

# WORK AS WORSHIP

BY  
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## Abstract

It was Elijah who criticized the prophets of Baal for trying to harbor two competing identities: “How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him” (1 Kings 18:21, RSV). In our modern workplace, this criticism remains valid. To harbor multiple worldviews is to try to live under different identities and navigate multiple, and often contradictory, aims. This paper gives critical scrutiny to what it means to adhere to our faith in a working capacity, lest we be subject to perversions that may occur in this arrangement. One particularly pervasive worldview is the belief that one’s work life, vocation, job, labor, etc. is separate from the spiritual essence, worship, ministry, and cultivation as a disciple. We refer to this partitioning of identities as the work-worship divide. Four divides serve as a threat to authentic faith expression in the modern business environment: the (1) work not worship divide, (2) work then worship divide, (3) work or worship divide, and (4) work and worship divide. We conclude with what we deem to be a more faithful narrative: work as worship.



## The Work Challenge

**D**avid Kinnaman, President of the Barna Group, has given recent attention to several cultural trends for today's church and society. Among other things, his research attends to our modern perceptions of work, and what he has found is not encouraging.

Looking specifically at youth and young adults (18-29), Kinnaman has found a discernible disconnect between one's vocational desire and their faith identity. In his recent book, *You Lost Me*, he writes: "Millions of Christ-following teens and young adults are interested in serving in mainstream professions [...] Yet most receive little guidance from their church communities for how to connect these vocational dreams deeply with their faith in Christ."<sup>1</sup> As a result, many Christians fail to link their career choices with a posture of Christian faithfulness. Kinnaman writes, "their faith and work decisions are bifurcated, rather than holistically entwined."<sup>2</sup>

This issue is not limited to youth and young adults. Christians of all ages often display a similar fragmentation in their lives. Moreover, according to the Barna Group, nearly two-thirds of churching adults say it has been at least three years or more since they heard teaching related to their work or their career, risking the continued separation of faith and work identities.<sup>3</sup>

What, we might ask, is morally objectionable about this bifurcation? For many, the faith life is a collection of given activities associated with the faith. Similarly, one's work life is another collection of activities associated with work. Stated in these terms, the gap between the two seems innocuous. However, the locus of the problem relates less to activity, but rather, to identity. Indeed, we might say that each sphere is conceptualized within a particular worldview. The worldviews we adopt in our various activities are not only distinct from, but often hostile to, identities associated with our faith lives.

The capacity for competing identities requires attention. Yet, this problem is not new. It was Elijah who criticized the prophets of Baal for trying to harbor two competing identities: "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him" (I Kings 18:21). Our aim in this paper is to introduce what we refer to as common work-worship divides, followed by the consideration of an alternative approach: work as worship. Our hope is that this posture will transform how Christians approach their work lives and provide them with a more faithful perspective of how their faith identity connects, and even redefines, other spheres of life.

## Work-Worship Divides

For the purposes of this paper, worship is defined as our primary identity as followers of Jesus Christ leading to our commitment to "love God and to love others." It is our faith life; our spiritual existence. Worship is not limited to what we do on Sunday or as part of a church service. Worship refers to embodying the essence of our faith. Moreover, worship, in this

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sense, should infiltrate the various aspects of our lives—work included.

Yet, in reality many Christians are divided between work and worship. For consideration and discussion, we offer four possible misconceptions about the relationship between our faith life and our work life. We suggest here that each of the four can result in a "divide" that undermines our wholeness as Christians. These divides are stated as follows: (1) work not worship; (2) work then worship; (3) work or worship; (4) work and worship. Given the scope of the paper, these divides are not exhaustive. However, we offer below some of



their common attributes and how they threaten to separate our faith identity from our work identity.

