

REFORMED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

TAKIN' CARE OF BUSINESS:

A CASE FOR PAUL'S POSITIVE ATTITUDE TOWARDS WORK

SUBMITTED TO DR. BOB CARA
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
PAULINE EPISTLES NT520

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APRIL 24, 2015

I. INTRODUCTION

“Perhaps not since the Protestant Reformation,” writes Tim Keller, “has there been so much attention paid to the relationship of Christian faith to work as there is today.”¹ Reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin made a significant impact on the Christian view of work when they identified all forms of work (whether related to the visible church or not), as a calling from God.² More recently, the various books, articles, podcasts, and organizations that focus on this topic have continued to present and promote a positive view of work. They root this positive view of work in the Bible, which portrays work as something that was originally commanded and blessed by God prior to the fall of mankind (Gen 1:26, 28). The Bible also indicates how even though work was cursed and made more difficult as a result of the fall (Gen 3:17-19), God is in the process of redeeming all things through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ so that even the seemingly most secular of jobs can be done to the glory of God today (Col 1:19-20, 3:17; 1 Cor 10:31). There is even Biblical evidence that God’s people will continue to work in some way for eternity in the new heavens and new earth (Matt 25:33; Rev 22:3).

The Apostle Paul wrote much about work. In addition to writing on the subject, he also engaged in it. Paul supported himself through much of his Gospel ministry by working a trade.³ In Acts 18:3 Luke identified Paul as a σκηνοποιος, which is usually translated as a tentmaker. Critical scholars who might otherwise dismiss the historical reliability of Luke’s portrayal of Paul

¹ Tim Keller, *Every Good Endeavor* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2012), 19.

² Keller, *Endeavor*, 20.

³ Todd D. Still, “Did Paul Loathe Manual Labor? Revisiting the Work of Ronald F. Hock on the Apostle’s Tentmaking and Social Class,” *JBL* 125 (2006): 782.

consider him to be reliable on this point.⁴ The majority of scholars believe that this means that Paul was a leatherworker who made various leather products, including tents.⁵ This work is likely what Paul was referring to when he explained that he worked with his own hands and toiled night and day.⁶ Given that Paul was familiar with hard work throughout his own ministry, it would seem especially appropriate to cite Paul's writings as a specific example of the Bible's positive view of work. Surprisingly, however, academic scholars and commentators are divided regarding Paul's attitude towards work.

For a long time the generally accepted scholarly assumption was that Paul viewed work favorably.⁷ Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer wrote that even though, "Greeks despised manual labor," that "St Paul glories in it."⁸ This consensus was initially challenged in 1976 when Swedish scholar Goran Agrell distinguished between the positive view of work present in what he identified as the deutero-Pauline writings and what he believed to be more of a work-as-necessity view from what he identified as Paul's authentic writings.⁹ Shortly thereafter the consensus was more significantly challenged by Ronald F. Hock's writings, which included his extremely influential 1980 work *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry*.¹⁰ Hock proposed that Paul would have viewed work just like any other aristocrat at the time would have and that would

⁴ Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971) 538.

⁵ Still points out that there are still others who take it to mean that he was a weaver who made tent cloth from goat's hair (Still, "Labor," 781).

⁶ 1 Cor 4:12; Acts 20:34; 1 Thess 2:9.

⁷ Still, "Labor," 782.

⁸ Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians*, Second Edition (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1914) 87.

⁹ Goran Agrell, *Work, Toil and Sustenance: An Examination of the View of Work in the New Testament, Taking into Consideration Views Found in Old Testament, Intertestamental, and Early Rabbinic Writings* (Lund: Verbum, 1976) 261.

¹⁰ Still, "Labor," 782.

have been as “something slavish and demeaning.”¹¹ Over the past thirty-five years many of those who have commented on the topic have adopted Hock’s view as their own.¹² Many others still maintain some version of the old consensus view that Paul felt positively about work.¹³ The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that though Paul sometimes used harsh language to describe the hardship of work, he consistently espoused a positive attitude towards it.

II. A SNOBISH AND SCORNFUL ATTITUDE?

Before making the case for Paul’s good but hard view of work, a more explicit and thorough examination and critique of Hock’s view is necessary. Agrell’s work will not be addressed as directly because his argument rests primarily on the supposedly deutero-Pauline epistles being the product of a Pauline tradition as opposed to Paul himself. It is the opinion of this writer that Paul did write all the epistles that are attributed to him in the NT canon. Additionally, in the following paper enough examples of Paul’s positive view of labor will be presented from his uncontested epistles that Agrell’s contention will be laid to rest. Hock’s

¹¹ Ronald F. Hock, “Paul’s Tentmaking and the Problem of His Social Class,” *JBL* 97, no. 4 (1978): 562.

