

Ephesians 4:28: A ‘Theology of Work’ in a nutshell and a stimulus for Entrepreneurship

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Abstract

It is argued that Ephesians 4:28 presents a Christian theology of work in a nutshell and that it might serve as a stimulus for Christian entrepreneurship today. The phrase “working with his hands” is a favourite expression of Paul (1 Cor 4:12; 1 Thess 4:11; Acts 20:34). It was likely a problematic phrase for the Greek audience. Jewish culture always had a high respect for manual work, which was very different from the Greek attitude towards work. The high value of manual labour has its theological source in Genesis where God himself is introduced as a working God, even working with His hands (Gen 2:7; cf. Isa 64:8). Even the new world (Isa 65) would include work. This positive attitude towards manual labour has some echoes in the New Testament, especially in the examples set by Jesus and Paul. According to Ephesians 4:28 Christians should not work for self-sustenance only but also to share with the needy. According to Calvin’s exposition of this verse work should contribute to the common good. In today’s societies, unemployment is a big issue. There are many people who are willing to work but have no access to the job market. There is a great need therefore for business people who can create new jobs. Ephesians 4:28 might motivate Christians to start their own businesses, not in order to become wealthy, but to supply jobs for the needy.

1. Introduction

“Let him that stole steal no more; but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth” (Ephesians 4:28, KJV¹). I argue that this little sentence presents a Christian ‘theology of work’ in a nutshell and that this verse might serve as a stimulus for Christians to become entrepreneurs these days.

The phrase “working with his hands” is a remarkable one. As Bruce rightly points out by interpreting Ephesians 4:28: “To ‘work with one’s own hands’ is a favourite expression of Paul (cf. 1 Cor 4:12; 1 Thess. 4:11); in recommending such activity to others, he set an example himself (cf. Ac 20:34)” (Bruce 1984: Position 5624). Of course, in those days ‘working with the hands’ was the usual way to earn money. Still, the fact that this expression appears four times in the Pauline corpus is only understandable in light of his Jewish heritage. An exhortation like this is in line with the Judean view on work but in clear contradiction to the Greek attitude towards work.

Although theological reflection about work is quite old, the concept of ‘theology of work’ itself is fairly new. It was invented around 1950 by French Catholic theologians (Cosden 2004:4-5; Volf 1991:71). But there is a lot of teaching on work in the Old Testament and New Testament writings. In section 2 we will summarize the Old Testament’s ‘theology of work’. Section 3 will unfold some echoes of this in the New Testament. In section 4 we will then have a closer look at Ephesians 4:28. In the concluding sections we will deal with modern application of this verse: Working for the sake of the community (sect. 5) and creating new jobs (sect. 6).

2. The nobility of work in the Old Testament

The topic of work is already present in the Old Testament narratives about creation, which reveal a different attitude towards work from other creation narratives of ancient times. According to Sumerian and Babylonian myths, human beings were created because the gods were fed up with working themselves, so created human beings to do the work for them (Meinhold 2002:20; Stendebach 2003:208). But Genesis 1 and 2 introduce a God who himself works. He worked six days and rested one (Gn 2:2-3). And Genesis 2:7, “[t]he Lord God formed a human being from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life”, describing God almost as a potter (Westermann 1974:276-278; Wenham 1983:29). While Genesis 1 describes the creation by God’s word, Genesis 2:7 implicitly refers to God’s *hands*. Though Genesis 2:7 does not explicitly mention God’s hands, this understanding became common in other Old Testament verses referring to the creation of human beings: “Your hands made me and formed me” (Ps 119:73), “Your hands shaped and fashioned me” (Job 10:8), and especially “Yet, Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, you the potter, and all of us are your handiwork” (Isa 64:8), a verse which has an obvious link to the narrative in Genesis 2:7.

