Slaves or Sabbath-Keepers?
A Biblical Perspective on Human Work

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I begin with an explanation of my title. My aim here is to show how the Bible sets forth two systems of human work, systems which are not just different but fundamentally opposed. One is the work system promoted by industrial cultures. Of course, a fully industrialized culture such as ours is a modern phenomenon. But the basic type was already well known to the biblical writers; their historical model for it was Pharaoh’s Egypt. Slavery in Egypt is the great biblical symbol for bad work, a system of work that is oblivious to God and God’s intentions for the world. The second and opposite understanding of work is not so easily assigned a social or historical location. Rather, it exists within the context of a certain theological worldview. I refer to the understanding of human work that develops when the world is seen as God’s creation. This is, of course, the theological understanding of work that the biblical writers seek to promote. And the primary symbol they choose to express and promote good work, work that recognizes God’s intentions for the world, is the Sabbath.

It is important to recognize at the outset that following the Bible’s prompting to embrace a Sabbath-oriented view of work would be for us a distinctly countercultural move—and for that reason, all the more urgent. In my judgment, articulating and embracing a biblical view of human work is one of the most crucial tasks for the Church in our generation.

Toward an Anglican Theology of Work

A preliminary but important matter before I turn to the Bible itself: Why take up this subject of work at a conference devoted specifically to Anglican approaches to Scripture, both old and new? In a

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word, I take it up in order to continue the theological revolution that began with the Reformation, and especially to underscore one distinctive contribution of the English Reformers. For they did more than any other Protestants to develop a new theology of work-in-the-world. They offered this innovative theology to counter the Roman Church’s ideal of holy work done in the cloister or the chancel; the Reformers challenged the well-established idea that the best work is done in some measure of withdrawal from the world. Martin Luther had already presented a different image in a Christmas sermon, when he envisioned the Blessed Virgin with a broom in hand—not a prayer book, as medieval artists had commonly portrayed her. Mary is sweeping up when the angel Gabriel arrives with his surprising news. Calvin, too, was profoundly concerned with the Christian’s calling to be a saint busy with the tasks of life in the world. Yet it was the early English Protestants who gave most probing thought and creative expression to a new ethic of secular work as the touchstone of Protestant spirituality. George Herbert’s poem\(^1\) may be the best-known expression of the spiritual value that seventeenth-century English Protestants placed on ordinary labor:

Teach me, my God and King,
in all things thee to see,
and what I do in anything, to do it as for thee.

All may of thee partake;
nothing can be so mean,
which with this tincture, “for thy sake,”
will not grow bright and clean.

A servant with this clause
makes drudgery divine:
who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,
makes that and the action fine.

This is the famous stone
that turneth all to gold;
for that which God doth touch and own
cannot for less be told.

Elsewhere, Herbert’s Country Parson reckons “the great and national sin of the land . . . to be idleness.” The Parson “represents to everybody the necessity of a vocation. . . . All are either to have a Calling or prepare for it.” Every Christian is called to labor sanctified by prayer. That was a sufficiently radical message for the aristocrat Herbert to address to his own class of landed gentry. But Herbert’s older contemporary Joseph Hall went much further in exploring the theological, social, and economic dimensions of this aspect of Protestant spirituality. Maybe the reason Hall had a deeper feel for the spiritual value of ordinary work is that he was himself born into the laboring class. Both clergies were born on great estates, but whereas Herbert was reared in a castle, the Anglican Puritan Hall was the son of a steward. In various writings, Joseph Hall looks at work from the perspectives of both Christian anthropology and social justice. On the one hand, he views labor outside the sanctuary as an indispensable element of the faithful life and therefore of human happiness. On the other hand, Hall was probably the Church’s most outspoken critic of social evils associated with the newly emergent mercantile economy.

