

WORK AND MISSION

Summary

Most of us spend a large slice of our lives at work. If we are committed to living for Christ, this makes our workplace a potential mission field. Tragically, there are many obstacles preventing many of us from grasping this potential. This short paper identifies these obstacles, explores biblical teaching on mission at work and poses eight questions for discussion in local churches that are intended to stimulate changes that would release and equip believers to be effective missionaries at their workplaces.

1. Introduction

What place does work have in our Christian life and how can we serve God and witness for Christ in and through our work? I want to answer this question by breaking it down into five parts.

- *First*, what is work? Is it just paid employment or are other activities also work?
- *Second*, why does work and what we do in the workplace matter?
- *Third*, what is the place of mission in our daily lives and especially in the workplace?
- *Fourth*, what are the obstacles to Christian mission in the workplace?
- *Finally*, bringing all these perspectives together, why does what we do and say at work matter from a Christian point of view?

So, **what is work?** My dictionary defines 'work' as "the application of mental or physical effort to a purpose; the use of energy; a task to be undertaken;" and so on. This is a helpful starting point because it includes far more than paid employment. Those who do not 'go out to work' but stay home to care for their young children or elderly relatives and do domestic work, also expend a lot of mental and physical effort to these purposes. Those who are not employed but engage in voluntary social service may also work very hard. Thus our definition of work must go beyond the category of 'going out to work' in paid employment.

2. **Why is work important to us?** There are five obvious reasons.

- *First*, most of us spend a significant percentage of our lives at work. The table below shows the average number of hours worked per week by employed men and women in *full-time employment*. There are no statistics for the hours worked by home workers but there is no reason to think that caring for active children or dependent elderly people is any less demanding of their time and energy.

	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>All</i>
Australia	45.9	41.1	44.1
Austria	44.7	40.9	43.3
UK	44.6	40.1	42.9
Spain	43.1	40.2	42.0
Italy	43.0	39.7	41.9
Portugal	42.3	40.3	41.4
Germany	42.2	39.3	41.1
France	42.4	38.7	40.9
Ireland	42.2	38.6	40.9
Belgium	41.9	38.7	40.8
Finland	41.9	38.8	40.4
Denmark	41.8	37.3	39.9
Sweden	41.3	38.0	39.8
Netherlands	40.4	36.4	39.3
Norway	39.8	37.2	38.8

OECD data sources, 2006

The focus on *average* working hours in the table masks the number of individuals working *very* long hours. There is a huge variation by country in the proportion of men and women working very long hours, (defined as over 50 hours per week); ranging from Australia (28% of men, 9% of women) and the UK (25% of men, 7% of women), to Norway (8% of men, 2% of women) and the Netherlands (9% of men, 1.5% of women). Of the 25% of men in the UK working over 50 hours per week, 16% work between 50 and 59 hours and 9% work over 60 hours per week. For women in the UK, 5% work over 50 hours and 2% work over 60 hours per week.¹ Given that work takes up so much of most people's lives, what we do in that time is highly significant for our Christian discipleship and the impact we have on those with whom we interact in our work.

- *Second*, work yields us the income that sustains our lifestyle, enables us to meet our obligations, and save for old age when we can no longer earn an income. It also enables us to contribute to Church finances and to support other Christian causes. The Bible has more to say about this aspect of our lives than it has to say about prayer. It is worth searching the Scriptures for this teaching and letting it practically shape our lives and attitudes so that we do not become obsessed with how much we earn.²
- *Third*, it enables us to use the gifts and abilities God has given us and achieve a measure of fulfilment. Our ultimate goal as

¹ These statistics are all taken from "Working Time and Family Wellbeing" a literature survey by Dr Clare Lyonette for the Relationships Foundation 2009

² See for example: Matthew 6:19-24;16:26; 25:31-46; Luke 10:25-37;14:33; 21:1-4; 2Corinthians 8:1-24; Philippians 4:10-19.

Christians is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, but we have our Creator's own example of being able to take pleasure at what he had made.³

- *Fourth*, work also enables us to make a contribution to society, by the goods or services we provide, and the taxes we pay.⁴ This is one expression of our citizenship.
- *Fifth*, The Bible presents a noble view of hard, honest labour. Genesis 1 portrays God as a worker. He also commands his human creatures, made in his image, to be fruitful. Tradition also identifies Jesus as a carpenter before he began his public ministry.⁵ At least four of the Apostles were fishermen.⁶ St Paul was a tentmaker⁷ and taught that work was an important facet of Christian discipleship.⁸ He would have been mindful of the practice established by Moses of everyone bringing the first fruits of their land to the house of the Lord God.⁹ Whilst few of us in modern industrial societies grow our own food and can do this literally, all of us in paid employment can bring to God a portion of our income in thanksgiving for the gifts and earning opportunities he has given us.