## *Work not Worship*

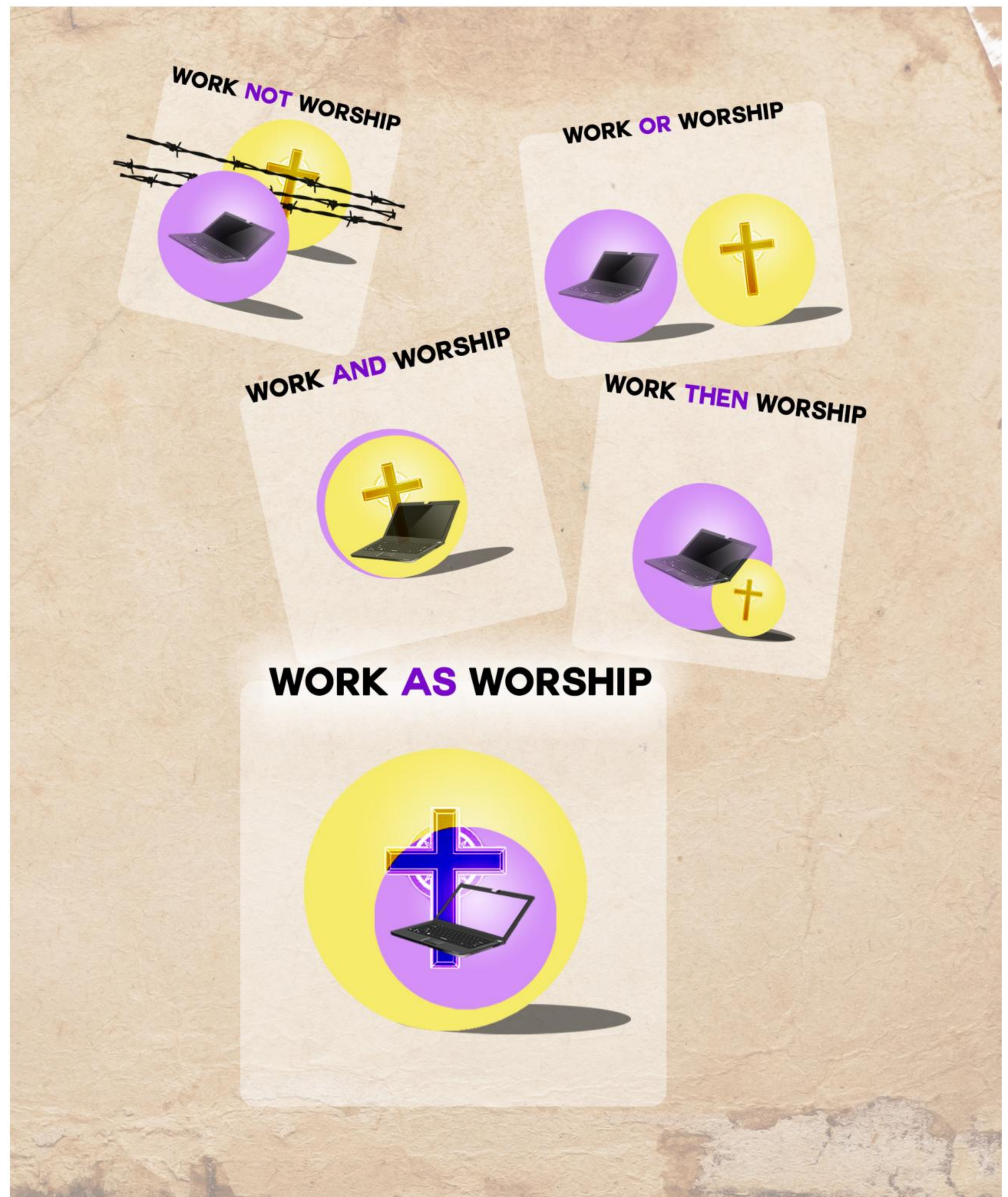
The first divide, work not worship, is when our Sunday-self is different from our Monday-self. “I’ve been sinning all week,” a worship leader once announced to a perplexed congregation, “but this morning I am here to worship!” We may find such a statement strange coming from a worship leader, but is it any less odd when it comes from a person in business? One author describes this disconnect well: “‘He’s really a very serious Christian,’ someone once told me about a very high-profile businessman in Nashville, ‘but you just wouldn’t know it by the way he practices business.’” They conclude: “The disjunction between the ‘church’ and the ‘secular’ continues to reign in much Christian practice.”<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the belief that our faith identity is fundamentally separate from our work identity, this false paradigm assumes that our faith has no bearing on our work identity whatsoever. In other words, we can literally be two, or more, different people, and navigate in and out of these identities as we go about our lives. Among other problems, this assumes that expressions of faith are merely things we do (without consideration to who we are).

