



Research article

## BIBLICAL MISSIONAL THEOLOGY OF WORK ON THE MISSIO DEI- MOTIF OF HUMANS AS CO-CREATORS WITH GOD

Deepthi Tarapatla

Research Scholar, Department of Advanced Theological Studies (DATS),  
SHUATS, Allahabad.

Email: [deepthidoctoral2018@gmail.com](mailto:deepthidoctoral2018@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

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God's people are called co-creators with God by becoming an instrument in the hands of God, thus participating in the *Missio Dei* of recreating the abused and the oppressed. The meaning of "co-creator" used in this paper for humans does not bring them to an equal position with God because God is the Master of Creation and can create out of nothing. Humans participate in this *Missio Dei* of creation and renewal by partnering with God. This paper seeks to analyse different pericopes from the scripture based on the Missio-Dei motif of co-creation.

#### Keywords:

Work

Missio-Dei

Co-creators

Co-creation

Worldview



The paradigms of Work have undergone several changes over the last few decades. Culture and tradition seem to have played a vital role in shaping the understanding of Work which has impacted the lives of Christians and the Church in a big way. There appears to be a significant gap of knowledge even in the Church about how the Bible addresses the issues of relationships, performance, truth, and justice related to Work. Work rather than God has become the source of satisfaction because of this lack of knowledge. In every Work done by a Christian, a Christian understanding of Work can be lived out (not only that which is called employment) for a change, rescue, transformation, and new possibilities within the present fallen world. Such a worldview shift will enable God's people to transform the world demanded by the resurrection of Jesus Christ<sup>1</sup>.

### **1. Significance of a Biblical Worldview**

We have the sure hope of resurrection, but "because the resurrection has happened as an event within our world, its implications and effects are to be felt within our own world, here and now."<sup>2</sup> Wright, in his book, "Surprised by Hope," splendidly appropriates the meaning of Christ's resurrection to our present world. He argues that our current bodily Work is essential because our bodies await a future resurrection. Every Christian has his own "worldview, "a matter of shared everyday experience of humankind, an inescapable component of all human knowledge".<sup>3</sup> One's perception about Work depends on one's "worldview". The purpose of a missional theology of Work is to facilitate the transformation of the view of human Work. It is essential to have a detailed interpretation of the Scripture to transform one's thinking for this to happen. The Scripture lays out the basic storyline of God's good creation, a radical fall into sin and redemption accomplished by Jesus Christ. However, Christians have always limited their understanding of redemption to their salvation.

The Christians as a community have struggled to understand the meaning and significance of a biblical perspective of Work. And, to rediscover the historic mission of the

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<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection and the Mission of the Church* (New York, Harper Collins, 2008) by Darren Dias O,P, Comptes Rendes, University of Saint Michael's College, Toronto. 306 in ATLA accessed September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 307

<sup>3</sup> Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical basis for a Reformational World-view* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition Postscript by Michael W. Goheen, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2005), Mid-America Journal of Theology, Mark D. Vander Hart, 372. Book Reviews and Short Notices in ATLA accessed October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2019



Church, Christians must realize that it is about the whole person and not just the soul; it is about the present and not only the future; it is about God working through believers, not just working in and for them. True Christian hope is rooted in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the promised renewal of all things, a renewal that has already begun. This perspective is critical to apprehend the concept of humans being co-creators with God. God wants to bring new life and vitality in the area of Work and the workplaces, especially where His people are placed. Wolters rightly underscores the cosmic dimensions of Christ's Work on the subject of redemption.<sup>4</sup> Though humans were appointed head of the whole creation under God, the entire creation was subject to frustration because of human rebellion. Re-creation cannot be limited to one narrow area of creation. The work of the Church needs to be rethought, given the anticipated renewal of creation.

