

My Father's Hands

Touching God through Daily Work

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Revised edition 2009

Originally published in *Zadok Perspectives* (69): 22-27, 2000





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As days of the week go, Sunday stands out from the rest in my memories of childhood. Not because it was the Sabbath, but because it was the day my father wore a suit.

I always thought he looked good on Sundays— important, almost regal. Indeed it was church day, and as the youngest I sat next to dad during the morning service. As sermons dragged on endlessly, I passed the time by playing with his hands.

Dad's hands were one of my favourite things about him. They were big and callused. I could lose myself for what seemed like hours in amongst the lines, crevices, and scars. I would imagine myself tobogganing down the slopes or

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hiding from the bad guys in a dark ravine.

Underneath dad's nails was always black. We had one of those plastic nailbrushes from Woolworths sitting beside the bathroom sink. Every Sunday morning dad would stand over the sink scrubbing vigorously, but the grease was deeply imbedded. No matter how hard he scrubbed, it was there to stay. I liked it though. His hands were strong, familiar, and secure.

My father is a turner-and-fitter by trade. When I was just one year old, my parents moved off the family dairy farm in the Gippsland. Financially they couldn't make it anymore. I am one of six sons. With a large family to care for, my parents decided that dad should look for work in the factories of an industrial suburb on the southern edge of Melbourne.

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For the next twenty years, six days a week, I awoke to the familiar sound of the front door closing as my father headed off to work for another day. I understood very little then of the responsibility that dad carried as he walked out the door. I understood even less the price he paid to meet that responsibility. Supporting a large family on a tradesman's wage made overtime essential. He could never afford the luxury of dwelling upon his own sense of fulfillment or need for personal advancement. Work was simply a necessity; it had to be done.

The factories were cold, noisy and impersonal. Dad was one of many workers who shared the factory floor. The work was hard, repetitious and dirty, and the hours long. He would come home tired, strained and smelling of the factory. He was always glad to be home. Work could be forgotten until morning.

Sundays were different though. My dad was an important man in the church. He served as a deacon and elder for all the years I can remember. In my estimation, my dad is a ‘godly’ man. He has been consistently passionate in his commitment to God and church for all the years I have known him. In those days, his gentleness and compassion drew respect from his fellow church members. In all matters of concern in the church, he was called upon for his wisdom. He was kept busy on boards and committees, and spent countless evenings visiting, pastoring and praying. The Sunday suit

seemed more than appropriate to me. In church my dad was somebody!

Despite all of this, no one in the church seemed to notice dad's hands. To my knowledge, nobody ever asked him why his nails were black. It never seemed to matter who my dad was *outside* the church. His value—indeed his spirituality—was always measured by who he was *in* the church. As far as I know, never in twenty years did the pastor or another elder ask him any detailed and engaging questions about his work, the factory or the people he worked with. Rarely, if ever, did a pastor visit him at the factory, curious to see what he worked at, what he achieved. I certainly cannot recall a single sermon on the subject of work during those years.

It was as though my dad lived in two different worlds with two distinct languages and outfits: the world of the blue overalls and the world of the suit and tie. His hands, however, always stayed the same. His blackened nails wouldn't scrub clean; a constant reminder that whatever he might be called in the church, he would always be a worker.

When I think of the word ‘spirituality’, certain images come readily to mind; images of solitude, contemplation, hushed Sunday gatherings, stained glass windows and mountaintop retreats. Rarely, if ever, would I picture a man in overalls standing over a lathe with blackened hands. Perhaps I'm not alone.

In reality, I've been conditioned to view the 'spiritual' as a realm that stands apart; a world of separation and 'otherness'. I have learned that the things of 'the spirit' stand in contrast to the physical, routine and daily. In the process, I've become an unsuspecting dualist, a modern day Gnostic.

It is when I think of my father that these conditioned responses feel so dissatisfying. It is simply not right that people like him live life in two worlds with no apparent connection, deprived of the resources and encouragement to discover the presence and purposes of God in the ordinariness of their daily lives.

Of course, the situation is changing. Much more is being said today about the 'integration' of faith and work. Pope John Paul II called the Roman Catholic community to rediscover *"a spirituality of work that will help all people come closer, through work, to God, the Creator and Redeemer."* This call has been mirrored widely in Protestant communities. This is good news. Yet old patterns of thinking persist.

