

A theological reflection on work and basic income

As we urge Anglicans to join the call for a guaranteed basic income in Canada, we are mindful that some might claim the Bible does not support such a measure, but rather obliges people to work. The Poverty Reduction Subcommittee is grateful to our fellow member, Mr. John Spragge, for this theological reflection.

The Bible says many things about work, about its place in our lives, and about our obligation to perform it. In the beginning, God gave the people a garden to tend, working in harmony with the creation. When the humans eat of the tree of knowledge, the creation is turned against them and the conditions of work become a curse:

And to the man he said,
‘Because you have listened to the voice of your wife,
and have eaten of the tree
about which I commanded you,
“You shall not eat of it”,
cursed is the ground because of you;
in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.
By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread
until you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
you are dust,
and to dust you shall return. (Genesis 3.17-19)

In Deuteronomy 6.10-12, God includes freedom, the opportunity for fulfilling work and sustenance, among the blessings He gives to His people:

When the Lord your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant—and when you have eaten your fill, take care that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

Here the biblical text contrasts slavery, work without reward, with the promised land, which offers sustenance without slavery. Yet in these contradictions, some common themes emerge, from which we can create an outline of the biblical attitude to work, which is relevant to the question of a universal basic income.

First, work has a purpose, a connection to the needs of the worker. As Psalm 128.2 says, “You shall eat the fruit of the labour of your hands; you shall be happy, and it shall go well with you.” The purpose of work is to sustain the worker and their family. Allied with this is the notion of work as something

worth doing well; as Ecclesiastes 9.10 says, “Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might.” The message is clear: work well to a good end. This good end is critical, because it illustrates clearly the biblical rejection of work as an end worth pursuing for its own sake. In the vast majority of places I have seen the Bible deal with work, it speaks of the purpose of the work, whether a smallholder feeding a family or the work of the apostles feeding the poor.

In the image of people sitting under their own vines and fig trees (Micah 4.4) we see again the notion of work, of cultivation, sufficient to produce enough for each person from the gifts of sun, rain, and earth God gives us. The biblical vision has little room for those who would harness thousands or million of workers to the project of a commercial or political empire. The Torah explicitly forbids those who control resources to deny others access to them as a means of control, as in Leviticus 23.22:

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the Lord your God.

Even the context of 2 Thessalonians 3.10, often cited by the advocates of work, makes it clear that the writer objects first to the notion of imposing your needs on the community by not contributing:

For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone’s bread without paying for it; but with toil and labour we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. (2 Thess. 3.7-10)

Again, the writer situates the imperative to work in the need to “*not burden any of you*”.

It appears to me the biblical texts offer little support to those who speak of the rituals of the 19th century workplace as a requirement for a fully lived human life. The view of work the biblical texts assume is work producing a sufficiency: of the needs of the family, of the needs of the poor, of the needs of the spirit. It is not a ritual of homage to the schedules imposed by nineteenth century industrial machinery, still less a process of generating a vast pile of excess, an overflow from the largest McMansions into public storage lockers and on from there into landfills. That process exacts a terrible cost in lives, dreams, and most of all to the Earth God gave us to share. The biblical view of work does not justify it.

In a society where production outstrips any sane notion of need, to the extent our manufacturers routinely design their products to break down so as to compel us to replace them; in a world of unneeded products, surplus services, and the resulting insecurity of work, we need a universal basic income. If those who value this insecurity and suffering of so many, on a mountain of riches mainly hoarded by the few, wish to justify their opposition to a basic income, they will need to find their own justification. I can find nothing in the Bible to justify that position.