Even behind the mopping of floors or paving over pretty meadows to create highways, God is hidden, bringing order to the fallen and rebellious world he still loves. The Bible records a few friends who once got a paralyzed man - just one individual - to Jesus. The Savior first forgave the man's sins and then provided for his physical wellness, marking the new creation with healing, both seen and unseen. This restoration of humankind and creation is not a going back to the Garden of Eden as if Christ came for re-creating creation. We started in the garden, but the goal is to bring the saved to the renewed city of God.<sup>5</sup>

## **2. Five Pericopes from the Scripture for A Missional Theology of Work**

### **2.1 Relationships**

'So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion...."<sup>6</sup>

This verse distinctly presents three significant inferences:

\*It gives God his rightful place as the Creator of all things.

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<sup>4</sup> Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basis for a Reformational Worldview*, Second (Grand Rapids, Michigan/ Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> N. T. Wright, "Surprised By Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection and the Mission of the Church." (New York, Harper Collins, 2008) by Carol Geisler, St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Journal/Fall 2009, 432 in ATLA accessed September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, Genesis 1: 27,28 Copyright 2011



\*It gives dignity to all humans alike – not just the kings and the rulers or a particular group as higher than the others.

\*It puts the rest of the creation in its proper place – not as objects of worship but humans to be caretakers of it.

This rightful order concerning God, humans, and nature seems to be misinterpreted in the minds of all human beings, not only the Christians. It is very profound when viewed from the Indian context how the *Manusmriti*, the ancient book of Law of the Hindus supposed to be written in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C, influences the Hindu thought, particularly the justification of the caste system. The caste system categorizes people into four varnas or social classes: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and the Shudras based on skin color and occupation. A few unprivileged individuals are still outside the Varna system called outcastes or untouchables. This concept absolutely deprives humans of any dignity bestowed on them by God. The Bible states that both men and women are created in the image of God. The absence of this understanding in humans closes the door for good and healthy relationships between human beings in the workplace.

Such a worldview has crept into the Church as well. Churches are divided caste-wise, distorting the biblical worldview of man and woman being made in the image of God. Thus there is little hope for His children to participate in God's mission and be instruments in God's hands in recreating and restoring the people and healing the environment. This worldview has been common even in Western culture as Glover points out how the integration of ideas about God, persons, and the created world slowly broke apart.<sup>7</sup> The concept which came from the Bible was misinterpreted and misconstrued. Stevens examines the implications of this understanding of call, vocation, and ministry for a reframing of the mission work of the Church.<sup>8</sup> According to him, the biblical concept of mission must be retraced concerning a new understanding where there is no distinction between a layperson and the clergy. The idea of equality as all humans are made in God's image gave a rightful place to Ruth even though

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<sup>7</sup> Willis B. Glover, *Biblical Origins of Modern Secular Culture: An Essay in the interpretation OF Western History*, (Macon Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1984), 435 by Henry Warner Bowden, Church History in ATLA accessed on September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2019

<sup>8</sup> Paul R. Stevens, *The other Six Days: Vocation, Work and Ministry in Biblical Perspectives*, (Interpretation: July 2001), 531 by Israel Galindo, Baptist Theological seminary, Richmond, VA Review and Expositor 97(2000) in ATLA accessed on September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2019



she was a foreigner, paved the way for God to use Boaz in restoring and re-creating her.<sup>9</sup> Christians are called to treat one another with dignity and honor regardless of race, color, Work, gender, or any other criteria, knowing that all humankind is made in God's image and likeness to participate in God's mission. Pope John Paul II solemnly affirms that "Work is one of the characteristics that distinguish man from other creatures, that it determines his inner quality and in a way actually constitutes his nature."<sup>10</sup>

## 2.2 Fruitfulness

"Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the Work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain."<sup>11</sup>

To develop a missional theology of Work, it is essential to understand that Christians participate in God's holistic plan to restore humanity and creation. This understanding evokes fruitfulness in Work. Labor in the Lord does not necessarily mean Full-time Christian Work but any work that one does for the glory of God. In his book, "Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work," Timothy Keller suggests seeing our life as God's Work of renewing heaven and earth, which is essential for every Christian in the Church.

