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# WORK AS SACRAMENT: THE QUAKER BRIDGE FROM SUNDAY TO MONDAY

KENT WALKEMEYER

Work is fundamental to human experience. Whether we imagine paid employment, household chores, or voluntary service to our neighbors and world, we recognize the vast space that work occupies in our lives. Although much of our lives are consumed by work, most of us attempt to resist self-identifying primarily with our work.<sup>1</sup> We have been encouraged not to allow our work to define the core of our being, yet this has contributed to a tendency toward partitioning that then leads to incongruent living.

This paper offers a practical perspective for considering the intersection of our work and our Christian faith. It arises from pastoral efforts to guide Christians into patterns of more congruent living, to help them make deeper connections between their, so to speak, Sunday and Monday lives. The Quaker testimony of sacramental living provides a foundation for the guidance here. The recognition of the sacramental possibility inherent in our daily lives challenges us to see our work experiences as opportunities to encounter God. Too many of us have been seduced by the dualistic tendencies of our culture. An incomplete understanding of the Christian experience contributes to the separation of life into the religious and regular. Hearing again, or maybe for the first time, the deep Quaker conviction about the present reality of Jesus can help bring congruence to divided lives.

After offering a definition of work and an introduction to the problem of incongruence, I will explain how the Quaker phrase “the sacramental life” has developed and show how this deep Quaker conviction helps address the stated problem. I summarize the helpful ideas from three popular Quaker authors who have addressed the sacred possibility of our work, then I finish with a few practical ideas for ways we can consider work a sacrament.

Work is the expenditure of physical or mental energy for purposes of sustaining life and culture.<sup>2</sup> It is not limited by our employment, though it includes such. All of us also work without pay, at home, in the neighborhood, at church, in other places and ways. This definition reflects the way volunteers, retired persons, homemakers,

and others spend their time and energies. The question of vocation, though important, will not be addressed in this project. The Quaker understanding of sacrament applies more readily and understandably to actual experiences of work than to the ideals of vocation. The variations of theologies of vocation, along with the need to streamline this project, compel me to narrow our focus.

Though work is fundamental to human experience, it is often aggravating.<sup>3</sup> Peruse the shelves of a bookstore to find titles like *The Working Wounded* (Bob Rosner), *The Working Life: The Promise and Betrayal of Modern Work* (Joanne Ciulla), *Take This Job and Love It: How to Find Fulfillment in any Job You Do* (Matthew Gilbert), and *Blood, Sweat and Tears: The Evolution of Work in America* (Richard Donkin). We know we are not alone in our experiences of feeling sometimes overworked, underappreciated, alienated, and dissatisfied. And, unemployment brings an entirely new kind of pain. Work is not always frustrating, of course. Many of us enjoy our work, including our working relationships and responsibilities, and we find great fulfillment in what we do. We understand that work consists of a mixture of joy and frustration, of fulfillment and pain, of good times and bad. The realization that we cannot avoid work seems to magnify the frustrations associated with it.

Christians are not immune to work frustrations. In fact, Christian commitments often complicate work frustrations in at least one particular way. Because we are taught that God's grace and our identity is not based on what we do, we have too often relegated what we do and our pursuits of faith to separate sectors of life. It often feels as if we are attempting to live in two separate and disconnected worlds. One world involves our spiritual pursuits of worship, prayer, religious learning, and spiritual community; the other world includes task lists, balance sheets, bosses, and deadlines. The bridge between the two eludes us and, when discovered, is precariously crossed. Work often feels as if it has no connection to spiritual life; spiritual life often feels as if it has no application to work.

Where, then, can we find a model of congruent living? How can we develop a perspective that helps us integrate our faith into all areas of life and our whole life into our faith? The Quaker understanding of life provides a paradigm that helps bridge the gap between the perceived sacred and secular spheres of life. Friends believe and teach that all of life can be sacred. They believe it is a mistake to distinguish between certain activities as holy and the remainder of life as necessarily

common or secular. God is present, accessible, presently speaking and active in far greater ways than we regularly perceive. God's life can inhabit people and events. We can live in tune with God such that each action and every part of life is lived unto God and for God's glory. The language some twentieth-century Friends have chosen to describe this possibility is "life is a sacrament," or "the sacramental life."<sup>4</sup> This concept offers genuine help to the consideration of how one's work and faith connect.

