financial sacrifices to open their own businesses, only to see them go under three short months later. Work is toil, and the fruits often do not match the exertion.

Work Is Meaningless

Work is not only fraught with difficulty; a gnawing sense of meaninglessness overshadows it. Ecclesiastes teaches that God created human beings with “eternity on their hearts,”⁹⁶ and yet these same human beings often toil and strive with a sense that their work is nothing but a chasing of the wind. “For a person may labor with wisdom, knowledge and skill,” the Teacher observes, “and then they must leave all they own to another who has not toiled for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun? All their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless.”⁹⁷

Nelson suggests that one of the main reasons that work can become meaningless is that “in many cases, the work we do is far removed from the beneficiaries of our efforts.”⁹⁸ As already discussed, God designed work to connect the worker to his larger purpose of cultivating his world. When people disconnect work from this telic purpose, it can indeed become meaningless and empty. Tim Keller offers an example of this disconnect. While “the banker in a small town making mortgage and small business loans can easily see the purpose and fruit of her labor,” he argues, “a bank worker bundling

⁹⁶ Ecclesiastes 3:11.

⁹⁷ Ecclesiastes 2:21-23.

⁹⁸ Nelson, 41.

thousands of subprime loans and buying and selling them in enormous blocks of capital will have much more difficulty answering the question, ‘What is your work for?’”⁹⁹

Work, haunted by the “what is it for?” question, becomes dehumanizing. Volf draws attention to “work on an assembly line: stupefying-ly simple actions done with monotonous regularity.”¹⁰⁰ DeKoster makes a similar observation of those who labor day in and day out, but feel only as though they themselves are “one more tool, a machine with clothes on ... and the company pays more mind to how the real tools get on than it does to [them].”¹⁰¹ Workers are anonymous, indecipherable from the machines they operate. Their work is but one isolated piece of a larger, yet unknown picture. “Such work,” concludes Volf, “is an assault on human creativity, and is dehumanizing.”¹⁰²

People naturally work with eternity in view, desiring to know that their work will last, that it makes a difference, that it contributes to society’s overall welfare and flourishing. Yet when work becomes menially repetitive, thoughtless, or thankless, it lacks meaning, and such working environments damage both work and worker.

Work and Idolatry

For some, work can indeed lack meaning. Yet for others, work becomes the ultimate meaning, the singular end towards which some people orient their entire lives. Keller maintains that “all of us look to something to assure ourselves we have spent our lives well.”¹⁰³ While the desire to live a worthwhile life is neutral, Keller argues that

⁹⁹ Keller, *Center Church*, 105-106.

¹⁰⁰ Volf, 39.

¹⁰¹ DeKoster, 49.

¹⁰² Volf, 39.

¹⁰³ Keller, *Every Good Endeavor*, 133.

meeting the need for worthiness with the wrong things can be dangerous. The effects of sin can be seen as work uncovers the idols of the heart. Keller frames work, not as the idol itself, but as the means by which idols are uncovered. “Christians,” he counsels, “must well discern the shape of the idols functioning in their professions and industries...so as to offset the excess and distortions.”¹⁰⁴

Nelson takes a different approach, arguing that work is distorted when “our identity centers in what we do.”¹⁰⁵ While Keller emphasizes that a person’s work reveals other idols such as money, status, or power, Nelson maintains that the work itself can be an idol when individuals are defined primarily in terms of their work.

In any case, the idolatry associated with work can have dire consequences. Veith, though not explicitly using the word “idolatry,” certainly describes it when he writes,

The devil tempts the holder of a vocation to the way of glory. Insisting on being served rather than serving, the calling becomes an occasion to wallow in pride. The person in this vocation feels no need for dependence on God. There is certainly no need for the Gospel, since the person in this successful position is doing just fine by himself.¹⁰⁶

When work becomes a means of pursuing personal glory, the need for the gospel is supplanted. DeKoster hints at the dehumanizing effects of idolatry. While a person may intend work to give them a sense of ultimate meaning, they end up asking “What was life like before I started moving up as I thought, toward the top- only to be greeted by the same old treadmill, carpeted and air conditioned. Who Was I then...and Who am I

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 137.

¹⁰⁵ Nelson, 42.

¹⁰⁶ Veith, 148.

now?”¹⁰⁷ The relentless pursuit of identity in work (or in the idols that work uncovers) actually strips a person of their identity.

A Theology of Salvation and Work

How Christians view the gospel’s scope, means, and purpose directly influences the way they carry out their daily work. For example, Larry Peabody, a former pastor and business owner, summarizes salvation’s effects in the workplace, stating, “God wants us to use our ordinary jobs as lampstands, light fixtures. Our work stations place us in positions of visibility.”¹⁰⁸ He suggests a number of ways a believer might do this. First, Christians can seek to “do good as opportunity offers.”¹⁰⁹ When they face adversity, Christians can recognize that “These things [hardships & disappointments] hurt, but praise God for every one of them...because he has placed us in our jobs...so that we may be channels for His light.”¹¹⁰ Finally, Christians should look for evangelistic opportunities because “There will be times for words of witness at work.”¹¹¹ In short, Peabody suggests that salvation’s primary purpose is to form Christians into examples of ethical conduct for their Christian witness in the workplace. Salvation is, according to Peabody, primarily a work of God on the individual. God changes individual people in order to be a Christ-like presence in the workplace.

¹⁰⁷ DeKoster, 50.

¹⁰⁸ Larry Peabody, *Serving Christ in the Workplace* (Fort Washington, PA, CLC Publications: 1974, reprinted 2004), 32.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 52.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 43.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 67.

Is Peabody's view an adequate representation of salvation's scope as it pertains to work? Does God save Christians in order to strategically place them as witnesses in the world? Cosden disagrees with Peabody and sees the work of salvation more broadly, suggesting that salvation "...does not stop with saving people, soul and body."¹¹² Rather, Cosden contends, "The Lord's work of resurrection encompasses realities far beyond what we usually think of as objects of 'religious interest.' It brings with in the transformation of all realities, what we might call 'secular realities.'"¹¹³ For Cosden, Christ applies his redemptive work on the cross personally and also cosmically. Jesus, he maintains, came to transform even those areas of life that are often deemed "secular" – including workplaces. Volf explains that it is

The presence of the Spirit of the resurrected Christ in the whole of creation, and in particular in those who acknowledge Christ's lordship, [that] gives hope that work also can be transformed in ever greater correspondence to this ideal. Christians will thus refuse to accept any given situation as irreformable. They will hope against all hope and strive in the power of the Spirit to make work "full of delight."¹¹⁴

In other words, he says, the same Spirit that brought Jesus back from the dead is breathing new life into all realms of creation, conforming them to the image of God's perfect design. Salvation, because it is not limited to personal to an individual phenomenon, changes every domain of creation, including, of course, the realm of work.

Cosden agrees, linking the Spirit to the physical, material world. He makes a case that "the New Testament writers see in Jesus a pattern, a principle that through his body

¹¹² Cosden, 65.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Volf, 168.

he is the prototype for the coming new creation.”¹¹⁵ Just as the Spirit raised Jesus from the dead physically, the Spirit will raise the physical world, including the world of work. Because “this ‘yes, but more’ dynamic characterizes our principle of continuity and discontinuity, when thinking about the resurrected body,”¹¹⁶ the work done in faith today will, Cosden argues, in some way, carry over into the resurrected creation. Shirley Roels, former professor of business and current academic Dean at Calvin College maintains, “if, indeed, the calling to business is rooted in creation, then it is also delivered from sin by Christ's victory. Once again it is possible to claim that material development and economic exchange, the daily work of so many, can be renewed.”¹¹⁷ She suggests, “Consumers, producers, and sellers can act redemptively if they aspire and learn to do so, while also excelling at their crafts. Imagine the re-creation that could be achieved if production, distribution, management, and marketing were redeemed callings!”¹¹⁸

The late Francis Schaffer, a pastor and philosopher, adds his perspective, showing that Christians, in God’s hands, become tools for remarkable service. “Though we are limited and weak in talent, physical energy and psychological strength,” he points out, “we are not less than a stick of wood.”¹¹⁹ Here, Schaffer draws on Old Testament imagery from the book of Exodus, where God uses a wooden staff in the hand of his servant Moses to do powerful things for the people of Israel. Believers, then, who commit

¹¹⁵ Cosden, 60.

¹¹⁶ Cosden, 64.

¹¹⁷ Shirley Roels, “The Christian Calling to Business Life,” *Theology Today* 60 (2003): 361.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Francis Schaeffer, “No Little People, No Little Places,” *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1982), 3:62.

their work to the Lord can be used in powerful ways in the midst of ordinary circumstances.

C.S. Lewis adds an important clarification. “Let us clear [a most dangerous and most anti-Christian error] forever from our minds,” he warns. “The work of a Beethoven, and the work of a charwoman¹²⁰ become spiritual on precisely the same condition, that of being offered to God, of being done humbly, ‘as to the Lord.’”¹²¹ The work itself does not hold value, but God uses people who offer themselves to him in their work.

Schaeffer argues that, for the Christian, God’s salvific work through Christ redefines what constitutes import. “As there are no little people in God’s sight, so there are no little places,”¹²² he contends. Christians are significant wherever they are, and in whatever they do, because it is not their work that makes them significant in the eyes of God (or anyone else) but their God that makes them significant in their work. Schaeffer concludes that work is an expression of faith when people work as “consecrated persons in God’s place for [them].”¹²³

Yet, although work can be an important expression of a believer’s faith, a number of authors caution against using one’s work to establish one’s relationship with God. New Testament professor Ben Witherington III laments a “world where many people, even Christians do not merely define themselves by what they do, but define their true worth by their financial or net worth.”¹²⁴ Gene Veith supplies the rejoinder that “In Christ,

¹²⁰ A woman hired to clean homes.

¹²¹ Lewis, 55-56.

¹²² Schaeffer, 62.

¹²³ Ibid., 66.

¹²⁴ Witherington, 83.

salvation does not depend on our work at all, but on His work, accomplished in his sinless life and atoning death on the cross. His work is imputed to us. This means that when it comes to salvation, we do not have to work. We rest in Christ.”¹²⁵ As vital as work is in the redemption of all of creation, work does not define the believer. Contrary to a prevailing worldview, work is not the source of one’s identity.

At the same time, sloth and indifference are not viable alternatives, at least if John Knapp, director of the Frances Marlin Mann Center for Ethics and Leadership at Samford University, is to be believed. While he concedes, “The notion that idleness is a sign of being among the damned may strike twenty-first century ears as questionable theology,”¹²⁶ he also maintains that “Calvin and other Reformers bequeathed us a far more helpful insight – namely that work is not merely a means of survival, but is a service to God in the ongoing process of creating and ordering the world.”¹²⁷ It is precisely because Christians are free from the incessant need to justify themselves in the sight of God that they are able to pursue work as it was originally intended to be.

Amy Sherman builds on this idea, observing, “Faithful vocational stewardship is not only about doing, it’s also about being. To deploy their vocational power for the common good, believers must possess a character that handles this power humbly and eschews its misuse.”¹²⁸ Christians, then, have been set free from the never-ending urgency of establishing an identity that is grounded in work by receiving in faith an

¹²⁵ Veith, 63.

¹²⁶ Knapp, 88.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Amy Sherman, 129.

identity in the work that Christ has done for them. They are subsequently being changed into people who desire to please God in their work, and seek the good of others. Ben

Witherington offers this perspective:

Everything is to be done coram Deo, before the face of God, not merely bearing in mind that God is watching, but bearing in mind that God is now working, and also will one day do the quality control test on one's work... We are co-laborers with the Almighty, and there can be no higher privilege. God has not merely assigned us a job to do, handed us the tools and ability, and told us to get on with it...we are working alongside him, which ought to be sufficient motivation not to slack off, and to always give our best.¹²⁹

At its very best, work, for the Christian, becomes a means of eagerly participating in God's redeeming work, as they await the return of Jesus.

Much of this sounds ideal – perhaps idealistic. Christians have been redeemed by God to serve him in such a way that is an outworking of their own salvation. Steven Garber, principal of the Washington Institute for Faith and Vocation offers a corrective. He names this “proximate justice,” which he defines as “an old idea, one that has rippled across the centuries, taken up by people who in their own times and places have longed to do what is right, knowing that all that is right will not be and cannot be done.”¹³⁰ As Christians, in a fallen world, there will always be more to do, explains Garber. Work is carried out with a longing for what was, and a longing for what will be. In the meantime, “we are in poignant conflict over the now-but-not-yet of history.”¹³¹

¹²⁹ Witherington III, 89.

¹³⁰ Steven Garber, *Visions of Vocation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 201.

¹³¹ Ibid., 202.

Work Through the Lens of Eschatology

Though much has already been said on the relationship between salvation and work, and though there is significant overlap in the area of soteriology and eschatology, a few brief words on the latter are in order. How does an understanding of the end times form an approach to work? Ben Witherington III elucidates the importance of the question when he states, “We must grasp that our God-given purpose has a goal, a *telos*, to use the Greek term, not merely a terminus, and it *most certainly involves us working*.”¹³²

What, then, is the *telos*, and how does it involve human work? Larry Peabody offers one perspective, arguing, “God has delayed His coming...to allow sinful man opportunity to repent and turn to Christ for salvation.”¹³³ He relates this to human work, suggesting that in work, “We are cooperating with God in His program of providing additional time for men everywhere to repent before Christ returns.”¹³⁴ At the end of time, says Peabody, God will exercise judgment upon all humankind, and work affords an opportunity to prepare others to face this judgment. The work itself matters very little; preparing individuals for the end of time is what counts most. He goes on to state that work is a way for God’s people “to be very much involved in the basic functions necessary to maintaining life on this earth. Though this world is not our final home, we are to settle down to work in it...of course, this does not mean we are to set our hearts on

¹³² Witherington III, 9. Emphasis in original.

¹³³ Peabody, 76.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

it.”¹³⁵ The world, Peabody argues, is something from which we will be rescued, but until that happens, human beings work as a way to maintain life on earth.

Tom Nelson disagrees. Instead, he suggests, “The unfolding future will have a significant degree of continuity with the present earth and the heavens.”¹³⁶ He characterizes reasoning like Peabody’s as “lifeboat theology” in which “God’s good world has hit the iceberg of sin and is irrevocably doomed... It is time to abandon ship and get as many people in as many lifeboats as we can.”¹³⁷ Nelson refutes such a perspective, maintaining that “God has not given up on his good world even though it has been ravaged by sin and death.”¹³⁸ Consequently, he argues, “our destiny is an earthly one: a new earth, an earth redeemed and transfigured. An earth reunited with heaven, but an earth nevertheless.”¹³⁹ Taken this way, work is means of anticipating God’s future redemption of all creation, and carrying the world towards God’s *telos*.

In fact, Miroslav Volf argues that this eschatological viewpoint is so important that work cannot be properly understood apart from it. He introduces his theology of work by explaining, “The shift I am suggesting is from the vocational understanding of work developed within the framework of the doctrine of creation to a pneumatological one developed within the framework of the doctrine of last things.”¹⁴⁰ Arguing against what he judges an inadequate view of work (namely that people “understand themselves

¹³⁵ Ibid., 77.

¹³⁶ Nelson, 72.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 73.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 74.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 76.

¹⁴⁰ Volf, ix.

as working beings whose highest destiny is to work and whose very being consists in the process of becoming something through work which they would not have been without it.”¹⁴¹), he pushes instead for a theology of work that is “done under the inspiration of the Spirit and in the light of the coming new creation.”¹⁴² That is, he outlines a view of work in which Christians are indwelt by the Holy Spirit and therefore empowered as agents who “lead the present world of work ‘towards the promised and the hoped-for transformation.”¹⁴³ Volf summarizes three key facets of the new creation of the “promised and hoped-for” world: 1) individuals are image-bearers of God, called into a relationship with Jesus, and therefore must never be treated as objects, but as a free and responsible agents; 2) each person is called into a new community of believers in which each person works for the good of all persons, and the fulfillment of their needs; and 3) individuals conduct their work in a way that preserves and protects the created world from irreparable harm.¹⁴⁴ These distinctions (according to Volf) characterize life in the new creation, and, by the power of the Spirit, they are to be pursued today, as workers anticipate the life that is to come.

Ben Witherington III agrees and challenges those in the workplace to ask, “How does our work foreshadow, prepare for, provide a foretaste of what is to come, when we will study war no more, and when swords will be turned into plowshares?”¹⁴⁵ Yet even as he makes his case that work is to be done in the anticipation of the new creation, he

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 3.

¹⁴² Ibid., 79.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 83.

¹⁴⁴ See Volf p. 15-16 for a further description of these three distinctions.

