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# Christians *in the* Workplace

## 1. A Practical Theology of Work

by Peter Stuart

### 1. Introduction

From the Christian point of view, what is "work" and what does it mean? When I get up on Monday morning, what am I going to do, and why, and where does it fit in with God's scheme of things ? Such innocent-sounding questions, these, and so relevant to the everyday life of all Christians, and yet they lead us into the great questions of creation and redemption, of God's grace and human achievement, and of how human beings relate to one another both within and beyond the Church.

What is "work" ? We dare not define it as "that which we are paid to do", for that would exclude the efforts and achievements of countless millions outside the cash economies of past and present: subsistence nomads and farmers, homemakers and parents, voluntary workers, and forced labourers and slaves (amongst others).

Perhaps we may seek to define work by its opposite, but what is this opposite ? Play ? Yet for some fortunate people, their "work" is also their "play"; for others (like professional sports players), their daily "work" is what others engage in as "play"; and others again, driven by ego

or ethic, turn their “play” into additional “work”.

We come closer when we contrast work with prayer and worship. Yet even here the categories overlap, the distinction is not absolute, for our daily work can (and should) be offered as an act of worship; worship in some traditions is described as *opus Dei*, the work of God; and prayer and worship can (and perhaps should) often be experienced as hard work.

The Fourth Commandment may give us our best clue to the opposite of work and therefore to work itself “*Six days you shall labour, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work.*” Here the opposite of work is “rest”, and sabbath rest at that. “Work” is everything which we as human beings made in the image of God are created and called to do; “work” is everything which we Christians as covenant people are re-created and called to do. “Rest” is the abstention from that, an abstention which enables our work to resonate with the meaning and significance of God's own work and dynamic rest, and which enables us to celebrate God in His creation.

It follows that not everything which we regard as “work” may be work as God intends it, nor is everything which God regards as work necessarily what we regard as “work”. We live as fallible human beings in a fallen world, a world which nevertheless has been redeemed by its Creator. Our wrestling with what it actually means to be “created and called to work” is part of our growth into the New Creation in Christ, and that wrestling is accompanied by both grace and judgement. Adapting a Scriptural text to our purpose, we could well say that “with fear and trembling we must work out what work means, for it is the grace of God which works in us.”

The Fourth Commandment also gives us an excellent entry into the ambiguity of human work (for work is indeed ambiguous). There are two versions. one in Exodus 20:8-11, and the other in Deuteronomy 5: 12-15. The substance of what is commanded is the same in both, but the reason given for the commandment is not. The first places “sabbath” in the context of God's work of creation, the second in the context of human sin and God's deliverance.

## **2. Work in the order of creation**

### *\*Human beings in the image of the God who works*

The Exodus version of the commandment runs: “*Six days you shall labour, and do all your work; but the seventh is a sabbath to the LORD your God... for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.*” There is no room here for any concept of God as being “above” work, He works. God is active, dynamic, creative, and life-giving, and He rejoices in what He creates. To be made in the image of such a God is to be called to echo both this activity and this celebration of its fruits. There can be no devaluing of the dignity of human work, and no exaltation of a life of leisure as the ideal human life. This Judaeo-Christian principle cut across the values of the Hellenistic world two millennia ago, went on to form part of the foundation of European culture and civilisation, and still challenges many cultures today.

### *\*Human beings as co-creators*

Here an important distinction must be made and a caution entered. Only God creates *ex nihilo*, from nothing. The Hebrew word used for what God does when He creates, *barah*, is never used in Scripture to describe what humans do when they make something. Human “creativity”

is within God's foundational and continuing work. It is therefore hazardous to speak of humans as "co-creators" with God, however subtly we calibrate our understanding of how God continues to relate to a created cosmos in process of change, evolution and movement towards teleological fulfilment, and however highly we place the role of human co-operation with that process. The dignity of human work has everything to do with God's own work and His creative purpose. If we have any illusions about human "co-creator" status we need only contemplate our precarious hold on time and space in this vast, wonderful and mysterious universe. For example, what will happen to humankind when our sun dies? Only God knows.

