

RECONSIDERATIONS

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN THOUGHT IN THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

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IN THE FALL OF 2015, acting on the idea and funding of a creative and generous donor, the Christian Study Center announced an essay contest for undergraduate students called "Thinking about Work in the Twenty-First Century." Twenty-two undergraduates submitted essays in response to the question: *What contemporary challenges most impact the work you anticipate doing in coming years, and how might biblically sound, theological reflection frame that work in our current cultural setting?* We are glad to share the winning essays with our readers:

First Place (\$1,000 Award)

"The Trees Will Probably Clap Their Hands At This," written by Caroline Hament (pages 1-3)

Second Place (\$700 Award)

"The Act of Choice, or, How To Decide What To Do With One's Whole Entire Life," written by Scott Trinkle (pages 4-7)

THE TREES WILL PROBABLY CLAP THEIR HANDS AT THIS

Caroline Hament

OUR ESCHATOLOGY, or view of "the end," has a profound impact on how we live and view our work. In my career in forestry, I will be facing big picture, forward-thinking challenges regarding the sustainability of our planet's resources for future generations. In the same way, our time on earth is finite, but our theological thinking must include a perspective that goes beyond that.

In many Christian circles, when eternal perspective comes up, the topic is usually some form of evangelism. Typically it's about telling all your friends about your faith, inviting your neighbor to church, or having a good attitude at work so people see you're *different*. Regardless of the angle, the purpose is always that somehow your words or actions will present an idea of God to others. Maybe there's not too much wrong with that, but do we have a purpose in our work besides glowing from our insides so everyone can see? I hope so.

Environmental thinking doesn't make much sense in such a narrow category of eternal goals. In his podcast, Michael Gungor pointed out that if we get stuck at lifeboat theology, then the only meaningful work we can do is work that pushes people into the boats and the only art worth making is signs to the exit deck.¹ If our main goal is evangelism and Earth is a temporary home that will one day be destroyed after we go to heaven, then

this planet stays at the bottom of our Christian to-do list.

However, our eternal perspective doesn't have to stretch us to focus on a lofty, far away, future realm, because our work is for now, too. When speaking on this, Paul Marshall said, "It is

also an unbiblical idea that the earth doesn't matter because we are going to heaven when we die. The bible teaches that there will be a 'new heaven and a new earth.' Our destiny is an earthly one: a new earth, an earth redeemed and transfigured. An earth reunited with heaven, but an earth, nevertheless."²

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The Trees Will Probably Clap Their Hands At This, continued from page 1

It's easy to turn a blind eye to the distressed state of the planet, but I think our overall reason for existing is more for our bio-physical environment than we like to acknowledge. As N.T. Wright puts it, "The created order, which God has begun to redeem in the resurrection of Jesus, is a world in which heaven and earth are designed not to be separated but to come together. In that coming together, the 'very good' that God spoke over creation at the beginning will be enhanced, not abolished."³

Jesus's work on earth reflects redemption at every turn. A blind man sees, tables are turned, and bread is broken. It's all finished off with the story of death and resurrection. There's death and life; brokenness and healing. It's similar to language used for ecosystems—degradation and restoration; succession and transition. As our socioeconomic systems have been distorted by violence, poverty, racism, disease, and oppression, so has the bio-physical world been plagued by pollution, disease, deforestation, destruction, and exploitation. Although some of these environmental issues are unintended consequences, the root of most is still sin, a concept I think of as overall wrongness in our world. Overconsumption, greed, and carelessness have perpetuated these concerns for generations.

It became pretty obvious that we were supposed to protect and restore the natural world when God once called it good and handed it over to the humans in the Genesis story. Plus, of course, our entire livelihood depends on the clean water, oxygen, and many other resources it provides. Still, *people* are suffering. People dying is worse than trees dying. So for a while, I felt really guilty about caring so much about trees when I knew people were more important. This reality of human suffering was smudging the perfect Bob Ross painting of my future.

From a young age I've had a deep appreciation for nature—I always wanted to be outside, made art with sticks and leaves, and even started a recycling program at my elementary school. When choosing a major though, I thought I should be in a career that was helping people because that's what felt meaningful to me, especially through the lens of my faith. Jesus's life was spent

helping people so I guessed I should too. At one point I thought that may even look like "ministry" as a career.