¹⁴⁵ Witherington III, 165.

concludes with a comfort and a caution: "...all along God the worker has been working on and in us to bring us to perfection even as we have been busy working out our vocation and indeed our salvation with fear and trembling."¹⁴⁶ The new creation, thus, is not a human accomplishment but a divine work. Elsewhere, he states even more emphatically that "It is God in Christ who will bring the end of all things we now know and bring in the new creation, and this is good news because it means new creation will not be a human achievement or accomplishment. It will not be accomplished by human work."¹⁴⁷ Guarding against the danger of hubris, Witherington stresses that even as human work anticipates the new creation, it does not actualize it. The eschatological reality of God's world, the vision for which Christians may strive, is finally a gift of grace, a work of God the Holy Spirit through the person of Jesus Christ to the glory of God.

The Art of Application in Preaching

In his essay, "When the Sermon Goes to Work," well-known homiletician Haddon Robinson asks a pointed question. He queries, "Does selling insurance, running a Laundromat, driving a cab or delivering mail matter to God?" He continues by answering, "judging by our preaching, probably not."¹⁴⁸ This is a pointed criticism for anyone who regularly engages in preaching and a painful reality for those who regularly listen to preaching. How can the literature on preaching help preachers better apply sermons so that they are effective in the lives of working people? Sidney Greidanus,

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 166.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 153.

¹⁴⁸ Haddon Robinson, "When the Sermon Goes to Work," in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, ed. Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 677.

professor emeritus of homiletics at Calvin Theological Seminary, emphasizes the importance of sermon application when he states that “without genuine relevance, there is no sermon.”¹⁴⁹ Haddon Robinson explains, “In application, we take what we believe is the truth of the eternal God, given in a particular time, place and situation, and apply it to people in the modern world, who live in another time, another place, and a very different situation.”¹⁵⁰ A genuine sermon must be one in which the truths of the Bible are brought to bear in a way that is relevant to the contemporary listener.

Doing this well is no easy task. Preacher and professor of theology Daniel Doriani explains that effective application in a sermon demands that “...preachers must exegete the congregation as well as the text. To exegete the congregation is to know its heart, its status before God. Preachers should take the joys and troubles of their congregation to the Bible.”¹⁵¹ Bryan Chapell, in his seminal work on preaching, urges all preachers to identify a “fallen condition focus” which “is the mutual human condition that...requires the grace of the passage for God’s people to glorify and enjoy him.”¹⁵² In other words, Chapell argues, preachers must find ways to understand the brokenness of their own congregations in order to better apply sermons to their situations.

How can preachers do this in their sermons? A number of ideas emerge in the literature. The first idea is that preachers need to be intentional in applying sermons in the

¹⁴⁹ Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1988), 157.

¹⁵⁰ Haddon Robinson, “The Heresy of Application,” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, ed. Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 307.

¹⁵¹ Doriani, 37.

¹⁵² Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 50.

workplace. Engaging in a study of pastors and their preaching habits for a doctoral study, Robert Reimer observed, “Generally speaking, a pastor’s Sunday sermon seems to confine the application of a biblical principle within the context of church life...thus, faith may be seen as irrelevant to the workplace.”¹⁵³ Too many pastors, argues Reimer, keep their sermons in the realm of the theoretical. Pastor and author David Veerman admits, “I used to assume the audience will make a connection between the lesson and their lives, a common mistake.”¹⁵⁴ Preachers cannot assume that their listeners will make a concrete application of the sermon into their workplace situations.

To remedy this disconnect between sermon and work, Haddon Robinson reminds the preacher that “the line of penetration should be from the pulpit to the pew to the pavement...We must help those who are Christ-followers to ‘remember the workday to keep it holy.’”¹⁵⁵ Preachers must consciously and intentionally apply sermons to the workplace. Robert Reimer offers advice for making specific application of the sermon to the needs of working congregants. He suggests that as pastors prepare their sermons, they ought to “Shape [their] thinking by focusing on two or three specific individuals in your target audience. Think about their personhood and about their work situations. Then ask yourself ‘How will this message affect Dave (or Bob or Jim) in his new job as an upper-level manager at Bell Atlantic Global?’”¹⁵⁶ Concrete application in preaching, Reimer

¹⁵³ Reimer, 151.

¹⁵⁴ David Veerman, “Apply Within,” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, ed. Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 283.

¹⁵⁵ Robinson, “When the Sermon Goes to Work,” 678.

¹⁵⁶ Reimer, 259.

argues, requires concrete and intentional reflection on the situations faced by working congregants.

In order to do think concretely about the workplace situations faced by congregants, Remier suggests that preachers who want to be relevant should “spend time with them in their workplace. Listen. Sit with them and ask for their help...career-minded people often express the desire for clergy to visit them at work. They want their pastoral leaders to come and spend time with them in their work environment, to learn about their work situations.”¹⁵⁷ Other well-regarded thinkers and practitioners agree. Shirley Roels, maintains:

One of the best strategies for enfolding business members involves understanding their daily business experiences. When a pastor shadows the banker in the congregation at her job, joins the coffee break at the local parishioner's manufacturing plant, visits the retailer at her clothing boutique, or rides the route with the congregation's FedEx driver, the daily work of those in business becomes concrete. These visits both convey curiosity and validate these parishioners' garden efforts.¹⁵⁸

Those who aim to preach in a way that addresses the needs of workers, need to be on the workers' home turf, listening to the workers' perspectives on their work, wrestling with the dilemmas faced by the workers in the workplace, bearing the burdens of the workplace, and taking an honest interest in the activity that occupies a majority of the lives of their parishioners.

Amy Sherman challenges pastors to go even deeper in learning to apply sermons to their working congregants. She suggests three ways that churches and their pastors can equip their members to “steward their vocational power to advance foretastes of the

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Roels, 365.

kingdom.”¹⁵⁹ Of particular interest to the area of preaching, she names inspiration¹⁶⁰ as a pressing need for pastors and preaching. By this, she means that church leaders ought to be “teaching a biblical theology of work and providing practical advice to members regarding the vocational ‘sweet spot.’”¹⁶¹ Preaching application begins with articulating a robust and biblical picture of work, and bringing that vision to the conference rooms, classrooms, workshops, and retail centers where congregants work. Shirley Roels echoes this sentiment. Suggesting that businesspeople are often viewed with suspicion by the church, she argues that preaching a proper theology of work can instead “build perspectives about its business members on the creation mandate to fill the garden. By doing so, pastors can embrace them as a vital part of the Christian community, overcoming the marginality they often sense.”¹⁶² She calls for the church to “preach and teach knowledgeably about the redemptive possibilities of business in the new creation.”¹⁶³ In other words, she is calling for preachers to proclaim a holistic theology of work by helping congregants to connect their work to the bigger picture of God’s work in the world.

Tom Nelson is a pastor who has intentionally cultivated a holistic theology of work in the congregation he serves. He cautions, “Becoming a faith community that takes work seriously will require a sustained intentionality in teaching the rich truths of

¹⁵⁹ Sherman, 100.

¹⁶⁰ In addition to “inspiration,” Sherman also calls for churches to provide a place for vocational discovery – namely a setting in which members can identify their vocational calling – and an intentional setting for vocational formation – namely an intentional practice of developing godly character for deployment in the workplace. See chapters 7 and 8 of her work *Kingdom Calling* for additional explanation of these two tasks.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 102.

¹⁶² Roels, 365.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 368.

Christian vocation.”¹⁶⁴ Yet he also offers the hope that “weaving a stronger vocational thread into the fabric of your local congregation will alter the preaching and teaching ministry of your local church.”¹⁶⁵ Improving application for listeners in the workplace goes beyond offering moral principles and suggesting specific applications. Instead, it demands using the preaching ministry of the church to articulate a positive theology of work. According to Nelson, one way to articulate a theology of work in preaching is to be cautious about the language that is used in the pulpit. “Our local church preaching team is vigilant in avoiding dichotomous or reductionist words,” he explains. Phrases like “‘secular job,’ ‘sacred space,’ ‘full-time ministry,’ ‘frontlines ministry,’ or ‘moving from significance to success’” reinforce what Nelson calls the “Sunday-Monday gap.”¹⁶⁶

Incidentally, Dorothy Sayers insists,

It is the business of the church to recognize that the secular vocation, as such, is sacred. Christian people and particularly perhaps the Christian clergy must get it firmly into their heads that when a man or a woman is called to a particular job of secular work, that is as true a vocation as through he or she were called to specifically religious work.¹⁶⁷

Preaching and teaching a complete theology of work requires vigilance in both the big picture message of work that is communicated, as well as the finer details of preaching.

Mainstream Literature on Workplace Motivation

What is perhaps most striking about mainstream literature on the topic of work is not that matters of faith are unaddressed, but rather that mainstream literature echoes many of the same themes found in the literature written from a Christian perspective. A

¹⁶⁴ Nelson, 194.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Sayers, 56.

short survey of mainstream literature reveals some common themes. Mainstream literature includes material relating to workplace leadership and productivity from reputable sources, written to an audience that would not necessarily share Christian convictions. The researcher will now discuss what this literature says about motivating workers, finding purpose and meaning in work, and the relationship between spirituality and work.

According to the British human resource journal *People Management*, a transition has occurred in recent years with respect to the understanding of the relationship between religion and work. While one's faith was once seen as a private realm of life, cordoned off from matters of work, those in workplace leadership now recognize the importance of faith. In her article, "Religion: The Last Workplace Taboo," Michelle Stevens observes, "Public discussion of religion in the US is now shifting to the role faith plays as a foundation for ethical business practices."¹⁶⁸ Writing for the *Academy of Management Executive*, Karen Cash and George Gray make a similar point, claiming, "Technology, global competition, downsizing, and reengineering have created a workforce of employees seeking value, support, and meaning in their lives that finds expression not only at home but also on the job."¹⁶⁹ A recent article in the Wall Street Journal acknowledges this as well, since employers are "faced with a cadre of young workers who say they want to make a difference in addition to a paycheck, employers are trying

¹⁶⁸ Stevens, 33.

¹⁶⁹ Cash and Gray, 124.

to inject meaning into the daily grind, connecting profit-driven endeavors to grand consequences for mankind.”¹⁷⁰

Is this need being addressed in the workplace? In their book *Church on Sunday, Work on Monday*, Laura Nash and Scotty McLennan observe how a “new spirituality”¹⁷¹ is addressing these spiritual needs in a way that “enjoys overwhelmingly popular success in the business community.”¹⁷² Their reason for this is because this movement “takes the soul of the businessperson seriously.”¹⁷³ In short, leaders in the workplace recognize the spiritual needs of their employees and then take significant steps to identify and meet the spiritual needs of their workers.

One way in which employers endeavor to meet these needs is by encouraging employees to seek a deeper purpose in their work. Writing for the *Harvard Business Review*, Clayton Christensen laments, “More and more of [his Harvard Business School classmates] come to reunions unhappy, divorced and alienated from their children...The reason? They didn’t keep the purpose of their lives front and center...”¹⁷⁴ Stuart Friedman, professor at the Wharton School of Business, agrees. He observes, “I have met many people who feel unfulfilled, overwhelmed, or stagnant because they are forsaking

¹⁷⁰ Rachel Feintzeig, “I Don’t Have A Job; I Have A Higher Calling,” WSJ.com, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/corporate-mission-statements-talk-of-higher-purpose-1424824784> (accessed February 25, 2015).

¹⁷¹ They define the new spirituality in part as a “therapeutic, holistic response” to the felt needs of human spirituality. This new spirituality includes elements of self-help thinking, Eastern, mystic, and Native American religious traditions, as well as self-referential understanding of truth. This concept is explained in considerable depth in chapter one of their book, *Church on Sunday, Work on Monday*.

¹⁷² Laura Nash and Scotty McLennan, *Church on Sunday, Work on Monday* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 81.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁷⁴ Clayton Christensen, “How Will You Measure Your Life?” in *Harvard Business Review’s 10 Must Reads on Managing Yourself* (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2010), ebook, loc. 98.

performance in one or more aspects of their lives.”¹⁷⁵ To those unfulfilled, he offers the goal of “becoming a better leader and having a richer life”¹⁷⁶ by taking a series of steps: prioritizing, reorganizing life to match priorities, charting a path to success, and measuring progress.

The need for a “richer life” is a theme that emerges in this area of literature. “It is vitally important,” writes management guru Peter Drucker, “for the individual...to have an area in which he or she can contribute, make a difference, and be somebody. That means finding a second area – whether in a second career, or a social venture—that offers an opportunity for being a leader, for being respected, for being a success.”¹⁷⁷ From this perspective, the pathway to significance in work involves more work.

Others offer a different approach to finding fulfillment and significance in work. John Maxwell is a best-selling author, former pastor, and widely recognized leadership expert. He too suggests the importance of a well-ordered inner life, and while he doesn’t explicitly use spiritual language, he promotes an idea that resonates with Christians. “Self-conscious people are rarely good leaders,” he asserts. “They focus on themselves, worrying how they look, what others think, whether they are liked.”¹⁷⁸ Contrasting self-conscious leaders with confident leaders, Maxwell continues, “The best leaders have a strong sense of self-worth. They believe in themselves, their mission and their people.”¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁵ Stewart D. Friedman, “Be a Better Leader, Have a Richer Life,” in *Harvard Business Review’s 10 Must Reads on Managing Yourself* (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2010), ebook, loc. 1695.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, loc. 1764.

¹⁷⁷ Peter F. Drucker, “Managing Oneself,” in *Harvard Business Review’s 10 Must Reads on Managing Yourself* (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2010), ebook, loc. 569. Emphasis in original.

¹⁷⁸ John Maxwell, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 147-148.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 148.

Although this is paramount to Maxwell's argument, he does not specify how a person can gain a strong sense of self-worth.

Clayton Christensen agrees with Maxwell's assessment. While he argues for personal success (as opposed to strong leadership, which is Maxwell's focus) he shares a common denominator with Maxwell. "One characteristic of these humble people stood out," he writes. "They had a high level of self-esteem. They knew who they were, and they felt good about who they were."¹⁸⁰ Qualities like humility, self-esteem, self-worth, and confidence are, according to these experts, traits that lead to success and fulfillment in the workplace. Notably, Christensen, like Maxwell, also neglects to describe how a worker might attain these traits.

The researcher will now discuss the concept of finding "meaning" in the workplace. A significant number of writers on success in the workplace insist that work, as important as it is, cannot be the source of ultimate meaning in life. Consider, for example, Clayton Christensen's assertion that "the choice and successful pursuit of a profession is but one tool for achieving your purpose. But without a purpose, life can become hollow."¹⁸¹ Work (as well as other activities) can be a means of attaining a sense of purpose in life, but the purpose must be something beyond the work itself, something transcendent.

Christensen has "concluded that the metric by which God will assess my life isn't dollars but the individual people whose lives I've touched. I think that's the way it will

¹⁸⁰ Christensen, loc. 215.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., loc. 140.

work for us all.”¹⁸² Maxwell concurs, “There is one critical question. Are you making things better for the people who follow you?”¹⁸³ True meaning in work, as well as in life, is the impact that workers have on those around them, and on the world around them. Maxwell concludes, “The best place for a leader isn’t always the top position. It isn’t the most prominent or powerful place. It’s the place where he or she can serve the best and add the most value to other people.”¹⁸⁴

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore how Christians apply sermons in the workplace. In order to better understand the issues of sermon application in the workplace, this study has explored the biblical basis for work, work as it relates to several theological categories, counsel for applying sermons in the workplace, and mainstream literature related to finding success and fulfillment in the literature. The next chapter will discuss the methodology by which the researcher conducted a qualitative study on how Christians apply sermons in the workplace.

¹⁸² Ibid., loc. 234.

¹⁸³ Maxwell, 51.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 52.

Chapter Three

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore how Christians apply sermons in the workplace. The following questions guided this study:

- 1) In what ways and to what extent do Christians apply sermons in the workplace?
- 2) What difficulties do Christians face in applying sermons in the workplace?
- 3) What factors help Christians to apply sermons in the workplace?

In order to answer these questions, a qualitative study was proposed, structured according to the parameters described below.

Design of the Study

Sharan Merriam, professor of adult education at the University of Georgia and an authoritative voice in the area of research design, states that applied research (of which qualitative research is a category) “is undertaken to improve the quality of practice of a particular discipline.”¹⁸⁵ Since a stated goal of this research was to improve the quality of preaching, an applied research design was most appropriate. Furthermore, qualitative research was the most effective way of answering the stated research questions. Merriam explains, “[Q]ualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they

¹⁸⁵ Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 3.

have in the world.”¹⁸⁶ This fits precisely with the objectives of this research. The researcher’s goal was to understand how congregants make sense of their daily work in light of their Christian faith; it is to discover how Christians apply the words of scripture into their work as they hear them explained in sermons.

The qualitative method allowed the researcher to listen to the individuals as they interpreted their experiences. This approach afforded the researcher the opportunity to gather a great deal of data that then assisted the researcher in listening for common themes, shared struggles, and similar needs among those in the workplace. Since qualitative research focuses primarily on “understanding the phenomenon of interest from the participants’ perspectives, not the researcher’s,”¹⁸⁷ this basic qualitative research study allowed the researcher to glean a wealth of learning by listening and understanding the experiences and perspectives of Christians as they strive to apply sermons in their work.