If even the Creator-God worked with His hands, then working with our hands must be a noble task. This insight gives a certain perspective on Genesis 2:15 where God put humankind into the “Garden of Eden to till it and to look after it”. This story does not bear the negative flavour of gods delegating to humankind a task, which they no longer want to do themselves. Instead, God introduces himself as a working God and when human beings work they copy his model. Since work is rooted in God himself we may speak of “the nobility of work” (“Vom Adel der Arbeit” in Sauer 1947:105-106). This nobility is underlined by the teaching that humankind is made in the image of God (Gn 1:26). Human beings work as God’s representatives, not as his slaves. In contrast to the common ancient view, the Old Testament considered manual work neither as a curse nor as the lot of slaves but as a God-given task to human beings, which has its root in God himself (Eichrodt 1961:82). Even the curse after the Fall (Gn 3:23) picks up the wording of Genesis 2:15: that man should till the ground (Wolff 1981:129). The curse does not consist of labour as such, the curse consists of the conditions under which man has to work after the Fall, among thorns and thistles in the field.

The following chapters in the book of Genesis describe how humankind's work branched out: the tiller of the soil is joined by the breeder of sheep and goats (Abel in Gn 4:2), the first city-builder (Cain in Gn 4:17), the musicians (Gn 4:21), and the blacksmiths (Gn 4:22). Later on vineyards are planted (Noah in Gn 9:20), and new building materials like bricks and bitumen make huge buildings possible (Tower of Babel in Gn 11:3). According to the Old Testament narratives manual work had a positive image right from the beginning. Thus godly wisdom is not reserved for professionals in the upper society like judges or political advisors (2Sm 17:14), it is also available for the simple ploughman (Is 28:24-26).

The commandment "Do not steal" (Ex 20:15; Lv 19:11; Dt 5:19) indirectly contributes to the esteem of work. One should not acquire property through theft but through work. This commandment saves the fruits of one's own work.

But due to the "thorns and thistles" there are also some negative voices like Ecclesiastes 2:11: "I considered my handiwork, all my labour and toil: it was futility, all of it, and a chasing of the wind of no profit under the sun." Notwithstanding, even the Book of Ecclesiastes with its more pessimistic, resigned tone does not teach about stopping work. It just warns against too much effort and it encourages us to enjoy the fruits of our work (Ec 3:22; 9:7-9).

The use of "handiwork" in Ecclesiastes 2:11 also indicate that this expression was used in a more figurative meaning. When King Solomon talked about his handiwork, probably the temple and the palace, he did not mean that he erected these building with his own hands. Thus "handiwork" is not restricted to manual labour in a narrow sense.

Despite some resigned statements, the overall attitude in the Old Testament towards work is positive. Work was already there in the Garden of Eden and will still be there in the new world described in Isaiah 65:17ff:

"My people will build houses and live in them, plant vineyards and eat their fruit; they will not build for others to live in or plant for others to eat. ... They will not toil to no purpose or raise children for misfortune." (Is 65:21-23a)

This vision shows that the believers of the Old Testament were not longing for a world without work. The problem was not work as such but work in vain: you build a house and someone else will steal it from you, so that you are not able to enjoy the fruits of your work. There is a clear linkage between the Garden of Eden and the new world. People in Old Testament times experienced in daily life that work could be futile. But they knew about a former place without futile work and thus they were longing for a future world with no futile work.

The Graeco-Roman view on work was very different to the Jewish one. “In general Judaism valued manual work, whereas the Greeks regarded it with disdain” (Walton 2000:169). For Jewish rabbis it was normal to learn a trade, whereas, in general, Greek philosophers would not work with their hands (although there were exceptions in both cultures). Those who had to work with their hands for their daily needs did not have a high standing in society (see Kegler & Eisen 2009:17 and Stenschke 2012:69).

3. Some echoes in the New Testament

The models found in the New Testament are fully in line with the Old Testament teaching on the nobility of work. Even the Son of God was born into a family where the father was a carpenter. Although the people held his family background against him by asking “Is he not a carpenter’s son?” (Mt 13:55) the gospels make very clear that there is nothing negative about Christ being a carpenter himself (Mk 6:3). Two persons of the Holy Trinity set an example of working with their hands: God the Father by creating humankind (Gn 2:7) and Jesus as a carpenter while living with his family (Mk 6:3). Thus the concepts of *imago Dei* (God’s image) and *imago Christi* (Christ’s image) both include the idea of working with our hands. (But it is also true that Jesus left his carpenter’s tools when he started public ministry, and he called his disciples away from their occupations, [Volf 1991:93]).

