



# The Parousia and Work: Being Found Working According to the Kingdom

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## Abstract

Eschatologies of work are almost as rare as discussion around Christ's *parousia* at the present time. This article will show that the second appearance of Jesus necessarily informs an eschatology of work. More specifically, two Matthean parables of eschatological discourse will be shown to insist upon 'watchful patience' and 'necessary expansion' as shaping contours to an eschatology of work which has Christ's *parousia* in mind.

## Keywords

Work; *parousia*; eschatology; final state; Scotland

## Introduction

Theologies of work, when they are attempted at all, tend to be developed with a view to origins and purpose, in other words, a protological bent. The inverse of this also holds true, that those who attempt an eschatology of work are, as has been manifest over the last three decades, few by comparison. Perhaps the latter emphasis is viewed as too theologically speculative to be worthy of development.<sup>1</sup> Theologians, however, are invited by Jürgen Moltmann to piece

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<sup>1</sup> See the response by Douglas Schuurman (protologically minded) to Miroslav Volf (eschatologically minded) as an example of fair-minded, mutual critique: Miroslav Volf, 'Eschaton, Creation and Social Ethics', *Calvin Theological Journal*, 30 (1995), 130–143; Douglas J. Schuurman, 'Creation, Eschaton, and Social Ethics: A Response to Volf', *Calvin Theological Journal*, 30 (1995), 144–158. Gordon R. Preece, *The Viability of the Vocation Tradition in Trinitarian, Credal, and Reformed Perspective: The Threefold Call* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1998). Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and the Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Leicester: IVP, 1996), pp.53–58.

theology together from Christ's future and thus apply the coming effects of his *parousia* to the present.

From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present. The eschatological is not one element of Christianity, but it is the medium of Christian faith as such, the key in which everything in it is set, the glow that suffuses everything here in the dawn of an expected new day.<sup>2</sup>

Eschatological thinking in this way is therefore a vital prism to unlocking Christian ethics, argues Moltmann. If he is on track in his bold assertion, then fleshing out an eschatological view of human work is surely necessary as it is for any other theological enquiry.

Assuming Moltmann is correct in his overarching lens for the Christian faith,<sup>3</sup> I will sketch out key statements from church history on the *parousia*, while also highlighting twenty-first century Western theology's under-emphasis, perhaps even deliberate omission, of the eschatological expectation of Jesus's second coming, otherwise known as the *parousia*. After all, the *parousia* (literally 'the coming') is one legitimate aspect of final state eschatology. As someone who roves throughout Scotland in partnership with Scottish Baptist Churches and befriending their pastors, it seems from my collected interactions over the last decade that the *parousia* is not an ever-present theme, nor a steady undercurrent, either in pulpits or in pastoral care. So how might this 'embarrassing' component of Christian eschatology be brought to bear upon the eschatology of work?<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. by Jim W. Leitch (London: SCM Press, 1978), p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> For a rigorous testing of Moltmann's overarching approach to theology, see Ryan A. Neal, *Theology as Hope: On the Ground and Implications of Jürgen Moltmann's Doctrine of Hope* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> The *parousia* was deemed 'embarrassing' by modern theologians from the time of the Enlightenment, according to Moltmann, due to concerns that the concept needed to be demythologised in the same manner as the virgin birth and Christ's resurrection. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions*, trans. by Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1993), p. 313.

## The *Parousia*

Throughout church history consistent effort has been made to ensure the chief place of the *parousia* of Jesus Christ in the telling of the Christian narrative and that it is yet to be fulfilled. In the New Testament, Paul teaches of another ‘coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together with him’ and that ‘the day of the Lord is’ yet to come (2 Thess 2:1, 2). Despite the sufferings of followers of Jesus, Peter comforts his intended readers by interpreting their present tortures through the Lord’s torture on the cross. And yet there will be a ‘shout for joy when his [Jesus’s] glory is revealed’ again, which will end all present strife (1 Pet 4:13). As the Apocalypse of St John concludes we read, “The one who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming soon.” Amen. Come Lord Jesus!” (Rev 22:20). Jesus’s future return is to be anticipated.