Participant Sample Selection

Since this study was intended to allow the researcher to learn as much as possible from participants, a purposive sampling method was utilized. According to Merriam, a purposive sample “is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned.”¹⁸⁸ Eight interview participants were invited to participate in a series of interviews. These individuals were selected to represent as many variables (age, gender, education level, career field) as possible, so that the research reflects as broad a

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 13.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 14.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 77.

demographic as possible. All participants self-identified as professing Christians who also identify themselves as regularly applying sermons in the workplace.

Participants were also chosen to represent of both male and female from a variety of ages (eighteen and older). Participants were chosen from a variety of fields, including agriculture, public service, stay-at-home-parent, business, government, and education. Within each of these fields were a number of sub-categories. In the educational field, for example, there was an administrator, a high school teacher, and a special education teacher.

Finally, care was taken to select participants who were able to give honest feedback to the researcher. For the purposes of this study, participants were chosen from the researcher's congregation, and this meant ensuring that the participants demonstrated the confidence to express honestly their difficulty in applying the researcher's sermons.

Data Collection

The interviews were arranged to include time in the participants' workplaces in order to familiarize the researcher with the participants' work. This also allowed the participants a level of comfort, since they were in a familiar environment. The opportunity for the participant to share with the researcher about their work also affirmed their experiences and perspectives as interesting and significant to the researcher.

The formal interviews were conducted face-to-face, either in the workplace or in a different setting, based on the participant's preference. Interviews followed a semi-structured protocol, which is formatted to allow a set of predetermined questions as a starting point, with the opportunity to explore additional areas of interest as they arise. Merriam explains that the semi-structured format "allows the research to respond to the

situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent and to new ideas on the topic.”¹⁸⁹ A semi-structured protocol allowed the researcher the freedom to explore the unique experiences and perspectives of the participants in their respective workplaces.

Participants were solicited from the researcher’s own congregation, ensuring that each person chosen satisfied the criteria outlined above. Participants were instructed in the purpose of the study and screened to ensure that they satisfied the participant criteria. Once chosen, they were given a copy of the interview protocol in advance, along with a consent form. Interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed for analysis.

In order to explore the research questions, the following protocol was employed:

- 1) Describe how you have applied a sermon recently heard to the workplace.
 - a. How did this sermon change the way that you did your work?
 - b. How did you DO your work differently?
 - c. How did a sermon change what you valued in your work?
- 2) How much of a difference do sermons make in your:
 - a. Attitude towards your work?
 - b. Your interaction with other works/clients etc.?
 - c. The rewards you seek from your work?
- 3) Tell me about some of the other ways that a Sunday sermon has influenced you throughout the week at work.
 - a. Their attitude towards their work
 - b. Their interaction with other workers/clients
 - c. The rewards sought from their work

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 90.

- 4) What are some of the things that make it difficult for you to apply sermons in the work place?
 - a. Describe some of the factors that make it difficult to think about Sunday's sermon on Monday morning.
 - b. In what ways do you experience a disconnect between what you hear in a sermon on Sunday and what you face on Monday?
 - c. If you could coach your pastor in how to better speak to your situation in the workplace, what would you say?

Data Analysis

The researcher used the constant comparative method of data analysis to interpret the data. Merriam summarizes the constant comparative method as follows:

The constant comparative method involves comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences. Data are grouped together on a similar dimension. The dimension is tentatively given a name; it then becomes a category. The overall object of this analysis is to identify patterns in the data.¹⁹⁰

This method was deemed most effective because it assumes that during the process of transcription and coding, patterns and common themes will begin to emerge. As these patterns emerge, they can be compared with one another and categories can be formed. The categories can then be used to draw conclusions that will answer the research questions under consideration.

Researcher Position

Because the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, and because every researcher holds to a particular perspective when they approach their

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 31.

research, it is imperative that researchers “explain their biases, dispositions, and assumptions regarding the research to be undertaken.”¹⁹¹ This will help ensure that the researcher is alert to their own subjective filter, and it will eliminate potential blind spots in the research. Additionally, it will help the reader to recognize other factors that may have led to the conclusions of the researcher.

The researcher in this study was a male pastor ordained in the Christian Reformed Church of North America, a moderately conservative Christian church in the Dutch Reformed tradition. As such, the researcher has been heavily influenced by the Dutch Reformed worldview, which has historically placed a heavy emphasis on the value of work and has traditionally understood that nearly all kinds of work –not only ministry-oriented careers – are considered a calling of God.

The researcher lives and ministers in the heavily-unchurched context of the Pacific Northwest. For more than eight years, he has pastored a church of approximately 220 members, across a broad range of ages and a cross-section of occupations. As the sole pastor of this congregation, he is responsible for preaching two sermons each Sunday.

Study Limitations

Due to limitations of time, only eight pastors were interviewed in this study. The researcher recognizes that this excluded a number of professional fields. This means that the study does not include perspectives from certain fields that might offer valuable insight. Additionally, this study is limited in that only those who self-identify as having applied a sermon in the workplace will be included. This disqualified a certain segment of individuals from participating, specifically those who struggle to connect their faith

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 219.

with their work. However, general principles can still be drawn from the particular individuals studied, even though their experiences do not cover every possible situation.

As with any qualitative study, “the person who reads the study decides whether the findings can apply to his or her particular situation.”¹⁹²

¹⁹² Ibid., 226.

Chapter Four

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how Christians apply sermons in the workplace. Three questions were used to accomplish this objective:

1. In what ways and to what extent do Christians apply sermons in the workplace?
2. What difficulties do Christians face in applying sermons in the workplace?
3. What factors help Christians to apply sermons in the workplace?

This chapter presents the findings gathered from in-depth interviews with eight interview subjects. The data gathered from these interviews will be arranged around the research questions, and will be used to gain insight into what sermons mean for listeners who seek to apply them in the workplace. The data will also address some of the challenges that Christians face as they make the connection between sermons and their workplace. Insight will also be gained for ways in which sermons can better translate into the lives of the listeners.

Introduction to Participants

Eight individuals were selected to participate in the interviews, according to the criteria detailed in chapter three. Three males and five females were chosen; each participant is a member of an evangelical and reformed church, living in the greater Salem, Oregon area. Each participant was known to the researcher before the study began. Although all names and identifying details have been changed to protect the anonymity of the participants, this section will give a brief introduction to each one. Care

will be taken to protect the identity of the participants, however, knowing something of the nature of their work is helpful because the challenges of sermon application will be unique to each individual setting.

Carlene

Carlene is a Caucasian female, married and in her early sixties. She is presently employed as a special-education teacher at a middle school, where she has been employed for many years. Her work involves teaching students a variety of subjects, including basic life skills. Additionally, she is required to coordinate various student services (such as learning plans and medical response plans) between the students, their families, and the school administration. She has been an active member of her local church for more than thirty years. She is involved in leading worship in the congregation.

Shirley

Shirley is a Caucasian female in her late twenties. She is presently employed as an attorney for the state of Oregon. She has served in this capacity for several months. Her work involves assisting the state in prosecuting cases, as well as working with legislators to draft state legislation. She and her husband have been active members of their congregation since moving to the area several years ago. She was raised in an evangelical and Reformed church, and she is a recent graduate of one of the denomination's four-year liberal arts colleges.

Bret

Bret is a Caucasian male, married and in his early sixties. He has been an active member of his local church for nearly thirty years. He is presently self-employed as a

truck driver, hauling livestock from the various farms around the area, and then hauling them to another state.

Dana

Dana is a Caucasian female, married, in her early sixties. She is employed as an artist at a local art gallery. Her work is balanced between assisting with the daily business operations of the gallery and creating art for display and sale. Her medium is primarily pen and ink, although she also uses acrylic paint. She was not raised in the tradition of Reformed faith, having come to it about fifteen years ago.

Marcel

Marcel is in his mid-twenties, married, and is currently a graduate student at a Christian university in the area. As he is pursuing his doctorate in psychology, he is also completing a residency which involves counseling individuals from a variety of ages and backgrounds. He and his wife divide their time between two churches – one in the evangelical and Reformed tradition, and another in the Quaker tradition.

Joshua

Joshua is in his late thirties, married, Caucasian, and has been attending his church for several years. He is employed as a principal at an elementary school. His work primarily entails administration of the school, supervision of the teachers, and implementation of state curriculum.

Alicia

Alicia is Caucasian, married, and in her early twenties. She was raised in an evangelical and Reformed church, and is new to her local congregation. She is employed

as a high school teacher at a Christian school where she teaches English to juniors and to seniors, as well as to Advanced Placement students.

Joni

Joni is a Caucasian female, married, and in her early thirties. She was raised in the Reformed tradition of churches. She received her degree in education from a four-year liberal arts college, and is currently working as a stay-at-home mom. She has three young children, the oldest being six, and the youngest being two. Her work entails ensuring that the household runs smoothly: cooking meals, cleaning the home, doing laundry, bringing her children to school, and providing a nurturing environment in which her children may grow.

In What Ways and to What Extent Do Christians Apply Sermons in the Workplace?

The purpose of this first research question was to study the overall impact of sermons in the lives of congregants in the workplace. In other words, the question focuses on how much of a difference Sunday preaching makes in the congregant's Monday morning vocation. Moreover, this question addresses how sermons make a difference in the lives of congregants in the workplace. That is, if sermons are deemed by congregants to be applicable to the needs of working people, what difference do they make as the congregants attempt to live their faith in the working world? The urgency of this question is summarized well by Carlene, who stated, "Work is life...I spend as many hours there as I do anywhere else." Clearly, there is a need for sermons – if they are to be effective – to relate to the workplace. In what ways is this accomplished?

I Can Move Chairs...

The connection between sermons and the workplace is not always immediately apparent. A number of the respondents struggled to recall specific sermons that made a concrete difference in their workplace. When asked how a sermon had been helpful specifically in the workplace, Marcel cited an example of a recent message he had heard on the New Testament story of Ananias and Saphira.¹⁹³ He related, “What I took home was, is my involvement with our church community saying, claiming, ‘This is me giving everything!’ ...and in reality I have more to offer because I’m young, I’m able, and I can move chairs...?” Even though the question asked how a sermon had been helpful in the workplace, his default answer drifted to ways in which he was challenged to help with setup at his local congregation.

Dana made a similar move when asked the same question. Her immediate response was to relate a way in which sermons encouraged her to live at peace with a next-door neighbor. She explained, “Every time I try to clip the bushes, and get closer to the neighbor, I always think of them, and I think, ‘I know my heart’s not right, and God, you’re the one that can make it right.’” Others took a related, though different tack. When asked about the importance of his work, Joshua tended to downplay it – and thus the impact of sermons on it – stating, “My legacy is not going to be here. Twenty years from now, no one will remember who Mr. [name] was.” For some respondents, the connection between sermons and their daily work was not evident.

¹⁹³ Acts 5:1-11. This narrative recounts an experience in which two individuals are punished for willingly and deceptively withholding their money from the church, in order to bolster their appearance before others.

When I See Jesus, What's He Going to Say?

When probed, however, all respondents articulated some ways in which they endeavored to apply sermons at work. For nearly all of the respondents, one of the ways in which sermons become most memorable for workplace application stems from an exhortation to steward their gifts well. Notably, two of the eight respondents singled out the same biblical text when asked about the most memorable sermon that they had heard.

Dana summarizes the meaning of the sermon, from Matthew 25:

Where it says, do not bury your gift, really, I heard that years ago, and it really bothered me. You know, to not – I mean, it bothered me in that that's why I was seeking God so hard because I did not want to be asked, "What did you do?" "Oh, I was afraid, so I buried it. I didn't use what you gave me." And I don't think that's the only thing that God has given me, but it's a major part of what He has given me.

At least two other respondents cited a similar sermon that made a significant change in their motivation for work. When considering the way her work might be important to God, Joni recalled a sermon that left her asking herself, "When I see Jesus, what's he going to say?" Congregants resonated with sermons that both challenged and encouraged them to use their unique skills as stewards who would be accountable to God for the way they employ his gifts in the workplace.

This uniqueness of their gifts was also widely acknowledged among participants. At least half of the respondents specifically addressed a theme that Joni observed when she stated, "I've always been raised that God loves you where you are at. He made you who you are, you each have talent ... we each have our gifts. Our talents." Sermons that recognize both the value and the diversity of these gifts were helpful to the congregants because they acknowledged the usefulness of all members as they searched for unique ways to serve God.

Shirley specifically recalled a sermon that came at a pivotal time in her training, as she was exploring what field to pursue and what goals to set for herself. It was a guest pastor, she explained, who preached a sermon addressing the “five-talent people” in the congregation. The pastor reminded them, “You’ve been called, you have to use your gifts, you can’t just hide under a rock, all that kind of stuff.” She went on to describe that through this one sermon, the Holy Spirit led her to wonder about her vocation, “What am I supposed to be doing here?” In asking this question, she was led to pursue an ambitious degree, and subsequently, ambitious positions in her field.

“I Need to Show Them the Light”

Each respondent noted ways in which their respective workplace created a tension between the values of their workplace and their values as a Christian. Joshua spoke for nearly all of the subjects when he shared that there were some things “...that morally and ethically I can’t stand. They’re going to continue to ask me to do things that, someday, I’m going to have to walk away and say, I can’t do it.” Others shared their own experiences of struggling to remain faithful to their Christian convictions, which ranged from a teacher wondering how to discipline a student guilty of plagiarism, to the stay-at-home parent facing a pressure to compare herself with other parents, to the truck driver being asked by clients (and fellow church members!) to do some questionable bookkeeping.

As the participants sought ways to remain faithful to their Christian convictions, many recognized that sermons play an important role in encouraging Christian conduct in the workplace. Interestingly, when asked how sermons may have changed the value of the work performed, Bret repeatedly emphasized that although sermons didn’t change the

value of the work, he affirmed, “I’m just continually reminded to do it in a godly way.”

Joshua echoed this sentiment:

I can’t proselytize, but I can show the love of God through my actions. I think when you listen to the things, you listen to your sermons, it’s a good reminder when you’re frustrated, you’re struggling with the systems, and the common core, and the union contracts, all the restrictions that are put around your job, what they can’t change is how I interact with people.

Joshua, like the majority of the respondents, acknowledged the difficulties inherent in the work, including the inability to openly speak about his faith. Though sermons couldn’t articulate how to deal with the specific difficulties (common core, union contracts, and restrictions put around the job), they could help him to be a witness to the people around him.

Others also value sermons for this purpose. Half of the eight participants specifically addressed the way that sermons help them to maintain their Christian conduct in the workplace. Alicia, the high school English teacher, spoke for many respondents when she shared that a recent sermon on the light of Christ encouraged her to “to show [her students] the light, just like Christ shows that to us.” Charlene, the special-education teacher, offered a suggestion for what that might look like: “I want to be there with the light on, both physically, and spiritually. I mean, there’s just something when they walk through that door, and you’ve got a smile and you’ve got energy, and you can encourage them, and I can’t do that when I’m not filled.” Notice that the ability to shine her light depends on being filled, and sermons “fill” her, allowing her to shine her light to those around her.

One of the most pronounced ways in which sermons help the respondents live as light in their workplaces relates to interpersonal relationships. As one respondent

summarized, “You’re stuck with these people [the people at work] for better or worse.” Often, the “for worse” aspect was all too apparent, as at least half of those interviewed cited specific troubles in their daily work. Respondents cited different personality types, infighting among coworkers, power struggles, office politics, and dishonest behavior in others as examples of relationship stressors in the workplace.

Yet, it was also noted that sermons often helped them to navigate these challenges. Dana, for example, observed, “When you’re dealing with people, all the different personalities, your own personality – I think sermons help by, God is sovereign, so, depending on the message at the time, I mean, everything sort of goes through your life... And you think, ‘Pastor was just talking about that!’” She is suggesting here that God uses sermons to form a grid of trust in the sovereignty of God through which interpersonal differences can be navigated. When asked how sermons help her to deal with these interpersonal differences, Shirley was even more specific, explaining that “just dealing with people, and being patient, and being honest, and those kinds of things. I guess that’s not a real specific sermon, but it’s a theme I’ve been noticing.” It is noteworthy that in both of these cases, there was not a one-to-one correlation between a sermon and a behavior. In other words, those interviewed didn’t hear specific advice from a specific sermon that would address a specific interpersonal problem. Rather, sermons were perceived as teaching general principles that were applied in the workplace. This idea will be explored in greater depth later in this study.

