

Article

Belonging to God: Karl Barth and the Value of Daily Work

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Abstract

This essay explores Karl Barth's understanding of daily work in *Church Dogmatics* in light of his understanding of Christian vocation. Because Barth is responding to post-Reformation developments in the understanding of work, this essay begins with a typological survey of Christian understandings of vocation and how the language of vocation gets reduced to work in the modern period. I next examine how Barth's theology recovers important themes of earlier views of vocation, while it also offers critiques of capitalist and state socialist views of work and workers. The essay concludes with a brief contrast between Barth's own work habits and his celebration of Mozart's work, a contrast that offers a window through which one might view "good work" in our day.

Keywords: work; vocation; Karl Barth; Christ; election

1. Introduction

Contemporary Westerners, particularly in the United States, go about their daily labors amid conflicting understandings of work's value. On the one hand, work is understood as a burden. One goal of the "good life" is the cessation of work. Such attitudes are reflected in daydreams of retirement saturated with leisure and few work responsibilities. Futurists have imagined a day when people will no longer need to work, or at least not work as much, for more than a century. The 1939 World's Fair in New York, for example, showcased a "World of Tomorrow," where electric gadgetry, robotics, and other labor-saving devices would herald a day when people would need to work much less. Such predictions have resurfaced in every generation: the dawn of the personal computer, e-mail and voicemail, the trend toward working from home, and the recent development of AI have all promised less work. But thus far, that promise has proved elusive.

Capitalism tends to value work—and workers—for what they produce. To be a worker is to be a productive member of society; to live long without gainful employment represents diminished participation in that society. On the surface, this attitude would appear to appreciate "hard work," valuing and rewarding workers based on their efforts and contributions. But the promises of this estimation of work have also proved elusive. Many of those who work the hardest, often in multiple jobs in the gig economy, earn relatively little. The fact that many need to juggle multiple jobs in the US is evidence that many kinds of work are not valued much. Those dubbed "essential workers" amid the COVID-19 pandemic often earned less than a living wage. Valuing work for production alone seems to offer little hope.

State socialism purports to value work—and workers—for their contribution to the collective. The propaganda of socialist revolutions highlights the prominence of workers, at least in rhetoric and symbolism. But the history of this celebration of workers also yields



Academic Editor: Glenn Morrison

Received: 12 March 2026

Revised: 3 April 2026

Accepted: 7 April 2026

Published: 8 April 2026

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mixed results. Emphasis on the collective can minimize individual creativity, and the status of common workers in state socialist economies is hardly better than their counterparts in most capitalist contexts. Again, the promise of work in this context has mostly failed.

Amid these conflicting attitudes toward work, it is worth considering the contributions of the Reformed theologian Karl Barth, who offers a nuanced understanding of ordinary, daily work that contrasts with currents of his time and currents of post-Reformation theology. Barth witnessed the staggering growth of consumer societies, the increasing specialization of the labor force, and the struggle between capitalist and socialist understandings of the value and nature of work. His understanding of Christian vocation, moreover, enriches his understanding of work and questions the spirit of his time, while it also speaks to ours. By focusing first on vocation, God's calling and claim upon our lives, Barth's understanding of everyday work neither overestimates nor denigrates ordinary labor. Barth resists the temptation to reduce persons to the sum of their labors, instead elevating all as persons called by God. Glimpsed within this comprehensive sense of call, our daily work neither enslaves nor liberates; rather, it affirms our creaturehood as persons who belong to God. The value of persons and their work, in this perspective, is not related to individual or collective productivity, but rather God's electing grace in Jesus Christ, who invites us to participate in reconciling work in the world.

2. A Historical Sketch of Vocation and Work

Barth's understanding of work and vocation both recovers and critiques earlier articulations of these themes within Christian traditions. Because they do so, it is important to outline some prominent themes in the Bible and the history of theology. When he turns to biblical themes, Barth notes: "The word 'vocation' is not known to the New Testament in its present meaning, i.e., in the narrower technical sense in which it denotes the definite area of man's work. In the New Testament, *klesis* always means quite unambiguously the divine calling, i.e., the act of the call of God issued in Jesus Christ by which a man is transplanted into his new state as a Christian." (Barth 2009b, p. 600). Calling, in this biblical sense, involves listening to, following, and obeying God, a divine summons focused not simply on daily work, but on the transformation of life as claimed by God.