Hall argues that work is part of the original happiness of humanity; it belongs to our created nature. The early English Protestants rejected the Thomistic view that manual labor has a penal aspect, derived from Adam’s punishment.\(^4\) On the contrary, Adam’s work of tending the garden is part of the joy of Paradise itself. Hall observes, “[Adam] must labor, because he was happy; how much more we, that we may be? . . . How much more cheerfully we go about our businesses, so much nearer we come to our Paradise.”\(^5\) Moreover, the biblical history shows that those closest to God engage in honest labor, though it be hard and even apparently demeaning. Adam worked a garden in Eden, and Moses was a shepherd as many years as he was a courtier. In clear and engaging terms Hall presents the new spiritual valuation of manual labor, and the corresponding admission that “church work” is not invariably pleasing to God:

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1. This abbreviated version of “The Elixir” appears as Hymn #592 in The Hymnal 1982.


3. That Herbert is thinking primarily of the idle rich is evident from the rest of this section, which urges the responsibilities of maintaining one’s grounds and also assuming public office (in this case, Justice of the Peace).


5. Cited in George and George, p. 133.
The holiest service that we do in an honest calling, though it be but to plow or dig, if done in obedience, and conscience of God's Commandment, is crowned with an ample reward; whereas the best works of their kind (preaching, praying, offering evangelical sacrifices), if without respect of God's injunction and glory, are loaded with curses. God loveth adverbs, and cares not how good, but how well.6

Yet Hall did not romanticize the life of the manual laborer in his own day. On the contrary, if he probed the subject of work deeply, it was just because he saw that the great “success” of the new economic order in England was in fact resulting in the suffering of many. Public lands were being enclosed; inflation was rampant and usury7 common; villages were widely depopulated as former farmers and artisans lost land and employment; hordes of beggars and vagrants were seen on roads and in cities. Hall knew the suffering of villagers firsthand. He and his family had lived many years in penury before he became chaplain first in a great house and then to the Crown Prince, and later Bishop of the prosperous see of Exeter. Even when he advanced into court circles, Hall did not fear to imitate the biblical prophets’ indictment of the wealthy: “ye that grind faces like edge-tools, and spill blood like water.”8 Again, he takes his cue from the prophets in denouncing an economic and social order that censures “not the oppressing gentleman that tyrannizes over his cottagers, encroaches upon his neighbor’s inheritance, encloses commons, depopulates villages, scours his tenants to death, but the poor souls that when they are crushed, yield the juice of tears, exhibit bits of complaint . . . ; would these men be content to be quietly racked and spoiled, there would be peace.”9

The early English Protestants began a revolution in the way Christians thought about work, but they did not complete it. In their masterful study The Protestant Mind of the English Reformation, 1570–1640, Charles and Katherine George identify the “historical tragedy” of the Protestant clergy as their helplessness “before the accelerating triumph of modern capitalist institutions and the acquisitive rationale that sprang up, weed-like, in the garden of their carefully-nurtured Christian sentiments about economics as a moral science.”10 The nineteenth-century Industrial Revolution again made the plight of workers a focus of concern among Anglicans, but little theological attention was given to the phenomenon of human work itself. As far as I know, among modern Christians it is the English Roman Catholic Eric Gill who has given the most consistent attention to developing an understanding of work that is profoundly shaped by biblical thought.11 Indeed, Gill devoted his life to articulating, in both practice and writing, a notion of skillful labor conceived as the practice of holiness, a notion that entails radical rejection of the values of industrial culture.12

So this address may be seen as a small effort to reopen the subject of human work as a concern of Anglican theology. The need for theological reflection in this area is now acute, for the technological innovations of our own lifetime have greatly magnified the consequences of human work and the distortions to which it is prone. Indeed, work is now consequential to a degree unprecedented in the history of the world. I think there is no question that the chief causes of the ecological crisis are human work13 and population growth, and that those two are related in very complex ways. Suffice it to say here that human work has in our lifetime affected changes in the biosphere that were previously unimaginable and may well be irreversible. I think of global warming, holes in the ozone layer, destruction of forests, radiation and chemical poisoning of soil and water, gene-splicing, and also of less-publicized effects, such as the drastic reduction of arable land.