I eventually freed myself up to think about work outside of a traditional ministry vocation because mainly, I knew I really didn't want to be in ministry. So I began to lean into the things I naturally felt drawn to and pursue a career in natural resources. Of course, I quickly found out that this field was almost equally about people as it was about plants, especially in urban forestry, where I'm focusing.

Urban forestry, which is the management of trees in an urban setting, typically has very anthropocentric objectives. Urban trees function to provide shade, clean air and water, aesthetics, and recreational opportunities. They are essentially managed

as human habitat. Until recently, urban trees were managed less as an ecosystem and more as individuals or small groups—trees on medians, city parks, and scattered street trees. Now, as the population is exponentially expanding and the world is becoming increasingly

urbanized, the thinking behind urban forestry is changing also. Urban foresters are now embracing more systems thinking in attempts to integrate cities and forests in the healthiest way possible. On a larger scale, the socioeconomic implications of a healthy environment continue to pull me in. Protecting and sustaining forests and natural resources is as much about caring for the environment as it is caring for people. (Plants still rock, and I'll always love them.)

So with my hair flowing in the cool forest breeze singing to my woodland brothers and sisters, I've found personal meaning in my work in environmental justice and stewardship. Still, some of our work is seemingly trivial and not as clear cut. Are we left on our own to go through the gymnastics of connecting our work to something more meaningful? Thankfully, Dorothy L. Sayers offers some simple, yet hopeful advice: "The only Christian work is good work well done."⁴ Regardless of how world-altering our work is or not, we should probably just try to do it well. We take menial work for granted. I've found that it's this work that keeps me grounded and present. I can't always be consumed by doubt, faced with the state of the world, and left to wrestle with

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my own post-teenage angst because I still need to make dinner tonight, wash my hair, pay the internet bill and get out of bed in the morning for my part-time job (where I will essentially just pour things into other things for a few hours).

In the end, our work does not define us. It doesn't determine our worth, and it certainly doesn't name our relationship status with God. Still, I don't think faith-based salvation can negate the impact of works. Author Rachel Held Evans puts it this way: "While I don't for a second think that we can earn God's grace by checking off a to-do list, I do believe that there is liberation in obedience. When we live like Jesus, when we take his teachings seriously and apply them to life, we don't have to wait until we die to experience freedom from sin. We experience it every day as each step of faith and every good work loosens the chains of sin around our feet."⁵ Our work is a refining process that draws us closer to experiencing Jesus.

When it comes down to it, my answer to what exactly happens at the ominous end remains a gentle shrug, but the few glimpses of redemption we see through Jesus give me enough hope that it could be realized, in ways big or small, even in our time here on earth. It's enough to make me believe that our work is meaningful and a big part of what we're here for. A new heaven and a new earth are in the works, and we're invited to join in on that.

Notes

1. The Liturgists Podcast: <http://www.theliturgists.com/podcast>
2. Nelson, Tom, *Work Matters: Connecting Sunday Worship to Monday Work* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011).
3. Wright, N. T. *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*. (New York: HarperOne., 2008).
4. Sayers, D. L. "Why Work?: Discovering Real Purpose, Peace, and Fulfillment at Work: a Christian Perspective." (Createspace, 2014).
5. Evans, R. H. "I Believe in Works-Based Salvation." Retrieved from Rachel Held Evans Blog: <http://rachelheldevans.com/blog/works-based-salvation> (2011, May 24).

More Theological Reflection on Faith and Work

The Study Center is offering three opportunities for students to engage in personal and theological reflection about how Christian faith impacts work and all of life.

Director's Class - "Creative in the Image of God:" Theological Reflections on Imagination and Creativity

Wednesdays, Period Five (11:45 a.m.-12:35 p.m.) beginning September 7th, 2016.

This class will begin with a brief look at some of the ideas that frame imagination and creativity in our current cultural context, then consider ways that thoughtful artists in the Christian tradition have framed the work that they do, and will conclude with a brief reflection on the artistic creativity of Jesus.

Undergraduate Seminars on Faith and Vocation: Exploration of Faith and Work Guided by Christian Wisdom

Seminars organized in 5 vocational tracks led and hosted by Christian professionals, featuring meals in a comfortable home environment with relationally based discussion and a \$300 stipend for students who meet track requirements. Visit christianstudycenter.org for track descriptions, leader bios, details, and application. Applications accepted online now through midnight on September 11, 2016.