God's call, in this light, can disrupt ordinary work, as evident in Jesus' calling of the first disciples. In Mark, Jesus calls to the fishermen Simon and Andrew, who are with their father in a boat: "Follow me and I will make you fish for people."¹ This summons leads them to "immediately" leave their nets and their father to follow Jesus. Though their summons is to a new kind of work (we subsequently read little of their fishing labors), it is also to a new relationship with the One who calls, a change that evokes a sudden and dramatic shift in life, shaped by the community gathered by Jesus, the nascent church.

As the church expanded to the Gentile world, this calling to the new community tended to make Christians outsiders in Roman society. God's calling on the Christian often summoned Christians to question and even shun prevailing cultural norms. The desert hermits, for example, understood their calling to a new relationship with Christ to include the renunciation of the world and pagan culture. A life of asceticism away from urban centers of power, culture, and commerce offered visible evidence of the hermit's call by a different Lord. Though less extreme in his renunciation of the world than the desert fathers, the writings of Ignatius of Antioch contrast Christian vocation and the summons of a pagan world rather sharply: responding to the call of God caused one to die to the world and even anticipate physical death.²

Christianity, however, did not remain an outsider faith for long. By the fourth century, when Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, promoting tolerance of the new faith, the status of Christians within the empire had changed. In a culture more hospitable to its

beliefs, the church began to depict the contrast between “church” and “world” less starkly. Vocation remained the primary summons of life, offered in the new life given by Christ. In a hospitable world, moreover, Christians could live into their *primary* vocation (relation with Christ) amid work necessary for the flourishing of culture. The concept of secondary vocation—work undertaken for livelihood—began to emerge. Yet nearly as soon as this distinction appeared, the church began to value some work more than others.

The primary example of this ranking of vocations was the notion that contemplative life offered in monasteries constitutes a higher calling than the active life of most believers. By the High Middle Ages, this distinction had entrenched itself firmly. For many monastics, the story of Mary and Martha³ became an allegory for the differences between the work of monastics and the work of the laity. According to the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Mary, who sits attentively at Jesus’ feet and has “no time for the busy activity of her sister. . . stands for all contemplatives, who should conform their behavior to hers.” (Walsh 1981, pp. 156–58).

Martha, meanwhile, busied with the work of the house so that the household can show hospitality to the guest, is likewise engaged in holy work: hers are the labors that make contemplation possible. Nonetheless, many contemplatives doubtless took heart in Jesus’ response that “Mary has chosen the better part.”⁴ Though most monastic movements never separated contemplation from labors of service, their mystical edges in the Middle Ages assumed that contemplation was a good in itself, regardless of its direct connection to serving one’s fellow creatures. Contemplation became the supreme service to God as the pilgrim journeyed ever deeper into the divine life. The work of the monastics was more valuable than the work of the layperson, even if the work of the laity made monastic contemplation possible.

This distinction made the Reformers’ stomachs turn. For Martin Luther, this *de facto* ranking of vocations contradicted the universal call of God, a call that encompasses all labors that respond to the Creator. God issues a general calling to each person in Christ to follow God and a particular calling that situates the general call. One follows God in Christ *as* baker, butcher, or bishop, with none being more distinguished or necessary than the other. Luther’s elevation of all work to the status of vocation involved criticism of monastic orders: “a religious is not allowed to leave the monastery, visit the sick, and devote himself to other Christian service. . . . Because manual labor is prohibited, they do no work. They are supported by the rest of the world, devouring everyone else’s substance, although they are perfectly hale and hearty. This is to the great detriment of the genuinely poor.” (Luther 1966, p. 334).

Monasticism, Luther claimed, absolved monks from working while they ignored the poor. This lack of work behind cloister walls meant that monastics were dependent on *others’* work, and hence drained resources from the needy. When fewer people work, there is less bounty to go around. Luther notes with some humor: “The religious orders are not supported by their labor. They are like a lazy rogue who does not exert himself bodily but lets others work for him, filling his belly through the sweat and blood of others. (Luther 1973, p. 20).