Under this conception, categories of work and faith are not so much like mixing paints that bleed together to form a new color, but rather, they are better understood as a series of silos: freestanding with each possessing its own content and independent of other silos. Some have referred to this as the problem of privatization, where one’s personal identity has little to no bearing on their public identity. However we might describe it, this divide risks adopting a form of incoherence in one’s personhood that can be difficult to navigate.

## *Work then Worship*

Another common mistake is the work then worship divide. Here, we may desire to exercise our Christianity in other areas of our life (i.e., our jobs), but our faith plays “second fiddle” to specific job characteristics and priorities. Unfortunately, under this paradigm our faith merely fills in the blanks of our otherwise regular work lives. In the workplace, Christians may appropriately offer values such as honesty, a good attitude, and a solid work ethic to the worldly structures they encounter without questioning the very nature of the social practices inherent in those structures.



Even worse, many under this divide believe that their faith is some kind of cosmic “good-luck” charm that will assist them in success. This dismisses the reality that being faithful may very well be accompanied by hardship, heartache, and marginalization. If faithfulness is a recipe for receiving blessings (as some preach today), then we risk making Jesus a formula, not a life-transforming savior. This, however, is far from worship. As A.W. Tozer once pointed out, “The idolater simply imagines things about God and acts as if they are true.”<sup>5</sup> One’s faith identity should redefine, redeem, and restore a person. It should transform who we are inside out, leading to changes in the way we think and act. However, under this divide, and the impoverished conceptions of God it tends to breed, our faith is tempered by alternate pursuits and desires.

## *Work or Worship*

Another perversion of the work-worship divide occurs when we completely divorce work and worship from each other (leading us to an artificial choice between one or the other). If the work then worship paradigm risked understanding the



faith life as playing handmaiden to our primary work identity, this misconception risks separating the two from one another. In this case, one might be a Christian, but they have a critical decision to make: do they take the Christian route and go into ministry, or do they take the non-Christian route and go into a secular work field? This either/or ultimatum understands the former as holy and hallowed vocational work, with the latter being worldly and secular.

To provide an example, an interviewing manager in an educational ministry once met with a very successful middle-aged financial consultant who was considering a “jump into ministry” from his finance job. “I suppose the question is,” he pondered out loud, “whether I want my job to allow me to support those who are in ministry, or whether I want my job to be my ministry.” We do not necessarily find his reasoning to be odd. Rather, it clearly articulates a common question among Christians in the workforce. However, we challenge the notion that one field is considered ministry, and one is not, an implicit assumption embedded in his statement. In other words, this implies that there is one route to worship God as it relates to our professional lives and careers.

## *Work and Worship*

Ironically, we can divide our work and worship by attempting to illegitimately marry our faith and work lives so that they more closely cohere. This divide, work and worship, risks over-spiritualizing all work-related activity. The good, the bad, and the ugly are justified as “God’s intervening hand” and strategic decisions are euphemized as God’s will. Three notable problems emerge from this. First, invoking God’s name for an organizational decision makes disagreement rather difficult. If a manager or co-worker remarks that “God” has ordained a particular strategy or direction, then challenging the merits of this strategy becomes an uncomfortable exercise since you might find yourself disagreeing, not with a fellow co-worker, but supposedly with the creator of the universe!

Second, the inappropriate blending of work and worship leaves little room for the mundane and the ordinary. It is important to relish and celebrate our mountain-top spiritual moments, but, like Jesus himself, we must come down from the mountain (Matthew 17:9). Living out our faith often involves doing what is sub-optimal or inconvenient. Further, it can involve heartache or a lack of gratification or fulfillment. In reality, much of our lives are lived in the valley, and we must learn what it means to be faithful in those places.

Finally, this paradigm can naturally lead to exhaustion. Our faith life should energize us, not make us weary. However, this is precisely what we risk if we believe that our work life and our spiritual lives are two separate spheres that we must give ourselves to entirely.