¹² Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans, 2002) 130-131; Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (IBC; Louisville: John Knox, 1997) 151; Peter Marshall, *Enmity in Corinth: Social Conventions in Paul’s Relations with the Corinthians* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1987), 359; John B. Polhill, *Paul and His Letters* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 190; Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 86-89; Abraham J. Malherbe, “Antisthenes and Odysseus, and Paul at War,” *HTR* 76, no. 2 (1983):168-169; David Stiles, “Jesus and Work: The Role of Work and Vocation in the Gospels” (MA thes., Reformed Theological Seminary, 2011), 81.

¹³ Still, “Labor,” 781-795; Robertson and Plummer, *Corinthians*, 87; Earl J. Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians* (SacPag; Collegeville: The Liturgical, 1995) 211-212; Richard S. Ascough, “The Thessalonian Christian Community As a Professional Voluntary Association,” *JBL* 119 (2000): 314; Arther T. Geoghegan, *The Attitude Towards Labour in Early Christianity and Ancient Culture* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1945) 112; Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) 71-72; Nils Alstrup Dahl, *Studies in Paul: Theology for the Early Christian Mission* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977) 37; Timothy B. Savage, *Power through Weakness: Paul’s Understanding of the Christian Ministry in 2 Corinthians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 86; Hugh Whelchel, *How Then Should We Work?: Rediscovering the Biblical Doctrine of Work* (Bloomington: Thomas Nelson, 2012).

argument on the other hand is more formulated and has also been much more influential and therefore requires more direct attention.

Hock's argument that Paul held the same "snobbish and scornful attitude" towards work that was typical of upper class Greeks and Romans is primarily based on his understanding of Greco-Roman attitudes towards work among the upper-classes and his interpretation of a few key verses from the Corinthian correspondence.¹⁴ Citing various literary sources from the time like Cicero and Plutarch, Hock makes the case that the upper-crust of Greco-Roman society viewed manual labor with disdain.¹⁵ He also then makes the case that Paul originated from the upper classes and therefore would have shared said negative views. This conclusion then heavily influences Hock's exegesis of the verses that serve as his main basis of support from Paul's actual writings.¹⁶

In 1 Cor 4:12 Paul lists manual labor alongside an array of other apostolic perils he faced including being hungry, thirsty, poorly dressed, buffeted, and homeless. This, Hock contends, is clear evidence that Paul "viewed his working at a trade none too positively."¹⁷ Later when Paul writes in 1 Cor 9:19, "For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant of all, that I might win more of them," Hock contends that he is referring to his plying of a trade. Hock acknowledges that only one previous commentator interprets the verse this way.¹⁸ The reason why so many commentators get it wrong, he argues, is because they associate 1 Cor 9:19 with what comes after it ("To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews...") and therefore interpret it as a general missionary principle. He believes that the verse should instead be read

¹⁴ Hock, "Paul the Tentmaker," 558-562. See also Still, "Labor," 793.

¹⁵ Hock, "Paul the Tentmaker," 560.

¹⁶ 1 Cor 4:12, 9:19; 2 Cor 11:7.

¹⁷ Ronald F. Hock, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1980) 67.

¹⁸ Arthur P. Stanley, *The Epistles of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (London: Murray, 1858) 156.

in light of what comes before it, which is a passage that focuses on Paul's preaching the Gospel free of charge. According to Hock, Paul is explaining how in order for him to provide said service, he had to become like a servant or a δουλος in that he had to work with his hands. Rather than interpreting δουλος in a more general sense, Hock believes that it needs to be interpreted as a manual worker. Hock contends that our interpretation of that word should be primarily based on the preceding context and Greco-Roman understandings of the term as opposed to Paul's usages of the term elsewhere.¹⁹ According to this understanding of the verse, Paul is essentially saying that he desired so much for converts among the Corinthians, that he was willing to get his hands dirty by engaging in slavish and demeaning manual labor for their sake.

