

The Value of Different Types of Work

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Acts

The first intra-group dispute in the early Christian community occurs between the Greek-speaking Jews who have returned to Jerusalem from one of the many Diaspora communities in the Roman Empire, and the Hebrews from the historic land of Israel. It takes very little social imagination to see what is happening in this situation. In a community that sees itself as the fulfillment of Israel's covenant with God, members who are more prototypically Israelite are receiving more of the group's resources than the others. This sort of situation happens regularly in our world.

Those who are most similar to the leaders of a movement on the basis of background, culture, status, and so on, often benefit from their identity in ways unavailable to those who are in some way different.

When a dispute arises over food resources, the twelve call together the whole community of the disciples and say, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables." (Acts 6:2)

It is hard not to read some condescension in the voices of the apostles in many English translations. In the minds of some, working with the word of God is "ministry", while the work of "waiting" at tables is somehow

menial. One line of interpretation has followed this sense, suggesting that waiting on tables was “trivia” or one of the “lower tasks” in the community. This line of interpretation sees Stephen’s subsequent preaching as the “real” purpose behind the Spirit’s influence in Acts 6:3. There would be no need for the Holy Spirit to get involved in the menial task of managing the allocation of resources.

But this line of argument depends on dubious translations. The Greek verb translated as “wait” in waiting tables is diakoneō, which carries the sense of service or ministry. The Greek word for the work of the word is diakonia. It is exactly the same (in verb form) as the work of distributing resources. They both mean “serving.” Whether working with the word or with food on tables, both groups “serve” equally.

The Greek text gives the important sense that the work of serving those in need is on a par with the apostolic work of prayer and preaching. The apostles serve the word, and the deacons (as they have come to be called) serve those in need. Their service is qualitatively the same, although the specific tasks and skills are different. Both are essential in the formation of God’s people and for the witness of God’s people in the world.

Ironically, one of the table-servers, Stephen, turns out to be even more gifted as a preacher than most of the apostles. Yet despite his preaching

gift, he is set aside for the service of resource distribution. At that moment, at least, it was more important to God's purposes for him to serve as a table-server than as a word-server.

The workers best suited to heal the ethnic divide in the Acts 6 community are qualified because they are "known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom." Like those qualified for prayer and preaching, the table-servers' ability is the result of spiritual power. Nothing less than the power of the Spirit makes possible meaningful, community-building, peace-making work among Christians. This passage helps us to see that all work that builds the community or, more broadly, that promotes justice, goodness, and beauty, is—in a deep sense—service (or ministry) to the world.

In contrast to the way Stephen uses all of his gifts in selfless service, other members of the community show what happens when sin poisons people's stewardship of resources and power.

Ananias and Sapphira, a married couple, sell a piece of property and publicly give the proceeds to the community. However, they secretly hold back a portion of the money for themselves. Peter detects the deception and confronts the two separately. Merely hearing Peter's accusation causes each of them to fall dead on the spot. Why does their infraction bring

instant death, when Peter acknowledges that they were under no obligation to donate the money?

Fundamentally, Ananias and Sapphira's transgression is that they are counterfeit community members. They are not so much misers as imposters.

Their deceit demonstrates that they are still functioning as members of the Roman patronage system, while they pretend to have become members of the Christian love-of-neighbor system. They attempt to look like Barnabas in his other-centered approach to stewarding resources. But their motivation is actually to gain honor for themselves on the cheap. In so doing, they actually function as part of the Roman patronage economy. They look generous, but they are giving for the sake of status, not love. Moreover, their lie about their stewardship of resources is interpreted by Peter as a lie to the Holy Spirit and to God. How striking that a lie to the community is equated with a lie to the Spirit of God! We have seen already that one of the primary roles of the Holy Spirit is to form God's people into a community that uses resources in accordance with a deep concern for others. It is not surprising, then, that Ananias and Sapphira's faked act of generosity is depicted as falsifying the work of the Spirit. Their false generosity and their attempt to deceive the Holy Spirit are a threat to the identity of the Christian community. This is a sober reminder of the serious

stakes connected to the Christian community and to our own participation within it. Belonging to the Christian community means genuinely acting in all ways—including work—to love our neighbors as ourselves, not to increase our social status, wealth and power.