Holiness Can Happen In Dungeons

One of the ways in which sermons affected workers on a deeper level had to do with the way sermons fostered a uniquely Christian perspective on work. Marcel, a

psychology resident, reflected on a sermon that he had heard recently on the biblical story of a woman caught in adultery.¹⁹⁴ Contemplating this story, he related how a recent sermon on this text challenged the hearer not to pass judgment on those who struggle with various sins. Drawing that to his own context of counseling, he summarized, “I’m sitting with people who are sometimes bathing in their own sins. And so those are the kinds of things that affect me the most because I’m sitting with that all the time, and whether or not it’s the individual’s sin itself, or whether it’s someone else’s sins, so devastatingly affected them.” In this instance, a sermon has helped reframe his work through the lens of a biblical narrative. Marcel described this lens by noting that his work is a way to make “holiness happen in dungeons.” Viewed from a biblical lens, counseling took on a new perspective. Sermons that emphasized the compassion of God, in other words, created a lens which allowed him to view counseling as a means of ushering broken people into a sacred place.

Dana, the artist, agreed. She noted great potential for sermons to reframe her perspective on work, although she was also careful to point out that not all pastors recognize this potential. She explained:

Jesus on the cross has been done a million times. He is our precious savior. But in the way that it’s expressed can also bring a deeper understanding to people than just the first glance. Sometimes in depicting, not just the cross, but God’s righteousness can come through ... You know, with people that have a heart for the Lord, and want to – especially pastors who want to teach their people, what God has given them, to make them grow deeper.

To paraphrase, pastors can use sermons to help their congregants recognize a transcendent purpose in the work the congregants do each day. For Dana, this has happened as sermons have helped her to “depict the righteousness of God” in her art –

¹⁹⁴ John 7:53 - 8:11.

not simply by painting Jesus on a cross, but by capturing beauty on a canvass. Alicia noted something similar, as the literature she teaches does not merely tell a good story, but in fact, points her students to the way that “God can be seen in literature.” In this way, sermons serve as a means of linking an artist’s work – painting or literature – with God’s work of creating beauty in the world.

Joni applies sermons by changing the motivation for her work, rather than by connecting her work with a divine purpose. She confessed that parenting her three young children often left her feeling as though all she did was “dishes and laundry, laundry and dishes.” However, she shared how sermons have helped her to see that in her work she is “...serving Jesus. You’ve said that before. And I get frustrated with these three, and I know that I have to continue [but]... I’m a servant for them.” In her vocation, she receives little recognition or acknowledgment from her children, but sermons help her to see that her incentive for serving need not be linked to a tangible reward. Rather, it can instead be driven by a desire to serve Christ in doing the “dishes and laundry, laundry and dishes.”

We’re Tired, We’re Hungry...But We Decided to Come to Church

Perhaps the most significant way that sermons are applied in the workplace involves the way that sermons are received as a means of refreshment for facing the demands of the workplace. Without exception, each respondent reported some of the ways that work left them feeling “exhausted,” “tired,” and even “done.” The demands of taking care of young children, navigating workplace politics, trying to work consistently with Christian integrity, bearing the burdens of those who are hurting, or making a plethora of daily decisions leave people physically, emotionally and spiritually drained.

Shirley, the attorney, echoed the voices of all when she described her mindset at the end of the work week: “We’re tired. We’re hungry. We maybe got five other things to do. But we decided to come to church... Our coworkers are sleeping in, they’re off partying, they’re on the coast, doing whatever. But we’ve decided to come to church, so there’s a reason for that. We’re hungry for something.” The working world leaves people depleted, and while others may turn to recreation for refreshment, those surveyed pointed out that Christians make a sacrifice to attend worship, because they are looking for something that will prepare them to face the demands of the workplace on Monday morning.

For some, the demands of the working world lead to a weariness of a different sort. Bret, the agricultural truck driver, pointed out, “It’s when you’re tired and in a hurry that you become weak in the flesh.” He explained that workplace tiredness left him vulnerable to being short-tempered on the job. It was this sense of fatigue, common to all participants in different ways, that left workers pleading for preachers, in the words of Joni, to “just give me what I need to be full for that week!”

Indeed, this was one of the most valued and widely acknowledged ways in which the participants reported applying sermons in the workplace. Sermons seemed to be most valued for application in the workplace not for the specific ways they teach Christians to apply Christian principles in a vocational setting, but for the refreshment and encouragement they provide to those who come to church weary and heavy-laden. Carlene, the special-education teacher, says of her appreciation for church, “I feel like I leave here...refreshed, recharged, ready to go for another week. I don’t dread Mondays!” Joni observed what happened when sermons fail to offer this encouragement. “If you

don't get that sermon," she explained, "it's back to where you are at again. Just lost – not really lost... But it's a roller coaster of emotions."

In particular, one way that sermons offered rest for the listener was by providing a safe space to listen. Shirley contrasted her experience at work, where "I have this guard I have to keep up... I've got to be measuring everything I say," with her experience at church, where she knew that when she was "listening to a sermon, there's no subterfuge. I can just listen. I know it's safe. I don't have to filter it. It's just there, and it's goodness, even though it might not always apply directly on Monday morning. It's just having your mind sort of soak in that for a while." Of particular interest is her comment that she didn't necessarily need sermons to address the specifics of her workplace in order for them to be relevant. Instead, they were relevant because they helped her mind "soak in goodness" even if only for a brief period.

Others describe the refreshment in terms of spiritual cleansing. Two respondents specifically used the language of "cleansing" and "washing" to describe the way that sermons helped them approach their work. Dana connected sermons to what she calls a cleansing that helps her face the deadlines and demands of the workplace:

Well, when you sit and hear God's word, and his truth washes over me and dispels the devil, and I feel washed. I think that's the best way to put it. And I realize how I haven't either been fellowshiping with God or letting him calm my soul. And so, when I hear the word of God, it washes me of this world's woes, and my woes, and I am – I feel freer and less stressed, so when I go to work or when I'm working here on something – if I have a timeline or something – I'm more at peace, but it's because of God's truth, it's because of his word.

From her perspective, sermons have a cleansing effect, washing away troubles and worries, creating an inner space that is free from anxiety. Put another way, the preaching of God's word fosters an inward renewal in her relationship with God.

Listening to those who are immersed in daily work clearly demonstrates that working people genuinely desire to apply sermons in the workplace. Sermons, in general, are not viewed as ancillary to the needs, problems, and challenges of the working world. Instead, congregants genuinely attempt to put the sermons they hear into practice in their own context. The participants noted several ways that they accomplish this. First, sermons challenge congregants to use the variety of their God-given talents well, because they will be accountable for how they have used those gifts. Second, sermons help congregants to live as examples of Christian character and integrity in the workplace, both in personal conduct and in interpersonal relationships. Third, sermons reshape the congregants' perspective on the purpose and motivation behind their work. Finally, sermons provide personal encouragement that prepares workers to face the stresses of a wearying world. Given these ways in which sermons are applied in the workplace, the next question becomes even more pressing: what obstacles hinder or even prevent Christians from applying sermons in the workplace?

What Difficulties do Christians Face in Applying Sermons in the Workplace?

This question focuses on the factors that hinder well-intentioned Christians from applying the sermons they hear during Sunday worship services in their respective workplaces. It was assumed for the purposes of this study that individuals desire to apply sermons in their daily work, but that they have identified factors that make such application difficult, or even impossible. Two broad – if overly simplistic – categories of difficulties emerged during the interviews. First, significant difficulties were rooted in the workplace itself, which stifled one's ability to apply a sermon. Second, some difficulties stemmed from the sermons themselves, which for a variety of reasons, hindered rather

than helped application. This study will look at the troubles rooted in the workplace first, followed by the obstacles presented in the sermons themselves.

That's What You Gotta Do When You're Out There

A range of difficulties that were inherent in the working environment presented challenges to sermon application. Such difficulties were most pronounced for those in work environments where the government was more heavily involved, including the attorney, the special education teacher, and the elementary school principal. Difficulties that were less obvious, but still recognizable, were articulated by the therapist who is engaged in counseling clients from a broad range of religious backgrounds, the truck driver who acknowledged the need to be careful about not proselytizing among clients, and the Christian school teacher who wrestled with how to respond to students who did not share the Christian beliefs espoused by the school. The artist and the stay-at-home parent also noticed some incompatibilities between their faith and their workplace, but as will be shown, these were of a different nature than the previously stated examples.

Shirley, the attorney working for the state, related the most poignant example of such difficulty. She shared of a recent experience during which some of her colleagues were discussing plans to aggressively pursue pro-life organizations with legal action in an attempt to shut them down, using the power of the office of the Attorney General. As she recounted,

I'm not at the center of this whole controversy. But do I say anything? I sat around a conference table and they were just going off on crisis pregnancy centers. "What are they doing? They're not medical professionals, they should be skewered..." Just going off on Crisis centers. And here I am, just [Name] in the corner ... And suddenly – what was it, in Psalms, or Proverbs: "Do not sit in the seat of mockers." And I was just ready to quit after that.

Sitting among those who mock the convictions she stands for, and prompted by a scripture verse, it became uncomfortably obvious that her worldview was on a collision course with that of her colleagues. She explained that she knew that, although she was able to avoid taking a costly stand on this occasion, it would only be a matter of time before she would be forced to choose between standing for her convictions, which would likely be very costly, or hiding her faith altogether.

In exploring this tension, Shirley recalled a recent sermon series based on the Old Testament book of Judges that expressed the difficulty of applying sermons in the workplace. She related well to “the Israelites who are failing in their mission to be in the world but not of it. And just playing with that balance...that’s what you’ve gotta do when you’re out there.” Joshua, the elementary school principal, expressed a similar concern. He admitted, “I’m being asked to do things that I don’t agree with, that morally and ethically I can’t stand. They’re going to continue to ask me to do things that, someday, I’m going to have to walk away and say, I can’t do it.” For the Christian who seeks to apply sermons and desires to live out their faith in their daily vocation, the conflicting moral and ethical values often present significant barriers.

Additionally, it was noteworthy that three of the eight specifically noted the way that their coworkers shared different worldviews when it came to parsing out what is wrong with the world, and what can make it right again. Specifically, these three each used the word “salvation” to contrast how their particular fields viewed what needed to be done to repair the world. Joshua, for example, reflected somewhat cynically about the popular notion that education can fix the ills of the world. He objected, “A friend and I always talk about drinking the Kool-Aid, as we go to these meetings.” Echoing the

firmly-held sentiments of his colleagues in education, he continued, “This is what’s going to save the world!” Shirley shared a similar experience, harkening back to her days in law school, when her fellow students became physically ill before exams, fearing the possibility of failure. “I just walked in [the library], and I was just like, wow. This is not salvational, people! Calm down!” Marcel concurred with these sentiments, though he was quick to qualify this idea, reasoning, “What we’re doing is not salvific, but it can be preparation [for salvation].”

These basic worldview questions of what is wrong with the world and how to fix it present challenges because they reshape a person’s approach to the meaning of work. Christians desiring to apply sermons in the workplace will find themselves on the outside of the ethos of the workplace. In one sense, this exclusion may have some benefits, as with Shirley, who was not nearly as anxious as her fellow students, but was indeed able to “calm down.” On the other hand, Christians like Joshua, who do not buy into the idea that education will “save the world,” experience some level of alienation or isolation from their peers, who stake everything on their given field to “fix” what is wrong with the world. Putting sermons into practice becomes difficult with such fundamental differences in perspective on the meaning of work.

It Really Comes Down to “So What?”

Some of the more significant barriers faced by people desiring to put sermons into practice, however, are not experienced in offices, classrooms, or studios, but in sanctuaries. Many of the participants noted that it was the perceived disconnect between the world of worship and the world of work that made it difficult to apply Sunday’s sermons in Monday’s work. Six of the eight participants related experiences in which the

preaching they were hearing was “too theoretical,” “lacking application,” or “pie in the sky.” Lest they be accused of wanting simplistic messages, Marcel, the resident psychologist, spoke for nearly all when he insisted, “I like struggling with theological concepts and those things. But sometimes, it really comes down to, ‘So what?’ How does it help me sit with people or whether it’s my family, or whether it’s a client in distress because of life events? Does that translate? Does that theological principle or tenet really ... does it make a difference?” Shirley echoed these sentiments, maintaining, “I always love it when we get a little deeper and get into etymology of a Greek word – that helps me remember, actually, so it’s not about dumbing it down.”

At the same time, while most people valued depth in the sermons, Alicia cautioned that she had trouble with sermons that:

...go so deeply theological that I’d be sort of lost, and then I’d get bored and not really listen anymore. [Sermons] really depend if they connected very well, or told stories, or things like that, that made me more interested, rather than explaining that “this word in the Greek means this...” and going off on all these things. Because I don’t really care about that as much.

It would seem then, that the difference between sermons that are helpful, and sermons that are difficult to apply in daily work because they result in people getting confused or bored is not the difference between whether a sermon is deep or shallow, but whether an in-depth sermon is also relevant. Bret, the agricultural truck driver, was asked to compare what he considered to be good sermons with what he considered to be poor sermons. He described poor sermons as those lacking the part where “you can take that sermon and take it to those that are listening and either put it in an aspect of their lives, or how they can apply it to their lives.” Too often, it was repeatedly stated, sermons spent a great deal of time “in the clouds,” focusing on technical detail of a text, the etymology of a Greek

word, or the finer points of theological differences. These aspects of a sermon, while often appreciated and valued by congregants, were dismissed as meaningless if they never found a point of connection to everyday work.

Joni, the stay-at-home mom of three children offered a concrete example, reflecting on a recent visit to a church while on a family vacation. Sharing how the preacher was using a narrative text from the gospels, she expressed frustration, noting that all the preacher did was "...[tell] the story over again. So nothing where it can really...apply it to us. Just [telling] the story over again." Moments later, she mused that perhaps the main application of the text was to enable her to, in turn, better tell the same story to her children in the future. To put it simply, congregants will not know how to apply into their daily lives those sermons that do not connect with them.

In some cases, the perceived gap between pulpit and pew had less to do with specific sermons and more to do with a perceived lack of understanding of the vocational world. This was most clearly expressed by Dana, who admitted that

...the Christian world – they have an idea of art [that is] more like the Thomas Kinkade way of looking at things. That art – and he was a very talented man, but...there is art that is very different from that. I think that there is a stereotype of what Christian art should look like: The Jesus with the blond hair, and the lamb, and being so handsome.

The Christian world, in other words, viewed art in a sanitary and polished manner.

Dana's art reflected remarkable skill and talent, but she felt that much of it would not be readily recognized as "Christian" because it did not deal with specific Christian themes of crosses and depictions of Jesus.

This disconnect wasn't always counted against preachers, however. In some cases, pastors who were careful not to presume too much knowledge in various fields

garnered more respect. Shirley emphasized the importance of “understanding [that] it’s a complex and differing situation for every worker out there.” She suggested that pastors need to be careful when “preaching on a specific occupation, or that kind of thing, because they know they could get themselves out of their knowledge base fairly quickly.” Alicia was also sympathetic, arguing that when it comes to understanding all of the vocational realities of their congregants, “...pastors don’t need to. If you knew the little challenges in everyone’s job, that’s a lot to know.” Nevertheless, while congregants didn’t expect their preachers to understand all of the contours of their respective professions, it was seen as a barrier to sermon application if the preacher demonstrated little understanding of the working world, or if the sermons merely dabbled in the theoretical without at least attempting to make a connection to the daily lives of their congregants.

Something in the Delivery Didn’t Get to Me

In some cases, the biggest obstacle to applying a preacher’s sermon was the preacher. Specifically, something in the manner of delivery or the structure of the sermon prevented the message from being understood and applied in the workplace. Bret echoed the thoughts of several subjects when he recalled a sermon which left him wondering about the intended application of the message. He confessed, “There’s times where I’ll look back, and I’ll try to search and see what you were trying to tell me. And ...there are times where I’m completely...wow. What did he talk about? Was it that my mind was preoccupied with other things? Or something in the delivery that didn’t get to me?” When pressed about what specifically was missing from the sermon, he clarified, “You didn’t

use a lot of... interactive stuff so to speak. Examples, or stuff like that.” Lacking a connection to daily work, those sermons come across as disengaged and unmemorable.

Joni saw this problem from a different perspective. She cited a particular problem with pastors handling narrative texts because they tend to “...tell the story again, which is great. I love to hear that story again, but how do I apply this to my life again?” In this case, it is a poorly-planned sermon structure that makes the application difficult. Such sermons are deemed repetitive because, rather than interpreting and applying the story, the pastor merely walks through the story again in great depth, which leaves the congregants wondering, “How do I apply this to my life again?”

In other cases, the problem related to the character of the preacher. Shirley emphasized the detriment that results from preachers with character problems. “If you’re going to be talking to other pastors about your thesis here,” she insisted, “you’ve really got to hit [the need for humility] really hard because...there’s definitely other pastors that have a little more of an ego, and they feel a need to display that.” She gave specific examples of how this pride can come across in sermons. She described such sermons as “...being talked at instead of discussed with. It’s church as holier-than-thou.” She added that when a preacher – or, for that matter, a church – was portrayed as a dispenser of answers, she put up a guard because the preacher lacked credibility. Such preachers, she determined, failed to empathize with the complexities of the workplace, or even deemed the work of their congregations as inferior to the work of ministry.