In his first letter to the Corinthian Church, Paul talks about the meaning and motivation to Work brought about by the victory and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Scripture says, "the body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power."<sup>12</sup> Thus a new theology of Work emerges where labor is not in vain because human life is free from the interminable cycles of reincarnation according to the concept of 'karma samsara' in Hinduism, which leaves life meaningless, and without a clue about what the next life is going to be. This belief indicates meaninglessness in the present life and Work because, in the Hindu philosophy, *karma* demands future payment for past sins. In contrast, the Cross of Christ provides forgiveness of sins, and the resurrection gives hope for new creation. There is nothing vain and meaningless when working for the Lord – not necessarily 'full-time Christian work'- because everything is anchored in the resurrection of Christ.

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<sup>9</sup> The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. Ruth. Copyright, 2011

<sup>10</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, (Communio viatorum, XXIV, 1961), Encyclical on Human Labor

<sup>11</sup> The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, 1 Corinthians 15:58 Copyright 2011

<sup>12</sup> The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, 1 Corinthians 15:42. Copyright 2011



Paul says that Christian life has meaning and direction, whether that meaning is realized in this world or not. This worldview enables the establishment of the Kingdom of God by the Church here on earth as it is in heaven. The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds perched in its branches. It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in about 60 pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough.<sup>13</sup> This indicates that when Christians work to bring the kingdom of God into their Work, there would be a significant impact; even though slower, things are not going to remain the same. The fruit that is borne is eternal and cannot be destroyed. Such is the power of the resurrection and the hope that our labor is not in vain.

### 2.3 Provision

"Slaves, obey in everything your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ".<sup>14</sup>

It can be observed in this verse, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it"<sup>15</sup> that Work is not a result of the rebellion of humanity against God but the *Missio Dei* for man to serve God through his Work.

Far from being programmatic, Christian Work in the world is missional only in so far as it is personal: *Missio Dei per Imago Dei*, the mission of God through the image of God. Justice, for instance, is not simply standing against a problem or for a person. God's original intention, damaged by our inherent corruption, finds earthly restoration in our gospel participation.<sup>16</sup> Wright mentions that mission is "our committed participation as God's people, at God's invitation and command, in God's mission within the history of God's world for the redemption of God's creation"<sup>17</sup> God does not simply have a redemptive mission, but a creational task as well. To think of mission in broad terms requires some measure of

<sup>13</sup> The Holy Bible, New International Version, Luke 13: 18-21. Copyright 2011

<sup>14</sup> The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, Colossians 3:22-24, Copyright, 2011

<sup>15</sup> The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, Genesis 2:15 Copyright, 2011

<sup>16</sup> Amy L. Sherman, *Kingdom Calling: Vocational stewardship for the Common Good*, (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2011) Review by Mark Eckel, 477 in ATLA accessed on October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2019

<sup>17</sup> Christopher J.H. Wright, *Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*, (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2006) Presbyterian: Covenant Seminary review 36/2 by Michael D. Williams, 76 in ATLA accessed on October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2019



worldview alteration, for many Christians opines Wright. Since the creation, God has given humans Work to do. An enslaved Christian is reminded that though exploitation may be his earthly lot, he will receive a proper repayment for his service from his heavenly Master. Slaves in the Roman Empire were bought and sold like vegetables which meant they were denied any rights. Paul exhorts the enslaved people to serve their masters to serve the Lord because their work has a purpose. This worldview regards Work as continuous with worship and does not contradict worship or service unto God. Such an attitude would take away drudgery and boredom out of Work and give meaning and purpose to it. There is a provision from God even in the most challenging workplaces and even where exploitation and injustice reign. The inheritance God's people receive is incomprehensible yet invaluable.

Even today, many workplaces deny employees' rights, and some works like that of a homemaker do not carry any intrinsic value. The poor and women are particularly vulnerable in such an environment. The hope of the resurrection has immense significance because every person may not be "re-created" in this physical world like how it happened in the story of Ruth in the Bible. The reward may not be immediate, but there is undoubtedly a reward. The Scripture presents a genuine motivation to Work, not to please people but to work with a sincere heart, fearing the Lord so that the *Missio Dei* will undoubtedly be fulfilled.