When Paul asks the rhetorical question in 2 Cor 11:7, "Or did I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached God's gospel to you free of charge?" Hock argues that Paul's humbling of himself has a more specific meaning than most commentators realize. While he cites several commentators who do associate Paul's humbling himself in this verse with both his having to accept gifts and his working of a trade, few commentators, he argues, recognize the social dimension of the humbling.²⁰ Hock again thinks that commentators focus too much on a religious interpretation of the word humbling or ταπεινουν as being rooted in the teachings of Jesus and instead he favors a sociological understanding of the term based on Greco-Roman uses, which would point more towards a willingness to engage in a demeaning practice like manual labor.

¹⁹ Hock, "Paul the Tentmaker," 559.

²⁰ Hock, "Paul the Tentmaker," 561.

The previous paragraphs are a brief summary of Hock's primary evidence for Paul having a negative view of work. As one critic surmised, "Hock has done too much with too little."²¹ The problems with Hock's argument are threefold. First, his sociological understanding of attitudes towards work among the social classes during Paul's lifetime is based on a pool of resources that is far too narrow. While he cites Greco-Roman literature, he fails to take into account the distinct possibility that Paul might have been even more influenced by the Hebrew writings of the OT, which happen to have an overtly positive view of work. He also neglects to take into account first century archeological evidence like tomb stones and funerary reliefs that proudly depict the deceased engaged in their trade or craft for the entire living world to see after their death.²²

The second major problem with Hock's argument is that he allows his sociological assumptions to drive his exegesis. For example, not once, but twice he consciously chooses to define the meaning of a word that Paul uses not based on how Paul or Jesus used it elsewhere but instead based upon on how Greco-Roman sources used it.

Finally, Hock fails to adequately address the remaining plethora of positive references to work made by Paul in the rest of his writings. Part of this is because, like Agrell, Hock dismisses certain epistles as being inauthentic. He acknowledges for example, that 2 Thessalonians 3 presents a positive view of work and that it highlights Paul's work as an exemplary model for others to follow but he dismisses it as being deutero-Pauline.²³

²¹ Still, "Labor," 788.

²² Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 85.

²³ Still points out that in Hock's review of Malherbe's commentary on the Thessalonian letters that Malherbe's defense of the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians "should persuade many scholars to add 2 Thessalonians to the seven authentic letters of Paul when reconstructing his life and theology" (Still, "Labor," 789). I wonder how this evolution in Hock's view may or may not change his interpretation of Paul's attitude towards work!

III. THE REASON FOR WORK

In addition to the explicit references to work present in Paul's letters, he also frequently alludes to it in more subtle ways. If Hock's hypothesis were correct, one would expect this abundance of references to back up his view that Paul saw work as demeaning. On the contrary, an examination of what Paul writes reveals a positive, albeit harsh, view of work.

While Paul never says outright, "I like work" or "I don't like work," he does regularly encourage others to work, make mention of his own work, and instruct people to do good things that are dependent upon work as a prerequisite. Though it is impossible to read Paul's mind on this subject and determine his feelings with exact exegetical certainty, a reasonable conclusion can be drawn when one examines Paul's references to work and the reasons that he presents for it. Taken together, these references reveal an assortment of positive reasons for work and therefore reflect Paul's positive attitude towards it.²⁴ The various positive reasons for work evident from Paul's writings are to receive compensation, to achieve self-sufficiency, to be a witness to a watching world, to provide for others in need, to grow in sanctification, to support Gospel ministry, and to give God glory.

The most straightforward reason for work evident in Paul's writings is that it is a means to receive compensation in the form of material provision. For example, while speaking about ministry work in 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul quotes a general work principle from Jesus that applies to all fields of work when he writes, "The laborer deserves his wages."²⁵ He refers to this same principle in 1 Corinthians 9 he asks the rhetorical questions, "Who serves as a soldier at his own

²⁴ Geoghegan agrees with this line of reasoning when he writes, "In the light of the motives presented for labor, it is evident that St. Paul set a high value on labor" (Geoghegan, *Attitude Towards Labour*, 117).

²⁵ 1 Tim 5:18.

expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit?”²⁶ In 2 Timothy 2 we get another glimpse of Paul’s view of work when he writes, “It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops.”²⁷ Paul clearly views work as a positive means to acquiring material provision.