Yet if the term "co-creator" itself is misleading, the insight behind it is valid: human work at its highest is needed if God's full purpose for His universe is to be achieved. This is the remarkable risk that God took in making the full flowering of love the goal of a universe shot through with His glory and in giving us creatures a measure of freedom to shape that part of the creation which is our world. Moreover, He has placed within us the springs of creativity, and given us vision, talents and energy. Our response to these gifts helps us become what we are created to be. Although not "co-creators", we are truly "pro-creators". "Procreation" is a term far too useful to be restricted in its reference only to human reproduction, awesome and delightful as that responsibility is.

*\*The intentional satisfaction of human need*

All work is intentional effort to satisfy human need, our own and one another's. God has created us as finite beings with a hierarchy of needs, which begin with the basic biological ones of sustenance and shelter and protection, and move progressively up through social needs for identity and intimacy and love to the spiritual needs for meaning and purpose and ultimate union with God. These various levels of need (and their satisfaction) are interlocked; we are unitary beings of body, mind and spirit. We never leave behind us the basic biological needs, and even these can seldom be satisfied over any length of time by our own individual effort alone. Work, as intentional effort to satisfy human need, is a co-operative enterprise. What varies is whose need it is which we seek to satisfy, which need, by what means, and why. The satisfaction of need can be intensely selfish; or it can be an expression of justice and mutual love; or it can be self-sacrificing. But always we have needs, and always someone has to exert effort of one sort or another to satisfy those needs. This is what work is. The Scriptures simply accept this as part of the human lot.

One of the needs which work satisfies is the need to belong, to share, to participate, to contribute and receive. There is much in the Scriptures about personal responsibility, but there is no false individualism, no hint that human beings are autonomous and self-sufficient individuals able to be fully human in isolation from one another. Our daily work, whatever it is, paid or unpaid, gives us much of our social identity beyond the family. It is a primary means of participating in and contributing to the community. We are relational beings; we become fully human through one another. In this relationality as well as in our working, we image the nature of God, three persons in dynamic divine community.

*\*Work and ecology*

There is another aspect of work which seems at first glance to fall outside the basic understanding of it as "intentional effort to satisfy human need", and that is work as caring for God's creation. Too often, in a misguided rush to satisfy human needs and desires, we have raped the earth, treating it as our possession to do with as we will. We have separated ourselves from the web of creaturely life and made ourselves into gods. In contrast to this, the creation stories set out our role as stewards of nature, caring for the Garden. Today, in the

gathering ecological crisis, that role and its implications for human work need to be strongly emphasised, the more so because our needs are being added to daily by the artificial stimulation of more and more wants. Nor does it take much reflection to soon realise that caring for creation does meet human need, on several levels, the most immediate of which is simple survival.

*\* Daily work*

The Bible is remarkably matter of fact about human work as such. From the divine command to Adam to till and keep the Garden of Eden, through the regulation of work in the Mosaic Law, and the admonitions against idleness in the Wisdom literature and St Paul, to the example of Jesus in His years as a village artisan, there is no hint that in this life we can or should escape in this life from what some have termed “the ordinance of work” and others “part of the natural law”. Work in itself is neither a punishment for humanity's sin nor the means of expiating humanity's guilt and regaining God's favour, though there is a clear-sighted recognition of how sin twists the realm of work. There are warnings against pride in human achievement, and an insistence that it is God who ultimately blesses our work and satisfies our needs. There is no gospel of redemption through work. Strangely for us modern Christians, there is no teaching in Scripture about “vocation” as a call to a particular form of work in the everyday world. “Call” means something else: the call to conversion, and then the call to service within the Covenant People of God.