Christians commonly apply the term "sacrament" to specific physical liturgical acts perceived to have spiritual significance. Augustine's definition, "a visible sign of an invisible reality," is still popular. Quaker theologian Alan Kolp defines a sacrament as a "bridge between the divine and the human."<sup>5</sup> It is the visible component of an encounter with God, in which an invisible God is revealed by visible means.<sup>6</sup> Jesus then, the fullest revelation of God, is the unique sacrament.<sup>7</sup> Friends believe that God is encountered in far more and diverse ways than Christians have typically imagined. A sacrament will be found wherever God is revealed; therefore all of life is potentially sacramental.

John Punshon's 1992 article in the *Evangelical Friend* describes the statement, "all life is sacramental," as a well-known Quaker phrase.<sup>8</sup> A historical study reveals, however, that the language of the sacramental view of life is, in reality, a twentieth-century development.<sup>9</sup> The Friends view of the sacramental life finds its roots in the seventeenth century, even if the actual language does not appear until later. The concept was not foreign to early Friends; it simply was not as clearly communicated in their literature. Most of the Quaker writings related to the sacraments have either been warnings against substituting traditional Christian sacramental rites for the reality of the presence of the living Christ, or they are biblical defenses of the Quaker position. Beginning with Fox, Quakers have argued vehemently against what we perceive to be heretical and dangerous abuses of religious symbols in Christian practices. When responses from other Christians have challenged Friends' interpretation of Scripture, Quaker writers have carefully presented an apologetic for our convictions.

The Friends movement entered the twentieth century with its leaders looking for new ways and new words to communicate their core convictions. The abusive practices of water baptism and the Lord's Supper were either not as severe or not as evident to Friends. Many Christian denominations found Quaker testimonies agreeable

with their own convictions and practices, and ecumenical movements drew Friends into deeper levels of dialogue. Believing that Friends still had a unique message to contribute to the larger body of believers as it relates to sacraments, some Friends began to press beyond the issues of water baptism and the Lord's Supper to the foundational beliefs that had led to the specific testimonies. In 1924, Alfred Kemp Brown, in a pamphlet on the sacraments wrote, "...all the experiences of life are, when rightly viewed, sacraments of the eternal and invisible."<sup>10</sup> Gerald Hibbert, in 1944, published a pamphlet on the Friends view of sacraments in which the phraseology of the sacramental nature of life is pervasive. In describing the early Friends, he writes that they were "so filled with the Spirit and so conscious of the Divine Indwelling that the whole of life became sacramental to them."<sup>11</sup> His intent was to draw attention away from the two physical acts that Friends do not practice, toward the positive testimony of the Friends' understanding of the sacramental life. Expressions such as these reflected a change in Quaker language, as Quaker writers began to express their understanding of God's nature and presence in new ways. Wilmer Cooper believed this twentieth-century change of language was influenced in part by the teaching about the sacramental nature of the universe by William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury, in his 1934 book, *Nature, Man and God*.<sup>12</sup> Whatever the causes, numerous Quaker writers returned to the core convictions underlying the specific testimonies and discovered new ways of expressing the core.

The heart of the Friends message is that Christ can be known immediately and experientially without dependence upon religious, human, or outward aids; and that this experience leads to the bringing of one's whole life under Christ's transforming power.<sup>13</sup> Divine encounters are not limited to or dependent upon liturgical practices. Every person, in every circumstance, at any time, may experience what Thomas Kelly calls "the cosmic Sacrament."<sup>14</sup>

In the later twentieth century, three popular Quaker writers have related the sacramental view of life to the specific issue of work. Elton Trueblood, in *The Common Ventures of Life: Marriage, Birth, Work and Death*, offers insights to help unite the common and divine. The sacramental idea is that God is recognized by virtue of some "utterly common substance."<sup>15</sup> Using the Protestant examples of baptism and the Lord's Supper, Trueblood notes that Christians have met God in the most common and accessible of the earth's resources.<sup>16</sup> "God is known best, not by separation from common things, but by such

identification with them that we find the divine meaning latent in them.”<sup>17</sup> He continues to explain how common life experiences, like marriage, raising children, working, and dying, are the places life can become the most sacramental. In *Your Other Vocation*, Trueblood invites workers to learn the way of the sacramental life by recognizing their partnership with God. “They are sharing in creation when they develop a farm, paint a picture, build a home or polish a floor.”<sup>18</sup> “Toil then becomes holy, because it is by toil that men can prove themselves creatures made in God’s image.”<sup>19</sup> Trueblood’s chapter on the sacraments in *The People Called Quakers* continues to address the understanding that “ours is a sacramental universe,” in which any physical reality “might reasonably be used by God for a spiritual purpose.”<sup>20</sup>