When contemplation removes itself from the active life, it disparages ordinary work. As an antidote, Luther uplifted mundane, seemingly unpleasant labors as marks of Christian service and response to God. One of his most colorful examples is the work of diaper changing: “When a father goes ahead and washes diapers or performs some other mean task for a child. . . God, with all his angels and creatures, is smiling—not because that father is washing diapers, but because he is doing so in Christian faith.” (Luther 1962, p. 40).

Though acts of childcare have value for Luther in themselves, they also become a response to God’s call on life when carried out in faith. In this regard, *all* labor for others,

no matter how small or insignificant, is a vocation. Because all forms of work are vocations (except for work destructive to human society, such as crime), all work is honorable in God's sight. God calls each one of us to labor, and we respond in labors uniquely our own. The value of work stems from a divine call that binds us in mutual service. With Luther, the language of vocation begins to shift from the relationship offered in Christ to one's daily work.

By the modern period, the correlation between vocation and paid labor is firmly set. Sociologist Max Weber documents the correspondence between secular vocation and divine calling that emerges particularly in Puritanism. Signs of election, which Calvin claimed to be invisible, become visible in Protestant America, as persons live into callings that emphasize a strong work ethic. One point of vocation, in the modern period, is to work hard and thus demonstrate one's election: "*Tireless labor in a calling* was urged as the best possible means of *attaining* this self-assurance." (Weber 2002, pp. 77–78). The language of vocation that Luther employed to value all forms of human labor winds up, in Puritan America, justifying one's status in society. The distinction between vocation and work is thus often blurred in the modern period. Vocation, in short, becomes a job.

3. Barth's Recovery of the Language of Vocation

Barth is conscious of this blurring of vocation and work in the post-Reformation period; his *Dogmatics* re-states their distinction from each other, while also recognizing their interrelation. Standing in the wake of Protestantism that expands the language of vocation to include all work, and post-Reformation developments that reduce vocation to work, Karl Barth applauds and laments his Reformation heritage: "Protestantism successfully expelled monasticism by recalling the fact that *klesis* [calling] is the presupposition of all Christian existence. But it lost sight of the divine grandeur and purity of this *klesis*, which were always in some sense retained even by monasticism." (Barth 2009b, p. 602). His reclamation of vocation focuses squarely on the primary vocation of humanity in response to God and situates our earthly work in light of that call.

Barth's most extensive discussion of vocation occurs in *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, where he considers the Word of Christ as "the creative call by which He awakens" humanity, receives humanity "into a particular fellowship with Himself," and "thrusts" humanity as "witness into the service of [Christ's] prophetic work." (Barth 2009c, p. 481). This consideration of vocation, in other words, begins by recalling God's initiative in Christ. We understand vocation first not by looking to the question "what am I to do?" but by remembering what God has done and is doing for creation in Christ. Election forms the basis of vocation: "Primarily in God Himself man stands already in the light of life—each man and all men." (Barth 2009c, p. 484). In vocation, we live out our election, which has already been accomplished in Jesus Christ. God calls persons, moreover, to community and not primarily as individuals. A narrowly personal sense of God's call is foreign to Barth, because the calling is to fellowship. The event of calling is "the event in which man is set and instituted in actual fellowship with Jesus Christ. . . and therefore in the service of God and his fellow-men." (Barth 2009c, p. 482). God's call summons us to others at the same time.

Barth describes the *goal* of vocation as "becoming a Christian,"⁵ by which he means not a religious identity over and against persons of other religions. The person who is called by God and becomes a Christian does not possess something that persons of other religious traditions do not. God does not choose members of the Christian church and reject those outside of that fellowship. Rather, becoming a Christian refers to the active acknowledgement that the person belongs to Christ. Christian-ness is not a marker of the person's identity or possession so much as it is a sign of how God is electing humanity in

Christ. Barth's reference to John 15:16 makes this connection clear: "'Ye have not chosen me'—whether by accepting a tradition or exercising your own judgment—but I have chosen you.'" (Barth 2009c, p. 528).