Why is some people's experience of work negative?

Whilst we may thank God for the opportunities we have to work and enjoy the rewards that our work gives us, we should not ignore the fact that some people's experience of work is not a happy and fulfilling one.

- *First*, we cannot ignore the fact that some people want to work but cannot find a job. There are people who have been out of work for a long time through no direct fault of their own. This may be the result of chronic sickness, disability, technological change; contraction of the demand for the goods or services they produce, the lack of appropriate skills to change their trade or profession, competition from cheaper products; protectionist policies or cyclical downturns in economic activity and trade. Welfare provision in some European societies may create a welfare trap which discourages unemployed people from seeking work but it would be wrong to assume that all unemployed people are idle as a matter of choice. Moreover, the

³ Genesis 1:31

⁴ Matthew 22:15-21; Romans 13:6-7.

⁵ Matthew 13:55

⁶ Luke 5:1-10

⁷ Acts 18:3

⁸ Ephesians 4:28; 1Thess 4:11-12; 2Thess 3:6-12

⁹ Exodus 23:19

Bible teaches us to care for our needy relatives and neighbours, which includes those who are out of work on long-term basis.¹⁰

- *Second*, it has also to be conceded that some work is stressful, insecure and may be unfulfilling. 66.9% of respondents to a work/life balance survey felt they had suffered ill health because of stress at work. A report published in 2006 found that 53% of workers had suffered from work-related stress in the past 12 months and 20% had sought medical or other professional help.¹¹ Highlighting the seriousness of stress amongst British workers a trade union leader has said, "People who suffer from stress aren't wimps, and their symptoms can make them really ill. Stressed out employees are more likely to experience weight loss, high blood pressure, depression and even heart attacks."¹² It is also true that some employers are poor managers and some workplaces have poor labour relations, frequent disputes and even strikes. Thus, whilst the Bible encourages us to hold a high view of work, people's experience of their work and their workplace may fall well short of this ideal in practice. Where a Christian employee is in a position to be 'salt and light' in this situation, by influencing the policies, practices and even the structures of the employing organisation, that would be a highly worthwhile goal to achieve but this is not a possibility for most employees.
- *Third*, some employers require their employees to work long and unsocial hours.¹³ The table below shows the percentage of employed people aged 15-64 working long hours by gender and country.

(OECD 2005 data, Family database: ¹⁴

¹⁰ See for example: Leviticus:19:10; 23:22; Deut. 15:4-11; 24:12-13; Mathew 19:21; Luke 10:25-37; Acts 2:45; 4:32-35; 9:36; Galatians 2:10

¹¹ This evidence came from a report commissioned by the International Stress Management Association and the Royal Sun Alliance (2001) and are cited in a University of Essex paper by Dr Martin Hicks (<http://www.essex.ac.uk/chimera>)

¹² Brendan Barber, TUC press release 30th October 2006. Mr Barber is the General Secretary of the British Trade Unions Congress.

¹³ Unsocial hours are defined here as any work done outside the hours of 8am to 7pm, Monday to Friday.

¹⁴ Source of these statistics is www.oecd.org/els/social/family/database)

Country	45-49 hours		50-59 hours		60 hours or more		Total 50 hours +	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Australia	12	6	15	5	13	4	28	9
UK	16	6	16	5	9	2	25	7
Austria	10	5	12	4	12	4	24	8
France	8	4	10	4	9	3	19	7
Spain	10	5	12	4	6	3	18	7
USA	7	4	11	5	6	2	17	7
Italy	10	5	11	4	6	2	17	6
Canada	5	2	8	2	7	2	15	4
Belgium	5	3	7	3	7	2	14	5
Portugal	9	5	7	4	5	3	12	7
Denmark	10	5	9	2	6	1	15	3
Germany	4	2	7	2	7	2	14	4
Finland	5	3	7	3	6	2	13	5
Ireland	6	2	8	1	7	1	15	2
Sweden	3	4	5	1	4	1	9	2
NL	1	0.4	4	0.5	5	1	9	1.5
Norway	4	2	4	1	4	1	8	2

Under the European Union Working Time Directive workers are entitled to:

- A rest period of 11 uninterrupted hours (12 for young workers) between each working day.
- Only work a maximum 48-hour week (averaged over 17 weeks). Employees can sign an opt out from this part of the legislation.
- One whole day off a week (2 days for young workers). Days off can be averaged over a two-week period, meaning workers can take two days off a fortnight.
- 4.8 weeks paid leave each year rising to 5.6 weeks from April 09.