William Diehl, a prominent Lutheran and businessman in the United States, has underlined the need for serious and sustained attention to this issue on the part of the church. He writes:

"Until now, lay people have not had much help in seeing any part of the work as a spiritual experience. If lay people cannot find any spiritual meaning to their work, they are

condemned to living a certain dual life; not connecting what they do on a Sunday with what they do the rest of the week. They need to rediscover that the very actions of life are spiritual, and enable lay people to touch God in the world, not away from it."

For me, Diehl's words raise an important question, one I want to address in this paper: How is it that we can 'touch God' in our daily work?

Before proceeding further, it is worth saying that although I have focused on the paid work of my dad, I could just as easily describe the unpaid work of my mother. For though mum has periodically worked for some form of remuneration, for the most part she has given herself to the multiple and demanding tasks of homemaking.

To speak of work is to describe something much broader than paid employment. Work can take many forms: from standing at a lathe to leaning over a kitchen sink; from voluntary service in a church or community group to the tiring business of searching for employment; from studying toward a qualification to caring for one's own children. All of this, and much more, is work.

Whatever forms it takes, the questions remain: How is it that we can 'touch God' in our daily work? And how can we embrace our work as part of our spiritual journey?

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In responding to these questions, I want to do two things: firstly, to affirm two simple yet important theological statements about work; secondly, to explore eight 'disciplines' important to Christian spirituality that are potentially present in our daily work.

A THEOLOGY OF WORK

From a biblical perspective, there are two important statements that we can affirm with confidence.

1. God works

While any good theology begins with the affirmation that God is 'mystery', this is one statement we can make with certainty. The God of the Judeo-Christian tradition is a working God.

From the very beginning of the biblical story, God is revealed as one who works. In his book *God the Worker*, Robert Banks explores the multiple images or pictures of God in the Bible that illustrate this truth: God as composer and performer, metalworker and potter, garment maker and dresser, gardener and orchardist, farmer and winegrower, shepherd and pastoralist, tentmaker and camper, builder and architect. We could add to these other more general descriptors of God as creator, provider, rescuer, redeemer, judge, reconciler, administrator and servant.

In stark contrast to the Greek idea of gods existing above and beyond the

realm of human work, the God of the Bible is quite prepared to get hands dirty. Further, in the person of Jesus God is embodied as a carpenter, living and breathing the kingdom of God in the midst of human labour. When we appreciate God as worker, we discover a new dignity in work and are able to embrace it more confidently as a holy business.

2. We are created to work

For many people, the experience of work is more closely aligned with the realities of Genesis 3 than the preceding chapters 1 and 2. Let me explain.

As a consequence of Adam and Eve's rebellion, the close of the creation story sees them banished from the garden of God with the divine rebuke: "from here on you will have to sweat to earn a living" (CEV Gen. 3:19).

The realities of contemporary workplaces often attest more to the 'curse' of daily work than its gift. Yet the conclusion that work itself is a result of sin and failure—something to be endured until redemption is come—is plainly unbiblical. Work remains a part of God's original created order (Gen. 2:15) and a part of what God routinely affirmed as "good" and "very good" (Gen. 1:12, 18, 21, 25, 31). To fully embrace our personhood as those created 'in the image of God' (Gen 1:27), we are challenged to embrace our identity as workers. We are created to work.

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To affirm these two statements is an important first step. For in embracing these truths—God works and we are made to work—we can proceed with confidence in reclaiming our work as an expression of our spiritual identity.

WORK AND SPIRITUALITY

In our search for ways to ‘touch God’ in our work and workplaces, we cannot afford a naive romanticism. The world of work is too real and its challenges numerous. If we are to respond to the God embodied in our work, we must first confront the ‘godlessness’ of much that goes on in that realm. In other words, we are obliged to proceed with eyes wide open. Conversely, surrendering to a dismissive cynicism—concluding that talk of ‘touching God’ in our work simply defies reality and is therefore a pointless pursuit—does nothing to encourage an all-of-life response to God. Frankly, both responses—romanticism and cynicism—simply land us back where we began: with a disconnected and otherworldly preoccupation that says nothing to our daily life experience.