God's initiative in choosing, moreover, extends to all. Jesus Christ is the eternally elected One whom God chooses, and it is through Christ that we as a people are chosen. This election, as the basis of vocation, is focused not on us and what we do, but on Christ's saving activity. This does not render human vocation, however, superfluous. Even if all are elected in Christ and move toward the fellowship offered in him, Barth claims that "it is one thing to be elected for it and another to be set in it." (Barth 2009c, p. 535). Vocation is this "becoming set" in election, the responsive life of the creature summoned by God's call. As Cynthia Rigby notes, Barth's understanding of vocation "frees Christians to embrace their vocation as those who continually lean in to what God has promised in ways that contribute to the actualization of reconciliation here on earth." (Rigby 2019, p. 432). God's call, in this sense, awakens us to our part in the healing of the world.

Barth points to the beauty and importance of our secondary vocation, the specific ways in which human persons live out their call of reconciliation in the world, but claims that they are not to be mistaken for the primary beauty that is Christ. Science, art, politics, and morality are all proper spheres of human labor, but are "not spiritual processes;" they are "lights which illumine the cosmos as such in reflection of the one light, [but] cannot be described immediately and directly as self-attestations of Jesus Christ." (Barth 2009c, p. 501). Each secondary vocation, properly understood, never exists on its own, but always in relation to the primary calling of life, which is already assured in relationship to Christ.

4. The Relative Value of Ordinary Work

What does this understanding of vocation mean for ordinary work, the labor necessary for survival and livelihood, and that occupies most of our waking hours? On the one hand, Barth distinguishes vocation from work. Most strictly conceived, our daily work does not constitute our vocation. But we carry out our vocation as Christians as teachers, plumbers, or parents. These daily labors are neither distant from our primary vocation nor synonymous with it; they derive meaning in relation to God's call upon us. As Amy Erickson notes, "Barth stresses the unique, concrete condition in which the individual creature encounters their vocation in the givenness of the creator," while also recognizing that this concrete life condition (which includes one's daily work) is not equivalent to their vocation. (Erickson 2023, p. 95). Barth thus steers his understanding of daily work between two dangers: an overvaluation of human labor that sees work as synonymous with human identity (thus encouraging modern addictions such as "workaholism") and the denigration of human labor that sees work as a problem to be overcome. Work, for Barth, has value and meaning, but never by itself.

In this understanding, work is neither a curse nor a blessing. To work is simply to acknowledge our place in creation. Not surprisingly, therefore, Barth's primary discussion of the value of work occurs in his Doctrine of Creation. God places Adam in the garden, commands him to till and keep it,⁶ and by doing so does not place work at the center of life, but as one dimension of it. Work occurs in response to God's commandment, as a dimension of the person's freedom for life. "God the Creator calls man to Himself and turns him to his fellow-man. He orders him to honour his own life and that of every other man as a loan. . ." (Barth 2009b, p. 324). God chooses human beings for a relationship with God and other humans, as a covenant-partner, and in choosing humanity, God wills us to exist as creatures: "The meaning of the work required of him is that he should exist as a man in order to be a Christian. Work simply means man's active affirmation of his existence as a human creature." (Barth 2009b, p. 518). Work has value because it represents our response

to God's election of us as creatures. In work, we say "yes" to God and ourselves as people who belong to God and our fellow creatures. It is not the center "of human activity," but "constitutes its circumference." (Barth 2009b, p. 517).

What, then, does good work look like? For Barth, good work attends carefully to process and aim, "work which to the best of its ability does justice to each specific task and end." (Barth 2009b, p. 528). Diligence and care, rather than acclaim and remuneration, constitute the chief markers of good work. Yet for any work to have worth, however, it must serve the bonds of community and human existence. (Barth 2009b, p. 530). One could, presumably, perform criminal work diligently and carefully, but such work would fail to be good. Where life flourishes, we glimpse good work in action.

Work's value, moreover, is not for itself; good work is never for work's sake. Its value is only in relation to the "service to which man is truly and essentially called," which means that our daily labors are properly described as "secondary work." (Barth 2009b, p. 522). In his description of work, Barth turns attention to our primary calling, belonging to God in Christ, living out that claim upon us in gratitude and service with others. Our vocation is to become a Christian, but we are Christians as we teach, preach, bake, and care for children. One does not become a Christian through baking, but one's baking occurs in the context of being called by God to a relationship and, as such, is good. When work serves our fellow human beings and says yes to our creaturehood, it has dignity; without faith and obedience, however, work "will always stand under the shadow of the most profound uncertainty." (Barth 2009b, p. 523).

