

ARISE & BUILD

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THE WORK OF OUR HANDS

BY MARTIN G. SELBREDE

“Christian reconstruction today means putting that crucial emphasis back on the table, recognizing that the only other option is the socialists’ coercive control of the world. Despite their efforts, God has appointed that the victory be won through the work of your hands, hands laboring in faithfulness, diligence, care, while modeling Christian excellence.”



Dr. Rushdoony brings several elements together for our consideration when discussing 1 Corinthians 15:57-58.

The statement that sin’s power is the law is an arresting one. Sin brings in death, the penalty for breaking God’s law. The positive power of the law is that it opens up the realm of God’s will and blessing, so that obedience means godly strength.

Knowing these things, we should always be “stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord” (v. 58). When we work with the Lord, the results are far beyond what we can see so that our work is never in vain. It always bears the fruit God intended.¹

This is the key statement: *When we work with the Lord, the results are far beyond what we can see.*

AN ESCHATOLOGY OF WORK

You would be hard pressed to find any modern theologian who has done greater justice to the biblical doctrine of work than Dr. Rushdoony. He is nearly alone in identifying the significance of work and its abiding importance. The failure to apply his insights is the root cause of the pathological rot in the societies of man. Rushdoony sets the stage prior to digging into the details thus:

... in a godless universe, the total conflict of interests prevails, not a harmony

of interests. In such a conflict cosmos, the goal becomes total war against the supposed source of trouble. Hence, class warfare, racial conflict, and generational tensions become commonplace. A man’s vocation then becomes the obliteration or the eradication of supposed sources of trouble. This means total war against the capitalists or the communists, or against some particular race. Evil then becomes a metaphysical principle, some segment of being, rather than a moral fact, what men do with themselves. The consequences for work are very great.²

Vocation and calling become wrongly separated from labor, so that escapism becomes dominant while work is considered meaningless drudgery. Our attitude toward work spreads out to cover the rest of life:

Not only work but life apart from God is meaningless. Work then becomes a question of survival economics, gaining enough food and shelter to live. For all too many people in history, work has had this connotation. Its goal has been survival, and hence it has had a sad and burdensome aura. Escape from work is then a much desired goal.

However, in the Bible, work is eschatological in meaning. It has a goal, the Kingdom of God. Work can be drudgery, a necessary means of survival, or work can be a means of dominion and subduing the earth (Gen. 1:26-28). *Work can be a means of maintaining life and no more, or work can be the means of creating the future.* Work thus can be done simply to maintain the status quo, or it can be the means of determining our tomorrows.³

Dr. Rushdoony then explains the difference between mediated and unmediated (direct) relationships in respect to work and all things else.

We should note that Dr. Rushdoony had pointed out that while Jesus Christ is the mediator between God and man, the Law of God is the mediator between man and man, and between man and creation. God's Law determines the boundaries of these relationships because He created the beings and objects in question (people and things) and sets the bounds of their habitation and, for man, duties and obligations and restrictions. But man the rebel seeks a *direct relationship* with all things, even though a direct relationship is a prerogative of God alone. Unmediated, direct relationships are an aspect of man's seeking to supplant God to be his own god. Unmediated, direct relationship is the mark of Genesis 3:5 in relational action.

WORK: MEDIATED OR DIRECT?

Because man's addiction to direct, unmediated relationships takes us back to Genesis 3, Dr. Rushdoony starts his discussion there.

Prior to man's fall, all his work was under God and in terms of God's directions, God's law-word. At the same time, all his relationships were mediated through God. Adam's relationship to Eve, to the animals, and to the earth, was not a *direct* one: it was always governed by God's covenant and hence a mediated and governed relationship. In submitting to the temptation to be his own god (Gen. 3:5), Adam chose instead to have a *direct* relationship to all things, an *unmediated* relationship governed only by his own will and word.