*\*Daily work as ministry*

Yet this does not mean that God has no claim on our daily work, or gives no guidance through the Scriptures about this. What it means is that any experience of divine guidance into a particular form of daily work must be provisional, relative, subject always to the overriding general call to conversion, holiness and ministry. Nevertheless, within the relationships of the working world Christians are called to bear witness to their Lord and Saviour and to serve a suffering and sinful world by the satisfaction of legitimate need. This witness can sometimes include explicit proclamation with a view to intentional evangelism. It is difficult, for example, to imagine Paul staying completely silent about his faith while he made and marketed his tents. More often, however, and usually more effective, this witness is made by the way we go about our work, by the care we have for our fellow-workers, by the integrity of our work itself, and by our concern for the common good both within and beyond our work-place, whatever that is. Paul would have applauded the conscientious Christian workers in Eastern Europe and China whose baffled Communist masters sometimes held them up as examples to the other workers. The satisfaction of valid human need by conscientious work for the common good and to the glory of God is ministry in its own right. And it is also one whose effects are unpredictable. People have multiple needs and these interlock; the way one need is satisfied may lead on to the satisfaction of other levels of need. This is an expression of the leaven principle which Jesus taught.

All this flows validly from a consideration of what might be called work in the order of creation, the perspective of the Fourth Commandment as we find it in Exodus 20:8-11. It can be profoundly attractive to the conservative mind, and to those who are the privileged beneficiaries of the present social order and who might well hail it as indeed a “practical theology of work”. But this world is not only a created world but also a fallen one, though gloriously redeemed. In this fallen world, work is twisted by sin. As Gerard Manley Hopkins put it,

*“The world is charged with the glory of God.*

*It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?  
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell..."<sup>1</sup>*

### **3. Work in a fallen world**

The Genesis creation story has God saying to Adam as He expels him from Eden: *"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 to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field, In the sweat of your face you shall eat your bread till you return to the ground"* Genesis 3:17-19. And in the chapters which follow there unfolds the disorder in God's creation caused by human sin. This myth vividly and accurately portrays the human condition. The Hebrew slaves in bondage in Egypt would have had no cause to question its truth. In their situation, work was an evil, something to be delivered from, and delivered they were. The second form of the Fourth Commandment, that in Deuteronomy 5:12-15, celebrates that deliverance, and stands against all human distortions of the divine ordinance of work: *"Six days you shall labour, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, or your manservant, or your maidservant, or your ox, or your ass, or any of your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your manservant and your maidservant may rest as well as you. You shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out thence, with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God brought you out thence, with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day."* (Deuteronomy 5.12-15.)

What are these distortions of work? They are manifold, and include exploitation, wrong motivation, and meaninglessness.

#### *\* Exploitation*

The Exodus story is an example of one such distortion: the wrong appropriation of the work of some by others more powerful than they. There are two key elements here: the theft of the freedom of workers, and the theft of the fruits of their labour. Workers are reduced to the status of living tools in the hands of others. This evil recurs again and again in human history in society after society. Sometimes both elements are present, sometimes one more than the other; sometimes it is explicit, sometimes it is disguised. It matters not whether the society is Stone Age or Information Age, individualist or collectivist, the same basic evil can recur.

Some of the Biblical tradition looks at work from the perspective of the powerless in a fallen world, work as the sphere of oppression and exploitation, as an arena of struggle with the powerful. The interdependence of human beings makes work relationships continually vulnerable to distortion by sin. Their balance must continually be restored by implementing the principles of Jubilee, when the freedom of workers is restored, debts cancelled and access to the means of production more equalised. It is difficult (though many make the attempt) to avoid the radical implications of so much of the Galilee teaching of Jesus, its continuity with the Jubilee tradition, and the congruity of both with the Exodus story. In the great reversal in

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<sup>1</sup> From "God's Grandeur" in "The Collected Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins".

Reign of God, the last shall be first, and the living tool shall be honoured as a child of God.

*\* Wrong motivation*

Wrong motivation is another distortion of work which can affect those who work (whatever their access or lack of access to power). This can take a number of forms, such as pride, greed, the drive for power over others, or anxious self-justification. The Scriptures are cautious about human work for these very reasons. They warn against over-reliance on one's work, a reliance which can topple over into idolatry, or into pride in the face of God and of one's fellow human beings. They stress the transitoriness of the earthly fruit of human effort, and the necessity of God's blessing of that effort if it is to bear fruit in the first place, and the deceptiveness of riches. They emphasise that those who have power are accountable to God for the exercise of that power in the interests of the less powerful or the powerless. And eager though they are to enjoin obedience to God, they usually teach that obedience (wherever it occurs) is to be a response to God's grace, and not the means of earning His favour.