Because our daily labors are secondary, we cannot confuse them with God's work. Although work represents one response to God's command, the work that we perform will not endure throughout time. Qoheleth, in this sense, is right: our labors will not abide and, in comparison to the work that sustains the world, are utter vanity. Barth is rather blunt in making this point, questioning whether our labors participate in the work of God. (Barth 2009b, p. 522).

For Barth, our ordinary labors always display a relative value; they grow from our awakening to our primary calling. On its own, by itself, work neither saves nor creates something out of nothing. Here Barth simply extends Reformation teaching to encompass daily labor: salvation is not by works, but by God's grace.

5. Rhythms of Good Work

If work has relative value in creation, that value, for Barth, relates to the rhythms of cooperation and rest that serve to make work more humane. Both marks of good work reveal that work performed for its own sake, without community, is dead.

Good work emphasizes interdependence and cooperation: there is no such thing as work that belongs to one person alone. The Lord's Prayer offers one touchstone in this vision of labor, as it contains the phrase, "give us this day our daily bread." The plural structure of this petition is striking: even when we pray alone, we pray not for *my* daily bread, but *ours*. "Without his fellows, man is not man at all but only a shade of a man. If he seeks to earn his bread and therefore to work in abstract isolation, his existence is that of this shade. ...the first person plural is the natural and rational basis of all work. . . We can work aright only when we work hand in hand." (Barth 2009b, p. 537). The most basic tasks—whether tilling soil, baking bread, or pouring wine—are bound up with others' work. Tilling connects us to irrigation and production of farm implements; baking binds us to threshing and transportation of food; decanting connects us to grape harvesting and waiting (a pause in work) for wine to age. When we labor rightly, we never labor alone and regard our work as also the work of others. Good work connects us to our neighbors in cooperative labor.

Barth's emphasis on cooperative labor caused him to criticize Soviet-style socialism and liberal capitalism. In capitalism, owners of means of production accumulate capital based on others' labor, ensuring that the fruits of labor are hoarded rather than shared. For Barth, capitalism causes us to regard our fellow laborers not as cooperative partners, but as means to accumulative ends. In capitalist systems, the prime economic beneficiaries—the wealthy—often rest at vast distances from the daily labors—and laborers—that stoke the engines of growth. Capitalism cultivates isolation in work, so that some “own” the labor of others, and many do not reap a sustainable yield from their labor. Yet the collectives of state socialism provide no antidote to this disparity between those who hoard the fruits of others' labor and those who wait for fruit to fall from the tree. Socialism can fail to understand labor as cooperative when the means of production and labor are “directed by a ruling and benefit deriving group.” (Barth 2009b, p. 544). Soviet-style economies simply replicate patterns of ownership found in capitalism and name them differently. Both capitalism and oligarchic socialism proclaim a lie that work belongs to oneself, the boss, or a benefit-deriving collective. Good work, by contrast, belongs to all.

Barth also addresses the significance of adequate rest in his vision of good work. When accompanied by rest, work can also be an expression of freedom, beauty, and creativity. Work not only benefits society, but it can also edify and nurture the gifts of the worker. We can grow as creatures in our work. Barth wrote these reflections on the meaning of work in the shadows of the most hideous abuse of work in modern history: Nazi Germany's extraction of labor from Jews in concentration camps for a war-hungry machine. The labor of these inmates, owned by the Third Reich, led to six million deaths of “dispensable” workers marched off to the incinerator under strains of Wagner's music. It is no coincidence that the builders of death camps at Dachau and Auschwitz emblazoned “*Arbeit macht frei*” (work makes us free) on the entrance gates. Under these words, millions of Jews were imprisoned and worked to death. Barth's theology is attuned to these distortions of work and acknowledges that work is more often toil than not. In the demonic cases, moreover, work becomes a curse of death. Chattel slavery in the U.S. and the Nazi death camps represent work without rest, the ultimate distortion of the labor God intends.