A second author reflects his Quaker influence by encouraging us to consider the spirituality of work. Parker Palmer shares a personal experiment of attempting to live a monastic-type life in his book, *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity, and Caring*. Pursuers of God have tended to value “the inward search over the outward act, silence over sound, solitude over interaction, centeredness and quietude and balance over engagement and animation and struggle.”<sup>21</sup> We perceive normal, working folks at a disadvantage in spiritual development. After Palmer realized he was not cut out for the contemplative life, he developed a spirituality of activity, demonstrating that action and contemplation are not contradictions but complements, “poles of a great paradox that can and must be held together.”<sup>22</sup> Palmer names action as a sacrament: the “visible form of an invisible spirit, an outward manifestation of an inward power.”<sup>23</sup>

Richard Foster begins his best-known book, *Celebration of Discipline*, stating that the spiritual life and the spiritual disciplines are for “people who have jobs, who care for children, who wash dishes and mow lawns.”<sup>24</sup> Using Brother Lawrence and Frank Laubach as examples later in his book, Foster encourages living daily demands in a state of worship, adoration, and listening to God, recognizing the sacramental experience available in common daily routines.<sup>25</sup> This idea is more fully developed in the final chapter of *Streams of Living Water*. One of six different Christian traditions, or streams, is described as “The Incarnational Tradition: Discovering the Sacramental Life.” It is dedicated to the ideal that common ventures and objects carry the potential of a divine encounter. “God is manifest to us through

material means” found in the arenas of everyday life, like home, work, and the community.<sup>26</sup> Work can be a “place for living sacramentally,” in which God’s presence is “manifest in the smallest, most mundane of daily activities.”<sup>27</sup>

With the Quaker testimony of sacramental living as our foundation, how do we begin to practice this in our working endeavors? How can we learn and teach others to recognize and experience sacramental possibilities in our jobs, daily chores, and service opportunities? Consider three practical aspects of our work and how we might identify directions for our thoughts. If sacraments are encounters with God, we can begin to encounter God in our work environments, our work relationships, and our work responsibilities.

We naturally tend to associate God’s presence with particular places: church buildings, places of private worship, Christian camps. However, we must guard against the danger of believing that God’s presence is confined to particular places based upon our subjective experiences. This caution has also been a Quaker contribution. In reality, God is no less present in coal mines and boardrooms than in the most elegant cathedrals and among the most majestic mountains. We know this theologically; now it is time we learn it experientially.

God’s presence fills our work environments, whether we sense God or not. When we vacuum the house, deliver a lecture, conduct a music lesson, or close a deal, God is always present. Once this theological truth is established in our thoughts, we can begin to view ourselves bringing a sense of God’s presence into our workplaces. Of course, we know we do not magically bring it with us. However, we do accept that God works in and through us where we are, and God’s presence in us can strengthen the sense of God’s presence in our environments. We pray for God’s Spirit to fill us, direct us, and minister through and around us as we work. We can imagine God’s light radiating out of our bodies and lives into our work environments. Our attitude of surrender to God serves as a sacramental spirit opening the way for a divine encounter.

Moving more specifically into a conscious sacramental mode, we can encounter God in our work relationships. All work involves relationships, at some level. Viewing other people as means to our ends, serving our goals, devalues them. It reflects our own self-centeredness and robs us of the sacramental experience. A sacramental view of life looks for God in others. One of the powerful truths of Scripture is that Jesus is revealed in those we have opportunities to serve.<sup>28</sup> The

core Quaker conviction that drives us out of our self-centeredness and into others' lives is the clear value of every human life. When we value people as God does, when we see every person as an opportunity to serve, we create the space to encounter God, and we become the substance of the sacramental experience. "As we live, so do we carry into the world and our relation with those in the world a sacramental possibility, namely, that when someone encounters us, they encounter the invisible reality of God."<sup>29</sup>