Working long and unsocial hours can have some serious consequences for those involved. The potential damage to their health has already been noted and the table below shows the proportion of employees reporting health effects according to *hours of work* (%), European employees, both men and women.¹⁵ Sleep deprivation can also affect an employee's productivity, create driver fatigue and other safety problems.

¹⁵ Source: Third European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS), 2000, reported in Boisard et al., 2003

	<i>30-35 hours</i>	<i>36-39 hours</i>	<i>40 hours</i>	<i>41-44 hours</i>	<i>45 hours or more</i>
Health affected overall	54.5	58.4	62.6	62.6	68.3
Backache	30.0	32.2	35.4	31.3	38.1
Headaches	13.1	14.7	15.8	18.1	18.3
Muscular pain (neck/shoulders)	19.7	22.0	25.4	27.0	26.4
Muscular pain (lower limbs)	9.9	9.1	12.8	16.2	13.7
Muscular pain (upper limbs)	10.0	12.4	14.3	14.7	15.0
Injury	4.8	7.6	8.9	11.6	9.1
Stress	27.4	27.4	26.6	35.3	39.0
Overall fatigue	19.0	20.0	22.9	24.7	33.3
Insomnia	7.6	7.7	8.0	12.8	12.5

Long and unsocial working can also damage couple relationships. The experience of one couple illustrates this and there is no reason to think they are unique. *“We were both working very, very long hours as doctors. We never really saw each other. And when we did it was in passing or when we were both conked out at home. We were like flat mates rather than husband and wife. You can’t keep a relationship going like that.”*

Where parents have to work long hours and at weekends, when their school age children are at home, this makes it very difficult for them to fulfil their parental responsibilities. For example, a UNICEF study in 2007 found that children in the UK have the lowest levels of well-being of all affluent western countries. The study suggested that children denied proper parental supervision are among those most likely to engage in early alcohol consumption, early sexual intercourse and other risky behaviours.¹⁶ The best way to prevent this is for both parents to spend quality time with their children at weekends as often as they can throughout childhood and adolescence, helping them with their school homework, encouraging them to take exercise and keep to a healthy diet, modelling appropriate values and beliefs at the same time. They cannot do this if one or both parents are obliged to work and there is a risk that the children and young people could look to their peers for companionship, inculcate the wrong values and engage in anti-social behaviour. *“The average couple mother who works at unsocial times spends approximately eight hours less with her children over a whole week and is particularly likely to miss out on time with her children at weekends. Fathers in sole-earner families*

¹⁶ An Overview of Child Well-being in rich countries; UNICEF, Innocenti Report Card 7, 2007

who work at unsocial times spend approximately ten and a half hours less with their children over a whole week. Relatively few parents spend significantly more time with their children to make up for the time lost by their partner working at unsocial times.”¹⁷

3. Work as a Mission Field

For all the reasons given above, our workplace and what we do there matters, so it is appropriate, if not essential, that we think about it from a Christian perspective.

- The attitude that what we do at work is irrelevant to our Christian life and witness is wrong because it places work and faith in separate compartments. This sacred/secular divide is advocated by secularists and atheists because they want to marginalize faith and make it a purely private matter. People can believe whatever they want, it is argued, but they should keep it to themselves. Thus, in the UK an employee working at Heathrow airport was told she could not wear a cross on a chain around her neck at work. A nurse was suspended for asking a patient if she would like the nurse to pray for her. From a Christian perspective this sacred/secular divide is wrong. God is sovereign over all of life and there is no part of life about which he is unconcerned. To suggest that there are spheres where humankind are autonomous, free to do as they please without reference to God is the ultimate form of rebellion against Him,
- The inference that our work is just about earning enough to pay the bills and it is what we do at Church that really matters is at odds with biblical teaching. As we noted above, the Bible portrays God as a worker, Jesus as a carpenter, and the Apostles working in various occupations. Some are called to be pastors, preachers and evangelists, but not all of us. Some are called to go overseas as missionaries, but not all of us. We are all called to be witnesses to the truth of the Gospel, which means that we do this wherever we have an opportunity, including our workplaces. We call Jesus ‘Lord’ and he is Lord of everything, all of the time – not just what we do on Sundays and what we do with a Christian label attached to it. If our work had nothing to do with Jesus, he would only be a part-time Lord!
- Nor is it right to think of Church as what takes place in a church building when we are gathered together. We are still the Church when we are scattered in our workplaces. So, the attitudes we express there, the relationships we make there, the work we do, and the way we behave all contribute to the impact we make on our colleagues. If our work is sloppy, our relationships messy, our behaviour rude, and our standards of integrity low, the