Faith and Vocation in the Academy: Graduate Reading Group

This group is open to graduate students considering careers connected to academic work. Readings will be aimed at questions surrounding what it means to be a Christian scholar within one's chosen discipline. The group is led by Dr. Brent Henderson, Associate Professor of Linguistics at UF, and will meet three times a semester for dinner and discussion. Kids and spouses are welcome! To participate, email betsy@christianstudycenter.org.

THE ACT OF CHOICE, OR, HOW TO DECIDE WHAT TO DO WITH ONE'S WHOLE ENTIRE LIFE

Scott Trinkle

Plenty has been written in an attempt to categorize shifting trends in our culture. The way we relate to and communicate with each other is changing – in my own lifetime as a young person in America, I have seen society struggle to come to terms with the unprecedented influx of new technologies and the subsequent redrawing of traditional social lines. I have also experienced shifting perceptions of religion and spirituality among my peers and the culture at large. I grew up in a time when many churches seemed to be fighting to convince society of their relevance. Even as a small child, I remember being mildly shocked when my family began attending a new church where a suit and tie were *not* expected and the worship music started sounding more and more like Top 40 hits. Today, however, it seems as if the cultural relevance of the church remains threatened – not only from its public portrayal of having somewhat backward responses to the moral issues of the day, but also from what I see as the general cultural way of thinking *about* belief. In today's climate of radical individualism, it is extremely difficult to consider "submitting" oneself to anything at all, much less to the Lordship of a deity you cannot be sure exists. In a culture where the idea of certainty itself is up for grabs, the notion of considering anything at all to be absolute truth is far-fetched, much less the idea that this truth is contained in a collection of ancient middle-eastern texts assembled by a group of Romans hundreds of years after the time of writing. Furthermore, it is nearly impossible to feel that any of our personal moral decisions should be informed by such a text, or by any sort of external guiding idea beyond the contemporary moral imperative of: do as best you can to stay out of other people's way.

This way of thinking permeates nearly every aspect of our culture. It informs and is informed by our individualism, materialism and consumerism, while ultimately affecting the way

we approach social interactions, public engagement and work. These issues have become extremely relevant to me as a college student in the slow process of becoming an adult. Accordingly, I have spent the last few years attempting to actively understand my culture and how it informs everything from how I approach faith, to how I decide what to do with my whole entire life, to how I choose what to do on a Saturday night.

The most personally impactful work I have come across while seeking to understand how our culture operates is Albert Camus's 1942 essay "The Myth of Sisyphus." In it, he provides his own interpretation of the contemporary issues raised by such minds as Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky and Kafka, and presents a comprehensive response to what he refers to as "the Absurd." Camus believed that each of us maintain an innate fear that life is meaningless and absurd, but feverishly attempt to deny this acknowledgement. For example, we live

with hope for tomorrow, without acknowledging that tomorrow brings us closer to death, "the ultimate enemy." We act with a "romanticism" about our place in the earth, without considering that the world is actually cold and "inhu-

man" – with no sympathy for anyone's particular plight. We continue seeking the truth about the universe without acknowledging that "true" knowledge is unattainably immense – the most advanced scientific discoveries rely on incomplete metaphors and physically meaningless mathematical abstractions. Camus thus defines the Absurd as the contradiction that arises between *the innate human need to find meaning and the lack of meaning, or "benign indifference" that the world actually offers us.* Notably, the presence of God is absent from this account of the human condition. While Camus himself saw the idea of God as one of many types of "elusions," or attempts to escape the Absurd, his system as a whole remains consistently agnostic: he does not

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claim that the world necessarily *has* no meaning (or God), just that any such meaning is inherently unattainable.

Again, countless volumes have been written exploring general questions of Meaning and in critique of this specific work; however, I have found Camus's response to his own philosophical framework to be extremely helpful in navigating our current cultural setting. Rather than facing the Absurd and concluding that life is not worth living, Camus instructs the reader to simultaneously respond with acceptance *and* revolt. We are to fully *recognize* the absurdity of our condition "without resignation." At the same time, we are to *revolt* against the idea of total meaninglessness and strive to find *our own* meanings in the world. Camus's Absurdist Hero would essentially live with irony: wholeheartedly pouring himself into any fictitious "meanings" he invents, but always recognizing them as such – just as an actress wholeheartedly pours herself into each role but never questions that the play is anything more than a play. Thus, Hope is rejected as yet another way of "eluding" the Absurd – and Hope's rejection lends us a very dizzying but tangible sense of freedom. With nothing but death ultimately awaiting us in the future and no external sources of meaning available, we are free to live as we choose – to define our own values and meanings, live for our own passions, draw up and tear down our own limits, and existentially take life as it comes. It may ultimately be in our best interest to "play along" with the meanings residually imbued in society (Laws, moral codes, etc.), but again, we are encouraged to maintain an "ironic distance."