Paul also makes it clear how gaining access to material provision is not so that one can live in excess but instead so that they can be self-sufficient. In 1 Thessalonians 4 Paul instructs the Thessalonians to work with their hands so that they would be “dependent on no one.”²⁸ Dependency on others made one a burden to their community.²⁹ In 2 Thessalonians he elaborates on this instruction. Paul and set an example for the believers in Thessalonica by working night and day so that he would not be a burden to anyone. He did not eat anyone’s bread without paying for it and he commanded those who failed to work, assuming they were physically able to, should not receive provisions from others. The reason for this is that, “those who imposed on the generosity of their fellows were not living in love.”³⁰ Paul commanded and urged in the Lord that anyone who was able to should “earn their own living.” The general idea is that Christians are supposed to live orderly lives by supporting themselves and not depending unnecessarily on others in the community.³¹

A purpose that dovetails with self-sufficiency is for Christians to be a good witness to a watching world. When Paul instructs the Thessalonians to work with their own hands in 1 Thessalonians 4 he says that they should do it so that they may “walk properly before

²⁶ 1 Cor 9:7.

²⁷ 2 Tim 2:6.

²⁸ 1 Thess 4:12.

²⁹ Ernest Best, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (BNTC 13; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1972) 178.

³⁰ Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans, 1959) 135.

³¹ John W. Bailey, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (IB 11; New York: Abingdon, 1955) 300.

outsiders.”³² Apparently some in the Thessalonian church were selfishly engaging in idleness that made them dependent upon the generosity of others in the church.³³ Not only did this negatively impact the immediate church, but it also hindered the church’s reputation in the surrounding community. As Jonathan Bailey notes, it is important for those in the church to “walk in a way that will command the respect of outsiders” and apparently they were not doing that.³⁴ This positive evangelistic purpose is also evident when Paul’s instructs slaves to regard their masters as worthy of all honor, “so that the name of God and the teaching may not be reviled.”³⁵ The idea here is that the believing slave would serve his or her master more faithfully because the reputation of Christ and the church would be associated with the quality of his or her work.³⁶

While work should not be used to provide for the strong and lazy, Paul argues that it should be used to provide for the weak and needy. In Ephesians Paul writes that the thief should no longer steal but instead should “labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.”³⁷ The material compensation that one receives from work is to be used to for the good of others. This is consistent with Paul’s encouragement to “contribute to the needs of the saints.”³⁸ Paul’s instructions for the collection in 1 Corinthians 16 and 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 also imply some sort of regular income that would come in the form of compensation for regular work.

³² 1 Thess 4:12.

³³ G.K Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians* (IVPNTC 13; Downers Grove: InterVarsity) 127.

³⁴ Bailey, *Thessalonians*, 300.

³⁵ 1 Tim 6:1.

³⁶ F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans, 1984) 168-169.

³⁷ Eph 4:28.

³⁸ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (WBC 42; Dallas: Word, 1990) 304.

Paul also makes it clear that even apart from special collections, that compensation for work should be used to care for one's spiritual family in the church and especially for one's own immediate family when he warns, "But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for the members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever."³⁹ The reasoning here is that even unbelievers know that they should use their compensation to care for their own family and therefore for a Christian to fail to do so would make them worse than an unbeliever.⁴⁰ Christians should be set apart in how they use their material abundance to alleviate any lack among others.

In 1 Tim 6:2 Paul also instructs slaves who have believing masters to "serve all the better since those who benefit by their good service are believers and beloved." This is another incident in which one's work serves the good of another and is especially valuable because it blesses another from the household of the faith. In order to "do good to everyone, especially to those who are of the household of faith," slaves, servants, and employees will, by implication, have to provide good services to those who are in authority over them.⁴¹

Though it is not from his writings, Paul's speech to the Ephesian elders also corroborates alleviating the needs of others as a positive reason for work. In Acts 20:34-35 Luke records Paul as saying:

You yourselves know that these hands ministered to *my necessities and to those who were with me*. In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must *help the weak* and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'⁴²

³⁹ 1 Tim 5:8.

⁴⁰ George W. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1992) 221. (1992).

⁴¹ Gal 6:10.

⁴² Italics mine.

Paul worked with his own hands not only to provide for himself but also to provide for those who traveled with him and were presumably unable to provide for themselves. Paul not only commends working in order to do this, but he specifically demonstrates how “working hard” will make doing this increasingly possible.