In response to the Nazi lie, Barth announces that work does not make us free; only God makes the creature free. Good work attends to the rhythms of God's time that are established in creation: six days God labors and hallows the seventh day in rest to acknowledge the goodness of creation. Our work responds to these patterns; we glimpse good work when we recognize that we are made not to work alone: “A total life of work is not only not commanded but actually forbidden.” (Barth 2009b, p. 550). Human persons are alone in creation in their tendency to ignore Sabbath: trees display fruitfulness and dormancy; animals rest, often for the larger part of their waking hours; fields lie fallow in order to bear fruit. Though Barth does not develop his understanding of rest and work from these observations of creation, they add resonance to his observations. Without rest, work devolves into willing or unwilling drudgery; without rest, work loses creativity; without rest, freedom slips away, and without freedom, the creature dies a slow death.

Good work sits on a delicate balance between labor and relaxation: inordinate amounts of the former lead to toil; excessive amounts of the latter lead to sloth. Barth is aware of this balance: “God demands that man should work. He also demands, however, that he should rest, that there should be in his life a place which is free for God and therefore for himself, in order that he may be protected against himself and the overwhelming power which his work, and the prospect of its reward, its aims and its objectivity, might gain over him.” (Barth 2009b, pp. 551–52). These words have particular resonance in twenty-first-century consumer economies, where hours on the job loom large, to sustain increasing consumer

appetites amid wages that have not kept pace with inflation.⁷ Work, for many of us, has become home, a home that offers more weariness than rest.

In rest, we are freed from inordinate attachment to our own labors, from what Barth calls “tense work.” This rhythm between rest and work, when seen in light of God’s work, can become an expression of play, of being in the “flow” with the current of work: “Outward and inward work will be done with more rather than less seriousness once a man realizes that what he desires and does and achieves thereby, when measured by the work of God which it may attest, cannot be anything but play, i.e., a childlike imitation and reflection of the fatherly action of God which as such is true and proper action.” (Barth 2009b, p. 553). Work, in the freedom given by rest, becomes enjoyable once again; we can play at work once we release work from our firm clutches, recognize its connection to others’ work, and its playfulness in light of the God who works on our behalf. Any kind of work can exhibit the levity that Barth suggests: gardening, changing diapers, or preparing a sermon. We work rightly when we recognize that our work does not belong to us alone but is given to others in thanks for God’s work. Then we, too, can rest from work and see creativity and beauty in our labors and others’. When we wake up by grace to the knowledge that our lives are not validated by work, but by resting in God, when our work occurs within that rest, we celebrate our creaturehood without working our fingers to the bone.

6. A Concluding Reflection: Barth’s Work Habits, Mozart, and the Meaning of Work

In his theological reflections on work and vocation, Barth does not offer any examples of model workers. To offer as much, no doubt, would turn our attention away from the attention properly given to God. Good work, for Barth, does not point to the worker, but to the common good, to cooperation, and to the service rendered to others in light of God’s calling of humanity in Christ. But Barth’s own work habits and his frequent references to Mozart’s work and music throughout the *Dogmatics* offer some clarifications and cautions about the value and meaning of work.⁸

Barth was one of the most diligent writers ever to pen theology. His work habits were regular, perhaps overly regimented. During the most productive period of his life, while he wrote *Church Dogmatics*, he generally avoided travel for interviews, insisting that potential interviewers visit him so that his magnum opus would not be interrupted. Barth, the theologian, tolerated little distraction from his work. On the one hand, these habits show discernment of vocation and work: Barth knew it was one of his tasks to write theology for the church, and cultivated habits that allowed his gift for writing theology to flourish. On the other hand, these same work habits impeded other aspects of his life, including his marriage and discomfort around small children. See (Werpehowski 2001, pp. 387–88).

Barth was both attached to his work, as evidenced by his regular routines that brooked little interruption, and aware of his work’s inadequacy, as he describes theology itself as a “broken thought.” Barth’s work habits, on the one hand, left little time for rest, yet Barth was one of the most celebrated pipe-smokers of the twentieth century. His work occurred interspersed with pipe smoking, a task that has no purpose other than sheer enjoyment and rest.

Barth’s work was also collaborative: The *Dogmatics* is inconceivable without the work of his assistant, Charlotte von Kirschenbaum. Yet most of von Kirschenbaum’s work remains unattributed. If Barth’s work was collaborative, that collaboration was often not acknowledged, as he assumed his assistant’s work as his own. Barth collaborated with von Kirschenbaum but also appropriated (we might even say *stole*) her work. Barth’s work thus

shows evidence of the patterns of good work that he outlines, and a testament of how his own work falls short of these measures.