Nothing has or can have any existence or being apart from the Lord. Hence, nothing can be apprehended or known without knowing God. Every attempt at an unmediated knowledge leads finally to a pessimism concerning the possibility of knowledge. Similarly, every effort at a direct contact and use leads to a like frustration and ultimate defeat. The world of men is not our creation, nor are animals and the earth. To approach any of them as a god, with our own creative word, is to move in terms of an insanely

evil delusion and assured defeat. In hell, there are no mediated relationships between men and men, and hence no communication.⁴

In contrast to the humanists' insistence on direct, unmediated relationships emancipated from God's order, the faithful Christian thinks and works in terms of covenantal obligations articulated by the Lord. Instead of the frustration inherent in direct relationships, productivity and fruitfulness arise.

The more mediated our relationships are in Christ, the more productive is our life and work, because the mediated relationship is the governed and directed one. The total providence and power of God are then linked to our lives and activities. [After citing 1 Cor. 15:58 that "your labour is not in vain the Lord"]:
Our work can never be futile when we are in Christ. ... This means that when we work in and for the Lord, we move out from under the curse into blessings to the degree of our faithfulness.

This means that the problems of our time are at root theological problems. We experience a world under the curse, because the nations seek an *unmediated* world. They declare their own independent law-word, and, in so doing, move more and more into the curse and in the process become a curse. ... Our task as Christians is to move ourselves and our society from the realm of curses to the realm of blessings.⁵

THE TOXIC NATURE OF UNMEDIATED WORK

Even a cursory survey of scripture establishes the contaminating nature of work that is not consecrated under God's covenant. The setting is laid out for us in Psalm 106 in this way:

They did not destroy the nations, concerning whom the Lord commanded them: But were mingled among the heathen, and learned their works. And they served their idols: which were a snare unto them. (Ps. 106:34-36)

You'll note how "learning the works" of the heathen is the crippling bridge that leads to the culminating disaster laid out in verse 39: "Thus were they defiled with their own works, and went a whoring with their own inventions." The curse becomes more

intense now that the labors of God's people have become aligned with the unmediated worldviews of the heathen.

Immediately before the predicted future conversion of the entire nation of Egypt (Isa. 19:18-25) we read of how poisoned their labor had become in their midst:

The Lord hath mingled a perverse spirit in the midst thereof: and they have caused Egypt to err in every work thereof, as a drunken man staggereth in his vomit. Neither shall there be any work for Egypt, which the head or tail, branch or rush, may do. (Isa. 19:14-15).

Of course, when every labor is unmediated and direct, the nation will indeed *err in every work*, which subsequently makes *any work* intended to correct the situation *utterly worthless*. The high calling that Adam was intended to bestow upon all the labors of the generations to flow from him has been lost in the savage fight to take God's throne for ourselves. The recovery of that high view of work is a crucial element in the restitution of all things (Acts 3:21), in which we are to play a part.

Unmediated work marked the entire Tower of Babel project, and Dr. Rushdoony is keen to focus on "the *work* involved in building the Tower of Babel,"⁶ which was intended to "rivet man into slavery to man."⁷ "Its purpose was to defy God by preventive planning against God's judgment and law, and it would also supplant God's government of man and the earth by man's government and law."⁸ While the Tower was indeed destroyed, Dr. Rushdoony warns us that "the motivation of its builders still remains and is as active as ever,"⁹ which is precisely why godly work,¹⁰ prosecuted with craftsmanship and excellence, is all the more needed in our day and age.

WARFIELD'S ANALYSIS OF THE ISSUE

If the above discussion is difficult to digest, we can approach the issue in a different way. This is what Benjamin Warfield did in 1896 in his essay, "Under Orders."¹¹ He drew upon a rough-worded thought from Rudyard Kipling for further elaboration:

The heathen in his blindness bows down to wood and stone.

He don't obey no orders, unless they is his own.

Warfield points out that, unlike the heathen, the soldier of Kipling's poem receives profound benefits from being "under orders."