6 Ibid., p. 139n.
7 In contrast to medieval clerics, the early Protestant divines were “aggressively and uniformly disapproving” of the practice of lending money at interest, whether that meant speculation among the rich or profiting from the needs of the poor. George and George see here the crux of “their basic moral objection to the spirit of capitalism” (pp. 166–169). To them the moneylender represented an economic ethic whose aim was primarily individual profit, without regard for any social or religious good.
8 Ibid., p. 150.
9 Ibid., p. 151.
10 Ibid., pp. 120–121.
11 An overview of Gill’s work is available in A Holy Tradition of Working: Passages from the Writings of Eric Gill (Ipswich, UK: Golgonooza Press, 1983).
13 Miroslav Volf comments thus: “It is safe to claim that human work is the cause of ecological problems. If the ecological crisis is a crisis of the whole life-system (as it certainly is), then the ecological crisis calls into question the kind of work that is causing that crisis. Such work is a form of long-term self-destructive behavior of the human race” (Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work; New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 42.
impoveryishment of the global seed-base to a degree that imperils the food supply of the future. Of course, technological change has brought short-term benefit to us in the Industrial West, whose lives are exceedingly long and comfortable compared to the lives of virtually everyone who lived on the planet before us, and most of those who live on it now with us. But the long-term effect of these many biospheric changes is likely to be that life will be considerably harder and more precarious for future generations, that our own grandchildren and great-grandchildren will struggle under burdens we are now preparing for them, that they will wonder and grieve—and rage—at our heedlessness.

It is time to reopen a Christian inquiry into human work; it is imperative that we discover or recover an understanding of the kind of work that is good for us, our children, and the other creatures of this world. In other words, we must seek to understand what kind of work is congruent with our created nature. One of my own new discoveries in study of the Bible is that Exodus may be the book that helps us most in that regard.

Slavery, Sabbath, and Good Work: The Book of Exodus

Consider this: The Book of Exodus contains the most extensive picture of human work found anywhere in the Bible. That is the account of the construction of the Tabernacle, the portable sanctuary; instructions and detailed reports of their execution occupy thirteen chapters—not, at first glance, the most compelling narrative in the Bible. But here is an interesting thing: exactly the same amount of space, thirteen chapters, is devoted to the account of Israel in Egypt. This balanced treatment is almost certainly no coincidence. Exodus is setting before us two lengthy, vivid pictures. In the first thirteen chapters, we see Israel enslaved in Egypt, trapped in "that iron furnace" (Deut. 4:20), the great industrial killing machine of Pharaonic Egypt. There Israel builds store cities for a king so deluded he thinks he is a god. Then at the other end of the book, thirteen chapters portray Israel’s first concerted activity in freedom. Israel’s first “public work” is to build a sanctuary for her God, who is of course the real God. These two long narratives at beginning and end are a sort of unmatched pair, designed to contrast absolutely. They are respectively, perverted work, designed by Pharaoh to destroy God’s people, and divinely mandated work, designed to bring together God and God’s people, in the closest proximity possible in this life. That is what worship is for.

Bad work and good work—that’s beautifully simple, isn’t it? Now I want to complicate (or enrich) the picture by adding the concept of Sabbath, which is always mixed into the way the Bible talks about work. Indeed, the themes of Sabbath and work run like twin threads, interwoven all through the book of Exodus. Interestingly, the first time we hear Sabbath mentioned is from Pharaoh’s mouth, in his very first speech. This is immediately after Moses and Aaron have appeared in court to state God’s demand: “Thus says YHWH God of Israel: Let my people go so they may make pilgrimage to me in the wilderness.” And now listen to Pharaoh’s answer: “Who is this YHWH, that I should listen to his voice, to let Israel go? I don’t know any YHWH, and I’m not going to let Israel go, either.” And when they persist in their request, Pharaoh says this: "Why, Moses and Aaron, would you let the people run amok from their jobs? Get back to your loads! Look, the people of the earth, 14 are already too many—and you would give them—sabbath (v shin bashetem) from their loads?!” (Ex. 5:2–5). It’s at this point that Pharaoh takes away the straw: “Let them feel the weight of their slavery!” he says (5:9).