Another purpose associated with what Paul writes in Eph 4:28, is that work is a part of the sanctification process. The thief who used to use his hands to deprive others is now instructed to use his hands to provide for others. It is not enough for the Christian to simply not steal—to stop using their hands for evil. Christian sanctification also requires the former thief to use their hands for something good. It is worth noting here that the work is not only good because it results in sharing with others but it is good in and of itself. The Greek word that is gets translated as “honest work” is *αγαθον*, which has at its root the notion of something good or worthwhile.⁴³

This same purpose of sanctification is implied in 2 Thess 3:11 where Paul writes, mentions that some “walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies.” While commentators disagree on exactly what Paul means by being a busybody, what is clear is that it is a negative thing and that Paul contrasts it with being busy at work.⁴⁴ In other words, being busy at work will make it harder for someone to become a busybody. In 1 Timothy Paul similarly connects idleness with sin when he describes how easily younger widows can learn idleness and become busybodies.⁴⁵ The implication in both of these passages is that if idleness leads to sin, then engaging in good and God honoring work will help Christians to avoid it. There are also several

⁴³ Bryan Chapell, *Ephesians* (REC; Phillipsburg: P&R, 2009) 225.

⁴⁴ Green, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, 351.

⁴⁵ These verses certainly seem to give some Scriptural credence to the proverb, “Idle hands are the devil’s playground.”

commentators who see Paul's instruction to not grow weary in "doing good" in 2 Thess 3:13 and Gal 6:9 as more than just an encouragement to be nice but instead as a specific command to engage in work that is, in and of itself, good.⁴⁶

In regards to Paul's own manual labor, the clearest purpose for it that he presents is that it was to support gospel ministry. Paul told the Thessalonians that he labored night and day so as to not be a burden, "while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God."⁴⁷ This most likely means that he worked during parts of the day and predawn hours and not that he worked all day and night.⁴⁸ Despite being financially supported by churches that he visited previously, he supplemented such giving by plying his trade.⁴⁹ In fact, while at Thessalonica, he received funds from the church at Philippi.⁵⁰ Paul's reason for doing this and not requesting compensation from those that he ministered to was so that he could "distinguish himself from many freeloading and avaricious preachers of the day."⁵¹ In 1 Corinthians 9 Paul explains how he would rather do manual labor to support himself "than put an obstacle in the way of the Gospel of Christ" by accepting the compensation he was owed for his ministry. His manual labor was intended to enhance his evangelism and pastoral nurture for the new and young churches that he was serving.⁵²

⁴⁶ Christopher H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010) 234; Bruce W. Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens* (Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans, 1994) 58.

⁴⁷ 1 Thess 2:9; Paul repeats this in 2 Thess 3:7-8.

⁴⁸ Robert J. Cara, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Evangelical Press Study Commentary; Faverdale North: EP BOOKS, 2009) 65.

⁴⁹ Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (NTC; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1997) 369.

⁵⁰ Cara, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 66.

⁵¹ Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 2000) 148.

⁵² Margaret E. Thrall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (ICC; New York: T&T Clark, 2000) 2:704.

What is most notable from Paul's discussion of this practice in 1 Corinthians 9 is how he expresses his personal pride in the fact that he is self-supporting. He clarifies that he is not asking for compensation for his ministry and that he would have no use for it because he would "rather die than have anyone deprive me of my ground for boasting."⁵³ The implication here is that Paul considers his labor as something positive and worth boasting in because it enabled him to offer his ministry free of charge. Paul boasted in his manual labor because of what it enabled him to do.

One final positive reason for work evident in Paul's writings is that brings God glory. In Paul's instructions to bondservants in Ephesians 6 and Colossians 3 he says that they should obey their masters as they would obey Christ and that they should complete their work as if it were done for the Lord and not for men. Lawful work that provided a service to others could be considered as being done as a service to God. A broader aspect of this principle is reiterated in 1 Cor 10:31 where Paul instructs, "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."⁵⁴ In addition to eating and drinking, this instruction would certainly also apply to the daily work of a Christian. In Ephesians 6 and Colossians 3 it is also evident that God sees the work that people do as well as the motives that they do it with and that one day people will either receive reward or judgement for how they approached their work.

In the writings of Paul, various reasons for work are present. It is the secondary means by which God provides material blessings to his people, it is what enables individuals to be self-sufficient so as to not be a burden to their community, it is one way in which Christians can be a witness to a watching world, it enables people to care for others in need, it is a means of

⁵³ 1 Cor 9:16.

