

# The Theology of Work in the New Economy

BY ROBERT DICKIE

**Two distorted views of work—the “poverty gospel” and the “prosperity gospel”—sidetrack many Christians in the new economy of part-time work. These two false gospels have the same flaw: they focus on what we earn and what we own rather than for whom we work and why we work.**

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**W**ork is such a central theme in the Christian life that we meet it at nearly every turn. The faith-versus-works tension is familiar to us: we are taught that God loves us unconditionally and that we owe God a life of excellent service. Indeed, we were made to be co-laborers with God in tending the creation, and understanding how God views our work and the stewardship of resources entrusted to us is a daily concern. Most of us who care about living life as God intended have spent time praying about what specific work God wants us to do and how he wants us to do it.

Unfortunately, the theology of work is often misunderstood and taught incorrectly. For instance, I remember a grade-school teacher instructing me that to spell “business” correctly one just needed to remember that “s-i-n” was in the middle of it. My Christian journey began with this and many similarly distorted views about work from well-intentioned educators putting their spin on Scripture.

It seems to me that two very misleading views of work are sidetracking many Christians today: I call them the “poverty gospel” and the “prosperity gospel.” As the following chart shows, these false gospels are opposin distortions of a proper biblical theology of work as stewardship.<sup>1</sup> This explains why to avoid one of these mistaken views, many believers are tempted to jump to the other one!

	<u>Poverty Gospel</u>	<u>Stewardship</u>	<u>Prosperity Gospel</u>
<i>Possessions are</i>	evil	a responsibility	a right
<i>I work to</i>	meet only basic needs	serve Christ	become rich
<i>Godly people are</i>	poor	faithful	wealthy
<i>Ungodly people are</i>	wealthy	unfaithful	poor
<i>I give</i>	because I must	because I love God	to get
<i>My spending is</i>	without gratitude	prayerful and responsible	carefree and consumptive

Even though these two false gospels are on opposite ends of the spectrum, they share the same fundamental flaw: they make what we own the most important variable rather than for whom we work and why we work. By focusing on how much or how little we own, each of these distorted views puts the focus on us, not God. In a proper theology of work as stewardship, the focus is on God: our work is unto the Lord and the results are up to him.



Understanding how God sees work in relation to Christian vocation and ministry is especially important today because young people who want meaningful work are facing a very rough road in a new economy. Due to a diminished pool of jobs, they are finding it harder to craft a career that encompasses a lifetime. The global economy came off the rails in 2008 and ushered in the Great Recession from which we are just now starting to recover.<sup>2</sup> However, things are not going back to “normal.” Rather the entire global workforce is dealing with a restructured economy that impacts our work, careers, and the way we live life.

This new economy increasingly offers young people only part-time work. In 2013, 75% of the jobs created in the United States were part-time.<sup>3</sup> In 2014, only 52% of college graduates were able to find full-time work.<sup>4</sup> Many experts believe that the contingent workforce (or, those who work on a non-permanent basis) in the United States, which is currently about 18.6%, will grow to become more like Europe’s at 30-40% in the next ten to fifteen years.<sup>5</sup> This tectonic shift will impact all sectors of the economy.<sup>6</sup>

To deal with the questions of meaning and purpose that are posed by these new economic realities, the world is searching for answers that can be found in the Bible. The sociologist Peter Berger reports that multiple studies show that countries that were founded on Judeo-Christian values and follow the Protestant work ethic prosper economically, while other countries with

different value systems lag far behind.<sup>7</sup> This is no accident because God's principles change everything!



Here, then, is a brief outline of what I called the "Stewardship" model above. It is the biblical view of work and the role it should play in our lives.

First, we must understand that God was the first worker. The Bible begins, "In the beginning *God created* the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1, NIV),<sup>8</sup> and it goes on to say "By the seventh day God had finished *the work* he had been doing; so on the seventh day *he rested for all his work*. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the *work of creating* He had done" (Genesis 2:2-3, NIV).

Furthermore, God was the first employer: "God said, 'Let us make man in our own image, in our likeness, and *let them rule* over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the creatures that move along the ground'" (Genesis 1:26, NIV).

In the biblical model, human beings report to God as stewards: "God blessed them and said to them, '*Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over* the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground'" (Genesis 1:28, NIV). Later it is explained, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden *to work it and take care of it*" (Genesis 2:15, NIV).

From the very start, our relationship with God was defined by the work God gave us. We are stewards or caretakers by birth to care for the things God has entrusted to us. We are to use our life, gifts, and talents to serve God and build his kingdom. There is no hierarchy of work. We are all called to be faithful in the execution of the duties we have been given whether great or small.

In the Parable of the Talents, Christ reminds us that our stewardship will be evaluated by God. The master in the story clearly distinguishes between the faithful and unfaithful servants:

"His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share in your master's happiness!'

...'And throw that worthless servant outside into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'"

*Matthew 25:23, 30 (NIV)*

As Christians, then, our work becomes worship as we glorify and honor God when we do our best. We should use the talents God has given us to expand God's kingdom by following his principles to help others and serve the poor. The Apostle Paul teaches, "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:21, NIV).