Moving from Scripture to the Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr declares that Jesus ‘should come again out of heaven with glory’, with particular reliance upon Daniel 7:13.<sup>5</sup> Among the second-century Apostolic Fathers there were four eschatological events which were consistently repeated: (i) the *Parousia*; (ii) the general resurrection; (iii) the judgement; (iv) and the end of the current world epoch.<sup>6</sup>

Irenaeus is convinced that Jesus ‘shall come in glory’<sup>7</sup> and ‘shall also come in the same flesh in which He suffered, revealing the glory of the Father’.<sup>8</sup> With rhetorical deployment, Tertullian declares, ‘Who has yet beheld Jesus descending from heaven in like manner as the apostles saw Him ascend, according to the appointment of the *two* angels? [Acts

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<sup>5</sup> Justin Martyr ‘The First Apology’, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1*, ed. by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. by Marcus Dods and George Reith (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1885.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0126.htm>> [accessed 28 May 2023], p. 51.

<sup>6</sup> T. A. Noble, ‘Eschatology in the Church Fathers’, in *What are we waiting for? Christian Hope and Contemporary Culture*, ed. by Stephen Holmes and Russell Rook (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), pp. 63–74 (p. 65).

<sup>7</sup> Irenaeus, ‘Against Heresies’, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1*, ed. by Roberts, Donaldson, and Coxe, revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103304.htm>> [accessed 15 June 2023], III.4.2.

<sup>8</sup> Irenaeus, ‘Against Heresies’, III.16.8.

1:11] Up to the present moment they have not, tribe by tribe, smitten their breasts, looking on Him whom they pierced.”<sup>9</sup>

Athanasius concludes his great defence of Christ’s incarnation with, ‘and you will also learn about his second glorious and truly divine appearing to us, when no longer in lowliness but in his own glory, no longer in humble guise but in his own magnificence, he is to come’.<sup>10</sup> The Nicæan Constantinopolitan Creed (381 CE) states that Jesus ‘ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father; And *He shall come again with glory* to judge the living and the dead’.<sup>11</sup> Nicæa’s further definition at Chalcedon unsurprisingly reiterates that the ‘one Lord Jesus Christ [...] is coming again’.<sup>12</sup> Cappadocian Father Basil the Great, likewise, repeats that ‘the Son of God shall come in His glory with His angels’.<sup>13</sup>

A millennium of church history later, the Schleithem Confession of 1527 plainly evinces that the brother- and sisterhood were ‘looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ’.<sup>14</sup> In 1530 the Augsburg Confession outlined that ‘at the Consummation of the World Christ will appear for judgement, and will raise up all the dead; He will give to the godly and elect eternal life and everlasting joys’.<sup>15</sup> The Scots Confession

<sup>9</sup> Tertullian, ‘On the Resurrection of the Flesh’, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 3*, ed. by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. by Peter Holmes (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1885.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0316.htm>> [accessed 28 May 2023], p. 22.

<sup>10</sup> Athanasius, ‘On the Incarnation’, in *Christology of the Later Fathers: Vol. III*, ed. by Edward Rochie Hardy in collaboration with Cyril C. Richardson, trans. by A. Robertson (London: SCM Press, 1954), p. 109.

<sup>11</sup> ‘The Nicæan Constantinopolitan Creed’, Orthodox Wiki <[https://orthodoxwiki.org/Nicene-Constantinopolitan\\_Creed](https://orthodoxwiki.org/Nicene-Constantinopolitan_Creed)> [accessed 15 June 2023], emphasis mine.

<sup>12</sup> ‘The Chalcedonian Decree’, in *Christology of the Later Fathers: Vol. III*, ed. by Hardy and Richardson, p. 372.

<sup>13</sup> Basil the Great, ‘Epistle 46’, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. 8.*, ed. by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans by Blomfield Jackson (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1895). Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3202046.htm>> [accessed 15 June 2023], Epistle 46.5.