Finally, our work becomes sacramental when we view every task as a holy endeavor, every responsibility as an expression of our life with God. We need not view work activities differently than liturgical or pietistic service. We may encounter God in the field, office, store, or classroom just as surely as in prayer, meeting, or church. Jesus was and is the fullest revelation of God: the one unique sacrament.<sup>30</sup> He revealed God to us not only in his religious activities, but also in his daily ventures. Christians correctly embrace the humanness of Jesus: his birth, growth, coming in the flesh, and engagement in everyday life. If Jesus revealed God in daily ventures, if the incarnation was pushed forward through layers of religion to the basest, human experiences of eating, sleeping, crying, fishing, building, and relating, then God can bring the divine to the mundane of our lives. When we offer our bodies and all our actions to God as living sacrifices, we become spiritual acts of worship.<sup>31</sup> The Apostle Paul instructed slaves, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord."<sup>32</sup> This encouragement also applies to us. We can encounter God as we engage every task as a holy endeavor and as an offering of worship.

There may be no better context to encounter God than in our daily working routines and relationships. It is God's way to infuse the ordinary with dynamism: a bush with fire, dust with breath, silence with voice. These become holy not by their nature but by the supernatural revelation of the Creator through the creation. Work might be considered the least obvious place to encounter God, yet how much more evident is God's supernatural power when revealed in the most natural of human environments? Is not the incarnation reflected most clearly in the ordinary? Is not God's power most clearly revealed in our weakness? A turning of our eye, a tuning of our heart, an offering of our life at work may be all we need to experience a fresh sacrament on Monday.

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## NOTES

- 1 George Barna notes that, although “it has become fashionable to dismiss work or career pursuits as the locus of our self-image and sense of purpose in life...work still represents the single most significant activity toward defining who we are in our own minds.” George Barna and Mark Hatch, *Boiling Point: It Only Takes One Degree: Monitoring Cultural Shifts in the Twenty-first Century* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2001), 106.
- 2 Definition compiled from three sources: Stephen Dempster, “Work,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 831; Paul S. Minear, “Work and Vocation in Scripture,” in *Work and Vocation: A Christian Discussion*, ed. John Oliver Nelson (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), 35-37; and Leland Ryken, *Work and Leisure in Christian Perspective* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1987), 22.
- 3 Both of these points can be developed biblically from a study of Genesis 1-3.
- 4 Several Friends have cautioned us that in our efforts to teach the sacramental life, we must qualify what we are saying. For example, Wilmer Cooper reminds us that “it is simply not true that all of life is sacred and therefore sacramental, though Friends would claim that it has the potentiality of becoming so.” Quoted in “Friends and the Sacraments” in the *Quaker Study Series* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1981), 8-9.
- 5 Alan Kolp, “Friends, Sacraments, Sacramental Living,” *Quaker Religious Thought* 20:3 (Summer 1984), 40.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Ibid.*, 45.
- 8 John Punshon, “The Shadow and the Substance,” in *Evangelical Friend* 26, no. 2 (November/December 1992): 3.
- 9 Wilmer A. Cooper, *A Living Faith: An Historical Study of Quaker Beliefs* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1990), 93.
- 10 Alfred Kemp Brown, *Sacraments: A Quaker View* (London: Friends Home Service Committee, 1924), 35.
- 11 Gerald K. Hibbert, *Friends and the Sacraments* (London: Friends Home Service Committee, 1944), 5.
- 12 Wilmer Cooper, “Friends and the Sacraments,” in *Friends and the Sacraments*, Quaker Study Series (Richmond, IN: Friends United Pres, 1981), 7.
- 13 Walter R. Williams, *The Rich Heritage of Quakerism* (Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 1987), 72.
- 14 Thomas Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941), 87.

- 15 Elton Trueblood, *The Common Ventures of Life* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949), 26.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 Elton Trueblood, *Your Other Vocation* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952), 64.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 Elton Trueblood, *The People Called Quakers* (Harper & Row, 1966; reprint, Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1971), 128-129.
- 21 Parker Palmer, *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity, and Caring* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990), 2.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 7.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 24 Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 1.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 162.
- 26 Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 260, 263.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 264, 266.
- 28 Matthew 25:31-46 contains Jesus' profound illustration of sheep and goats, which are distinguished by their serving.
- 29 Kolp, 47.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 45.
- 31 Romans 12:1.
- 32 Colossians 3:23.