Whether we labor in traditional church work or the marketplace, every bit of work we do is to be ministry that reflects our service to God. Unlike the teacher of my youth who demonized business as sinful to extol the virtues of “full-time ministry,” I am convinced that we need committed Christian leaders in every honorable walk of life.



We should be encouraging, teaching, and empowering the next generation on their journey as stewards whose work can shine as a light in a dark world. In truth, most people will not come into contact with Christ in a church, because they do not attend. As “missionaries” in the business world, we can take the gospel to people where they live and spend their time.

Think of the impact of the faithful business leader Dan Cathy, founder of Chick-Fil-A, whose testimony has touched millions as he showed how to run a business based on biblical principles. The film *God’s Not Dead*, directed by Harold Cronk and with music by the Newsboys, reached millions for Christ. Even in the realm of sports, athletes like Tim Tebow, the famed Heisman-winning quarterback from the University of Florida, was given a national platform to be a witness to millions of people who might never enter a church.

Those who are blessed with the resources to employ others should be esteemed and taught to handle that mantle of responsibility with much reverence. The marketplace has great significance in the Bible; I believe it is no accident that thirty-four of Christ’s fifty parables are set in the marketplace. In the book of Acts alone, thirty-seven of forty miracles are performed in the marketplace. It continues to be the place where business leaders can bear witness to many people who are not in the pews on Sunday morning.<sup>9</sup>

A recent survey of global Christian business leaders showed that 59.8% said their greatest need was “Biblical mentorship and practical examples on how to lead their businesses by the Book.” Seeking biblical guidance on how God views work and our responsibilities to him should be of extreme importance to every disciple.

As in the Parable of the Talents, the stewardship of our work will ultimately be inspected by our true employer, God himself. All Christians aspire to hear the words, “Well done thou good and faithful servant. I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share in your master’s happiness.” The way we perceive our work and how we conduct ourselves in those pursuits will have great bearing on the words we hear one day from our Master.

## NOTES

1 This chart is adapted from the Crown Financial Ministries seminar “The Bible on Money.”

2 Matt Egan, “2008: Worse than the Great Depression?” *CNN Money* (August 27, 2014), [money.cnn.com/2014/08/27/news/economy/ben-bernanke-great-depression/](http://money.cnn.com/2014/08/27/news/economy/ben-bernanke-great-depression/) (accessed May 25, 2015).

3 Lucia Mutikani, "75 Percent of Jobs Created This Year Were Part-Time Due to Weak Economy, Obamacare Concerns," *Reuters* (August 21, 2013), [www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/21/part-time-job-creation\\_n\\_3788365.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/21/part-time-job-creation_n_3788365.html) (accessed May 25, 2015).

4 Melissa Korn, "Job Market Perks Up for Recent College Graduates," *The Wall Street Journal* (February 27, 2015), [www.wsj.com/articles/job-market-perks-up-for-recent-college-graduates-1425013918?mod=VWSJ\\_hps\\_sections\\_careerjournal](http://www.wsj.com/articles/job-market-perks-up-for-recent-college-graduates-1425013918?mod=VWSJ_hps_sections_careerjournal) (accessed May 25, 2015).

5 For a snapshot of the current American workforce, see Doug Short, "Ratio of Part-Time Employed Still Higher Than the Pre-Recession Level," *Advisor Perspectives* (May 11, 2015), [www.advisorperspectives.com/dshort/commentaries/Full-Time-vs-Part-Time-Employment.php](http://www.advisorperspectives.com/dshort/commentaries/Full-Time-vs-Part-Time-Employment.php) (accessed May 25, 2015), and for the comparison with the European workforce, see "Charting International Labor Comparisons (Washington, DC: U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics, September 2012), [www.bls.gov/fls/chartbook/2012/section2.pdf](http://www.bls.gov/fls/chartbook/2012/section2.pdf) (accessed May 25, 2015).

6 I wrote *The Leap: Launching Your Full-Time Career in Our Part-Time Economy* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2015) to address these issues and instruct on how to navigate this new reality.

7 Jerry Bowyer summarizes his interview with Peter Berger in "Is Religion an Essential Driver of Economic Growth?" *Forbes* (May 29, 2013), [www.forbes.com/sites/jerrybowyer/2013/05/29/is-religion-an-essential-driver-of-economic-growth/](http://www.forbes.com/sites/jerrybowyer/2013/05/29/is-religion-an-essential-driver-of-economic-growth/) (accessed May 25, 2015).

8 Scripture passages marked "NIV" are from THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION® NIV®, Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society®. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

9 Larry Burkett, founder of Crown Financial Ministries, wrote *Business by the Book: The Complete Guide of Biblical Principles for the Workplace* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998) to help marketplace leaders. Burkett provides insight on how to start and operate a business based on biblical principles.



**ROBERT DICKIE**

*is President of Crown Financial Ministries in Knoxville, Tennessee.*