Paul invokes Philemon in his letter to him to treat Onesimus, no longer as an enslaved person but more than a slave, as a beloved brother.<sup>18</sup> Paul's intercession for him illustrates Christ's Work on the Cross. Paul's plea and intercession recreate Onesimus and give him full dignity as a human. Work should be the full expression of the worker's faculties, the thing in which he finds spiritual, mental, and bodily satisfaction, and the medium through which he offers himself to God. Each worker "must be able to serve God in his work, and the work itself must be accepted and respected as the medium of divine creation."<sup>19</sup> But, the study of the various periods of the Church's historical understanding of Work makes it quite clear that the Church has failed to have such an understanding and was also unable to stand with the Christians in upholding them as they faced challenges at Work. To some extent, in the

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<sup>18</sup> The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, Philemon, verse 16 Copyright, 2011

<sup>19</sup> William J. Collinge, *Doing well a thing that is well worth doing: Teaching Dorothy L. Sayers on Work*, (Horizons 33/1, 2006), Mount St. Mary's University accessed in ATLA on November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019



apocalyptic period, the Christians seemed to have shown excellence in being exemplary in displaying the God they believed, proclaiming the Gospel in every way they could, and thus making themselves participants in the mission of God.

#### **2.4 Dominion**

"And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open the seals, for you were slain, and by your blood, you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth."<sup>20</sup>

God has redeemed his people not just to give them a place in heaven after they die, as it is widely preached and believed among Christians. But to qualify his people to represent God to creation in their Work and represent creation to God in intercession. The believers should recognize the God-given authority and dominion to use it for the glory of God. Redemption does not mean undoing the creation but bringing God's redemptive work to elevate creation to its rightful place for the sake of his creation purposes. The actual theology regarding mission is that Christians must not withdraw from the world into the Church but embrace the world with their proclamation of the Gospel.<sup>21</sup> The workplace has great significance as it creates opportunities to live out the Gospel amid the world. It allows God's people to participate in God's mission in re-creating people, circumstances, and the universe with the authority of being a kingdom and priests. There is an urgent need for the Church to be reminded that it is set apart by God, redeemed out of bondage and sin (past), and brings blessing to all nations on earth (future).<sup>22</sup> The Church is the agency for spreading the kingdom of God in the world and must proclaim the Christian message and minister to the totality of human need. It is a grave mistake to emphasize the salvation of individual human beings at the expense of ignoring God's purpose of rescuing and recreating all of creation.

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<sup>20</sup> The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, Revelation 5:9-10 Copyright, 2011

<sup>21</sup>Paul R. Stevens, *The other Six Days: Vocation, Work and Ministry in Biblical Perspectives*, (Interpretation: July 2001), 336 by Robert Karl Gnuse, Loyola University, New Orleans in ATLA accessed on September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2019

<sup>22</sup> Christopher J.H Wright, *The Mission Of God's People- The Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission*, (Langham Partnership International, 2010), 120





The believers have to realize the authority they have "as a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, to proclaim the Excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into the marvelous light."<sup>23</sup> The two terms 'priesthood' and 'reign' are paradoxical as they represent authority in Christ and rule with Christ but at the same time with servant leadership and humble intercession. One of the chief results of humankind's rebellion against God is the desire for control, explicit from the following Scripture, "Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you."<sup>24</sup> But the Cross is the place where God chose to lose control over His creation, allowing the creation to crucify His Son for the redemption of the creation itself. With this biblical worldview, a Christian in his Work shows the attitude of the Cross, not exercising control but self-denial towards people and relationships and towards nature. There is no desire to control work and no personal agenda working with Christ as His people. By this, God's people fulfill the purposes of God's kingdom here on the earth as the royal priesthood proclaiming His Excellencies and participating with God in calling others out from darkness into the light.