## *A Faithful Narrative: Work as Worship*

In light of the aforementioned work-worship divides, we invite the reader to consider conceiving of their work activity as a

form of worship itself: work as worship. More specifically, we present this paradigm as the 4 C’s of work as worship. The C’s are as follows: Co-Creation, Catalyst, Contribution, and Community. Each represents faithful activity, that is to say, our worship, in a work context.

## *Co-Creation*

To introduce the first “C”, we can begin with an important philosophical question that was asked centuries ago. It was the philosopher Hegel who inquired as to why a perfect God would need to create an earth and a people to inhabit that earth. If God is perfect, why does He need others? While this evoked an array of answers, it can be responsibly suggested that in asserting that God created the world, it doesn’t tell us what He needs so much as it tells us who He is. More specifically, we see that God creates (and He relates to that creation).

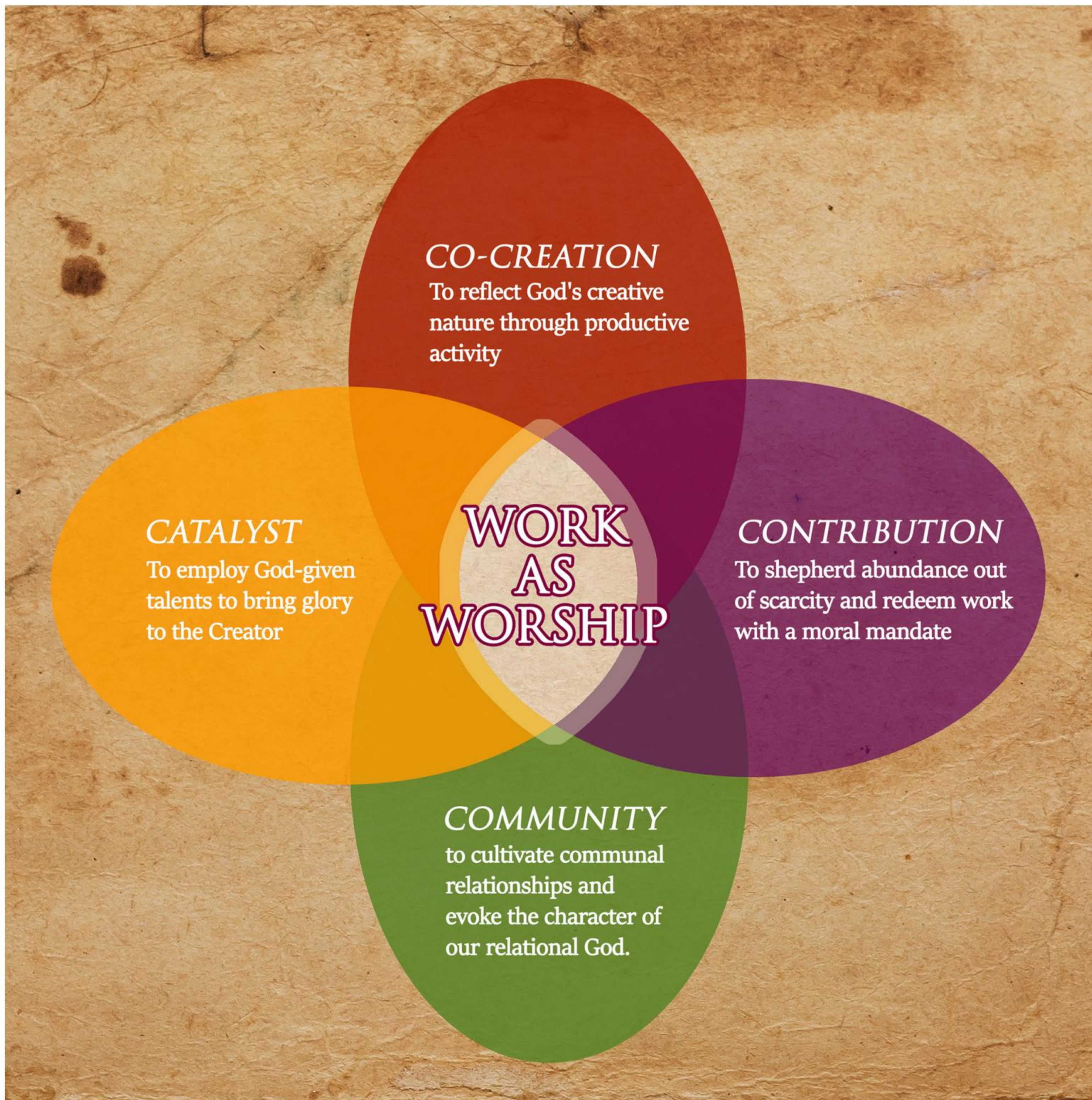
Furthermore, as image-bearers of a creative and relational God, as we create, produce, and act within the world, we are participating in this activity with God. We are demonstrating this same attribute (co-creating with God). Thus, our work activity, itself, suggests that there is not only output in our labor (what we produce), but there is an essence to our labor; an intrinsic value. To illustrate, consider this familiar story:

In the days of misty towers, distressed maidens, and stalwart knights, a young man, walking down a road, came upon a laborer fiercely pounding away at a stone with hammer and chisel. The lad asked the worker, who looked frustrated and angry, “What are you doing?” The laborer answered in a pained voice: “I’m trying to shape this stone, and it is backbreaking work.” The youth continued his journey and soon came upon another man chipping away at a similar stone, who looked neither particularly angry nor happy. “What are you doing?” he asked. “I’m shaping a stone for a building.” The young man went on and before long came to a third worker chipping away at a stone, but this worker was singing happily as he worked. “What are you doing?” The worker smiled and replied: “I’m building a cathedral.”<sup>6</sup>

Many are likely to resonate with the feeling that their work consists in little more than “shaping stones.” In this sense, our productive activity, even if mundane or unpleasant, is often appropriately viewed as a means to an end. One’s labor provides a wage, which in turn gives us an opportunity for shelter, food, and clothing. Further, our wage allows us to satisfy our preferences in the marketplace (purchasing a good book, funding a vacation, etc.). While this is all true, this framework risks making “work” only something that we do, yet disconnected from who we are.

We may appropriately contrast this with the conception of our work activity as a creative statement; an expression. Here, productive activity moves beyond producing, working, and laboring as a mere means to live. Rather, our daily life (identity, creativity, personhood) has the capacity to be bound





Stewardship is manifest in our work activity. For example, in the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30), each person is given a great sum of money that they are to steward. The servants receiving five talents and two talents put the money to work; they activated their gift, and thus rightfully received praise from their master upon his return. The servant receiving just one talent, however, buried his in the ground. The master condemns him, takes away the talent, and banishes him to the outer darkness: "And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (v. 30).

Upon reading this story, many conclude that the master was a shrewd and heartless businessman upset that the "lazy" servant did not make him more money.

up in making our work an act of devotion to God, participating with Him in creative and productive activity.

### *Catalyst*

In addition to being co-creators with God, we can utilize the gifts that God has provided us in a way that is glorifying to the gift-giver. Gifts, however, are inert if they are not employed, what John Wesley referred to as "blowing up the coals into a flame."<sup>7</sup> Thus, as humans and image-bearers of God, we exist as the catalyst for our gifts and their ultimate employment. In this sense, we are stewards.

Oxford economist and Christian, Donald Hay, has suggested that creation gave us three primary elements: man is personal, man is a steward of creation, and man exercises his stewardship through work. Here, Hay reminds us that our gifts have a purpose. Yes, we are to enjoy them and employ them, but ultimately they are resources we are to steward. In biblical terms, to be a steward (*oikonomos*) is to be a manager, not an owner. And what is being managed? The resources that God has put in our care.

To read the passage this way, however, would be to miss an important point: the resource put under the stewardship of the third servant was squandered. There is an etymological connection between the biblical idea of talent (which was a sum of money) and our idea of talent today (natural giftedness). Being a good steward does not mean hoarding and protecting our resources; it means putting them to use in an appropriate way. Hay reminds us that "each person is accountable to God for his stewardship."<sup>8</sup> Or, as New Testament scholar Ben Witherington writes, "There are few things as frustrating to God as wasted abilities."<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, being a faithful steward means using the gifts and resources under your care for others. The Bible makes clear that the purpose of our gifts is to serve others: "Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms" (1 Peter 4:10). Furthermore, serving others is not to be disconnected from serving the "master": God—our original gift giver; the owner of our resources.