It is that fact which has not only reduced chaos to order for him, but which has lent a real meaning and importance to his life and made him a fellow worker in great undertakings. ... The principle of "authority" is thus one of his most precious possessions, not only as an organizing but as an elevating principle.¹²

The heathen obeys no orders but his own; he is self-governed; he is autocratic. The Christian has orders from above to obey; he is governed by a power without himself; he is under obedience to an external authority.¹³

Are we under orders, and do we look upon it as a source of dignity and worth to ourselves that we are under the orders of such a Leader? Or, after all, are we in the position of the heathen, of whom it is said that "They don't obey no orders, except they is their own."¹⁴

Let us look to ourselves closely: for it is just here that the Christian is really separated from the heathen standpoint. The Christian is a man under orders; the heathen obeys no orders but his own.¹⁵

By being "under orders," the Christian approaches every relationship in terms of those orders, which mediate how he relates to his fellow man and to the world at large. Warfield uses this military concept to illustrate what Rushdoony calls "mediated" relationships. It is the same concept using different words.

DIRECTING AND ESTABLISHING OUR WORK

Dr. Rushdoony says that mediated work is *governed*, *directed*, and *established*. These concepts are all-too-often glossed over. The concept of God *establishing* our work is actually repeated at the tail end of Psalm 90, giving the translators freedom to employ vivid terms.

And let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us: and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it. (Ps. 90:17)

That God *establishes* us as we labor in covenant with Him is taught elsewhere as well:

Commit thy works unto the Lord, and thy thoughts shall be established. (Prov. 16:3)

The notion of our work being *directed* by God is also well-represented in Scripture.

For I the Lord love judgment, I hate robbery for burnt offering; and I will direct their work in truth, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. (Isa. 61:8)

We have drawn attention to the smiths of Zechariah,¹⁶ who overthrow the power of the enemy by their diligent labor and craftsmanship in their trades, thereby establishing the power of mediated labor. This should be no surprise since “The labour of the righteous tendeth to life: the fruit of the wicked to sin” (Prov. 10:16). As Dr. Rushdoony said above, “when we work with the Lord, the results are *far beyond what we can see* so that our work is never in vain.” One famous example of this outcome is composer Johann Sebastian Bach.¹⁷

We also find that godly, mediated labor can bring forth the fruit of peace.

Lord, thou wilt ordain peace for us: for thou also hast wrought all our works in us. (Isa. 26:12)

And the work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance for ever. (Isa. 32:17)

We will take up the matter of the *coordination of God’s work with man’s work* shortly, but first we need to look at the *bridge between men* that these concepts bring to the table.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PROVERBS 14:9

In 1995, Dr. Rushdoony drew attention to the difficult text of Proverbs 14:9 in the second volume of *Faith and Action*.¹⁸ We discover that this text, hopelessly mangled by translators, can best be understood when we bring the question of *relationship* into the picture. Because he was aware of this issue, Dr. Rushdoony perceived that the Berkeley Version preserved all the elements in the Hebrew text while doing justice to the question of relationship obscured by the major translations.

The bond [or, interpreter, intermediary] between foolish men is guilt, but between the upright it is good will. (Prov. 14:9, Berkeley Version)

It is proper to have “between” appear in both halves of the verse (or the word “among,” which is nearly identical in meaning) but other translations often fail to realize that linguistic necessity and ignore it. The concept of the “bond” or mediator is also usually lost in most translations. We’ll leave the technical discussion in an endnote¹⁹ to avoid a messy rabbit hole here.

Whichever bond we’re considering (the one between fools or the one between the upright), its effect is a total one: a comprehensive bond between members of each group that extends to their every action. Dr. Rushdoony explains the positive side of the verse well:

Proverbs 14:9 goes on to say that the bond “between the upright is good will.” They have a common life in the Lord, a common goal in serving Him, and a common hope in the future.

The bond, interpreter, or intermediary between us is One greater than ourselves. It is the Lord. Our relationship is thus greater than we are. As Christians, we have no *direct* relationship with anyone or anything. All our relationships are mediated through Jesus Christ, who made and remade us all. This gives a more solid and a permanent bond to our fellowship with one another.²⁰

The evil effects of the bond between the wicked in Prov. 14:9 are in continual evidence, and Rushdoony explains this in the context of resentment, using the example of how an innocent victim is treated.