This caution about human work is strongly vindicated by today's widespread notion that human beings create themselves by their work. This notion has taken various forms, sometimes ideological (as in Promethean capitalism or Marxism), sometimes in psychological theory, and perhaps supremely in the psychobabble of countless self-help books in our narcissistic Western culture. Against all this stands the liberating witness of Christianity: we are creatures made in the image of God and loved and cherished by our Father in Heaven. Yes, our work has value, but our essential identity is not dependent on it. Our identity flows from who it is God has created us to be. Our work has a part to play in our becoming, but that becoming is always as creatures, always as a son or daughter of the God who is at work in us.

Why do we work, and to what end? In a fallen world these are different questions with different answers, though that may not be immediately apparent to those who perceive no transcendent goal for human striving. In the New Creation of the Reign of God, they are the same question with the same answer. It is when our motivation for our work coincides with God's purpose for our work, that the two questions merge, as do their answers. And for those of us who in faith reach out for God as the goal of human endeavour and life, but are aware of the sinful complexity of our motives, the tension between the questions is the arena of so much of our spiritual struggle. "*Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well*" (Matthew 6:32). The emphasis of Jesus on the centrality of right motivation for action, and His placing the service of the Reign of God at the heart of all our striving, challenges all wrong or incomplete motivations for work. And His liberating gift of God's prior love, through the Holy Spirit, empowers our work if we will but allow it.

*\* Meaninglessness*

A third distortion of work is its frequent meaninglessness, its "vanity", to use the language of the book of Ecclesiastes. In our struggle to find meaning to human life, so much is centred on our work, yet it is specially in the sphere of our work that our lives can be rendered apparently meaningless. We may be acutely aware of this even while we work, in the drudgery of being a living tool at the disposal of others. Or it may come later, when a sudden reversal of external circumstance or internal perspective renders our life's work, or large parts of it, devoid of significance.

Deliverance from this sense of meaninglessness is sought in many ways, but none truly suffice, and that is the perspective of Sabbath life in Christ, when after our life's work is done we look back and see that in the Mercy and in the Providence of God, "it is good". At the

abiding core of our work are its relationships, both within the work-place and in the impact our work has had on people beyond it (and on ourselves). The bridge we built may have fallen down, the book we wrote be forgotten, the field we brought into production be washed away, the assembly lines we tended be still. but the impact on people abides. It is here that our work stands or falls, and within the Reign of God and the Sabbath of Christ's New Creation, it stands.

Once this is grasped, meaning becomes possible, and more than possible, even while we work our way through this life. We rejoice in the presence of Christ in the provisional circumstances of our lives, knowing that in Him whatever we do in faith and from faith takes on eternal meaning. There is a centredness to our work, and it is not of us. To adapt some fine words of Herbert McCabe, work becomes sacramental, externalising and effecting the rule of Christ the King over a disordered earth; work becomes the conquest of Satan, whose sacramentals are squalor, degradation, pain and chaos.<sup>2</sup>

#### **4. The redemption of work**

*\*The Way of the Incarnate Christ*

There is a progression in the life of Jesus which is instructive.

Firstly, Jesus spent the greater part of his adult life as a manual worker. We should neither ignore nor overplay the significance of the single New Testament reference (in Mark's Gospel) to this. This sharing in the ordinance of work is as much an integral part of the Incarnate Life as being born of a woman, or thirsting at a well, or bleeding on a cross. The form of the work is less important (though how appropriate it would be for the Maker and Redeemer of all things to work in a carpenter's shop, where things are both made and mended). We know nothing about these years beyond the bare fact, yet manual work and all human work with it, are dignified by that fact.

In the second phase, Jesus leaves that work and moves on to another: his public ministry. It too is work, in which He exerts effort and from which He requires rest. And it is co-operative work, work into which He draws others whom He calls away from their normal work.