Conversely, she stated, “Even for people who don’t naturally think, ‘How do I apply this to work?’ I think maybe that helps to make the connection a little bit more, when you yourself are a little more down to earth.” In other words, preachers who didn’t

talk at their congregations, or act as though they had all the answers, were better able to help their congregants apply sermons in the workplace. Preaching (or preachers) that came across as arrogant only served to alienate listeners, preventing them from applying sermons at work.

Sermons Tend to be Theoretical or They're Sort of the Introductory Ones

This study has already demonstrated the difficulty that individuals have in applying sermons in the workplace when sermons are too theoretical. Sermons that demonstrate a lack of understanding of the worker's ethos or sermons that are too theoretical will leave listeners lost, bored, or disinterested. However, some of the participants noted an opposite difficulty – sermons were sometimes not deep enough. Joshua articulated a difficulty in applying his faith in the workplace, “As I fight back against school systems...it's the frustrations, that we've lost all moral compass almost, of what the difference is between right and wrong.” When asked what preachers needed to do to better equip people to apply their faith at work, he reflected, “I think if I had a roomful of pastors, I think it's not just the feel-good [sermons]: ‘Here's Christian living!’ Because that's where we've gone wayward. I'm now creating the god I want, and not the God that he is, and we have to know the God that he is.” Oversimplification of the message, in other words, was just as hazardous as overcomplicating the message.

Bret agreed, at least to a point. For a time, his work with the Gideon's organization allowed him to visit numerous churches, hearing a variety of sermons. He observed that in many churches, “There was no content, but still it sure felt good. So I've listened to many of those, and so, to apply it to work – yeah, sometimes when you get one of those sermons you come back all jolly, but it doesn't last.” The so-called “feel-

good” sermons that lacked depth at least had the benefit of boosting a person’s mood when facing the hardships of the workplace. Yet even as he sees a deficiency in the depth of sermons, Joshua concedes, “I sometimes feel like that in Reformed Churches, that’s what is sometimes lacking: reaching the emotions of humans.” So, a consensus may be lacking in this area. There was a genuine desire for preachers to be relevant to the needs faced by workers in such a way that sermons were not overly complicated. Others, however, were more concerned that preachers foster theological and biblical literacy among their congregants.

I Wish I Had a Brain Like That

The importance of memorability was also a consistent theme among the participants. Seven of the eight individuals specifically cited their difficulty in recalling sermons as a barrier to applying sermons in the workplace. Shirley pointed out that if sermons were going to make any difference to her work, “I’d better remember it, or I’m not going to apply it.” For many, the inability to remember a sermon was not simply a factor that prevented sermon application, but a frustration they took personally. Dana expressed, “I want to apply it, and I want it to change my life, but as far as remembering... I wish I had a brain like that because I feel embarrassed, you know.”

Most of the others, when asked to recall a specific sermon that had helped them in their workplace, paused for a significant amount of time before answering. Some apologized, almost sheepishly, stating that they “couldn’t think of one” or that all of the sermons that they hear “blend together.” This suggests at least two things. First, sermons that were difficult to remember were, quite simply, difficult to apply. Second, it raises the question of how people actually remember sermons. It became clear during the

interviews that sermons were memorable, but their memory had more to do with long-term formation, rather than the ability to recall the specifics of a sermon.

Lack of Expanded Theology of Work

Perhaps it was what the participants did not say about the hindrances of applying sermons in the workplace that was the most surprising. Given the abundant body of literature referenced earlier in this study, it seemed logical that the individuals discussing their work would echo these sentiments. That is, it seemed probable that the interview subjects would express a greater disconnect between the sermons they were hearing and their experiences in their respective workplaces. That turned out not to be the case; many did express a sense that, at least in general, the church understood and valued their work.

However, what the individuals did not articulate was an expanded theology of work. When asked how God valued their work, most of the subjects clearly believed that their work did matter to God (contrary to what some of the literature suggested), but they didn't expand significantly on what precisely that meant, even when pressed. For example, Dana expressed her belief that God clearly valued her work, particularly because she did her work as a way of glorifying him on her canvas. Joshua stated that God valued his work because it was dealing with his creation – but didn't expand much beyond this. Alicia recognized the value God placed on work in that, according to the book of James, teachers were in positions of great responsibility.

In this sense, what the participants did not say during the interviews may reveal another obstacle to the application of sermons in the workplace. It is possible that one of the elements holding people back from more fully applying sermons is that a more complete theology of work is still being developed. It is worth considering that

individuals are still learning to identify the “big picture” nature of their work – the role their work plays in God’s bigger mission in the world. While they don’t view their work as insignificant to God, it is possible that those in the pew on Sundays aren’t fully applying the sermons they hear because they don’t fully appreciate the way their work is not only important, but integral to God’s mission in the world.

Christians applying sermons in the workplace face a number of significant obstacles. Some of the obstacles are inherent in the workplace, including the competing worldviews at play in the workplace, which present ethical dilemmas and competing views of the purpose in work. Other factors that make sermon application difficult are rooted in the preacher or in the sermon. Sermons that are either simplistic or overly complicated, sermons that lack application, and preachers that lack credibility with the congregation make it difficult for individuals to translate sermons into action in their workplaces.

What Factors Help Christians Apply Sermons in the Workplace?

The third area of research aims to discover specific factors that facilitate better sermon application in the workplace. These factors correspond with the factors that make sermon application difficult – but only to a point. Neither sermons nor preachers can, by themselves, do much to change the environment in which congregants work; this prohibitive factor will likely remain constant. However, the research did demonstrate that there are some steps that hearers can take to cement the sermons in their minds for more effective application. However, the most significant factors that assist Christians in applying sermons at work largely involved sermons and preachers. Some of these factors

will be specific steps that preachers can take in structuring sermons, and other factors will relate more to big-picture matters, such as sermon planning and ministry philosophy.

What Did the Pastor Talk About?

While most of the factors that help listeners apply sermons in the workplace focus on what preachers can do, there was a general – though not unanimous – consensus on one specific step that listeners can take. When asked what steps they take to apply sermons, five of the eight respondents indicated the importance of community in remembering and applying Sunday’s sermons in Monday’s work. Dana explained, “If I’ll go to church, and [my husband] is staying home, we’ll talk about it: What did pastor talk about?” This exercise in dialogue both reinforces the content of the sermon and offers the opportunity for congregants to grapple with possible applications in vocational settings. Of particular interest were the married couples, a number of whom noted the way that males and females hear sermons differently. Marcel shared that he and his spouse “always have something to talk about: ‘Oh, what did you think about that statement?’ ‘Oh, I didn’t pay attention to that at all – I paid attention to this...’” Bret echoed these sentiments, stating that he and his wife “take notes, and our notes are different. Different things that we pick up. ‘Oh, you thought about that in one way? I thought about it another way.’ So it’s fascinating how we both don’t pick up the same things.” Engaging in constructive conversation about a sermon with another person draws out complementary insights that enrich the listening experience.

Of course, it isn’t just married couples who help one another apply sermons in the workplace. Half of the participants specifically used the phrase “community of believers” when they considered the factors that helped them to remember and apply sermons. Each

of these four individuals recognized that spiritual growth stems from hearing, understanding, and applying sermons alongside other believers. Reflecting on the challenges of serving in public office and working in an environment that presents a sharply divergent worldview from her own, Shirley had this to say about “the community of believers. So there they’re for support too. That’s really important. And, you know, boy the world out there is hard enough, but you know, here it’s safe, here we’re community, here we can share our problems.” The community of Christians offers a safe place to be vulnerable and honest, and to encourage one another in living out the Christian faith.¹⁹⁵

As a teacher in a Christian school, Alicia works in a markedly different environment than Shirley. She can safely assume that most of her coworkers are fellow Christians, and therefore her basic worldview is largely shared by her colleagues. Yet she too stressed the importance of the church, commenting that, “[The] sense of community, and growing together” helps her because “even if I know the truth, sometimes you need that reinforcement coming in and you just need to be with a body of believers.”

One final step that individuals took to better apply sermons in the workplace involves reviewing sermon notes. Each of the individuals (with the exception of Marcel, who attends a church closer to his home while in school) attends a church where a sermon outline is made available in the bulletin. This is a simple outline, consisting only

¹⁹⁵ This is much easier said than done; becoming a community that is safe enough for people to be vulnerable requires an investment of time, and time can be a scarce commodity, particularly for those in the working world. Some of this community happens organically, as individuals in a particular congregation develop friendships that allow them the opportunity to share with and encourage one another. One way that churches can also encourage this is by creating a culture that is honest about brokenness and weakness. In other words, churches can strive to become places where brokenness is not looked down upon and perfection is expected. By valuing weakness, members of a congregation can be encouraged to share about their own workplace struggles in a non-judgmental environment, and encourage others who have dealt with similar issues.

of the main points and the sub-points. Additionally, there are questions pertaining to the sermon that are geared towards application of the sermon. While not a significant proportion of the listeners, two of the eight did indicate that these notes played a part in their ability to apply sermons through the course of the week. Bret in particular benefitted from this practice, describing how on “Mondays I take up my little sheet and I go through it, read it, and try to reflect upon what you say. So to me, it’s just a reminder to go back to the sermon, ‘cause I can drive home – [Spouse] and I will talk – but that evening, it’s blank. But the next day, it’s better revealed to me.” He observed that even on the same day he hears a sermon, it will be largely forgotten that evening. However, reviewing the message the next day (presumably on a workday) brings the sermon back to mind again.

Dana agreed, “That’s why I keep the bulletin in my Bible for, depending, a couple of weeks at least, because of the notes I write when you do your sermon.” Taking notes, reviewing them, discussing them with someone else, and even following up on the notes at a later date were noted as factors that helped individuals listen to sermons, and then subsequently apply them in their respective workplaces.

He Could Connect With Where We Were

Most of the factors that enabled listeners to apply sermons were observed to be not in the hands of the listener, but in the hands of the preacher. In some ways, the most apparent factor is related to sermon structure and delivery. Sermons that were perceived by listener to have been constructed with their particular needs and circumstances clearly in mind were most readily applicable to daily work. Listeners identified a number of different tactics that a preacher might use to bridge this gap. Alicia shared a unique experience that helped her to recognize some of the different methods preachers might

use to craft sermons that were applicable. She shared her experience from college when, midway through the year, one chaplain ended, and another began a preaching ministry at her college. Comparing the two, she noted that the second chaplain was much more adept at preaching applicable sermons because, as she put it, “He was a lot more energetic. The first chaplain talked in a monotone voice the whole time. He [the second chaplain] knew what it was like to be in our situation. He could connect with where we were. And how old we were, if that makes sense.” The second chaplain was perceived as more relevant because of his manner of communication in the pulpit.

Shirley concurred, describing an unhelpful preaching style as “being talked at instead of discussed with.” She stressed, “Even for people who don’t naturally think, ‘How do I apply this to work?’ ... [it] helps to make the connection a little bit more, when you yourself are a little more down to earth so they can bring these lofty ideas down to earth.” Preaching that was perceived as arrogant was deemed irrelevant; conversely, preaching in which the preacher attempted to work through a difficult text with the congregation connected more effectively with the congregation.

Alicia – along with many of the other respondents – offered a number of additional, specific suggestions to fine-tune sermon styles and homiletical methods for maximum effectiveness. Recalling the more effective chaplain from her college days, she observed that he “always started off with a story and a lot of times they were kind of funny stories. And then he would lead it into whatever the subject was that he was talking about.” Stories are major hooks to help listeners connect the depth and the complexity of sermons to the matters of daily work. At least half of the respondents singled out stories,

examples, or analogies as elements of a sermon that helped them connect the teaching to their daily work.

Marcel offered insight into why stories are effective in helping people to make sermons applicable. “People love stories,” he explained. “That’s what’s so easily connected. And I think ... stories carry messages. And if the stories are carrying messages that are embedded wholly in scripture, I think they’re easier to remember,” he concluded. Stories can help people to clearly see the application of the scriptural message into their everyday lives. Dana summarized the scope and the primacy of rhetorical technique as “the explanation of God’s word, the actual words you use, the phrasing you use, the examples you use,” all of which, in her words, are tools “that the Holy Spirit uses to open my eyes for me.”

It’s not always as simple as carefully choosing the phrasing, examples, and actual words, however. Sometimes the preacher has little control over the way that a sermon will resonate with the audience, leading to successful application in the workplace. Instead, it is a series of factors beyond the reach of a preacher that facilitate a connection between sermon and vocation. Bret, while conceding that he couldn’t think of a specific instance in recent memory, did recall occasions where “something has happened during that week, and then the sermon touches upon that, and then it really becomes applicable.” He suggested that a sermon may become relevant after the fact; while it may not stand out as particularly relevant initially, an event later in the week may bring the sermon back to the hearer’s mind, allowing them to put the lesson into practice. Dana expressed something similar, recalling experiences in work when she would “...think, ‘Pastor was just talking about that!’ ...I have seen, in my devotions, I’ve read about work in my

devotions, and how we are to glorify God, and so there's this wonderful thread, golden thread, from in your class,¹⁹⁶ through today, where I'm reading, even in my devotions." Sermons became easier to apply as this "golden thread" became woven through her life. The topic of integrating work began surfacing in a Sunday school class, in sermons, and in her personal devotions, and as this theme was reiterated, it became easier to recall when she faced a particular challenge in the workplace. As a result, sermons became easier to put into practice.

Perhaps all of this begs the question – what are the needs that a preacher can address in sermons that will in turn make sermons more applicable? What is the "golden thread" that a preacher can weave? The respondents addressed a wide variety of needs, but each person, perhaps unknowingly, drew attention to the various thorns and thistles of the workplace as the source of needs that they wanted addressed. In other words, the people in the workplace wanted to hear a response to the ways that sin damaged the workplace. Concerns like forgiving coworkers, dealing with the jealousy of colleagues, addressing conflict, managing the busyness and demands of the work/home balance, or struggling with comparing oneself to others were all topics of concern, and when sermons managed to touch on these needs, they stood out as being particularly relevant and applicable. To put it all very simply, working people are looking for answers to the problems they face, and sermons are easier to apply when they speak to these difficulties.

Educate the Conversation, Don't Dictate It

The participants noted that sermons become easier to apply when the preacher gives a solid biblical and theological foundation, without coming across as all-knowing.

¹⁹⁶ The subject here is referencing an Adult Education class taught by the researcher in the local congregation exploring the topic of vocation.

The participants stressed that they did not want abstract or purely theoretical sermons that lacked clear and concrete application. However, helpful sermons also avoided the opposite mistake of over-simplification. Joni recalled a period in her life when she and her husband attended a large church in town, but eventually left because the preaching was too simplistic. She reflected, “In the mega church, you’re approaching all different, new people coming in. Not the aspects of the fear of God...rather, Jesus is love. And he’s all of the above. But I came from a place that had catechism. And these are the reasons why we believe what we believe.” She was observing that the church had tailored its message to new people rather than preaching sermons that contained the depth that she needed – depth that included teaching the Heidelberg Catechism and equipping people to articulate and defend what they believe and why.

Three other respondents expanded on this idea. At least two individuals appreciated sermons that dabbled in Greek etymology, or wrestled with complex theological issues. Joshua went further, arguing the case that sermons are not effective if they are “just sending people out into the world that are just swayed by the wind.” Instead, he contended that the most useful sermons teach the truth so that listeners become “rooted and solid, that are grounded in that sense that they’re not going to be swayed by the world.” Participants gave no small weight to the importance of biblical and theological depth in sermons – but they wanted their preachers to be cautious when handling these tools.

One caution regarding depth has already been noted earlier in this chapter – the notion that depth without answering the “so what?” question becomes a hindrance to applying the sermons. A second caution is in order here, mentioned by at least one

subject, concerns moments when preachers overstep boundaries in sermon application. Sermons in which preachers pretend to be experts outside their field will leave the listener skeptical. Shirley cautioned those preachers, “You must be very, very careful. And not just because you might offend someone, but because, you know, this isn’t your area of expertise to be honest.” Rather, she counseled preachers who desired to take the complexities of biblical and theological truth into the workplace, to arm themselves with humility, and then to “let people extrapolate for themselves, talk to them amongst themselves about it. Educate the conversation but do not dictate it, I guess would be the most helpful thing.”

Preachers who were best able to help congregants apply their sermons dug deep into theology – and then used that depth to guide the conversation, all the while allowing congregants make applications that were specific to their particular situations. Alicia described this approach as wise. She recalled her first year of teaching:

It was figuring out so many little decisions. Like can a student go to the bathroom now? Should they put their rubric on the front of their paper or the back? And I’d come home exhausted because I wasn’t used to making so many decisions in one day. So that’s not a huge thing of wisdom, but it’s some sort of wisdom, what you want them to do.

Faced with a myriad of workplace decisions each day, she did not come to church seeking specific answers for each of these minutiae. Rather, she wanted sermons to offer wisdom, and she wanted the pastor to trust her enough to make the specific applications, rather than having the pastor overstep vocational boundaries and tell her exactly how to make each of these decisions.