I believe that the way of thinking and living described seventy years ago in "Myth of Sisyphus" has come to fruition in today's society. I find myself constantly struggling with these ideas and their implications – particularly as they relate to my own attitude towards work and vocation. As a bit of background, my career narrative reads as follows: by most quantitative measures available, I am a pretty smart guy. I have always done well in school and have always had a *very* real love of learning – anything from physics, history, literature, film, marine biology, music, philosophy, tea, coffee...the list goes on. Accordingly, deciding what to study in college was a formidable challenge made slightly simpler

by the encouragement of those graciously funding the whole affair to apply my obvious passion for physics towards a program with a tangible job waiting. Ultimately, I found the most physics-y engineering program available, and will be graduating this spring with a degree in Nuclear and Radiological Science – a precursor to a graduate program in a field called Medical Physics, which deals with optimizing the medical application of radiation. I am currently waiting to hear admission decisions from three graduate schools for next fall, where I hope to spend

the next four to six years earning a Ph.D. Afterwards, I will begin applying for a two-year residency position at a research hospital, at which point I will be qualified to take the necessary exams to become a *licensed* medical physicist, and *then* I can begin looking for a job.*

“ Our culture’s consumerism reframes any act of choice from the positive: “Given my options, I choose x,” to a negation: “Given my options, I reject all except x.”

Now, when I consider the work I anticipate doing in coming years, *all sorts* of potential challenges immediately come to mind. There is one, however, that I have already begun to wrestle with considerably: the act of choice. By none of my own doing, I was brought up in a privileged position in history's wealthiest society – with unprecedented access to education and almost staggering opportunity in front of me. There are over one hundred majors offered at the University of Florida, and I conceivably could have performed decently in a good number of them – *so why did I choose Nuclear Science?* As stated before, there are many other fields that I am almost certainly *more* interested in than physics. There are *certainly* easier and more conventionally *fun* fields I could have pursued. Our culture's consumerism reframes any act of choice from the positive: "Given my options, I choose x," to a negation: "Given my options, I reject all except x." So, more than *choosing* to pursue Medical Physics, I am *rejecting* a technically infinite number of alternative futures for myself, many of which I would find at least *equally* fulfilling.

The consumeristic burden of choice is further compounded by the cultural acceptance of Camus's relation to the Absurd. Regardless of how much I consciously agree with the life he prescribes, much that Camus says resonates with me in a fundamental way. It often *feels* like life makes little sense. I have never encountered any unmistakable Meaning written for me in the sky. I *know* I will die, so it certainly *feels* like I only have

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one shot at this. These existential concerns generate an urgency to fabricate a perfect life for myself that is uniquely *mine* – to explore as much of life and rack up as many experiences as possible. In Camus's words, "What counts is not the *best* living, but the *most* living." The certainty of death *does* create a sense of freedom where I can pursue *anything* I find compelling. The full-scale integration of the term "#YOLO" (You Only Live Once) into our cultural vocabulary a few years ago shows the centrality of this line of thinking today: with one life to live, the burden is on each of us to make it as beautiful, fun and *experience-driven* as possible.

I, however, will *not* be found on YouTube videos jumping off any waterfalls, backpacking through Cambodia, or getting any ironic tattoos. As far as I can tell, I will be found performing experiments, preparing papers for publication, writing grants, ensuring the mechanical wellbeing of Very Expensive Equipment, and trying to get sleep when possible. And while I will probably enjoy it, our cultural climate will be pressuring me to ask: *would I have enjoyed something else more?* This is the challenge the act of choice creates today: I have virtually limitless possibilities and an imperative to create one perfect life – how and what do I choose? Should I pursue Medical Physics, or drop out and pursue music like I have always dreamed of doing? If I *do* pursue Medical Physics: which professor at which school do I study under? What will my dissertation topic be? Afterwards, do I apply for jobs in academia or hospitals? Where do I live? Who do I marry? Do we have children?

How many? These are impossible questions. Our culture has adopted Camus's system of thought – and it is admittedly compelling in light of our fundamental experiences. However, I have ultimately found the freedom offered by this system to be paralyzing. I will always be able to look on my vocational choices with apprehension – there will always be those who enjoy their work more than I do, who have more profound experiences and are actualizing their perfect, individualized meanings to a greater extent than I am.