In the third phase, that of the Passion, Jesus ceases to work and to act; instead He is acted upon. Others seemingly take power over Him and work to destroy the impact of His public ministry. Yet it is only when their work is climaxing in His death that Jesus cries "It is finished!"; only then that the goal of His life was reached, the supreme Work accomplished, the consecration of life in the offering of suffering love. By Christ's offering our life is redeemed, and our work with it.

The mission of God in and through the Incarnate Son of God required that He first immerse Himself in ordinary human work, then distance Himself (and His disciples) from it and give Himself to an explicit Kingdom ministry as teacher and prophet, healer and exorcist, and finally allow Himself to hand over that life and that earlier work into the hands of both a fallen world and of a faithful Father. There is, of course, much more to the Passion and Death of Jesus than this, but it does include this. And there are implications here for the way Christians should approach work.

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<sup>2</sup> McCabe, "Theology and work" in the symposium "Work", ed. Todd, John (Darton Longman and Todd, ).



There is the sort of work which we share with all humankind. There is also the work which is peculiar to us as Christians, which builds up the Body of Christ and embodies His Kingdom. Both are validated by the example of Jesus. Yet in an imperfect world we have to learn to distance ourselves from both forms of work, and to entrust this work, and more importantly ourselves, into the hands of God. An anxious grasping at our role as worker, and at visible proof of our achievement, is destructive of the life of the spirit. True wisdom is to depend not on our own work but on the finished work of Christ on the Cross, and on the assurance that in Christ our labour is not in vain. True wisdom is to let go of our work by consecrating it to Him. We are to seek as best we can to conform it to His will and purpose, not only as revealed in His life and public ministry, but supremely in His Passion and Death, when He entrusts all to His Father.

*\* Work in the Holy Spirit*

How does human work relate to the work of the Holy Spirit? When Christians are doing that work common to all humanity, is the Spirit acting within them, or only when they are doing "church work", work which is peculiar to Christians? What indeed is "church work"? In what contexts do the gifts of the Spirit operate? And is the Spirit active in people outside the community of faith we call the Body of Christ? These questions are not as simple to answer as some would make out. Here the relationship between the Holy Spirit, the Body of Christ, and the Reign of God may be the key.

The Body of Christ gathered for worship and ministry is a manifestation and sign of the Reign of God made possible by the presence, power and work of the Holy Spirit. Part of that sign should be the way the Church frees, values, develops and harmonises the gifts and work of its members.

The Body of Christ dispersed for ministry and witness is an instrument of the Reign of God made possible by the presence, power and work of the Holy Spirit. The places Christians disperse to include the places of their daily work, and there they need to discern the presence of the Reign of God in any situation. There is no zone of work in which God has no purpose to accomplish. However, that purpose may sometimes be a radical refashioning or even ending of what is done there, and there is some "work" which no Christian may engage in because it contravenes God's purposes for His children.

Both gathered and dispersed, the Body of Christ and its members are indwelt by Christ through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit bestows gifts and energy for ministry when the work Christians are engaged in is indeed building up the Body of Christ, or healing God's creation by the intentional satisfaction of valid human need at any of its levels. The meaning of what is done by the Body of Christ in dispersion is made explicit and celebrated when its members gather for worship.

However, this does not mean that all that Christians do is of the Holy Spirit. The Reign of God has not fully come and the Church is but incompletely surrendered. A Practical Theology of Work work of the visible Church can be a denial of the Kingdom and its way of working, in sharp contrast with that of some secular workplaces. Nor does it mean that nothing of what others do is of the Holy Spirit. The image of God has not been totally defaced in those beyond the community of Christian faith, and the Creator Spirit who first "moved over the face of the waters" may be at work in any creature, unacknowledged perhaps, but truly there. Yet God-given "natural" talents do not serve as gifts of the Spirit building up the Body of Christ unless

surrendered in conscious faith to Christ as Lord, nor are they securely or fully used for His Kingdom.

The Reign of God is present in all work which moves the creation to wholeness. The Spirit goes before and beyond the Church in the healing of creation, which is indeed the flowering of the Reign of God. The secret of the Kingdom is both hidden and revealed in the life of the Body of Christ, whose members need always to conform their work humbly to the nature of servant ministry. *"For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake "* (2 Corinthians 4:5).