The Drumbeat in the Background

One might assume that the most noticeable way congregants would apply sermons in their daily work would be by receiving counsel on navigating specific workplace challenges and then finding opportunities to apply this counsel. However, while several individuals did mention particular concerns for which they looked to sermons for guidance, the most dominant way that sermons were applied in the workplace was cumulative personal formation. As referenced earlier, most of those interviewed struggled to recall specific sermons that made a difference in the way they did their work. They confessed, usually sheepishly, even apologetically, that they “couldn’t recall” sermons, they “forgot” the specifics of a message, or they explained that the years of sermons “all ran together.” Yet they unanimously agreed that sermons shaped the way they did their work.

When asked how a sermon had helped her in the workplace, Shirley responded, “...specifically to a sermon...changed something I did at work.... [Lengthy Pause] hmmm. I don’t know if I can think of a specific example. It’s just kind of that drumbeat going on in the background that keeps on reminding me.” Sermons, then, formed an ever-present rhythm in her thinking and living as she conducted her work, even if she wasn’t always conscious of how it was shaping how she did what she did. Carlene noted that when it came to applying sermons, “A lot of it isn’t...new. I’ve lived so long, I have heard a lot of sermons that aren’t new. I can say that, I’m sixty! But we forget.” However, lest a preacher conclude that sermons had had no long-term effect on her, Carlene continued, “It’s like [sermons] become a part of my thinking, and I don’t remember where the ideas have come from.” In other words, while tying a concept (that

she would apply in the workplace) to a specific sermon would be difficult, if not impossible to do, sermons had shaped her psyche over many, many Sundays of listening.

Every other person, using similar language, shared that they actually valued the repetition. Joni emphasized, “It feels good to hear that story over again. It’s great to hear stories over again.” She expanded on this concept to illustrate the way that repetition of sermons helps her in the workplace. “It’s good to hear it again,” she reflected. “To think that you are doing this [parenting] as service to Jesus. This isn’t just serving these guys [her children] – as irritating as that may be. It’s a service to Jesus. So I look at it as a way to get refreshed, and to get reminded that I am going to get rewarded.” In a job that she admitted often left her tired and weary, the drumbeat of sermons helped her focus on the bigger purpose of her work.

Bret also offered insight into the way that sermons have a cumulative effect of forming him in the workplace. He shared, “It takes a while. I think everything you preach molds me in who I am. Does that make sense? So, particular sermons maybe not, but the way I’m molded, and when I go out on Mondays, take this, who I am, what I do, how I act, how I behave, how I interact, so it’s not particular sermons, but it’s all together.” Sermons were helpful, not as dispensing pieces of specific, concrete advice for use in workplace settings, but because they were formative of a person’s character. This is not to say, of course, that sermons should not have application, since it was noted by respondents that they clearly valued sermons that were applicable. Rather, it is to suggest that were most effective when they were received as a regular part of a long-term diet of growth.

Two respondents offered insight into how this of cumulative formation works. Both of them (notably, they were both educators) explained that information is retained until the person encounters a related experience. At that time, their minds retrieve the stored material. By way of example, Alicia nicely summarized what this looked like in her English classroom:

I feel like a lot of times, a little while after the sermon, I don't remember it very well. But the lessons I think are still in there somewhere, even if I don't remember it specifically, it's still sort of there. If I hear a sermon on Sunday, I don't just go and tell my students about it the next week. It's more that I'm growing and learning more, and because I'm understanding my faith better, I can show it more to my students.

Sermons rarely shed light on the literature she teaches. However, she affirmed that the sermons form her as a person of faith over time, which in turn allows her to shape the worldview of her students.

The idea that applying sermons in the workplace is the result of a continual drumbeat begs the question: What is the drumbeat itself? That is, what is the heart of the message that, when repeated, helps an individual to apply a sermon to their daily work? When the respondents were asked this question, a number of themes emerged. First, it was worth noting that two of the respondents specifically mentioned the “sovereignty of God” as most helpful theme to hear. Compare Dana the artist, with Shirley the attorney. Shirley acknowledged the comfort that comes from hearing that “at the end of the day, God is sovereign – you really need to keep that in perspective or else you can get all caught up in this game playing.” Dana concurred, “When you’re dealing with people, all the different personalities, your own personality – I think sermons help by [reminding that] God is sovereign.” The emphasis on the sovereignty of God in sermons from week

to week helped these two workers stay above the fray of workplace politics, personality clashes, and demanding bosses.

There were other aspects to the sermon drumbeat that helped listeners apply sermons, but aside from the sovereignty of God, there was no uniform theme. A number of respondents noted that it was not just sermons that helped, but shared that the entirety of the worship service prepared them for the workweek. Others suggested that focusing the thoughts of the congregation on themes that were “true, noble right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, or praiseworthy”¹⁹⁷ offered a respite from the stresses of everyday work. Finally, Shirley described the drumbeat of sermons as reinforcing the identity of the believer. She explained, “I have real confidence knowing who I am. That’s probably a big thing too...I knew from the day I was, what, fourteen when I made profession of faith, this is what I believe, this is who I am. Obviously I struggle with that sometimes, but having that base knowledge, and just going through the scriptures again and again and again and again. Drumbeat.” In an environment that constantly shapes identity around workplace success and achievement, the drumbeat of sermons that regularly detail who she really was helped her to remember what was important.

I Would Tell Them That Work is Real Work Too

“My work is real work too” – this was the sentiment expressed by Shirley, when asked what advice she would give to pastors, to help them preach sermons that better connect with the needs of people in the workplace. To put it positively, sermons are more readily applied in the workplace when the congregation has a palpable sense that their preacher values the work that they do. Most respondents acknowledged that God valued their work, but they wanted to be sure that the person in the pulpit also recognized that

¹⁹⁷ A paraphrase of Philippians 4:8, quoted by one of the participants.

their work mattered to God. Likewise, others who were asked what counsel they would offer preachers reiterated the need for preachers to walk among their listeners. Alicia acknowledged the difficulty of knowing the ins and outs of the lives of every member of the congregation, but still pleaded with pastors

...to know [their] audience, to connect with [them] ...I would remind them that they need to have a variety in the people that they're speaking to. Because they can't talk to everyone, every Sunday. So maybe you'll address more of a college age group one Sunday, but a different Sunday it's more for elderly people. Remembering who you are speaking to.

How might preachers do this? Alicia again suggested that “knowing your audience [means] spending time with your audience.” It's not enough, in other words, to know demographic information about a segment of the congregation; relational knowledge is required. Part of this study entailed visiting individuals in their workplace, and each individual was subsequently asked about their reaction to this. While some of the respondents admitted that it was “weird” or “strange,” and, in some cases, even “pretty intimidating to share their real lives with their pastor,” all later stated that they appreciated the connection with their pastor. Joni remarked, “I want to have that relationship with my pastor.”

It is worth noting that while having the preacher enter into the working environment of their parishioners was viewed as helpful in applying sermons, it could also cause some discomfort. When asked what it was like to have her pastor visit her workplace, Dana, the artist, laughed, “I wanted to hide the naked lady!” She was, of course, referring to a sculpture that (while acceptable for those in the artistic community) was perceived as an embarrassment for a pastor. Joni echoed a similar fear, in reflecting on welcoming her pastor into her home, confessing that a visit “could be intimidating: I

hope he doesn't see me doing this! I hope he doesn't look there..." A number of others shared similar feelings. All of this serves to highlight the perceived gap between the working world and the world of pastors and churches.

Nevertheless, when the pastor (in this case, the researcher) made the effort to cross that bridge, the participants felt deep appreciation. After getting over her fear of the pastor seeing the "naked lady," Dana stated, "When you came in, I was really honored, and you showed that you were genuinely interested, and that also sort of surprised me...It was a very good visit, and I was so proud to have you there." Likewise, Marcel showed how the pastor's visit put flesh on the sermons. He explained, "I liked it. I was excited to have you come. I don't get to share that sacred space very much...But it's also kind of neat to say 'Here's where some of the things that we talk about on Sunday happen!'" So, even as some were initially reluctant to have the pastor bridge the gap, all later shared that they indeed appreciated the effort, and would gladly repeat the experience, even if not for research purposes. From their point of view, workers were better able to apply sermons because, to conclude with the words of Joshua, "I think it's appreciated. From your standpoint, you understand my job."

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways that Christians apply sermons in the workplace. To that end, three research questions guided the study:

- 1) In what ways and to what extent do Christians apply sermons in the workplace?
- 2) What difficulties do Christians face in applying sermons in the workplace?
- 3) What factors help Christians to apply sermons in the workplace?

Interviews with eight participants have demonstrated that listeners genuinely attempt to apply sermons in their workplaces. Sermons help them recognize that they will be accountable for their work, and challenge them to be people of strong Christian character. Sermons are applied by shaping a perspective on work, and by encouraging weary workers. Sermon application is difficult when Christians are immersed in a secular environment, when sermon structure is too theoretical or lacking application, or when sermons are forgotten altogether. Sermons are easier to apply in the workplace when the congregants discuss the lesson with someone else, when preachers take steps (including visiting congregants in their workplace) to know and understand the congregants' world, when preachers provide both a solid theological foundation and a clear application, and when preachers view preaching as beating a drum, so that sermons have a cumulative formative effect.

In the following chapter, the study will draw the themes observed thus far to some conclusions, and will offer some clear suggestions for pastors who wish to help their congregants better apply sermons in the workplace.

Chapter Five

Discussion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore how Christians apply sermons in the workplace. In order to study this question, three questions guided the research:

1. In what ways and to what extent do Christians apply sermons in the workplace?
2. What difficulties do Christians face in applying sermons in the workplace?
3. What factors help Christians to apply sermons in the workplace?

Chapter two reviewed relevant literature on the intersection of sermons and work. This included examining both a biblical and theological understanding of the role of work in God's plan of redemption. Additionally, the study explored the importance of application in a sermon, including practices that preachers might employ to strengthen that application. Chapter two also focused on the way that mainstream literature on leadership motivates workers to do their work well, and to find meaning in their work. Chapter three described the interview protocol used to survey a selection of Christians who acknowledge a desire to apply sermons in the workplace. Chapter four revealed the in-depth findings from eight individuals who are actively trying to apply sermons in their respective workplaces. The challenges involved were outlined, as well as the factors that help with sermon application in the workplace. This final chapter will discuss the findings of these interviews in light of the literature studied, and the researcher will offer three practical recommendations in light of this research.

Summary of Findings

Haddon Robinson probed preachers with a pointed question: “Does selling insurance, running a laundromat, driving a cab or delivering mail matter to God?” His answer was an admonition to preachers. “Judging by our preaching,” he contends, “probably not.”¹⁹⁸ Indeed, many other scholars, pastors, and writers echo this theme. Robert Reimer argues, “A pastor’s Sunday sermon seems to confine the application of a biblical principle within the context of church life... thus, faith may be seen as irrelevant to the workplace.”¹⁹⁹ David Veerman summarized a faulty assumption he held early in his preaching ministry, acknowledging, “The audience will make a connection between the lesson and their lives, a common mistake.”²⁰⁰ The literature suggests that a gap exists between pulpit and pew; sermons are not taking into consideration the needs of the listeners who spend many of their waking hours in the workplace. Workers desire to apply what they hear in the sermon on Sunday to the work they do in their offices, classrooms, boardrooms, sales floors, and dairy farms. However, the literature argues, sermons are not in tune with the needs and the experiences of their working congregants. Thus, when the people in the pew listen to a sermon, they leave ill-equipped to apply their faith in the workplace at best, or at worst, they have a sense that the pastor doesn’t really know or doesn’t really care much about a part of life that matters to them. Is the literature correct? Did the experiences of people in the working world support this theory? The first research question will address this issue.

¹⁹⁸ Haddon Robinson, “When the Sermon Goes to Work,” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, ed. Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids, MI: 2005), 677.

¹⁹⁹ Reimer, 151.

²⁰⁰ David Veerman, “Apply Within,” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, ed. Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids, MI: 2005), 283.

In What Ways and to What Extent do Christians Apply Sermons in the Workplace?

The interviews suggested that the reality is not as clear-cut as the literature suggests. There was indeed evidence that verifies the existence of a gap between pulpit and pew in the area of workplace application. Marcel, when asked to share about the way that a particular sermon had helped him in the workplace, responded that he felt convicted to help with moving chairs before a worship service at church. To be sure, this was not a misapplication of the sermon; finding ways to give more of oneself in serving the local church is valuable, and most pastors would be grateful to see that trait. At the same time, it was curious to observe that the natural understanding of sermon application – at least in this case – drifted immediately to the context of the local church and not to the workplace, even when that was specifically requested.²⁰¹

Additionally, it became apparent during the course of the interviews that silence sometimes spoke loudest. Without exception, when asked to recall specific sermons that had been helpful in the workplace, each respondent had a difficult time doing so. Most of the respondents paused for a lengthy period of time, and even after a period of deep thought, naming one specific sermon that had been helpful wasn't easy. This wasn't to say that these individuals were not applying sermons at work (as follow-up questions demonstrated) but it did suggest that obvious connections to workplace situations were not always apparent to listeners. In other words, listeners typically did not identify concrete sermon applications on Sunday to employ in their workplace on Monday.

This lack of explicit recall may be due to a number of factors. Perhaps the idea that a person's faith should be applied in the workplace is not always assumed. That is, it

²⁰¹ Again, it should be stated that this response was in no way taken as a "snub" from Marcel. His response was thoughtful and valuable, and his application will benefit his local church greatly.

could be assumed by listeners that sermons, by default, speak into a person's involvement with church (as with Marcel, and the "setting up chairs" application), or into marriage, or family, or other realms deemed by the listener to be "sacred" areas of life. Meanwhile, it may not be immediately apparent to congregants that work is a significant setting for sermon application. Another factor could be that preachers need to do more in their sermons to connect the biblical truth to the workplace setting. When this happens, sermons become more memorable because they are seen as more relevant.

Preaching Helps the Congregation Work as Light

There were also clear indicators that, while specifics may have been hard to recall, congregants clearly recognized the need to apply sermons at work. Frequently, this meant that congregants desired to be an example in the workplace. "I want to be there with the light on, physically and spiritually," shared Carlene about her desire to be a positive witness to her students and coworkers. Other respondents echoed this theme. Christian witness in the workplace was often perceived as exemplary conduct before the watching eyes of colleagues, clients, and customers. Sermons were seen as a means to instruct and encourage individuals to be a light. Joshua reflected, "I can show the love of God through my actions. I think...when you listen to sermons it's a good reminder when you're frustrated, you're struggling with the systems, and the common core...what they can't change is how I interact with people."

These sentiments echo what was noted by author Larry Peabody, who maintained, "God wants us to use our ordinary jobs as lampstands, light fixtures. Our work stations place us in positions of visibility."²⁰² Notice his use of the imagery of the believer as a light. Like the respondents, Peabody suggests that by their examples, Christians exercise

²⁰² Peabody, 32.

a positive influence in their professional surroundings. The respondents agreed, often using similar language in acknowledging that God had placed them in their work environments for the purpose of being positive influences on those around them.

While sermons helped individuals serve as light in their cubicles, classrooms, and kitchens, there was some evidence to suggest that sermons didn't really change their viewpoint regarding the significance of their work. Indeed, when the participants were pressed on this question, their responses were ambiguous. Sermons encouraged people to focus on their Christian witness, but it seems that they could have done more to form a unique perspective on work. Compare the reflections of the participants to what Miroslav Volf envisioned for work:

The presence of the Spirit of the resurrected Christ in the whole of creation, and in particular in those who acknowledge Christ's lordship, gives hope that work also can be transformed in ever greater correspondence to this ideal. Christians will thus refuse to accept any given situation as irreformable. They will hope against all hope and strive in the power of the Spirit to make work "full of delight."²⁰³

Volf presents a lofty vision for the value of work. For the Christian, he argues, work can be markedly different in that it can become a way of bringing the reforming, renewing power of the Holy Spirit into the workplace, and thus into the broader world.

The End of Work

This presents both a gap and an opportunity for preachers. To the extent that the individuals surveyed are a fair representation of believers, preaching is generally viewed as helpful and relevant to the needs of working people insofar as it helps them to be lights in the workplace. At the same time, preachers must do more in their sermons to help congregants align their work with God's ultimate purpose for vocation. Preachers have

²⁰³ Volf, 168.

operated under the assumption that when crafting sermons that speak into the workplace, it is sufficient to shape moral behavior or to encourage Christian witness. While not undermining these goals, preachers must shape a greater purpose behind their working congregants.

Recall that Ben Witherington argued, “We must grasp that our God-given purpose has a goal, a telos, to use the Greek term, not merely a terminus, and it most certainly involves us working.”²⁰⁴ Witherington is encouraging believers to recognize the telic purpose in their work, and, to use a very loose paraphrase of Romans 10:14²⁰⁵, how will workers grasp this unless they are told? To put it positively, preachers have a significant opportunity to help parishioners connect their daily work with God’s ultimate work.