The great apostle Paul followed the same path. Like most rabbis of his time he had learnt a trade, in his case tent making, and he still practised tent making on his missionary journeys. In Corinth he worked together with Aquila and Priscilla (Ac18:3), probably the background for his statement in 1 Corinthians 4:12a: “We wear ourselves out earning a living with our hands”. When speaking to the elders of Ephesus, Paul was proud of working with his hands: “You all know that these hands of mine earned enough for the needs of myself and my companions” (Ac 20:34). But for the audience of his speech in Milete this might have been a tough teaching, maybe even a bit of a disappointment. The elders of Ephesus knew firsthand that religious leadership often went together with financial gain (Act19:23-40). By working with his own hands Paul set a leadership example contrasting the religious leadership of their culture. Christian leadership does not mean financial gain, sometimes it even means a financial loss because of the need to support other co-workers (“for the needs of myself and *my companions*” emphasis added).

This topic is also taken up in Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians²: “You remember, my friends, our toil and drudgery: night and day we worked for our living, rather than be a burden to any of you while we proclaimed to you the good news of God” (1 Th 2: 9). Since Paul and his co-workers worked for themselves he had the credibility and the authority to demand: “Let it be your ambition to live quietly and attend to your own business; and to work with your hands, as we told you” (1 Th 4:11). As in Ephesians 4:28 the hands are explicitly mentioned:

We note first the mention of hands in 1 Thessalonians 4.11f and Acts 20. 34. In both cases it is work with the hands that is mentioned: in the letter Paul is urging the duty of work with the hands on Christians; in the speech Paul reminds the elders of his own work with his hands.” (Walton 2000:169)

Having already taught the Thessalonians about work at least twice the wording of Paul’s plea in his second letter to them became a bit sharper: “Already during our stay with you we laid down this rule: anyone who will not work shall not eat” (2 Th 3:10). Paul mentioned this because he had heard that some members of the church would not work (v11). In this passage Paul clearly stated an important motive for his working day and night: “to set an example for you to follow” (v9).

4. A closer look at Ephesians 4:28

Having described the worldview background, we will now have a closer look at Ephesians 4:28. This verse contrasts property acquisition through theft against acquisition through work. Stealing is a violation of God’s commands (Ex 20:15 et. al.). The verse occurs during a teaching about the old human nature and the new human nature, which starts at Ephesians 4:17. After a general explanation of the differences between the old and the new human nature and the appeal to “put on the new nature created in God’s likeness” (v24), some very concrete instructions follow: do not lie any more (v25), do not be led into sin while you are angry (v26), give no foothold to the devil (v27). Then verse 28 gives the order: “Let him that stole”, an example of the old human nature, “steal no more”, that is to lay aside the old human nature (see v22). In this case putting on the new human nature means to “labour, working with his hands” (v28b).

The verse could have stopped there. But it continues by pointing out a particular aim: “that he may have to give him that needeth” (v28c). Thus Ephesians 4:28 goes beyond 1 Thessalonians 2:9 and 2 Thessalonians 3:10, which indicate self-sustenance as an aim of work. According to Ephesians 4:28 it is not sufficient to stop doing harm to others, i.e. stealing. To simply cease doing a vice involves a move from a negative state to a neutral state, from -1 to 0 on a scale. But Ephesians 4:28 demands doing good to others, i.e. to exercise a positive virtue. Vices belong to the old nature. The new nature is not just the absence of a vice, but also the presence of a virtue. This means a move from -1 to +1 on a scale. Instead of regarding “yours” as “mine” the former thief now regards “mine” as “yours”. Working for the sake of others bears an “inner nobility” (Schlatter 1995:224).

Again, this teaching has a parallel in the Miletus speech Paul gave to the elders of Ephesus. In Acts 20:34 he mentioned that he worked to sustain himself. But then he went further: “All along I showed you that it is our duty to help the weak in this way, by

hard work, and that we should keep in mind the words of the Lord Jesus, who himself said: ‘Happiness lies more in giving than in receiving’” (Ac 20:35). This is actually the closing of the Miletus speech. Acts 20:35 is thus in line with Ephesians 4:28: working yourself not for self-sustenance only, but also for sharing with the needy and the weak.