“And you would give them sabbath from their loads? . . . Let them feel the weight of their slavery!” The slave system, the industrial system, is work without Sabbath. And in the theological framework of Exodus, that means work that takes no account of God the Creator. For that is what Sabbath is in Exodus: the way Israel holds its own face before the Creator in the same seven-day cycle that “in six days YHWH made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them; and he rested on the seventh day. Therefore YHWH blessed the seventh day and made it holy” (Ex. 20:11). That is the reason Exodus consistently gives for keeping Sabbath—(cf. 31:17). Yet Deuteronomy’s version of the Decalogue gives a humanitarian reason for Sabbath observance: Let your child and your slave and your ox rest. Yet Exodus seems only to be interested in Sabbath as an act of initium Dei; it is our imitation of God the Creator. The theology of Exodus is wholly theocentric and, moreover,

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14 It is telling that Israel is so named by Pharaoh. As I discuss below, Exodus is consistently concerned that Israel identify and honor God as the One who created the heavens and the earth. Even in his hostility to Israel and her God, Pharaoh characterizes Israel as a people who belong fundamentally to the earth. Within the theology of Exodus, the implication is clear that they are bound to worship the God who created it.
it is creation-oriented, the Sabbath commandment fits that theological pattern. This is arguably the most important of the Ten Commandments: It is far longer than any of the others (it occupies about a third of the Decalogue), and it is the most frequently repeated of all 613 commandments in Torah. Fittingly, then, this most important commandment looks back to the very first story of the Bible and underscores its chief point: Creation achieves its culmination and crown, not with the appearance of homo sapiens on the sixth day, but with the Sabbath on the seventh.

There is good biblical evidence that homo sapiens finds its proper place in the created order only through observance of Sabbath. It is a fact too little noted: Sabbath—and not humanity itself—is the only aspect of creation that specifically receives a blessing from God. Sabbath is a kind of sphere of blessing into which we are invited, indeed commanded, to enter. And there we discover who we really are in relationship to God. Now think about this. Sabbath is the day when God rested from the exquisitely demanding work of creating the world. When you’ve completed some huge task, with whom do you want to share your downtime? With your family, your friends, your intimates. So this gives us our first clue that God regards Israel, humanity, us, as potential intimates. Sabbath, the crown of creation, is an invitation extended obliquely to humanity, inviting us to be intimate with God. And good work, as the Bible conceives it, always leaves us free to accept that invitation. In fact, we are expected to accept it. (It’s like being invited to lunch by the Archbishop of Canterbury; when it happens, you are expected to squeeze it into your calendar.)

The essential connection between Sabbath and good work is evident in Exodus 35, which is the beginning of the actual construction of the Tabernacle. It is important to get some narrative perspective on that event by locating it within the larger structure of Exodus. The instructions to build the Tabernacle appear in chapters 25–31, immediately following the dramatic “ratification ceremony” for the Sinai Covenant, when Moses throws blood on the people. Then Moses sets off for his forty days on the mountain. It is noteworthy that the sole reported content of the revelation he receives is instruction for building the Tabernacle and for instituting its priestly service. The spotlight is on this good, holy work. But what follows is in fact its distorting mirror image: the Golden Calf incident (chapters 32–24). Having just received careful instructions about how the people are to build the Tabernacle, using the most precious materials and their best skills, Moses comes down the mountain to find that they have given their gold away to Aaron, who tossed it in the fire, “and out came this calf!” (32:24). These ex-slaves need to get free not only from Pharaoh but also from their own religious delusions, before they can do what God called them out of bondage in Egypt to do: namely, worship the true God in the wilderness (Ex. 4:23, 5:1).