What sorts of themes might preachers emphasize in preaching? Merritt Nielson summarized God’s work by saying that in the beginning, “God separates and gathers; God makes and positions what God creates in its proper place; God makes and fills what is made.”²⁰⁶ Preachers, then, can explain the ways in which the varied vocations of their congregants are a part of God’s work “filling what is made.” Tim Keller clarifies what this might look like when he describes workers as “gardeners who take an active stance toward their charge.”²⁰⁷ I will now suggest at least seven possible ways in which daily work can be linked to God’s ultimate work – his telos. These themes can be frequently highlighted in sermons, and over time they may create a church culture that affirms each vocation as a piece of God’s redemptive work in the world.

²⁰⁴ Witherington III, 9. Emphasis in original.

²⁰⁵ Romans 10:14 says, “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in?”

²⁰⁶ Nielson, 10.

²⁰⁷ Keller, *Every Good Endeavor*, 58.

Cultivating Potential

God's first work involved forming the cosmos. God revealed himself to be an architect, an engineer, a craftsman, and a builder as he laid the foundations of the world, designed it to sustain life, and fashioned a home for humankind in which they might thrive. But God's world is, by no means, a finished product. The cosmos is bursting with potential for transforming the raw material of creation into new and useful products. Many vocations mirror God's work of cultivating raw material to its full, useful potential. Architects and builders design bungalows and apartment buildings, bridges and interstate highways. Contractors, electricians, plumbers, and painters bring these ideas into being. Inventors and innovators imagine and implement technology that allows us to accomplish tasks that were unimaginable to previous generations. Investors use their capital to finance these visions, and marketing executives and sales people help consumers understand how technology can be used well in daily life. Preachers can help God's people recognize the many ways in which their work develops the potential in God's world.

Creating Beauty

It is no small thing that God's creative work is not merely utilitarian. God does not merely form a cold and rigid universe that is adequate to meet human needs. Rather, he infuses it with a rich palette of colors, tastes, sounds, tones, smells, and textures. As a worker, God values beauty, and many professions today contribute greatly to God's world by reflecting this beauty. Recall Dana's approach to painting, in which she created art as a way to "let the righteousness of God come through," or Alicia's approach to teaching, in which she points out to students the ways that God "can be seen in

literature.” Painters paint canvasses or walls, musicians compose symphonies or jazz pieces, playwrights tell stories, interior decorators imagine ways to make living spaces beautiful. Preachers can encourage their congregants to not only value beauty, but also to see their role in the creation of beauty as a way they can partner with God’s work.

Creating Order

God did not create a world of chaos and disorder. He organizes the animals according to their kinds, fills habitats with appropriate species, institutes laws of thermodynamics, laws of gravity, and laws of motion. Many professions bring order into our world. Accountants organize numbers into tax forms for the good of society. Physicists explore and apply the properties of the physical world to produce energy and to design machines. Legislators write laws that order a just society, police officers protect citizens from violence and petty crime, county court judges punish offenders, and addiction counselors can rehabilitate a disordered life. Preaching can encourage congregations to view their work through a lens of bringing order to a chaotic world.

Sustaining Life

God’s involvement did not stop at the moment of creation. The Garden of Eden was designed as a place in which God would meet the ongoing needs of his people. Plants produced healthy food to eat. There were, presumably, comfortable places to sleep and clean places to bathe. In a post-fall world, God provides clothing for Adam and Eve, and Jesus heals the ill and cares for the grieving. Employees today – from hourly-wage workers to salaried executives – can participate in God’s ongoing, providential care for the world. Truck drivers transport goods from the farm to the grocery store, where clerks stock shelves and scan items at the register. A hotel maid ensures clean sheets and

pillows that contribute to a good night's sleep for weary travelers. A stay-at-home mom takes her three year-old daughter for a well-child checkup, where doctors and nurses immunize her and watch for signs of illness. Firefighters move quickly to rescue people in danger and to prevent the loss of life and home. When presented this way in sermons, jobs can be valued for the way that they play a part in God's work in this world.

Educating the People

Even Adam and Eve, in paradise, at first lacked the knowledge necessary to maintain the Garden of Eden. God educated them, commanding them not to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. While Adam and Eve disobeyed, the fact remains that they were in need of teaching. This is a constant need throughout the Bible; God commands his people to teach future generations the paths of righteousness. Parents play this role, of course, but so do professors, kindergarten teachers, authors, preachers, therapists, and principals. Preachers can find ways to illustrate that teaching is a pattern etched in the work of God himself.

Creating Space for Recreation

God works, but notably, God also rests. Human beings are not designed to work without the blessed interruption of rest, and many professions contribute to our ability to enjoy rest and recreation. The owner of a resort creates a space for people to relax. The young woman selling popcorn at the movie theatre enhances our movie-going experience with our families. The martial arts instructor teaches disciplines that are not only healthy, but often a means of relieving stress. Preachers can show that the work of their congregation links recreation to God's purposeful rest.

Redemptive Work

While the world will not be free from brokenness until Jesus returns and ushers in his kingdom in its fullest, some work mitigates the effects of sin in the world. Lawyers work to bring justice to individuals who have been wronged by others. An addiction counselor works with a person struggling with substance abuse toward the goal of recovery. Social activists are motivated by a desire to bring justice to the public sphere. Preachers can encourage members of their congregations to play their part in God's work of making the wrong to right again.

Ill-Advised Work

At this point, a brief word is in order about work that is off-limits to Christians. Lester DeKoster warns that some work "...sullies culture with the grime of lawlessness, selfishness and greed -- jobs which destroy rather than weave the fabric of civilization." While preachers should be careful not to overstep their boundaries of expertise, and while they should embody the humility suggested by Shirley, who encouraged preachers to "educate the conversation but...not dictate it," preachers would do well to point out to their congregations that certain vocations – and certain aspects of some vocations – may contribute to the destruction of God's creation. Preachers can make a case that not all jobs are worthwhile to pursue, and within nearly every job, there will be aspects that are antithetical to God's telos in the world. Listeners need to be challenged to avoid such professions, and they need the support of the church when, in their jobs, they need to, as Joshua put it, "walk away and say, 'I can't do it.'"

As the preacher shows the congregation how to link their work to God's ultimate purpose, there will, no doubt, be overlap between these categories – and indeed there

should be. But using preaching as a way of helping the congregants to consider the ways their work is linked to God's work may encourage them to see a renewed and deeper value in their work.

What Difficulties Do Christians Face in Applying Sermons at Work?

As preachers learn to link the work of their congregants to God's redemptive work in the world, it may be tempting to underestimate the difficulties faced by the congregants hearing their sermons week after week. It was revealing to hear the participants describe the weariness they experience at the end of each week. This wasn't an indication of dislike for their work; rather, it was the result of a week-in-week-out, in-the-trenches life. "We're tired; we're hungry," explained Shirley, who spends a great deal of time balancing her faith with the demands of a boss and a government that do not share many of her personal convictions. "I'd come home exhausted," shared Alicia, about her first year of teaching, learning the ropes of how to manage and teach a classroom of high school students. Joni described herself as "exhausted" at the end of a day full of running errands, shuttling kids from place to place, and living what seemed like an endless cycle of "dishes and laundry, laundry and dishes." Work, which is meant to be purposeful, is often wearisome.

This was not an unexpected finding, particularly in light of the literature. Miroslav Volf explained, "Alienation from God, the fundamental form of alienation inevitably causes alienation in all areas of life – in relations of human beings to themselves, their neighbors, and nature."²⁰⁸ Tim Keller was more detailed in his description of the impact of the fall on human work. He notes specific ways in which the alienation of sin

²⁰⁸ Volf, 167.

(described by Volf) plays out in the arena of work: work becomes fruitless, work becomes pointless, work becomes selfish, and work reveals our idols.²⁰⁹

Preachers need to be keenly attuned to these needs. It is common for preachers to labor through the week, studying a biblical text, learning the specific interpretation of Greek words, intriguing historical background of the Greco-Roman world, and new ways in which God instructs his people to obey him. Sunday morning is an apex for the preacher; it is the moment when the hard work of the week will be shared with the congregation. Preachers can be eager and excited to share the culmination of their work, and they may, subconsciously, assume that their congregation is equally eager to listen. Usually, however, this is not the case. Congregants are there because they are “hungry” and because they desire to be fed. But the thorns of the working world often weigh heavy on their minds: they are wondering how to respond to a student who plagiarized – twice. They feel internal pressure to speak up for their convictions in meetings with legislators, yet they fear the repercussions. They have been working with people who do not share their Christian worldview. The congregants desire to be fed, but the thorns of the work week are never far from their hearts.

Preachers, therefore, would do well to acknowledge these thorns. It can be helpful for preachers to name these difficulties, to remind their congregants that the challenges they face, while undesirable, are not altogether unexpected in a post-fall world. Preaching can help the congregation make sense of their struggles from a biblical perspective. Preachers can take to heart Bryan Chapell’s insistence that sermons identify the “fallen condition focus” of a passage, spelling out what is broken in the world because of sin.

²⁰⁹ Keller, *Every Good Endeavor*, chapters 5-8.

Preachers will do well to consider how the fallen condition surfaces in the workplaces of the listeners.

More than this, however, preaching can be a way to minister to a congregation that feels the pain of the thorns of the workplace. One way to do this is to remember Steven Garber's description of "proximate justice." Proximate justice reminds us that as long as we are living in a fallen world, we will have to live with a degree of injustice. For example, Shirley may not be able to exert significant influence on her colleagues on legislative matters connected to abortion. Sermons can help her to accept this deficiency as a reality of a still-fallen world, even as they point to the time when things such as abortion will not be a reality.

Sermons can also shape perspective on the limits of work in a fallen world. Tim Keller noted that one of the ways sin distorts work is that it reveals our idols. The interviews supported this notion. Shirley shared of an experience from her days in law school, where fellow students were physically ill prior to tests because they feared failure. Joshua remarked that the overemphasis on the benefits of education sometimes felt like "drinking Kool-Aid" because education was believed by some to be the solution to all of society's ills. Likewise, Marcel was coached by a mentor to remember that counseling "is not salvific." Each of these professionals had heard the narrative that their particular field offered a path to significance and even salvation. These narratives can lead to frustration and weariness as those who pursue them inevitably fall short.

One possible solution to the idolatry of work is suggested by management guru Peter Drucker. He suggested, "The individual [must] have an area in which he or she can

contribute, make a difference, and be somebody.”²¹⁰ Drucker calls for a holistic approach that balances work with other areas in life. He encourages his readers to find “a second career, a parallel career or a social venture that offers an opportunity for being a leader, for being respected, for being a success.”²¹¹ In other words, Drucker cautions us not to allow work to dominate our lives, but he remedies this by suggesting more work. While there is some wisdom in what he is suggesting –namely a holistic approach that does not find ultimate meaning in one’s job – Drucker’s solution is counterproductive because it increases the burden upon an individual.

I suggest instead that we listen to the voices of those surveyed in this study. These individuals expressed a desire to be “refreshed” and “encouraged.” Sermons can offer respite from the stresses of the work week. To do this, preachers tell their congregations the story of God’s grace offered in Christ. The gospel is a promise of rest for the weary, rest in the ultimate work that has been accomplished for us. Since our standing with God, as we saw in Ephesians 2, is not secured by our work (moral, vocational, or otherwise), but rather by the work of Jesus, we are free from the pressure to work as though work is “salvational.” Preaching proclaims weekly that the most important work has been done for us; we are the work. We are God’s work in progress, his masterpiece in the making.

What Factors Help Christians Apply Sermons in the Workplace?

If it is true that God’s people gather each week, wearied by their work and looking for encouragement, how can Christian preachers proclaim the good news that will equip their congregants face the week ahead? The answer to this question is, on some

²¹⁰ Peter F. Drucker, “Managing Oneself,” in *Harvard Business Review’s 10 Must Reads on Managing Yourself* (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2010), ebook, loc. 569. Emphasis in original.

²¹¹ Ibid.

level, surprising. When reflecting on the ways that sermons helped them, at least half of the participants explained that sermons have a cumulative effect rather than what I will call a correlative effect. A correlative effect happens when a sermon imparts a specific directive that correlates directly to a workplace situation. A sermon might suggest, for example, that Christians need to practice honesty, and a listener might then correlate that to the importance of telling the truth when confronted by their boss with a fault in her workmanship. Sermons could be applied, in other words, by giving specific instructions that can be applied to workplace situations. It might be expected that this is how congregants would remember sermons. A preacher might imagine that, over time, his parishioners might remember specific guidance given in particular sermons: “This sermon taught me how to be honest;” “That sermon reminded me to be careful with my words;” “Another sermon explained how to make work meaningful.” Over time, a faithful listener would have a mental catalog of sermons that they could recall, with each sermon giving direction for one of the many facets of work.

My research shows that this is a false presupposition held by preachers. With the exception of a couple of especially memorable sermons,²¹² many of the listeners had difficulty recalling specifics from the messages that they had heard. They could recall generalities, but the particulars – such as a biblical text, or a specific application – were not as memorable. This is not to say that the individuals had forgotten the sermons they had heard, but rather that the precise details were hard to recount. Participants were emphatic, however, that weekly sermons were vital to them. Carlene explained that

²¹² Sermons that stood out did so for a variety of reasons. In one case, the participant shared that the most memorable sermon she had heard was delivered by Franklin Graham, and it was this message that led to her conversion. Another sermon that stood out as memorable stood out because it related to a particular dilemma that she had been facing in her education at the time. In general, it seemed that the sermons that stuck did so because they had a direct relationship with a particular need in the life of the listener.

sermons “...become a part of my thinking, and I don’t remember where the ideas have come from.” Bret explained that preaching “...molds me into who I am.” Even though he had forgotten the particulars of those sermons, he stressed that he is “...molded, and when I go out on Mondays, [sermons shape] who I am, what I do, how I act, how I behave, how I interact.” In other words, sermons have a cumulative, molding effect. Sermons may be more akin to puzzle pieces that, when assembled, are indistinguishable from each other, but collectively, they form a cohesive image. Sermons may blend together – but they blend together into something significant and potentially beautiful.

Preachers must adapt the way they make their sermon applications to fit this reality. Preachers err when they craft their sermons under the assumption that sermon application is primarily about teaching their congregants what to *do*. Instead, they must realize that sermon application is more about helping congregants *become* the people God desires them to be. In practice, this means that preachers will continue to find ways to challenge their listeners to apply their faith in their daily calling. However, preachers need not despair if every sermon is not relevant to every person, for every situation, every time. Robert Reimer encourages preachers to “shape [their] thinking by focusing on two or three specific individuals in your target audience. Think about their personhood and about their work situations. Then ask yourself ‘How will this message affect Dave (or Bob or Jim) in his new job as an upper-level manager at Bell Atlantic Global?’”²¹³ This is good advice; however, preachers could make the mistake of becoming so fixated on Dave (or Bob or Jim) and his specific needs at Bell Atlantic Global, that they fear that the

²¹³ Reimer, 259.

sermon will be irrelevant unless they name a concrete application for that person, in that situation.

Rather, preachers must take a long-term, formative approach to sermon application. They must deliver their sermons under the assumption that Sunday's sermon may not be relevant to what everyone in the pew will deal with on Monday morning, but that over time, their sermons are shaping and forming the members of their church into faithful followers of Jesus who are engaged in the workplace. This can be liberating; a preacher need not be anxious that Sunday's message isn't reaching every person; instead, they can be reassured that as they affirm, week after week, the sovereignty of God, the grace shown in Jesus, and the identity of believers as children of God, they are forming character. They are, in the words of Carlene, leading their congregants to be "refreshed, recharged, ready to go for another week." Preachers can give themselves diligently to preaching the good news of Jesus, knowing that it forms their listeners to face the hardships of the workplace.²¹⁴

It is also worth noting that application often works in a backwards motion. Preachers may assume that a person hears something in a sermon, and then looks for opportunities to apply that particular truth. Instead, what seems to happen is that a particular situation triggers the recall of a sermon. In other words, when a congregant faces an ethical dilemma in the workplace, such as dealing with a surly coworker, wrestling with questions of the purpose of work, or facing corporate layoffs, that issue

²¹⁴ There are a number of scripture texts that reinforce this idea. In Isaiah 55:8, for example, God reminds His people, "my word does not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." While preachers may assume that this principle means that God's purpose – proclaimed on Sunday – ought to be fulfilled on Monday, God may in fact be working for the long-term. Preachers can take comfort knowing that God's word will not be void, but will accomplish His purposes, perhaps in six months, or six years. On this, see also Isaiah 40:8 and Ezekiel 12:25.

triggers a memory of something the congregant heard in a sermon. “The lessons are still in there,” explained Alicia on this topic. She added, “I’m understanding my faith better, and I can show it more to my students.” Over time, sermons formed an undergirding in her thinking that allowed the applications to surface when needed.