There is an outpouring of sympathy. But, suddenly, this sympathy is replaced by venomous hatred. Why? Well, the victim does something to correct the evil, and the result is hatred.²¹

This hatred is collective, driven by the bond of guilt between foolish/wicked men. Antinomian autonomy is fiercely protected. The “right” to have a direct relationship with anything and everything carries with it the need to dictate the allowable range of speech, the will to silence all challenges to the rebellious morality of Babel that’s rampant today.

We very much need encouragement to face the kind of hostility that Dr. Rushdoony describes. We find that encouragement in a well-known place, but we need to dig under the popular surface to grasp how it dovetails with the idea of mediated work.

PSALM 127 RE-EXAMINED

We want to focus on the opening verse of Psalm 127 in light of the Dr. Rushdoony's focus on *mediated* versus *unmediated* work. The danger of being a well-known scripture is that we become lazy because we're so familiar with it. Such familiarity can be an impediment to deeper understanding.

To get a picture of unmediated work, go no farther than the book of Ecclesiastes, where the phrase "under the sun" indicates an unmediated situation: man operating without reference to God and only with reference to himself and other men. The downsides of work and labor prosecuted that way are ruefully laid out (Eccl. 1:3, 2:10-11, 2:18-19, 2:20-22, 24, etc.; 2:20 even speaks of a man's heart despairing over his labor). Even if labor is done in a righteous way, we learn from Ecclesiastes that it can *still trigger ugliness* among those who demand direct, unmediated relationships:

Again, I considered all travail, and every right work, that for this a man is envied of his neighbour. This is also vanity and vexation of spirit. (Eccl. 4:4)

Consider the teaching of Prov. 21:8 that "the way of man is froward and strange: but as for the pure, his work is right." The man in question is being envied despite his motives being godly and pure.

This underscores the importance of Psalm 127:1a, which speaks about the outcome of labor, of work, and how it depends on our motives and our relationship with our fellow man, with the creation, and with the Lord Himself (who governs the previous two relationships).

Unless the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it. Unless the Lord keep the city, the watchman watcheth but in vain. (Psalm 127:1)

James Montgomery Boice draws attention to the "frantic, self-absorbed, and self-sufficient work ethic described in the first stanza," which results in the verdict of

vanity, of the resulting labor being rendered useless.²² He also points out that the motto for Edinburgh, Scotland is *Nisi Dominus Frusta* (*Without the Lord, Frustration*) taken from this very Psalm. The takeaway from this passage (as Boice sees it) is that when the Lord's efforts and our efforts are aligned, our labors are not in vain. Boice is even more fervent in asserting that without God our labor is *meaningless*²³ as well as futile: there is no meaning in any unmediated work being done.

Leslie C. Allen explains the setting of the psalm to give us important context:

Earthly life was regarded as essentially the arena of divine salvation and judgment, blessing and curse. The will of God was ignored at humanity's peril not only in the realms of military activity (2 Sam 2:1), national internal policy (Hos 8:4), and foreign policy (Isa 30:1), but also in the ordinary life of the individual believer. Futility curses in common use, which the prophets exploited to express divine judgment, dwelt on the grim possibility of labor in vain. ... Yahweh's smile of favor, or rather active involvement in the enterprise, is essential.²⁴

God's order has been established over human life and determines success or failure.²⁵

Labor is to be a matter of collaboration with God (1 Cor 15:10, 58).²⁶

We find an interesting aspect of the word "vain" or "futile" in the analysis made by Allen P. Ross, who finds another nuance of the word:

The word translated "vain" is difficult to translate precisely. "Vain" conveys the idea of empty or futile; the Hebrew word does indeed mean "futile, worthless, meaningless," but it also means "false."²⁷

This means that unmediated, direct labor ungoverned by God's covenant law is propagating a *falsehood* with every swing of the hammer. A lie is being propagated by every copycat Babel being erected. A deception is being inflicted upon the people by every promise of military protection. Further, *these lies are accepted* by a people intent on promoting autonomy and rejecting the Creator, Lawgiver, King, and Judge. This dovetails with Isaiah's description of "a refuge of lies" which God will overflow

(Isa. 28:15-18). Unmediated relationships are proactive lies that God overrules and overthrows.