So, in pursuit of a realistic yet hopeful spirituality of work, I want to suggest eight ‘disciplines’ that are important to our practice of the Christian faith and present in our work. Of course, these disciplines are not the final word. They are more a work in progress and arise as much out of personal experience as they do a thorough analysis of working life. More than anything, I hope they will stir

your own thinking.

1. Work as Creation

In Genesis 1:28, God blesses humankind with the words, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and *subdue* it.” This blessing-command is central to God’s original and continuing purposes for the whole of creation.

Unfortunately, associations with the English word ‘subdue’ are often negative. It commonly infers domination, control, or the ‘breaking’ of something into submission. It sounds anything but creative. In contrast, the Hebrew word from which it comes, *kabhash*, literally means ‘to knead’ or ‘to tread.’

Given my professional background as a chef, I find both meanings helpful in reclaiming God’s commission. I immediately think of kneading bread or treading grapes, activities fundamental to the creation of two culinary staples, and both life-giving and creative processes.

Seasoned bread makers will know that successful baking relies upon one’s ability to work with yeast, a notoriously temperamental ingredient. One quickly learns that kneading has little to do with domination and control, as though one can beat the dough into submission. Rather, good bread making is about working with the basic ingredients provided by God and gently, slowly and skillfully bringing those ingredients to their full potential.

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At its best, this is what much of our work is about. We are co-creators. Think of a musician, carpenter, teacher, parent, metal worker, gardener or architect. Each one takes basic ingredients given by God—music, wood, metal, plants, even a human mind—and through various means works those elements to their potential.

In this sense, our commission to subdue the earth is a call to be co-creators with God.

2. Work as Providence

Divine providence is the certain and daily sign of God's on going involvement with creation. The God of the Bible does not create and walk away but stays intimately connected with the creation. That God is Provider is not simply descriptive of a role or function. It describes God's character and being.

Genesis 1:30 speaks of God providing food for "everything that has the breath of life in it." Similarly in 1 Timothy 6:17, God "richly provides us everything for our enjoyment." This is one of the most empowering evidences of continuing relationship between the Creator and humankind.

As workers created in the image of God, we are co-providers. Providing is a God ordained responsibility. In light of this, it occurs to me this business of working to provide for those who are dependent upon us is a virtue entirely underrated. Too often the response, "I just work to

earn a living" is meant to indicate a meaningless task devoid of spiritual significance. But this is not so.

Our call to co-provision is gathered up in the 'image' that we share with God. To provide is not merely an activity we engage in by necessity. It is an expression of our God-likeness; a responsibility for the good of creation and of those in community with us.

Perhaps this is partly why the New Testament writer speaks so directly in 1 Timothy 5:8: "And whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (NRSV). Obviously the connection between our role as providers and our identity as followers of Christ is a crucial one.

3. Work as Community

In the doctrine of the Trinity—one God in three persons—Christians profess faith in a community God. The call to conversion is a call to enter into the community nature of God. Through the 'body of Christ' and the 'household of faith', we are born again into community.

In the gospels, Jesus drew upon a long-standing tradition of summarizing the entire Hebrew law code in two commandments: love God with heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbour as yourself. According to Jesus' interpretation of the law, our responses to God and those around us are indivisible. God is encountered,

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experienced and followed in community.

An vital aspect of the mission of the church is embodying a community—one that uniquely reveals the presence and purposes of God. It follows from this that anywhere we are about nurturing human community, we nurture a context of potential Divine encounter.

In some cases, the work of community building is explicit to a worker's role or task. Urban planners, teachers, community workers and café proprietors all have community making as an important activity in their job description (or at least they should have). For others, the work of nurturing community is more a choice in the way one works than it is a task on the official to-do list. Either way, community nurture is an outworking of Christian commitment.

This activity of community making at work takes on a more urgent character when we understand that for many people in society, the workplace is one of a shrinking set of daily contexts where human intimacy is experienced. For a steadily increasing minority, the workplace sets the boundary for daily social interaction.

There are any number of television sitcoms and weekly dramas that focus exclusively on a small web of workplace relationships. To what degree is this a reflection of reality? Workplace sociologist Jim Channon believes it's all too common:

“When people had tribes to go home to, or villages where they could share the seasonal festival, or even neighborhoods with some personal intimacy, the spirit of community was a part of the natural order of life. But as we approach the 21st Century, our business cultures have become our tribes, our villages and our neighborhoods ... if there is no experience of spirit in our corporations, then there may not be much spirit in the civilization at large.”