Thus, the faithful way to serve as a catalyst of our skills and talents is to activate these attributes through work, use them in ways that assist others and ultimately glorify the



creator, and to do this out of a sense of reverence, hope, and anticipation.

## Contribution

While co-creating with God and being a catalyst of the skills he has endowed us with relate to the essence of our work, we do not wish to dismiss the fact that work also serves a very practical function: production. Work is not just about a state of being; it is also about a state of doing. In business parlance, our work makes a contribution.

Work activity addresses one of the most pressing, pervasive, and ubiquitous problems in modern society: scarcity. Scarcity, or the idea of finite resources in a world of infinite desires, creates considerable problems related to justice (who deserves what), production decisions (how do we trade-off the use our resources), and social maladies (conflict, poverty, corruption, etc.).

Scarcity, in some way, shape, or form, will always be present in nearly any environment we find ourselves in. There is a force, however, that can serve to minimize its effect: Growth. In other words, our work activity can make a contribution to growth and development in a way that fends off the threat of scarcity. Scarcity is the problem of not having enough; production is the solution of creating more. Proverbs 14:4 describes this simple philosophy well: "Where there are no oxen, there is no grain; abundant crops come by the strength of the ox." In other words, when we work, we produce, and our needs are satisfied. Or as "The Message" translation puts it, "No cattle, no crops." No activity, no output.

Moreover, we can conceive of our activity to achieve growth in a faithful way. If scarcity is a matter of finite resources, then we can also shift our understanding of abundance and "enough." In other words, as I adjust my appetite, the problem of scarcity becomes less acute. Further, we can recognize that material development is different from moral development (what good is our abundance if it has little effect on our character?). Finally, we can redeem productive work that is being done which mirrors God's themes. To steward the environment, help a child learn to share, assist the poor and elderly, or create a device that brings clean drinking water to a third-world village is to make an important contribution. To redeem these acts as God-created and God-sponsored themes is to redefine, altogether, how we conceive of the very notion of contribution. This, we submit, is an act of worship.

## Community

Finally, our work lives can serve to cultivate community, which can be a robust expression of worship. John Wesley provided a cogent expression of the relational link between all mankind: "With an honest openness of mind, let us always remember the kindred between man and man, and cultivate that happy instinct whereby, in the original constitution of our nature, God has strongly bound us to each other."<sup>10</sup>

In other words, being relational is not something we simply choose, nor is it merely a personality trait. Rather, it is our blueprint; it's in our DNA. If we are relationally constituted, as Wesley suggests, what are the implications for our work lives?

Work, particularly in an organization, can be appropriately characterized as having a communal expression. Any institution, whether a general organization, a corporation, a department, a school, etc., requires that the individuals working for that group partner together in order to achieve common ends. Thus, community, partnerships, and collaboration are all a natural overflow in the work settings we find ourselves in today.

With this in mind, we can define community in the workplace as bonding between co-workers where relationships, shared meanings, and a sense of common good is cultivated from a diversity of backgrounds. Community, in this sense, is shared space accompanied by inclusion and membership. When we commune and when we relate, we not only live out our relational nature, but we reflect our relational creator. As image-bearers of a relational God, we are living out His essence.

## Living Holy and Whole

To address the problems created under the aforementioned work-worship divides, we have provided an alternate paradigm: work as worship. To support this, we offered 4 C's that comprise this paradigm: co-creating with God, being a catalyst for God's work through our gifts, making a lasting and faithful contribution in the environments that we work within, and finally, engendering community.

We believe that to be holy is to be consistent and whole in all aspects of our lives, and this includes our work lives. To live otherwise is to live divided. However, wholeness is not as easy as we may think. Here, we offer two primary reasons as to why.

First, we live in a world with an array of voices competing for our attention. More to the point, we live in a society where voices, captions, lyrics, slogans, and websites constantly wave their proverbial arms to get our attention and tell us who we are (or who we should be). Just as we would sink in the middle of the ocean if we did not kick our legs and move our arms, we will sink in a sea of impressions (voices, words, images) if we aren't deliberate about cultivating our identity in Christ and operating out of that identity alone.

Secondly, and more pressing, we are not blank slates upon which a personality, character trait, or attitude can be hard-wired into us. If the wind blows in the direction of multiple identities and a divided self, then sin is the sail tied to our backs that catches an opposing, stiff wind.