PROVERBS 16:3 AND PSALM 127

Moreover, the teaching of Psalm 127 dovetails with the teaching of Prov. 16:3, “Commit thy works unto Jehovah. So will thy plans be established.” We meet here again the concept of our plans, our thoughts, our works, being *established*, again in the context of committing all our efforts unto the Lord God. Waltke’s comments on this scripture are pertinent here (note the reference²⁸ to Psalm 127):

When the motives are pure, He will integrate them into his fixed righteous order (Prov. 10:22; Psalm 127). The admonition *commit to* (literally “roll to/upon”) connotes a sense of finality; roll it unto *the Lord* and leave it there. ... The indirect object *the Lord*, the subunit’s key word, infers rolling away from oneself.²⁹

This reflects Rushdoony’s focus depicted in different words. To avoid a direct, unmediated work, you roll away the matter from yourself onto the Lord.

Secular man, who feels so self-confident, paradoxically is plagued with fear. Pious people, who know God’s sovereignty and their limitations, live in prayer and peace.³⁰

By observing a mediated relationship governed by God, we see the establishment of our labors (sometimes literally, but certainly with the eye of faith):

Plans and deeds performed in conjunction with a total commitment to the Lord *will be established* (see Prov. 4:26).³¹

Humanity participates with God in creating history, but God establishes only what is pure and purges away the dross.³²

It isn’t that work itself is futile, meaningless, or a lie, but rather that unmediated work is futile due to its vulnerability to being shaken in order that only unshakeable things will remain. Mediated work ranks among the unshakeable things – even if evil men destroy the physical aspects of a work, its impact on the world remains, “and their works shall follow them.” As Dr.

Great things happen when God’s people labor with all their strength as unto the Lord (Col. 3:22-23). God’s active blessing upon work done under obedience to His Law is transformative in a way few other things are, and this is by God’s specific appointment. It reflects His intention for how the world reaches the goal He has set for it.

Rushdoony noted, “When we work with the Lord, the results are far beyond what we can see so that our work is never in vain.”

Hengstenberg’s notes concerning Psalm 127³³ also speak to our age, especially when we read that “it is rich in consolation to those who are in adverse circumstances, paralyzed in their activity.”

The Psalmist has here before his eyes those who strive and labour without God. Hence, he renders only the one side prominent. ... It is not working, which since the fall is of divine ordination, and foresight that are condemned, but only the pernicious error, quite destructive of prayer, that one can succeed in accomplishing somewhat without the divine aid.³⁴

Even Satan acknowledged God’s participation in the productivity of Job, in a railing complaint that accuses God of protecting Job and blessing the work of his hands. When dealing with humans, Satan omits this background material because he wants man to pursue unmediated, direct relationships. Here, Satan is hot and bothered that Job pursues mediated relationships and enjoys the ensuing fruit of them.

Hast not thou made an hedge about him, and about his house, and about all that he hath on every side? thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his substance is increased in the land. (Job 1:10)

Satan seems to know his theology better than most Christians who hastily gloss over

Psalm 127 do. He is arguing that to get a fair assessment of Job's morality, Psalm 127:1 must be arbitrarily suspended. Satan knows that God operates in terms of that psalm's promises, and that Psalm 127 creates a big problem for Satan and his plans. But it was Job's determination to pursue governed, directed, established, mediated relationships that furnished the anchor point for his labors to leave their imprint upon the world.³⁵

WORK AS THE HIGHEST CALLING

Great things happen when God's people labor with all their strength as unto the Lord (Col. 3:22-23). God's active blessing upon work done under obedience to His Law is transformative in a way few other things are, and this is by God's specific appointment. It reflects His intention for how the world reaches the goal He has set for it.