## **5. A "Practical Theology of Work"**

What might a "practical theology of work" be ? The phrase is an intriguing one, and it is essential to ask: "practical" by what standards of usefulness, for what purpose and for whose purpose ? There are at least four paths to follow here in exploring the phrase, and it is a useful exploration.

The first can easily be discerned, and rejected in theory though not so easily in practice. It amounts to the capture of theology by those who control work in society (whatever form that society takes), or who seek to turn theology into the ideological sanctioning of the status quo. How can Christians be helped to feel good about the daily work they are doing or see others doing, without challenging or changing anything? "The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate", or blacks as the servants, mineworkers and farm labourers of apartheid South Africa, are arrangements which if "ordained by God" are very "practical" - for some. This is the peacetime equivalent of "blessing the guns." When we see all work purely and simply as a divine ordinance, part of natural law, we can topple over into this position all too easily,

Another path is the contextual one of theological reflection on work in a particular context, for example New Zealand in the year 2000. Here we might want to reflect first on the past, on the pragmatic work ethic of the European frontier, focused on meeting the more basic human needs for food and shelter, and featuring both cooperation and self-reliance. and reflect on the communal nature of the Maori approach to work, with its strong emphasis on the common good, and its different attitude to property. We might then want to explore the impact of the global market and the information revolution on a primary producing nation with this double heritage, and consider new forms of unemployment, and the transformation of the work ethic in a consumer society. Christian reflection on all this would be a valid theological enterprise. But sooner or later we would be driven back to draw on and interrogate the more systematic understandings in the wider Church about the general significance of work. And thinking out basic principles for action is something the pragmatic New Zealand mind has often been reluctant to do.

A practical theology can also sometimes be conceived of as simply answering the question, "what should Christians do in the face of such and such a situation in daily work ?" The New Testament Household Codes appear at first sight to be examples of this. But this is to reduce theology to ethics, the more so when the question is understood to be identical with "what should any (ethical) person do in the face of such and such a situation in daily work ?" Our understanding of what ought to be done and our motives for doing it are affected by our basic beliefs about reality. The Household Codes have an implicit theology when they are examined.

The approach this paper has taken is that all theology, if it has a measure of truth in it, has

important implications for our life in this world, It is "practical" in that sense, though some of it may at first seem far removed from everyday reality. Moreover, all Christians, whether they are theologians or not, have theological beliefs in their heads, and sooner or later their "theologising" affects (though not determines) the way they behave, for good or ill. For example, a believing Christian was recently heard to say, "Something isn't work for me unless I feel there's somebody standing over me, making me do it." There was a whole theology behind that remark, though probably unexamined, and certainly imperfect: a theology which locates work neither in God's creative purpose nor in the realm of this redemption.

## **6. Work and Worship**

It seems right to close by considering (though all too briefly) how work and worship are related

Our whole life is to be offered to God the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit; our relationships, our thoughts, our leisure, everything, including our work. This is an imperfect offering, acceptable only because of Christ's offering, but offered it must be. We are to make this offering day by day, continually asking for God's guidance and grace in our work.

We are also to make this offering sacramentally, when we come together in worship, especially in the Eucharist. It is no accident that the elements there are bread and wine, the combination of God's gift in nature (wheat and grapes) and human effort, of God's creation and human work. When we place them on the Altar, they represent not only creation but ourselves and what we have made of the life God has given us. They are both tainted by sin and shot through with the glory of grace given and responded to. Yet by the Mercy of God in the Work of Christ, enfleshed, crucified, risen, and ascended for us, we are acceptable in the Beloved. However we articulate what happens in the Eucharist, that surely is at the heart of it. And the invocation of the Holy Spirit on the elements or on us is an assurance that He works in us and through us, changing us into the likeness of the Lord from one degree of glory to another, weaving our work into the New Creation. Then, having renewed Christ's presence in us by feeding on Him in those same elements now taken up into Him, we go out as the Body of Christ into the world, to help make it His world.

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