If Channon is right, then the business of community making at work is more significant than we've appreciated. From a Christian perspective, it is central to our mission.

4. Work as Service

One of the defining images of spirituality in the New Testament is in the account of Jesus washing his disciples' feet (John 13).

At the conclusion of this intimate act, Jesus makes it clear that the humility of service and self-giving defines the essence of Christian ministry: “Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you should wash one another's feet.” “I have set you an example,” Jesus said, “that you should do as I have done for you.” When we place this story in the context of Jesus' life and ministry, we appreciate afresh that God places

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a high spiritual value on service.

With Jesus as our model, we cannot help but note the contrast between the profit-driven nature of ‘customer service’ in the commercial world, and the humbling, selfless and routine embodiment of grace evident in the act of foot washing. Perhaps there is a place for Christians working in ‘service’ industries to reclaim the notion of service as virtue and vocation rather than a pure marketing strategy.

When I look for similar examples today of this selfless and routine act of service, I come back to the image of my father. By walking out the front door every morning, my father served me, routinely, humbly and selflessly. Why did he work? In large part, he worked for me. Six days a week for 20 years, my father took off his outer garments, knelt down before me and washed my feet.

I do not mean to be overly nostalgic or idealistic in this assertion. I don’t need to be. In assessing my father’s actions in this way, I’m not suggesting that he left every morning with a divinely inspired sense of purpose, or that a stream of heavenly light circled his head as he stood at his lathe. No, the service of foot washing is not like that. It’s ordinary, routine, dirty and domestic. Tomorrow it will need to be done again, and again. Surely this is, in part at least, the real test of genuine service as Jesus envisioned it.

5. Work as Perseverance

Given the nature of the journal for which this paper is written, it is safe to assume that the majority of readers have benefited from some degree of tertiary education. Many will be ‘professionals’ engaged in work perceived, to some extent at least, as fulfilling and worthwhile. This is certainly true for me. How easy it is to forget that this is not the case for the vast majority of people in the today’s global marketplace.

For a significant number of people, work is simply a necessity, a matter of financial survival. For these people, to seek more meaning in work than this is to push the boundaries of credibility.

In the last decade, much has been written about the integration of faith and work for Christians in the marketplace. It’s an encouraging development. However, the vast majority of this material is written from the perspective of the ‘white collar’ professional. While this may be indicative of the church’s demographic and of those who access written material on subjects like this, it also underlines the fact that to wax lyrically about the deeper significance of work is generally a ‘middle-class’ preoccupation.

In truth, it is a far more challenging task to find God-connections in menial and ‘unskilled’ labour. In these cases, I suggest we do better to look for signs of ‘the Spirit’ in the character that we bring

to work than in the nature of the work itself. At points this will be true for all work, no matter what it is.

One of the character traits highly valued in the New Testament is perseverance. The writer of Romans asserts that “suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.” (5:3-4). Perseverance is an important link in the ‘chain’ of spiritual maturity. It speaks of our faithfulness to God and those around us. It mirrors the image of God, the one whose persevering grace holds human existence together and points us confidently and persistently to the future.

Daily work, especially work that is routine, mundane or difficult, demands perseverance in good measure. When we persevere in difficult or tedious circumstances for a greater good, we touch the character of God.

6. Work as Grace

On a recent overseas trip, I was reminded of the saying, “absence makes the heart grow fonder.” How much more I appreciate my family when I am deprived of their presence. There is a principle here that applies more broadly. Work is a gift that we do not fully appreciate until we are without it. I have never suffered the challenge of long-term unemployment, but those who have are quick to remind me that to have a job is grace. Work is a gift.

There are things going on at all sorts of

levels in the deprivation we feel when unemployed. Partly it has to do with the values of our consumer society.

Sociologically and psychologically, we are defined by our ability to produce, provide and purchase. To be without work is to be significantly diminished in these abilities and therefore diminished in our sense of self and the worth attributed to us by mainstream society.

From a Christian perspective, there is much that should be challenged in these measurements of human worth.