So we have instructions for good work, then a false move into bad work, and now in chapter 35 Israel is ready to try again. And here is the very first order that comes from Moses: the construction superintendent: “Six days shall work be done, and on the seventh day you shall have holiness, total Sabbath for YHWH” (35:2; cf. 20:8–11, 23:12, 31:12–17, 34:21). Good work begins with total Sabbath, Shabbat Shabbaton. In other words, in order to “have holiness” in work, the first thing we must learn is when to stop. Surely there is a word of the Lord in that for overworked clergy. Here Sabbath serves to remind Israel at the outset why they are doing this work at all. Building a sanctuary and keeping Sabbath have the same aim: namely, worship, intimacy with God. Sabbath, observed at the beginning of the undertaking, extends its blessing over the work itself, so the presence of God becomes palpable. Thus the account ends: “And Moses finished the task. And the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of YHWH filled the Tabernacle” (40:33–34).

However, we would understand the text too literally if we concluded that what is most important about this lengthy description of the completion of the Tabernacle is the content of the work done. More significant for our understanding is what it teaches us about the form of good work, i.e., the attitude that in-forms it. As Hall says, “God loveth adverbs, and cares not how good, but how well.”

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15 Terence Fretheim brings this out in his very useful commentary, Exodus (Interpretation Series, a Commentary for Teachers and Preachers, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991).

16 The (negative) correspondence between the Golden Calf incident and the actual construction of the Tabernacle is highlighted by the fact that variant forms of a single verb introduce each section: anayagqaḥel, “and [the people] gathered together” (32:1) and anayagqaḥel, “and [Moses] gathered” (35:1).

17 A parallel between the two forms of bondage is implied by the narrative comment that the Israelites “ran amok” (Ex. 32:25) from right worship, just as Pharaoh earlier feared they would “run amok” from their jobs (Ex. 5:4).

18 George and George. p. 139n.
ed emphasis of the narrative is that work which is done well proceeds from a willing heart. Moses’ first step is to solicit contributions from the congregation, and note how he frames the stewardship appeal: “Gather from among yourselves a contribution for YHWH, let everyone whose heart is willing bring it.” And everyone whose heart elevated them, and everyone whose spirit was willing brought YHWH’s contribution for work on the Tent of Meeting . . .” (35:5, 21).

Moreover, we are told that the work was done wisely: “And all the women whose hearts elevated them in wisdom, spun the goat’s hair” (35:26). Again, “And all those wise of heart among the artisans made the Dwelling” (36:8). It is striking that the concentration of wisdom language is greater in this small section of Exodus than anywhere outside the book of Proverbs. Contrary to expectation, the one person who consistently receives the accolade of wisdom in the Old Testament is not Solomon (who proves to be a fool for his foreign wives), but rather Betzalel, the master artisan for the Tabernacle (31:1–6, 35:30–35). What are we to make of this? For we do not normally think of wisdom as something that has material results. A wise person might produce good words, but we would not ordinarily describe a gifted craftsman, even a practitioner of the “fine arts,” as being wise. But the Bible does not observe our modern distinction between practical skill and the spiritual condition we call “wisdom.” As the Bible understands it, human work is done wisely when it proceeds essentially from a desire to honor God; and wisdom very often has material, tangible results.

Yet the strong material strain of biblical religion is generally ignored by modern churchgoers. We have, on the whole, drawn a sharp dichotomy between Mary and Martha; and as we all know, “[Mary] has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her” (Lk. 10:42). “Spirituality” is all the rage at seminaries these days. If the emphasis twenty-five or thirty years ago was on social justice, now the pendulum has in many places swung far the other way. My point is not that emphasis on spirituality is wrong but rather that there is very grave danger in viewing the material and the spiritual as separate realms, as modern Christians often do. This does not, of course, mean that we Christians participate less in the material world than other people; it just means that we do not bother to sanctify our participation. And work belongs to the material domain, which we have thoroughly secularized. Dorothy Sayers comments perceptively: “[The Church] has allowed work and religion to become separate departments, and is astonished to find that, as a result, the secular work of

..."19 “As a result” of its separation from religion, work becomes selfish and destructive. The Church’s disregard of work is not itself the cause of destructiveness. Sin, and primarily the sin of avarice, leads to such destruction. Yet, because it has ignored the theological dimensions of work, the Church has largely forfeited its teaching witness and call to repentance and responsibility in this area.