¹⁷ “All work and no play? How unsocial hours affects family life”, Relationships Foundation, UK 2006

message we are communicating will not make a positive difference and will not honour our Lord. Why, in such a situation, should anyone take our professions of faith seriously?

Which brings me to the question: *what is the place of mission in our daily lives and especially in the workplace?* The Bible is a Christian's ultimate authority on all matters of faith and practice and mission is a central theme in the whole Bible.¹⁸

- *First*, consider the Old Testament. It tells us that God adopted a particular people, Abraham and his descendents, and made a covenant with them, but that is not the whole story. Abraham comes onto the scene in Genesis 12. The Old Testament begins with Adam, who represents the whole human race, not a chosen race. The God of Israel was not a petty tribal god but the Creator and Lord of all the nations.
- God's promise to Abraham included the promise that all peoples on earth would be blessed through him.¹⁹ The New Testament shows us that God adopted Israel in order to prepare for Christ's coming, and through his coming God has blessed the entire world. St Paul understood this when he wrote in Galatians 3:29, "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise".
- Sadly, Israel kept forgetting the full scope of God's promise and the prophets, such as Isaiah, had to remind them of their intended role as a light to enlighten the Gentiles and prophesied that all nations would stream to the mountain of the Lord's temple.²⁰ Thus, the God of the Old Testament is a missionary God.
- *Second*, in the Gospels we find Jesus to be a missionary Christ. It is true that he mostly limited his earthly ministry to Israel, apart from a few excursions into Samaria and a few meetings with non-Jews. His priority was to prepare his disciples to undertake mission on an international scale. Through his death, resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, he made possible the salvation of all peoples in every nation. In Matthew 29 and Acts 1 he instructs his disciples to take the good news to all nations.
- Matthew's Gospel is the most Jewish of the four but it clearly anticipates this global mission strategy. He describes the Magi

¹⁸ The author wishes to acknowledge a huge debt to Revd Dr John Stott for the material and insights in this section of the paper. See for example: "The Contemporary Christian", chapter 19 and "Issues Facing Christians Today" chapter 8

¹⁹ Genesis 12:1-4

²⁰ Isaiah 49:6; 2:2

coming to worship the infant Christ, forerunners of every Gentile who would come to worship Jesus. In Matthew 8:11, we find Jesus saying “many will come from the east and the west and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of God”. The Jesus of the Gospels is unquestionably a missionary Messiah.

- Moving on to the story of the early Church in Acts, we see the Holy Spirit, central to the Church’s mission, empowering the Apostles to take the good news far and wide. We see this in Acts 2, which records the first evangelistic address by Peter. In succeeding chapters we see how the missionary movement moves out of Jerusalem, into Samaria, then across the Mediterranean to what we now know as Turkey, Greece, Malta and then Rome.
- The 21 letters of the New Testament take up and prioritise the mission theme. Paul writes about how Gentiles as well as Jews can be saved through faith in Jesus. He thanks the Philippians for their ‘partnership in the Gospel’, asks the Thessalonians to pray so that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly. He makes similar requests of the Colossians and the Ephesians and each local church is encouraged to spread the word in their regions.
- The last book of the Bible, Revelation, anticipates the outcome of this missionary focus. The countless number from every nation, tribe, people and language that John saw worshipping God is the promise to Abraham fulfilled and the goal for mission in every generation.