## **2.5 Limits**

"Come to me, all who labor and are heavily laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart."<sup>25</sup>

By resting, God's children acknowledge that life is not defined only by Work or productivity.<sup>26</sup> The human task is to extend God's Creative Work in many ways limited only by God's gifts of imagination and skill and the limits God sets. In a sense, it indicates our embracing the dependence on God, the Creator, by renouncing some part of our autonomy. Otherwise, humans tend to live under the illusion that life is entirely in human control. The workplaces are so competitive in this contemporary world that humans are in a rat race all the time. Their physical bodies and their mind are never at rest. Although the Christian understanding of rest seems to align with the sophisticated knowledge of Work, it is not cessation from working. The kind of rest that Jesus is referring to is without any selfish

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<sup>23</sup> The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, 2 Peter 2:9 Copyright, 2011

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., Gen 3:16b

<sup>25</sup> The Holy Bible, English Standard version. Genesis 2:15 Copyright, 2011

<sup>26</sup> Andrew Schmutzer and Alice Mathews, *Bible Commentary produced by Theology of Work project*, (TOW Project steering committee, June 11, 2013)



agenda. Rest is therefore not necessarily ceasing from Work. Chapter 4 in the book of Hebrews also refers to this kind of rest.

In contrast to the biblical worldview, the founder of modern economies, Adam Smith, suggested that the most significant impetus to the personal effort was competition with other individuals. Adam Smith reversed the reformation link between Work and self-interest, changing the theological justification of Work. "...because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. But Jesus answered them, My Father is working until now, and I am working."<sup>27</sup> When God is supposed to be resting on the Sabbath day, Jesus benignly declares that he and his Father are working.

Jesus calls his people to come and take his yoke upon them to experience the rest he is offering. Again, this is paradoxical as carrying a yoke and resting cannot happen simultaneously. God wants his people to understand the limits he has put on Work and not go limitless with their selfish motives in Work. Work becomes toil only when one is driven to do something without a biblical worldview. Proper Sabbath rest is resting from personal reasons and engaging with God in his mission. This is a worldview that every believer in Christ should have in their Work, knowing that perfect rest and perfect work are inseparable. Jesus is a perfect example of this in his earthly life. This perspective will not allow oneself to be part of any unhealthy competition and immoral practices in the workplace. It will keep away the contest to prove oneself to the authority, which gives rise to unhealthy rivalry and helps understand that the rest offered by the God of the Bible is experienced by his people even while working.

### 3. Conclusion

The five pericopes reflect the the God-given partnership to humans as co-creators with Him. Unfortunately, many Christians understand Work as a curse because of man's rebellion against God initially and thus have a negative attitude towards Work. Being made in the image of God, humans are qualified to fulfill the *Missio Dei*. Sayers' "Christian understanding of work" begins from the biblical theology of human beings as created in the image of God. Work, she says, "should... be thought of as a creative activity undertaken for

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<sup>27</sup> The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, John 5:16b, 17 Copyright, 2011



the love of work itself; and...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."<sup>28</sup> Even the Work that the abused and the exploited worker does in the present world, though it might not have an immediate significance, can still bring meaning to inspire hope given the resurrection of Christ. And yet, too often, the Church relegates itself to the cultural sidelines, content with the myopic view of resurrection past and future.<sup>29</sup>

The biblical concept of mission can be achieved through a proper theology of Work as Christians start treating one another with dignity and honor in Work. Regardless of race, color, work, gender, or any other criteria, it is high time we understand that all humankind is made in God's image and likeness to participate in God's mission. God's mission is to redeem everything, including our Work. Setting limits to work allows God's children acknowledge life not to be defined only by Work or productivity. Work allows God's people to participate in God's mission in re-creating people, circumstances, and the universe with the authority of being a kingdom and priests.

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<sup>28</sup> William J. Collinge, "‘Doing Well a Thing That Is Well Worth Doing’: Teaching Dorothy L. Sayers on Work," *Horizons* 33, no. 01 (2006): 101–10, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900002978>.

<sup>29</sup> N.T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection and the Mission of the Church*, (New York, Harper Collins, 2008) by David Swanson, New Covenant Community Church, Chicago III. Book Reviews ATLA accessed September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2019.



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