The aim “to share with the needy” has also to be read in the context of several warnings against the dangerous vice of greed. Greed (*pleonexia*) is mentioned three times in the section Ephesians 4:17-5:20 and the verse 28 is in the midst of these warnings: Greed is an essential feature of the old human nature (Eph 4:19), therefore it should not even be mentioned among the people of God (Eph 5:3). Greed is considered as idolatry and therefore a greedy person has no share in the kingdom of God (Eph 5:5, see Kessler [2012] for a detailed discussion on greed). There are two links between Ephesians 4:28 and the vice of greed. Firstly, sometimes greed is the reason why people steal (and sometimes it is simply hunger). Secondly, Ephesians 4:28 teaches us to work hard. But the harder people work, the more they will earn (under regular circumstances). If they kept everything for themselves, they would become richer and richer. And this has the inherent danger of becoming greedy. To share with the needy as commanded in Ephesians 4:28 is a good precaution against becoming greedy.

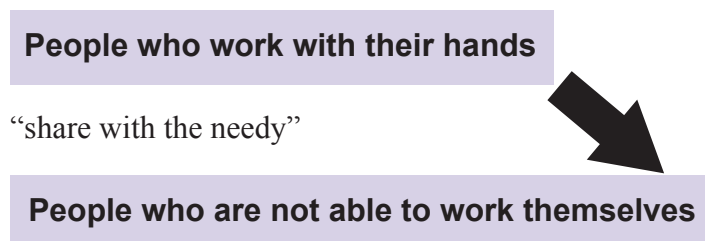


Figure 1: Application of Ephesians 4:28

5. Application for today: Working for the sake of the community

Ephesians 4:28 was written in an agricultural age where most work was manual work. This situation has changed tremendously. Due to the industrial revolution much of the former manual work has been overtaken by machinery. It would be an anachronism to interpret Ephesians 4:28 in such a way that we must return to the agricultural age of manual work.³ (Experiments where the majority of a people had to return to agricultural work like during the Cambodia’s Khmer regime led to poverty and death.) It is obvious that we have to read “working with his hands” in a broader sense when we apply this verse today. But as we already saw in Ecclesiastes 2:11 the expression “handiwork” was already used in Scripture itself with a broader, more figurative meaning.

In his sermons on Ephesians, which were addressed to “ordinary Christians within a specific congregation” (Zachman 2003:482), the reformer John Calvin applied Ephesians

4:28 as follows: “It is not enough when a man can say, ‘Oh, I labor, I have my craft,’ or ‘I have such a trade.’ That is not enough. But we must see whether it is good and profitable for the common good, and whether his neighbors may fare the better for it” (Calvin 1973:457, cited in Volf 1991:189). Thus Calvin extended the application of Ephesians 4:28 to the context of Geneva: this verse spoke about the “needy”, Calvin spoke about the “common good”. According to Calvin an extension like this is legitimate and necessary because “every word written in the Letter to Ephesians contains a meaning that must be brought to bear on the lives of the congregation in Geneva” (Zachman 2003:497).

Daniel Bitrus, the former General Secretary of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa, in similar way extended the meaning of Ephesians 4:28. When he wrote about “the right Christian attitude to work” he also emphasized the common good: “It is equally important to note that ultimately, work is not intended to benefit only the worker but also the community” (Bitrus 2003:139). And with reference to Ephesians 4:28 he concluded: “We can see that the Bible regards work as a community activity carried out by the community for the good of the community” (Bitrus: 2003:140).

6. Application on a meta-level: Creating new jobs

In order to seek the good of the community I would like to suggest another application of Ephesians 4:28. Of course, the essential teaching of Ephesians 4:28 is still true today: stop stealing and work yourself so that you may share with the needy. But what about those people who are willing to work but can not find a job? How can these people apply the teaching of Ephesians 4:28 in their life? Unemployment was not a major issue in ancient times. Thus, Paul could just assume: he who does not work is obviously not willing to work and then he should not eat (2 Th 3:10). But today many nations have high unemployment rates.