This brief overview of the Bible shows us that from beginning to end it communicates a mission imperative because God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit have a compassionate commitment to mission, that all people may hear the good news and, as many as believe, might be saved. The New Testament illustrates how the first generation of believers understood this and proclaimed the Gospel at every opportunity. Real Christianity is not a comfortable, self-centred, escapist religion. It is a Spirit-filled commitment to serve God’s purposes that drives us into the world to witness, so that our friends, neighbours and colleagues may all have the opportunity to join that countless number in God’s Kingdom. Witnessing to our colleagues at work is not an option for the zealous few; it is the calling of every believer.

In most European nations church attendance is low and declining so a mission strategy that is church-centred is inadequate. There is nothing wrong with Christians inviting their non-Christian colleagues to come to their churches for special services, say at major festivals or to hear visiting choirs and speakers, but this is more likely to be

successful if the invitation is the outcome of conversations and evidence of interest on the part of the person invited. Any credible mission strategy in contemporary Europe will include recognition that Christian employees are potential front line missionaries in their workplaces. How many churches teach this, equip their people to fulfil this role and support them in it?

4. What are the obstacles to Christian mission in the workplace?

We have already noted above some of the obstacles to Christian mission in the workplace. They include secularism that wants to privatise faith. European secularists often use the argument that to privilege any one faith will offend people of other faiths and undermine social cohesion. In fact the evidence suggests the opposite. Far from being offended by traditional Christian symbols, such as nativity tableaux at Christmas, most people of other faiths welcome and enjoy them. It is fine to respect other people's right to profess and practice their faith but that does not require us to believe that it will set them right with God. As St Peter said, "Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to humankind by which we must be saved."²¹ In the words of St Paul, "How then can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent?"²²

Sadly, the other obstacles noted above all reflect failures within the Christian churches, including a flawed theology of work, a flawed ecclesiology and flawed mission strategies. They have produced a generation of Christians who mostly keep our faith and our work in separate compartments and do not see ourselves as front line missionaries. Our churches do not teach, equip and support us in this missionary role and tend to focus on the neighbourhood rather than the workplace in their outreach. Of course, both are important but whilst the professional pastors can lead in their local neighbourhood, the only people who can reach colleagues at work are the Christian employees.

It may be objected, however, that most of us don't have a gift for evangelism, so it is not unreasonable for us to leave outreach to those who do. It is true that we do not all have the same gifts but this attitude hides a fallacy. Witnessing is not simply something we do; it is also something we are. Everyone practices his or her core beliefs and values. They are revealed in what we say and how we behave, and those with whom we work will be well aware of them. So, do our colleagues see Christ in us, or do we leave him at home when we go to our workplace?

5. Conclusion

²¹ Acts 4:12

²² Romans 10:14-15

So, why *should* every Christian seek to be a full time Christian worker at their workplace? Let me suggest *four* reasons.

- *First*, because the Bible teaches that it is God's will for us, our calling as members of the Body of Christ. It is how we serve our Lord.
- *Second*, because we are there in our workplace. Other people may be better evangelists than us, but they are not there. What we lack in confidence to talk about our faith, the Holy Spirit will empower us if we ask.
- *Third*, people who don't yet know God need our help to do so. To withhold that help is cruel because it may deny them a hope of heaven.
- *Lastly*, if we keep our faith secret at work, it may be compromised. As Paul wrote to Titus, we may claim to know Christ but by our actions deny him. (1:16)

However, if it is agreed that Christians should be seeking to be missionaries in their workplace, some important questions have to be considered.

- What are the churches teaching their people about work and their witness at their workplace?
- Could the concept of full time Christian worker realistically be applied to everyone?
- What is the church doing practically to support people in their community who are unemployed, especially the long term unemployed?
- What is the church's response to long/unsocial hours at work that is damaging employees' health and family relationships?
- How can church fellowships support one another in witness at work, especially those who are the only Christian in their workplace?
- How can pastors learn more about the work experiences of those to whom they minister? (Some pastors visit church members in their workplaces, to learn about the work they do and the pressures they experience, and to encourage and support them in their witness at work)
- What resources are available to help churches get to grips with the opportunities offered by workplace witness?

Further Reading and Resources

Mark Greene "Supporting Christians at Work" - a practical guide for busy pastors, LICC

Mark Greene "Thank God its Monday – Ministry in the Workplace",
Scripture Union 2001

D. Sherman & W Hendricks. "Your Work Matters to God", NavPress
1987

Miroslav Volf, "Work in the Spirit: towards a Theology of Work", OUP
1991

R, Higginson, "Mind the Gap", CPAS 1997
The London Institute for Contemporary Christianity website:
www.licc.org.uk

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