<sup>14</sup> ‘The Schleithem Confession’, Baptist Studies Online <<http://baptiststudiesonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/02/the-schleithem-confession-2.pdf>> [accessed 4 May 2023], p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> ‘The Augsburg Confession’, *Book of Concord* <<https://bookofconcord.org/augsburg-confession/of-christs-return-to-judgment/>> [accessed 15 June 2023], Article XVII.

of 1560 also reads ‘we certainly believe that the same our Lord Jesus shall visibly return, as that He was seen to ascend’.<sup>16</sup>

Stanley Grenz’s impressive *Theology for the Community of God* stands tall among twentieth-century contributions to doctrinal theology.<sup>17</sup> But for all its merits, it is almost silent on the eschatological moment of Jesus’s second appearing in the flesh. With no sub-section allocated in a volume committed to in-depth eschatology, readers find a mere inference to this future moment subsumed among talk of the day of judgement. Not that both events are unrelated, but perhaps Grenz’s omission of the *parousia* is indicative of the sheepishness that Moltmann detected among others in the early 1990s. Indeed, Moltmann further notes that in the main christological contribution of his contemporary Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*,<sup>18</sup> Pannenberg entirely glosses over the once expected return of Jesus Christ. Significantly, Pannenberg was Grenz’s doctoral supervisor and prominent influence throughout his corpus.

Kirk MacGregor’s important Molinist/Anabaptist contribution gives the *parousia* no place either, despite his disclaimer that he will only attempt to discuss ‘direct and pressing challenges to the coherence of the biblical worldview or to the vitality of Christian discipleship in contemporary society’.<sup>19</sup> This absence is the case even though the focus of the final chapter is upon Jesus and the kingdom of God. This is not dissimilar to the non-feature of Christ’s *parousia* in Glen Stassen and David Gushee’s *Kingdom Ethics*. Their emphasis is to develop Christian ethics almost exclusively from Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount.<sup>20</sup> James McClendon, however, does include the *parousia*. The baptising community of faith is simultaneously an eschatological community of

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<sup>16</sup> ‘The Scots Confession’, The Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, <<https://www.fpchurch.org.uk/Beliefs/ScotsConfession/index.php>> [accessed 15 June 2023], chapter 11.

<sup>17</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).

<sup>18</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus – God and Man*, trans. by L. C. Wilkins and D. A. Priebe (London: SCM Press, 2002).

<sup>19</sup> Kirk R. MacGregor, *A Molinist-Anabaptist Systematic Theology*, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2007), p. 14.

<sup>20</sup> Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003).

faith because it awaits the Master's reappearance.<sup>21</sup> This handpicked cocktail of modern Baptist thinkers highlights that Jesus's *parousia* is not given a prominent emphasis among Baptists.

Nevertheless, the *parousia* is always included in the ancient creeds and mediaeval confessions. As such it can be said with some confidence that the *parousia* is a vital aspect of final state eschatology and Christian theology in general. For my purposes here, by extension Jesus's second coming must have some bearing upon an eschatology of work by virtue of its eschatological significance, and furthermore because of the lacuna which exists in the lack of overt interplay between the two.<sup>22</sup>

### Working in Anticipation of the *Parousia*

In what ways should an eschatology of work be shaped by the immanent return of Jesus? Even if certain apocalyptic teachings, which for generations have been interpreted as Jesus's second coming, turn out to refer to the sacking of Jerusalem in 70 CE,<sup>23</sup> thus reducing these texts to a past and not a coming event, I remain convinced that the message to workers now or in the past is/was always urgent and life altering. In seeking answers to my self-posed question, I will turn to Matthew's Gospel account to enquire how Christ's future *parousia* might shape human work until that day. The reason for selecting Matthew's evangel is that the Matthean Jesus repeatedly teaches that ethical acts, whether performed or left undone, have a definite, final state corollary (5:12, 21–23, 46; 6:1–6, 16–18; 7:1–2, 23; 10:15, 41–42; 11:22, 24; 12:36, 41–42; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 23; 24:51; 25:31–46).<sup>24</sup> In short, there is a causality of human agency toward what will eventuate in the future age known as

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<sup>21</sup> James Wm. McClendon, Jr, *Ethics: Systematic Theology Vol. 1* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), p. 266.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Miroslav Volf's anticipation of how reconciliation might take place at the final judgement as an aspect of human life's correlation to the eschaton. Miroslav Volf, 'The Final Reconciliation: Reflections on a Social Dimension of the Eschatological Transition', *Modern Theology*, 16, no. 1 (2000), 91–113.

<sup>23</sup> See N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God: Volume Two* (London: SPCK, 1996), pp. 341–343; Andrew Perriman, *The Coming of the Son of Man: New Testament Eschatology for an Emerging Church* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), pp. 77–79.