Mozart's patterns of work also embody contradictions: He was endowed with remarkable gifts for musical composition and performance, a child prodigy molded into success by an eager father, an exuberant and often excessive celebrator, an enormous success in his own time who squandered the financial resources that were the result of his work, leaving his family vulnerable. When he died, Mozart was destitute, relegated to a pauper's grave. Even considering his acclaim, viewed in terms of modern markers of success (financial security, stability, and balance), Mozart could hardly be described as a good worker. Yet, if one point of work is to offer service to others, to employ one's gifts for the common good, then Mozart's work is remarkable, emerging all the while from a conflicted and complex person.

Listen to Barth: "Mozart saw [the] light no more than we do, but he heard the whole world of creation enveloped by this light. . . He neither needed nor desired to express or represent himself, his vitality, sorrow, piety, or any other programme." Mozart's work, in other words, is not particularly self-expressive as much as it gives voice to others and the longing of creation: "He did not produce merely his own music but that of creation, its twofold and yet harmonious praise of God." Mozart's work is valuable not because of his personal virtue, work habits, or stewardship of his resources gained through work, but because it responds in service and gratitude to the Giver of all gifts. In this response to the Giver, Mozart "heard the negative only in and with the positive," (Barth 2009a, p. 298), recognizing that the experience of persons and their work was not unadulterated happiness or goodness, but tragedy amid redemption. Such, in the end, is the ultimate character of our work, if we take Barth's theology seriously: that our work, no matter how heralded, is inadequate in light of God's work for the world.

Inadequate, yes, but we work nonetheless for others and for the world, recognizing the beauty and goodness of these labors. When we work rightly, we respond to God's calling, never mistaking our labors for God's labors for God's Reign. To understand work's relative value and goodness is to hold it lightly: we work because we are creatures, not because in work we make our mark on the world. We work not to gain freedom, but to respond to the God who gives, creates, and loves in freedom. Before that work, all human work falls short, but in light of that work, all human work can become an expression of service, of gratitude, even of play. In the end, our work does not constitute our identity; work does not make us who we are. Election, not productivity, is the marker of personhood because in Christ God chooses us as God's own. When election, not work, becomes the basis of our identity, we are freed from dehumanizing and degrading work, no longer valuing some workers more than others. Barth's theology of vocation reminds us that we are not what we do; rather, we are *whose* we are: creatures who belong to God.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

¹ Mk. 1:17. All biblical citations are from the NRSV.

² The letters of Ignatius are filled with longing for martyrdom. "The greatness of Christianity lies in its being hated by the world, not in its being convincing to it. . . Let me be fodder for wild beasts—that is how I can get to God. . . Then I shall be a real disciple of

Jesus Christ when the world sees my body no more.” “Letter to the Romans,” in William C. Placher, ed. *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation* (Ignatius of Antioch 2005, p. 34).

3 Luke 10:38–42.

4 Luke 10:42.

5 (Barth 2009c, p. 521). Cynthia Rigby notes that Barth avoids terms such as “non-Christian” in his writings. Language of “becoming a Christian” is not religious exclusivism because all persons “live with their vocations before them.” Rigby, “Justification, Sanctification, Vocation,” in (Rigby 2019, p. 430).

6 Gen. 2:15.

7 American workers continue to log more hours on the job than most of their European counterparts, in some cases ten hours more per week. World Population Review (World Population Review 2026). See also (International Labour Organization 2022). Though the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an increase in work from home, it did not translate into reduced working hours. The dawn of so-called “labor-saving” technologies such as voicemail, email, and the laptop computer has not resulted in fewer hours on the job for most of us. And the move to remote work, though welcomed by many, also runs the risk of blurring the lines between work and rest, with the expectation that workers will be on call wherever they are.

8 We might consider both Barth and Mozart to be “geniuses,” workers with extraordinary gifts whose labors were astonishingly productive. And if we do so, perhaps their examples of work are not that helpful to more ordinary mortals. Nonetheless, even if we consider them geniuses, we can learn from their patterns, just as recreational tennis players can learn by watching Jannik Sinner or novice poets can learn by reading Maya Angelou.

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