Making the Complex Simple

All of this begs a question that surfaced a number of times in the interviews: What is the most effective balance between applicable sermons and intellectual sermons? People want sermons that are down to earth, easy to understand, and applicable in their workplace and daily life. At the same time, they collectively expressed a desire that sermons not be simplistic, indicating that they did like for the preacher to explain academic aspects of the text such as theological complexities or Greek etymology. At the same time, they wanted sermons that are practical for everyday life. On the surface, these two desires seem contradictory: Listeners want complex sermons that are easy to understand and apply.

Since each person who indicated that they appreciated sermons with some complexity and depth stated so in an apologetic tone, it may be that desiring depth in sermons is viewed suspiciously by congregants. A number of the respondents – particularly the ones in professional fields – appreciated depth, and they viewed simplistic sermons with suspicion. Joni, the stay-at-home mom, left a previous church precisely because the sermons were overly simplistic. So it seems that preachers need not fear going too deep in their sermons; in fact, depth in messages is generally valued by listeners. Recall Joshua’s counsel that preachers “cannot send people into the world that are swayed by the wind.”

However, that depth has to be communicated in a way that will ultimately answer the question posed by Marcel: “So what?” Preaching that engages complex theological or biblical questions, but never leaves the realm of the theoretical frustrates the congregants. Haddon Robinson teaches preachers that “The line of penetration should be from the pulpit to the pew to the pavement.”²¹⁵ This is an important progression. Sermons begin in the pulpit, which one would assume includes the research and learning that goes into writing a sermon. Sermons should include an explanation of the biblical text, without shying away from difficult theological questions, ethical dilemmas, and intellectually rigorous topics.

From there, sermons need to address the hearts of the listeners, which means, to use Dan Doriani’s language, knowing the congregation’s “heart status before God. Preachers should take the joys and troubles of their congregation to the Bible.”²¹⁶ Even sermons on complex issues have to address the needs of the listeners, and not simply answer theological questions. That is, the sermon needs to show how a given biblical or theological complexity relates to a need faced in the workplace. Finally, the sermon needs to make a difference in daily workplace life. A suggested application is unlikely to apply to everyone in every situation, but complex issues, when explained and applied in concrete ways, will form a person in such a way that they may remember what was said six months later when a pertinent situation arises.

Consider an example. The topic of election is notoriously complex, as any preacher will attest. A preacher might be tempted to ignore the subject altogether, in

²¹⁵ Robinson, “When The Sermon Goes To Work,” 678.

²¹⁶ Doriani, 37.

favor of simpler topics. However, preachers who do so neglect an opportunity to share profound biblical truths, which their congregants might need in the workplace. Shirley admitted that sometimes she struggled with remembering her identity as a Christian in a workplace. A sermon on election could help her to grasp the complexities of God's election, acknowledging the controversy of the teaching and making a case for what the Bible teaches on the topic.²¹⁷ Here, of course, preachers relying not only on their exegetical skills, but also on their apologetic and rhetorical abilities to make the case carefully. The sermon might then discuss what happens when people try to create identities for themselves, using examples from the workplace to discuss how people in business or in politics are pressured to live out their identity, and how that shapes the way a person approaches their work. The sermon could conclude by reminding and assuring the congregants that their identity has already been established by virtue of God's choosing them for salvation through Christ. A person's conduct is not to be determined by an effort at building an identity, but as an outworking of an identity already given.

Incidentally, although Shirley did acknowledge struggling to remember this, she was able to draw on sermons that she had heard over the years, and remember, "I have real confidence knowing who I am." Hearing this sermon may not make an immediate difference the next day, the next week, or even the next month. However, the listener might find eventually face a situation in which they are pressured to conform to a different identity. In that moment, this sermon may surface, leading the individual to live out their identity as one of God's elect.

²¹⁷ The purpose of this paper, of course, is not to make a case for any one view on this doctrine, but rather to use this as an example of a complex issue. Whatever side a preacher would take, the methodology remains the same.

Recommendations for Practice

This study has explored the ways and the extent to which Christians apply sermons in the workplace, the factors that make sermon application difficult in the workplace, and the factors that help Christians apply sermons in the workplace. In light of this study, the following suggestions are offered to pastors who wish to help their congregants better apply sermons in the workplace.

First, ministers need to preach biblically and theologically about work. Preachers have not done an adequate job in shaping a theology of work that goes beyond ethical behavior and Christian witness at work. Therefore, it is imperative that preachers help their congregants approach their daily work as a calling from God himself. This means that they will be frequently weaving into their sermons ideas that make explicit not only what God is doing in the world, but also how human work connects to that work. A sermon that focuses on the beauty of God's creation, for example, will not simply extoll the beauty of God and His creative power, but will take opportunity to encourage artists in the congregation to see how they reflect God's creative nature in their daily vocation. Perhaps one of the most significant steps preachers can take is spending time in the workplaces of their parishioners. Shirley Roels advised,

When a pastor shadows the banker in the congregation at her job, joins the coffee break at the local parishioner's manufacturing plant, visits the retailer at her clothing boutique, or rides the route with the congregation's FedEx driver, the daily work of those in business becomes concrete. These visits both convey curiosity and validate these parishioners' garden efforts.²¹⁸

I found this to be emphatically true. The early stages of this project involved entering the workplaces of those participating in this study, and this was an eye-opening experience.

²¹⁸ Roels, 365.

There is a gap between the world of the preacher and the world of the working individual. I was able to observe this in some of the participants' reactions. Dana admitted to wanting to hide "the naked woman" sculpture before I came, for fear that I would disapprove. Alicia shared that she was nervous about having me observe her in the classroom. Coworkers or colleagues of the subjects also acted somewhat surprised to see a pastor entering the workplace. Pastors should not underestimate the significance of these reactions. There is significant concern among congregants about what their pastor might see in the workplace. They may be uncomfortable having the pastor hear their colleague's foul language. They may feel they have to act in such a way that their pastor will approve. They may worry what their pastors might think when they are exposed to the realities of a non-Christian working environment, or they may feel uneasy about what coworkers will think when a pastor visits them in the workplace. Pastors need to anticipate this gap and they need to take steps to address this potential discomfort.

From experience, I learned a number of ways to bridge this gap. It will help greatly to reassure their congregants that they are not there to judge and then they need to be able to graciously tolerate actions that might otherwise be uncomfortable. They need to be exceptionally courteous to their congregants' colleagues. Pastors must enter these workplaces remembering that they are entering holy ground. They can also reassure their congregants that they enjoyed seeing them on the job, and that they learned from watching them work.

Visiting congregants in the workplace had an additional benefit related to how I viewed parishioners. On Sundays, the pastor is, in some ways, used to being the focal point. Pastors usually lead the services and preach the sermons. They are the leaders, and

so they are seen as the de facto “experts” in the life of the church. Other members look to them for leadership and for expertise. When the pastor enters the workplaces of the congregants, those roles are suddenly reversed. The pastor is now the learner, the one looking to the members of the church for their expertise. In this way, these experiences cultivated empathy between myself and the members of the congregation.

Moreover, once I crossed the boundary into their workplace, the individuals were more open to sharing about their experiences on the job. I observed that, after I visited their work environments, a number of the participants approached me to share updates about situations they faced at work. Bret discussed his ongoing difficulty in hiring a driver – and his happiness when he finally found someone to fill the post. Carlene kept me updated on improvements that she had sensed in the morale of her classroom. It is hard to say for sure, but it seems that this came about because a bridge had been crossed into the workplace. Crossing this bridge was a way of caring for the members of the church.

Arranging this type of visit doesn’t have to be a complex practice. Care should always be taken to make prior arrangements before showing up in the workplace. A number of individuals contacted for the purpose of this study had to decline to participate because they were unable to invite non-workers into their workplace. This was the case due to issues such as confidentiality concerns or timing (one person was willing to have me visit, however his office was in the middle of a months-long, major project which allowed him very little time that would be convenient to conduct even a brief visit). While in the workplace, pastors can best serve their congregants by being good learners. Ask what their work entails, and what they enjoy about their job. Ask them to tell the

story of how they got involved in the work they do. Ask them how they see their work as important to God. Pastors will do their best work by becoming students of their congregants because this validates the importance of their position and their work. The pastor is no longer acting as the expert, but as a curious learner.

As a learner, this isn't the time to give advice or instruction. Pastors should refrain from jumping to conclusions about what a worker ought to do in a given situation. Instead, the pastor should learn to empathize with both the joys and the challenges of the workplace. The insights gained will shape the pastor's preaching over time – much the same way that the pastor's preaching shapes the congregants over time. The dilemmas that workers face, the connection between the congregants' work and God's work, the ways to encourage congregants – all of these will begin to shape the pastor as they study scripture and draw out the application. A visit in the workplace has the additional benefit of affording pastoral care. John Knapp observed, "Our research discovered a widely held perception of clergy as disinterested in church member's work lives."²¹⁹ A visit by the preacher to the workplace for the purpose of learning from the congregant will demonstrate a genuine interest in the church member's work life.

Related to this, preachers should consider reading a book or two each year that pertains to the working world. This might include business journals, popular books on leadership, or even memoirs of well-known entrepreneurs. In addition to offering valuable advice to pastors on the topic of leadership, such literature also offers valuable insight into the culture in which many congregants live. As they read, preachers can consider what values are being promoted. How are the writers seeking to motivate the employees? What constitutes success in the corporate world? How do the authors define

²¹⁹ Knapp, 24.

the problems of the world? What are the solutions to these problems? How does a person find meaning in life?

These questions define a person's worldview, and the preacher can compare and contrast these worldviews with a Christian worldview. In doing this, preachers will not only gain understanding of the pressures, obstacles, and ambitions that their parishioners face, they will also begin to formulate mental responses to what they are reading. They can then incorporate these insights into their sermons by comparing and contrasting, from the pulpit, the biblical worldviews with the worldviews of the working world. Preachers can ask their congregants to suggest useful books. Additionally, Harvard Business Press publishes a digest of some of their top articles on given subjects. More information on this resource can be found in the bibliography of this study.

Though not directly related, preachers would do well to consider how the ministries of the church as a whole are helping the congregation to apply their faith in the working world. Two suggestions are offered here. First, consider how the worship service might be more sensitive to the needs of workers. For example, if a church practices a time of confession in the liturgy, a pastor might consider acknowledging in prayer the way that the thorns and thistles of a sinful world have affected the individuals during the previous week. This could include anything from lamenting the difficulties of labor that arise from the fall, to confessing specific sins with which people may have struggled. Just as importantly, pastors do well to include the needs of their laboring church in the prayers offered during the worship service. This could be done on a weekly basis, by rotating the professions or fields included in the prayers. For example, one week the pastor might pray for those laboring in the agricultural field, giving thanks to God for the way that

God uses their work to provide for the physical needs of his people and praying that God would continue to teach them to be wise stewards. The next Sunday, the pastor might pray for those in the business world, followed the next week by prayer on behalf of those in government, public service, and other fields of labor. Pastors should be careful not to overlook some of the fields that might otherwise be ignored: students, stay-at-home parents, retired people (whose vocations might include volunteer service or caring for grandkids), and unemployed or underemployed people. This practice will also attune a preacher's ears to the needs of the congregation throughout the week, especially if the minister is visiting members in the working world.

Secondly, preachers can seek ways to foster ongoing discussion on the integration of faith and vocation in their congregations. This might include organizing monthly lunches that allow people to meet with other Christians for the purpose of learning and encouraging one another in their respective vocations. Time might be given to share challenges that are faced, or to discuss case studies. It seems best to organize such groups around a particular guild – entrepreneurs, government workers, artists, and the like.²²⁰ The level of structure and organization could, of course, be left to the respective groups. Churches might consider hosting an adult-education class on the topic of vocation.²²¹ These steps will allow the church expand the ministry to working people beyond simply preaching effective sermons, helping to weave vocational ministry into the whole life of

²²⁰ Such efforts have been undertaken by two notable groups. First, the Center for Faith and Work at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City hosts monthly gatherings, and a yearly conference on this topic. Second, the Washington Institute for Faith and Vocation has launched a number of initiatives throughout the United States that are designed to foster discussion on the integration of faith and work.

²²¹ Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia has designed one such curriculum, entitled "Reframe."

the church. Church will be seen as a place where work matters deeply, and where the body of Christ equips the members for service in daily life.

Finally, I would like to offer a word of encouragement, as well as a suggestion. Preaching can be arduous work. Each week, preachers put their heart on the line, instructing, teaching, and encouraging God's people to live obediently to their Lord in daily life. Sometimes, preachers question how much impact they are having on their members. While it is absolutely vital that preachers seek ways to connect faith with the everyday life of working members, they must remember that they are preaching for the long term. They are, to use the words of Shirley again, banging a drum, week in and week out. This means that preachers need to view their preaching (particularly when addressing vocational needs) as a long-term goal. It will not suffice to do a brief series on work, and then move on, neglecting the topic until an opportunity for another series on the subject presents itself. Preachers be most effective when they seek to incorporate vocational instruction into their sermons frequently; it must become a part of the rhythm of preaching.

At the same time, preachers can be encouraged. They will not address every concern, answer every question, or motivate every worker, every Sunday. There will be sermons that connect with one person regarding their work, while not drawing the same direct connection for twenty others in the congregation. But over time, if the preacher is consistent, the congregation will be edified and encouraged in their work. They will gain the sense that their pastor cares about them and about the work that they do. Moreover, this pastoral care communicates not only a personal interest in the work of the individual,

but also that Jesus himself cares and values the work that is done by the members of the congregation. The pastor's care reflects the savior's care for the congregation.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study focused on how Christians apply sermons in the workplace. As with any such study, there are limitations to the ground covered. Therefore, a number of areas for further study and research are proposed.

First, significant new insights could be gained by asking similar questions to a deliberately different demographic. The target group in this study included people reared in a theological tradition that has long held (at least in theory) that work is to be approached as a calling from God. A number of the interviewees graduated from the same liberal arts college²²² that is known for promoting the engagement of faith with culture. Consequently, the participant group had something of a head start on the concept of integrating faith and work. What would happen if the target group were changed to include individuals from an Anabaptist perspective, which has, historically, not promoted the same level of engagement between faith and work? Moreover, it would be enlightening to study a group of people who are not professing Christians in order to determine what meaning they seek from work, and why work matters to them. This may, perhaps, offer the possibility of developing an apologetic not just for doing work well, but for the appeal of the Christian faith in general. Could the Christian view of work offer a compelling reason for faith in this present age?

A second area for further study would be to explore the difference in the way that men and women hear and apply sermons. During the course of the interviews, many of the participants noted that they frequently discussed sermons with their spouse, and each

²²² Namely Dordt College in Sioux Center, Iowa.

couple pointed out that their spouse heard different aspects of the sermon. Different themes stood out to each person, and some of the parts of a sermon that were noted by both individuals were nonetheless understood in different ways. Some exploration of this would be fruitful. To what extent does gender affect how people hear sermons? How much of these different perspectives are related to personality differences, and how much are related to gender differences? Studying this might help preachers craft sermons to better speak to both males and females.

Related to this, a third area of study might include exploring the way that preaching is retained. Typically, it is thought that a sermon is preached, and the listeners subsequently identify where in their lives application might take place. In this sense, the sermons have priority – they give instruction and guidance that is then applied daily life. In this sense, sermons are constructed with a focus on providing specific, “go-and-do” application. However, there were indications in this study that sermons are heard differently. It is possible that it is a particular event that has priority – something happens that triggers recall of a sermon. The details of a sermon, then, are buried in the mind, stored for future use. Studying this further could lead to significant changes in how sermons are prepared and preached.

A final area of study would be to examine the relationship between the applicability of a sermon and the memorability of a sermon. During the course of the interviews, there were several hints that a person was much more likely to remember a sermon if it had clear application. Sermons lacking points of application were less likely to be remembered for the long term. Studying this relationship might provide fruit for those desiring to understand ways in which sermons can more memorable for listeners.

Conclusion

This study has examined the ways that Christians apply sermons in the workplace, the obstacles that make such application difficult, and the factors that make sermon application in the workplace easier. This research has explored biblical and theological foundations for work, studied the importance of sermon application, and looked at the ways that secular literature attempts to motivate individuals to do their work well. Interviews with eight individuals explored the ways that Christians apply sermons in varied workplaces such as a government attorney's office, a trucking company, classrooms, and homes. This data allowed the researcher to compare real-life experience with what the literature presented, further enhancing the understanding of sermon application in workplace settings. I concluded by offering a number of suggestions that will help preachers to craft their sermons towards the goal of ministering to people in the workplace. Having explored these questions in detail, readers are encouraged to pursue their own work with new enthusiasm, and to preach with a kindled desire to help their congregants apply sermons in the workplace. As they do so, they may be assured that banging the drum creates a beat that that given time, plays like a Sousa march.

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