Nonetheless, in a few quarters the resolute materiality of biblical religion has received and is still receiving powerful contemporary expression. Here I think of several twentieth-century “wisdom writers,” such as the English craftsman Eric Gill (see above), and E. F. Schumacher, for many years head of the British Coal Board, who knew the industrial system well and worked to develop alternatives in technology, economics and organizational practice, both in the industrialized North and in the developing world. I would mention also Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson, a former English professor and a plant geneticist, both farmers and essayists, who have done important work in the field and also in print to clarify the sharp contrast between an agrarian-based economy, which works within the limits set by nature (that is, by God), and an industrial economy, whose “success” depends upon ignoring the limits of sustainability and mortgaging the future.

The work of these people is too infrequently consulted for its distinctly theological value, which is evident to an eye sensitized by the biblical wisdom literature. Like the Israelite sages, they encourage us to make “good faith” operative in concrete ways: in how we acquire money and spend it, how we care for the soil and the water sources on which our life depends. At the same time, like the biblical writers, they are not afraid to tell us plainly that there is a time limit for the exercise of folly. The earth is YHWH’s (Ps. 24:1, cf. Lev. 25:23), and it will not indefinitely tolerate the presence of those who habitually violate its God-given rhythms—in the language of Leviticus, those who violate “[the earth’s] Sabbaths” (Lev. 26:34). Exile and death are the ultimate penalty for such Sabbath violation.

The Wisdom of Keeping Sabbath

It is evident by now that the biblical writers view Sabbath as something more than a rest stop that gets us ready to run another lap

of the rat race. As I have suggested, Sabbath offers a perspective from which to judge the value and the faithfulness of our work. At the conclusion of Sabbath, Jews traditionally exchange the greeting: "Have a good week." When Sabbath is properly observed, it extends its blessing over the work week that follows. I shall conclude by setting forth three criteria for work that is eligible to receive a Sabbath blessing.

First and above all, work that can be blessed is done in acknowledgment of the one God who "created the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them" (Ex. 20:11). Good human work is done in remembrance of God's work of creation, and also in imitation of it. The biblical writers of the Priestly School imply such a correspondence in their use of language; the account of the construction of the Tabernacle contains clear echoes of the first story of Genesis.20 "And Moses saw all the work, and behold! they had done it; just as YHWH had commanded, so they did; and Moses blessed them" (Ex. 39:43, cf. Gen. 1:31, 2:3). Applying that criterion of acknowledgment to our contemporary context, is it time for us in the Church to ask the question, whether some work is simply not eligible for God's blessing— including some work that is done by highly touted professionals, work that is legal and even well-subsidized? I pondered this question in the wake of the nuclear accident in Japan this past autumn. Maybe the immediate cause was a workman's sloppiness: too much radioactive material in the bin. But consider how much careful work lay behind that blunder, careful work that, ironically, made it possible for a casual blunder to have such terrifying consequences. Is it time for us in the Church to say that splitting atoms is holy work, work that even "at its best" is inherently incapable of giving glory to the God who made heaven and earth? (That position is now being taken by very many in our society who have no clear religious commitment; it would seem that Christians have much stronger reasons for taking it.)

A second criterion for work that is eligible for blessing: It eschews excess in terms of both time and material expended. In the Tabernacle narrative, the Sabbath limit on time invested in work is matched by a Mosaic limit on material investment. The Israelites bring their contributions for the Tabernacle until quickly there is more than enough, and then Moses sends word through the camp, "Don't bring any more!" (Ex. 36:4–7). With this notice, the preparation for the construction concludes. Thus the work of preparation is bracketed on ei-

20 For a recent study of the implications of this, see Jon Levenson, Sinai and Zion, An Entry into the Jewish Bible (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985).