However, it must be acknowledged that the human needs to produce and provide are God-given. When we are deprived of work, the experience cuts at the heart of who we are created to be. To be invited into the co-creation and co-providence of God through human work is a part of the on-going and gracious activity of God. Work is grace.

7. Work as Celebration

In the creation story, there is a time when God steps back from the work of creation and celebrates the results: “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). This form of celebration is an expression of our spirituality. For it is time to contemplate, assess and enjoy the real worth of who we are and what we have achieved with God.

The people of Israel followed an annual calendar of celebratory feasts, each one (i) marking a particular act or provision of God, (ii) restating their dependence

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upon God, and (iii) reaffirming their bonds as the people of God. Furthermore, the annual celebrations of the harvest were an opportunity to enjoy together the 'fruits' of their labour.

By its nature, celebration is always seasonal and occasional. The depth of celebration is directly proportional to the effort extended in working toward the goal. In many cases, our work affords us seasonal opportunities to find joy and satisfaction in what we do, celebrating the fruits of our labour and saying with God, "It is good."

Think of the teacher who works day in and day out with her students, explaining, marking, inspiring, exhorting, prodding, encouraging—sometimes reveling in the privilege, other times longing to walk away from it—who once every year watches with pride as her students 'graduate' to the next stage in life.

Think of the carpenter who labours month after month in rain and heat, hammering, sawing, lifting, negotiating, and building a home. There comes the day when he stands back and admires what he's achieved, enjoying a sense of completion and accomplishment.

Think of the therapist who meets week after week with a struggling client: the tears, the anger, the ups and downs, two step forward, three steps backward. Finally, maybe months or even years later, she watches her client walk out the door for the last time, significantly more whole and stable than before.

In so many expressions of work there are moments when we can say with God, "It is good." Those moments bring perspective and hope. They remind us of what we are created for. They are moments essential to our spirituality, for in them we touch the goodness of God.

8. Work as Prayer

"To work is to pray." So said the monks some five centuries ago. As lovely as it sounds, it is here that eyebrows are raised by many of those in contemporary workplaces.

Certainly, those who have lived in monastic communities through the centuries are people who've taken hard work seriously, but they have done so within the context of a worshipping community. Even today, the daily schedule of the cloistered order involves an almost seamless movement between the disciplines of physical labour and the liturgies of prayer. Frankly, there are not too many secular workplaces that look anything like this. Simply finding the time to sit with co-workers over a leisurely cup of coffee is challenge enough, let alone finding the time and space to meditate and pray.

However, before we dismiss outright this business of work as prayer, we need to reconsider the directive in Romans 12:1-2:

"Therefore, I urge you, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship."

"In many cases, our work affords us seasonal opportunities to find joy and satisfaction in what we do, celebrating the fruits of our labour and saying with God, 'It is good.'"

Similarly, in Colossians 3:23-24: “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord ... it is the Lord Christ you are serving.”

Though it may sound clichéd and far fetched, it is clear from these two directives remind us that life is prayer. By offering up to God who we are in our fullness, everything that issues from our hands, hearts, and imaginations is sanctified. It is prayer; a conversation with the Creator. In all its ordinariness, messiness, and transience, we find the sacred and eternal.

To claim our work as prayer is not about being transported to some spiritual plane where we are eternally attuned to the Spirit. It is much more ordinary than that. It is more simply going about our daily routines with the confidence that God is present—listening, speaking, celebrating, even grieving.

CONCLUSION

As I noted earlier, this list of disciplines is not complete. There is much that could be said more profoundly, and I hope some of my assertions will cause disagreement and generate further discussion. Regardless, I have wanted to communicate this: I love my father's hands.

Though they no longer seem quite as big as they once did, dad's hands still retain the signs of a lifetime's hard work. They are hands that have provided for me, protected me, and selflessly laboured on

my behalf for close to 40 years. The black under dad's nails has faded a little now. It has been a while since he laboured over a lathe, but no matter how many years go by, his hands will always be those of a worker.

They say that when we gather in heaven, Jesus will still bear the scars of the nails in his hands; an eternal sign of the sacrifice made on our behalf. It is my hunch that when my dad lifts his hands in worship on that day, God will see his blackened nails and smile.

“It is my hunch that when my dad lifts his hands in worship on that day, God will see his blackened nails and smile.”



Further reading:

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