I think there is a new task for Christians today, which was not an issue in New Testament times. Today the provision of jobs for those who are willing, but unable to find work, is greatly needed (see Kretzschmar 2012:129 concerning the situation in South Africa). One could even argue that this might be a special vocation for Christian business people. Van Duzer (2010:23) starts his book about business with an open-ended parable where students ask for guidance concerning their calling. The one who wants to become a lawyer is encouraged by his pastor because lawyers care about justice – and that is a Christian virtue. The second student wants to become a medical doctor; she is also encouraged by her pastor because healing is a Christian virtue. The third student is considering a career in business. What kind of advice will he get from his pastor? – Many Christians would not see a career in business as a special vocation.

But some Christians discovered very early the importance of fostering entrepreneurship for the sake of the community. For example, the Mennonite Economic Development Associates (MEDA) has created business solutions to poverty worldwide for 60 years: “Rooted in our faith values, we firmly believe that unleashing entrepreneurship is the best way to alleviate poverty” (MEDA 2013). NGOs like Opportunity International, seek to create jobs in underdeveloped countries (see Bussau & Samuel [1998] for a theological foundation).

There is a growing number of people involved in the movement *Business as Mission (BAM)* (see [Johnson 2009] and internet sources). This is not the place to evaluate this movement but it serves as an example where Christians sense a call to go into business. However, it would be one-sided to restrict this calling for businesses in the missionary field. “BAM’s outreach is not only international, it can also be domestic, even next door. Further, BAM is not solely oriented toward evangelism or discipleship; it is holistic – reaching the whole needs of the whole of humanity elsewhere” (Johnson 2009:22).

Of course, in a literal sense Ephesians 4:28 does not say anything about entrepreneurship. But it might serve as a stimulus for Christians starting an enterprise. *Christian entrepreneurship* can be seen as an *application of Ephesians 4:28 on a meta-level*: Christians who start a business will work in order to provide jobs for the needy, i.e. the unemployed in this case. Thus they will help others by enabling them to live according to the words in Ephesians 4:28: to work themselves so that they have something to share with the needy. Christian entrepreneurs help people so that these people can in turn help themselves and others. Christian entrepreneurship might be a contextualized application of Ephesians 4:28 in today’s society. It goes beyond the literal sense of the words in Ephesians 4:28 but is in line with and in the spirit of Ephesians 4:28. And the motivation behind starting a business is crucial: not to become wealthy oneself, but to share something with those who are needy.

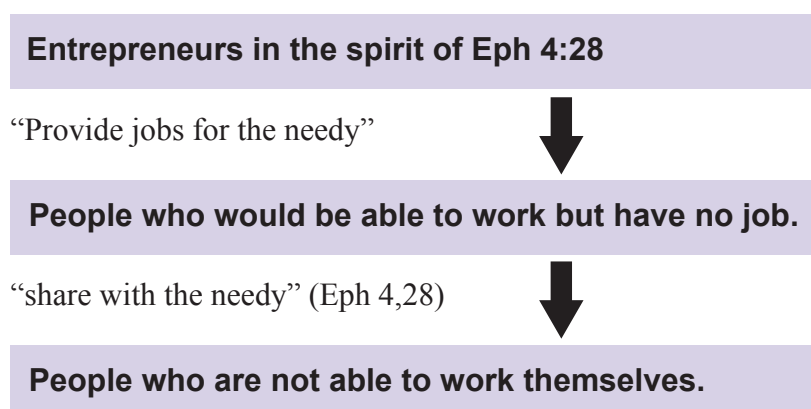


Figure 2: Application of Ephesians 4:28 on a meta-level

7. Notes

1. For Ephesians 4:28 I use the King James Version because the structure of the sentence is close to the Greek original. In all other cases, Bible quotations are taken from the *Revised English Bible* 1990.
2. See Walton 2000:140-185 for a very detailed comparison between the Miletus speech and 1 Thessalonians.
3. I thank the anonymous referee for the hint that my article could be misunderstood as an appeal to return to manual work. Actually, I myself as a professor seldom work with my hands. I make more use of my fingers while typing on the computer.

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