Adam initially had this mind in him, to build God's kingdom by way of work under God's revealed covenantal order. As Warfield would put it, Adam was operating "under orders." Christian reconstruction today means putting that crucial emphasis back on the table, recognizing that the only other option is the socialists' coercive control of the world. Despite their efforts, God has appointed that the victory be won through the work of *your* hands, hands laboring in faithfulness, diligence, care, while modeling Christian excellence.

Never forget the pivot point that emerged during the reconstruction of Jerusalem under Nehemiah, when the scripture discloses the reason for the extraordinary achievements recorded: "for the people had a mind to work" (Neh. 4:6b).

Do you have a mind to work? 

1. R. J. Rushdoony, *Sermons in First and Second Corinthians* (Vallecito, CA: Chalcedon/Ross House Books, 2023), 195-196.
2. R. J. Rushdoony, *Systematic Theology in 2 Volumes* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1994), 1020.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid, 1023.
5. Ibid, 1023-1024.
6. Ibid, 1027.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. The Babel mentality entails replacing a mediated concept of work with an unmediated concept, reattempting the rebellion of Adam with the benefit of having strength in numbers.

11. John E. Meeter, ed., *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield, Volume Two* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), 729-734.
12. Ibid, 729-730.
13. Ibid, 730.
14. Ibid, 734.
15. Ibid.
16. <https://chalcedon.edu/resources/articles/the-smiths-of-zechariah>
17. <https://chalcedon.edu/resources/articles/johann-sebastian-bach-a-model-for-christian-excellence>
18. R. J. Rushdoony, "The Bond of Guilt Versus the Bond of Faith" in *Faith and Action, Vol. 2* (Vallecito, CA: Chalcedon/Ross House Books, 2019), 842-843.
19. The word "among" is properly rendered in the second half of the verse by *The Reformation Study Bible. The Pulpit Commentary* also commends "among" while also endorsing "good will" as correct. Bruce K. Waltke prefers the rendering "between upright people" and pinpoints the opposition between guilt and favor, but gets no further in satisfying the text before us. William Beck's translation of the verse leverages the Greek Septuagint, but footnote F acknowledges that the Hebrew reads "among the upright." *The Evangelical Heritage Bible* adopts "idea of guilt" instead of "guilt offering," which is a notable improvement on that one point. Remarkably, *The Living Bible* comes closer than most translations despite usually being a compromised paraphrase: it renders the verse "The common bond of rebels is their guilt. The common bond of godly people is goodwill." This may well be the last time you will see *The Living Bible* reading of a verse being endorsed in these pages.
20. Ibid, 843.
21. Ibid, 842-843.
22. James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms, Vol. 3* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 1119.
23. Ibid, 1117.
24. Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150 Revised Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 238.
25. Ibid, 240.
26. Ibid, 241.
27. Allen P. Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms: Volume Three* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2016), 680-681.
28. Ralph Wardlaw also connects Prov. 16:3 to Psalm 127, as do other expositors.
29. Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15-31* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 11.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid, 12.
33. Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg, *The Works of Hengstenberg, Volume 7: Psalms* (Cherry Hill, NJ: Mack Publishing, n.d.), 448.
34. Ibid, 449.
35. Job 31:1 is but one example of Job pursuing mediated (covenantally-proscribed) relationships. Christ Himself had only mediated relationships, while Moses after the exodus got into trouble the one time he entered an unmediated relationship and struck the rock with his staff in angry frustration. The populace of Sodom and Gomorrah sought an unmediated relationship with the visiting angels, to their everlasting regret.

There is no solution other than the long-term mission of Christian Reconstruction.

Rushdoony predicted the times in which we live which is why he focused the mission of Chalcedon on the great work of Christian Reconstruction. The only remedy to what we face is a return to Christian faith, character, and obedience.

Rushdoony wrote, “The Biblical doctrine of theocracy means the self-government of the Christian man,” (*Sovereignty*, p. 31) which means the Christian most needs the resources to equip him for Biblical self-government.

The Chalcedon Foundation is a “think-tank for the self-governing Christian,” and our mission is to equip Christian families and churches to apply the faith to every area of life and cultivate faithfulness to God’s law and covenant in order that Christ’s Kingdom might increase.

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