Sin not only prohibits our capacity to act appropriately, but distorts our ability to define what is appropriate in the first place. When this disposition is coupled with living in an environment of competing and ulterior identities, then living whole seems a near impossible task. It is appropriate, therefore, to remind ourselves of Jesus' words in Mathew



19: "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (v. 26). Not only has God justified mankind through Christ's atoning sacrifice, but He has restored our capacity to love and worship God, serve our neighbor, and live a whole and consistent life.

Herein lies the answer to wholeness. Changing our mind, paradigm, attitude, etc. by conceiving of our work as a form of worship can free people of faith to conceive of their labor activity, whatever field it may be in, as a worshipful activity. However, the key to this is not just changing the mind, it is living within the fullness of the Creator.

The full presence of God may be the key to a holy life, but it is equally part and parcel of a whole life. Among other points that can be made, we here wish to remark that being whole does not divorce our identities in an inappropriate way. It does not separate our faith life from other important aspects of our life. It recognizes that everything we think, say, and do can be an act of worship. Being whole is not the absence of sin, pain, or vice; it is the full presence of God. Moreover, this presence crowds-out space for other allegiances, and reveals and reflects a life that displays a unified, constant, and consistent act of worship.

## Conclusion

In light of this, we recognize that it is inappropriate to divorce our faith identity (worship) from other realms of life (work, family, hobbies, etc.). Indeed, we recognize that our faith identity, our ministry, and our worship, both precede and supersede other identities, realms of life, and activity, and ultimately redefines them altogether. Under this paradigm, what we do is a function of who we are.

In the work-worship divide paradigm, it is just the opposite: who we are is more a function of what we do. This latter paradigm, as we have pointed out, risks taking the world as it is, at face value. It flirts with participating in the forces, structures, and cultural conventions that tell us what to do, how to believe, who we are, and why we exist. Under this paradigm, humans are passive agents who receive inputs that ultimately serve to define us. Yet, this passive posture only serves to distort the reality we hope to envisage. For the Christian, this is a false narrative.

Alternatively, we have argued for a conception that invites the fullness of God and the wholeness consistent with that fullness. This paradigm understands all activity as an act of worship, including our work. Moreover, we have suggested that work and worship should not be divided, nor should it be inappropriately married. Rather, we begin with our faith identity, and then see, understand, and act upon the world based upon that identity.

Christians are equipped to view, process, and act upon a world in a faithful way. In addition to "taking every thought captive and making it obedient to Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5), faithful activity is "Salt and Light" so as to "honor and glorify the Lord" (Matthew 5:16). Our identity as a Christian, cultivated and refined through the faith community, is our lens by which to perceive and engage the world around us, and this includes the workplace.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> David Kinnaman and Aly Hawkins, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church-- and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011) p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 144.

<sup>3</sup> "Three Trends on Faith, Work and Calling." *Barna Group: Knowledge to Navigate a Changing World*. Barna Group, 2014. Accessed May 2014: <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/culture/649-three-major-faith-and-culture-trends-for-2014#.U3DKwNzD-po>.

<sup>4</sup> Lee C. Camp, *Mere Discipleship: Radical Christianity in a Rebellious World* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2003) p. 181.

<sup>5</sup> A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy: The Attributes of God, Their Meaning in the Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Dumaine, Brian. "Why Do We Work? Sure, It's for the Money. But More and More People, Realizing That's Not All There Is to Life, Are Embarking on a New Search for Meaning in Corporate America." *CNNMoney*. Cable News Network, 26 Dec. 1994. Web. Jan. 2013.

<sup>7</sup> "2 Timothy 1 Wesley's Notes on the Bible." Biblecommentor.com, Accessed 2013, [http://wes.biblecommentor.com/2\\_timothy/1.htm](http://wes.biblecommentor.com/2_timothy/1.htm).

<sup>8</sup> Donald Hay, *Economics Today: A Christian Critique* (Leicester: Apollos Books, 1989).

<sup>9</sup> Witherington, Ben. *The Gospel of Mark: A Sociohistorical Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001, p. 352.

<sup>10</sup> Wesley, Notes, 10:37.