ther side by an observance of limit.21 Even good work, motivated by generosity toward God, can be done in excess. Sanctified work has internal limits. Think how different that is from the principle of our present industrial system. Our culture of waste consumes unlimited quantities of the world's resources, heedless of any realistic assessment of basic human needs, now or in the future, unmoderated even by our own limited capacity to enjoy and to cherish—let alone to be grateful for—the stuff we already have. A culture of waste is grounded fundamentally in the denial of our status as creatures. It ignores the fact that our finite lives are joined indissolubly with everything else God has created. Moreover, the industrial system eventually vandalizes and destroys its own power base, as the plague narrative in Exodus vividly shows. Because Pharaoh fails to acknowledge the God who created heaven and earth, Egypt is reduced to wreckage. At an advanced stage, after seven plagues are completed, the blinded despot is confronted thus by his own incredulous courtiers: "Do you not yet know that Egypt has vanished?" (10:7). In more contemporary terms, an immoderate, rapacious industrialism consumes the consumer. We work frenetically hard to compete in both production and consumption. We are, it seems, afraid to stop; and we are teaching our children to fear the same. Recently my stepdaughter's twenty-six-year-old friend commented: "We are the generation of the seventy-hour work week." What an education we have given our children.

A third and final criterion for labor that can be blessed: It is work to which we can give ourselves eucharistically, "lifting up our hearts unto the Lord." Consciously or not, the Sanctus is echoing the way the Priestly writers of Exodus describe the contributors to the Tabernacle construction: "And everyone came whose heart lifted them up..." (35:21). Sanctified labor is work that elevates our hearts toward God. That does not, of course, mean that it is glamorous work. In most cases, work that can be called holy is distinctly unglamorous, often wearying and sometimes deeply saddening. Yet good work is fundamentally humane. Eric Gill says it well: "[A]ll the works are holy which are done by [people] in the exercise of the human personality."22 That


is a reliable criterion if you understand that Gill’s notion of the human personality is wholly informed by the first chapter of the Bible. Any work is holy in which we can so invest ourselves as to remember that we are made in the image of God, just as is the neighbor with whom work brings us into contact. Work that distracts us from that recognition, or blinds us to it, is inevitably destructive. Holy work is done in the right exercise of the human personality, and I would add, in its nurturance, for our personhood is always a work in progress; every investment of our selves either enhances or diminishes us. Maybe this is the clue to why it is Mary who has chosen the good portion—not because she is studying Torah while Martha is sweating over a hot stove, but because at that moment Mary has chosen work which offers a channel for her to move into deeper intimacy with her Lord. Her work is eucharistic; through it she lifts her heart toward God. Martha’s service of feeding the hungry is no less valuable in itself, as countless Gospel passages testify. However, it gets a lower dominical rating here, because that kitchen service is just now being used as an occasion for resentment. Martha is letting service to her Lord feel too much like work—a problem with which most of us are familiar.

If Jesus’ remark to Martha sounds like a harsh judgment, it is because he confronts her—and us—with the reality of Sabbath, the condition of intimacy with God. Sabbath is a reality both restful and demanding, freeing and at the same time limiting. Wendell Berry is perhaps the contemporary writer who has reflected most deeply on that dual aspect of Sabbath. Wendell Berry is a Christian farmer who, it seems, often seeks Sabbath intimacy with God in the woods, as his many lovely Sabbath poems attest. At a conference called “Healing Leaves,” it may be appropriate to end this address with his image of the Sabbath as the narrow gate that admits us to our proper freedom. Berry’s symbol for our God-created freedom is the woods:

Why must the gate be narrow?
Because you cannot pass beyond it burdened.
To come into the woods you must leave behind
the six days’ world, all of it, all of its plans and hopes.
You must come without weapon or tool, alone,
expecting nothing, remembering nothing,
into the ease of sight, the brotherhood of eye and leaf.21

21 “How long does it take to make the woods” (Sabbath 1985, V), Sabbaths (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987), p. 89.

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Exodus 1–13
Israel in Egypt (slavery, perverted work, that destroys the laborers and eventually the slavedrivers; Ex. 5:3–5: Pharaoh objects to “giving [the people] sabbath from their loads”)

Exodus 14–19
Crossing of the Red Sea, wandering in wilderness (Exodus 16: living by the manna economy teaches them to keep Sabbath)

Exodus 20–24
The Ten Commandments and the Making of the Sinai Covenant (the Sabbath Commandment, Ex. 20:8–11 and 23:12)