Camus believed that any appeal to God used to escape the Absurd amounted to "philosophical suicide." So, at the risk of

committing philosophical suicide: I believe that the Christian tradition adds important depth to Camus's conversation on the Absurd and its relevance to choice and work. In considering the issue of deciding what to do with one's whole entire life, many Christian communities I have encountered typically appeal to the notion of "God's Plan." They often cite two specific verses:

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." – Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV)

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. – Romans 8:28 (NIV)

and subsequently conclude that God develops precise Plans for each individual's life, specifying the career they are intended to pursue, the person they are intended to marry, etc. If we want to "prosper," and have God "[work] for the good," our objective as believers is to *discover* our prescribed Plan, and do everything in our power to not *stray* from it. If, however, we *do* stray from the Plan and, for instance, mistakenly take the *wrong* job or marry the *wrong* person – we essentially have a good deal of backtracking to do to find our way again.

"This is the challenge the act of choice creates today: I have virtually limitless possibilities and an imperative to create one perfect life – how and what do I choose?"

I have seen numerous people find tremendous comfort in these verses. When carefully interpreted, they clearly offer important glimpses at the nature of God. That being said, I frankly find this understanding of "God's Plan" to miss out on the full biblical presentation of how God engages with our experience. The

Bible certainly demonstrates God's power and His knowledge of our lives. Additionally, the Bible contains countless instances of God orchestrating specific individuals' lives for specific goals – of his having "Plans" for them. However, most of these cases seem to emphasize individuals' obedience following the supernatural revelation of a *very specific* call. God directly tells Noah

to build an ark, Hosea to marry Gomer, and Jesus to go to the cross – they obey “Plans” that are made very clear to them.

I am in no position whatsoever to speak with any authority on a theology of God’s sovereignty – but it seems that in today’s setting, the story is a bit different. I believe Jesus left us with spe-

cific instructions on *how* to live, but not necessarily a “Plan” for *what* to do. We are to care for the poor, pray for our enemies, resist anger and greed. We are to love God and love our neighbor. As I see it, *this* is the Biblical notion of God’s “Plan” for each of us today – to follow Christ in our

relationships with God, others, creation, and self, and let these relationships fundamentally inform our decisions. I may have a terribly difficult time discerning where I should attend graduate school next fall. But perhaps this absence of divine clarity could be a cue that it might not *matter* – because I *do* know that wherever I decide to go, He intends for me to share His love with my colleagues and honor Him with my work. Perhaps all else that is left for *me* is to trust that the Lord is handling the remaining significance of my decision Himself.

I find the freedom of this position significantly more compelling than that of Camus’s Absurdism. If I let my decisions be informed by the teachings of Christ, I am free to follow the

passions God instilled in me. I am no longer burdened to manufacture perfect meanings for myself, I can trust that God is utilizing *whatever* decisions I make for His own purpose. I am compelled to work hard to the glory of God, while also seeking to “rejoice in [my] work,” as the writer of Ecclesiastes instructs (3:22, ESV). Finally, I am permitted to live with hope – not that

my conditions will improve, but that the Lord will use my decisions to accomplish something beyond what I could have conceived. Any glimpse of purpose I see along the way I can *fully* embrace, rather than slyly winking at from my “ironic distance.”

All things considered, I still may never be absolutely certain of my decision to pursue Medical Physics. But in following Christ, the act of choice no longer appears to me as a negation of appealing alternatives, but as an affirmation that, *independent* of my context, my task and joy lie in living as He would have me live.

**Note: Since the time of this essay’s writing, I have graduated from the University of Florida, and have accepted a position in the Medical Physics Ph.D program at the University of Chicago. There are plenty of difficult choices still ahead of me – but, for what it is worth, I have found myself perfectly content and unburdened with this one.*

“

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Great News!

Your response to our financial need this year has been wonderfully encouraging and very helpful! While the first four months of the year were the worst we can remember, the summer months have been the best we can remember, and so we are entering the fall semester in a good position to get on with serving the university community.

As always, your generosity makes all the difference. Thank you for your continuing partnership.

If you are new to the Study Center and want to contribute, please visit our website at christianstudycenter.org and click on “donate” or mail your gift to Christian Study Center of Gainesville, 112 NW 16th Street, Gainesville, FL 32603.





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