⁵⁴ See also Col 3:17.

sanctification, it can be used to support explicit Gospel ministry, and it is a way God's people can give him glory. With such a wide range of positive reasons for engaging in work, it is hard to conclude that Paul would have viewed work with anything less than a positive attitude.

IV. HARD BUT GOOD

While the evidence demonstrates that Paul held a positive view of work, it also cannot be denied, as Timothy B. Savage rightly notes, that Paul sometimes spoke of his own labor in "harsh terms."⁵⁵ As was mentioned earlier, in 1 Corinthians 4 Paul lists his labor among other perils: "To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands."⁵⁶ Then again in 2 Cor 11:23 when comparing himself to his opponents he writes, "Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with *far greater labors*, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death."⁵⁷ Likewise, in regard to 1 Thess 2:9 Charles Wanamaker points out how there is little to distinguish 'labor and toil' in the passage, "but together they stress the considerable efforts to which Paul went, even to the point of hardship and deprivation, in order to avoid becoming a burden to his converts."⁵⁸

Paul most definitely spoke of his work as hard but this does not mean that the reader should conclude that he viewed work negatively. Savage points out that when Paul uses harsh terms, he is often referring particularly to the "physical strain" of his labor.⁵⁹ Paul "draws attention to his *surpassing* toil (εν κοποις περισσοτερως, 2 Cor 11:23), his *intense* labour

⁵⁵ Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 86.

⁵⁶ 1 Cor 4:11-12.

⁵⁷ Italics mine.

⁵⁸ Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans, 1990) 103.

⁵⁹ Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 86.

(κοπω καὶ μοχθω, 11:27) and his *long* hours (νυκτοσ καὶ ημερασ εργαζομενοι, 1 Thess 2:9).

Yet he always stops short of disparaging work itself.”⁶⁰

Paul also frequently speaks of his gospel ministry in terms of toil and labor.⁶¹ In several of the instances where Paul does this, he makes specific reference to ministry being hard work.⁶² The idea that ministry is hard work is also emphasized in 1 Tim 5:17 where Paul says that those who are engaged in ministry as elders should be considered worthy of double honor because of the especially hard work that they do. Similarly, in 1 Thess 5:12-13 Paul instructs his readers to, “respect those who labor among you in the Lord and admonish you and to esteem them very highly in love *because of their work.*”⁶³ Though Paul clearly views ministry as being hard, it does not then follow that he has a negative attitude towards it. Likewise, just because Paul describes manual labor as being hard, it does not follow that he has a negative attitude towards that either. On the contrary, Paul views both as hard but good.

This very simple description of work as being something both hard and good lines up with the theological dispensation of redemptive history in which Paul lived. Prior to the fall of humanity work was good and blessed by God. After the fall it was still good but it was cursed in the sense that it became more difficult and less fruitful. Work continued this way up until the ministry of Jesus Christ. Thanks to the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus and the resulting indwelling of the Holy Spirit in God’s people, work experienced a redemptive transformation whereby God’s people became increasingly able to see their work in light of God’s eternal purposes. The curse is experiencing its reversal but its reversal is not yet

⁶⁰ Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 86.

⁶¹ See Rom 16:6,12; 1 Cor 3:13-15, 15:10, 58, 16:16; Phil 1:6, 2:16, 30; 1 Thess 1:3 and 5:12 as originally cited by Justin J. Meggit (Justin J. Meggit, *Paul, Poverty and Survival* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998) 89).

⁶² Rom 16:6, 12; 1 Cor 15:10; Phil 2:30.

⁶³ Italics mine.

complete. Therefore, work continues to be difficult even if Paul provides us with increased positive motivations for engaging in it.

V. CONCLUSION

The conclusion that Paul views work positively, albeit harshly, is much more consistent with the writings of the OT as well as the teachings of Jesus and the other Apostles that we see in the NT. Their message is that work is good but still hard and that same attitude is also what Paul demonstrates in his writings.

What does this mean for Christians today? Christopher Wright seeks to answer that question when he writes, “Work is still a creational good. It is *good* to work, and it is good to *do good* by working. All this is part of the mission of God’s people.”⁶⁴ Christians should therefore view their work positively and engage in work if they are able, so that they may pursue the various purposes that Paul identified for work in his writings. This also means that Christians should be willing to engage in hard work. Rather than seeing work as something slavish or even as something that is morally neutral, the Christian needs to adopt a redemptive view of work that is more in line with what Paul and the rest of the Bible teaches.

⁶⁴ Wright, *Mission*, 234.