<sup>24</sup> Richard A. Burridge, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), p. 202.

the new creation. By using the first two parables of Matthew 25 as a stimulus, I will sketch out charcoal-like contours which show how Jesus's *parousia* might inform an eschatology of work.<sup>25</sup>

### *Watchful versus Lackadaisical*

The first parable of Matthew 25 (verses 1 to 13), typically known as 'the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids', conveys that the kingdom of heaven *de facto* will appear at an unexpected moment with the return of Jesus. It will startle even those who are his followers. Remaining on high alert by monitoring life's happenings will ensure that alarmed followers are as ready as possible for that arrival. The key message for the ten bridesmaids is *preparation*. Those who have readied themselves in advance for the overdue arrival of the bridegroom are not filled with dread when word comes 'at midnight' that he has suddenly appeared.

Required for the smooth running of weddings, bridesmaids are at the beck and call of the bride. But the anticipation of an expected bridegroom is all the more heightened in this depiction of the kingdom's fullness because there has been such a prolonged wait to endure. So, when the time finally arrives for the bridesmaids to react there must be no hesitation in falling into line with their wedding day duties. Their attentiveness must be immediate and full. Thus, when the five who did not prepare in advance ask for a bit of help to catch themselves up, they are promptly denied by those who are at the ready. Their firm decline in not sharing their oil with their ill-prepared counterparts is striking.

Whereas this parable is not the most obvious of texts for a theology of work, its suitability for an *eschatology* of work is more evident. Nevertheless, there are subtleties which help us see work's connection with this teaching on the *parousia*. The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids urges workers to avoid being in a situation where shame is the only outcome due to the bridegroom's disappointment in work's failure to launch. It is difficult to ascertain Jesus in any other role than the bridegroom. He is the coming one. There is no one else to whom this

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<sup>25</sup> The final parable of Matthew's 'eschatological discourse' (25:31–46) has also been claimed as crucial to ascertaining *who* and *how* human agency is vital to an eschatology of work and the new creation. See Stuart C. Weir, *The Good Work of Non-Christians, Empowerment, and the New Creation: The Efficacy of the Holy Spirit's Empowering for Ordinary Work* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016).



character could be attributed but the coming Messiah. If this identification is correct, the dread of his pronouncement shown in the parable lays bare poor working efforts and becomes a very sharp motivator. The ‘fear factor’ of the bridegroom elicits a prominent moral incentive for an eschatology of work. Being tempted into slovenliness might swiftly be rescued by the thought that one’s work be incomplete and not at the ready for his undefined time of arrival. Fearing Jesus as a retributive deity might be viewed as problematic for some because it creates real anxiety about assurance of salvation. Moltmann, for one, objects to any final state portrayal of Jesus being one who in a binary fashion separates saints and sinners to heaven and hell respectively.<sup>26</sup> He calls for all final state eschatological visions of Jesus to be consistent with the Jesus of the gospels. But although, on the one hand, Jesus radically includes those who had been excluded by religious Jewish society in his day (the poor, the leprous, women, the *ochlos*) — a point Moltmann makes with sufficient force<sup>27</sup> — on other occasions Jesus makes severe judgements about those whom he deems worthy of (at least) criticism. Examples of such are found laid at the feet of religious leaders (Matt 23:1–36); those worshipping at the Temple in loose fashion (Matt 21:12–13; Mark 11:15–17; Luke 19:45–46; John 2:13–21); Judas at the point of betrayal (John 13:16–18, 21–27); Peter in his opposition to Jesus’s forthcoming passion (Matt 16:23); and occasionally toward non-Israelites (Mark 7:26–27). No one really wishes to recall these moments with great glee, but they are part of the whole Christ presented to us by the evangelists. No one is exempt from enquiring whether our comprehension of Jesus is selective towards his palatable traits. In the end, as the parable relays, being ill-prepared will subsequently see said workers excluded from the final state. The bridegroom is unequivocal at the great wedding that losing interest regarding the time of his arrival will cause great alarm and subsequent omission from the kingdom of heaven. Correspondingly, any

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<sup>26</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions*, trans. by Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1993), p. 336.

<sup>27</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology: Ways and Forms of Christian Theology*, trans. by Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 2000), §III.

eschatology of work must integrate vigilance which governs the manner and content of one's endeavours.

Watchful work, then, should also be *patient* work. Patient insofar as waiting for the Son of Man's return involves real longsuffering. If time is indeed short until his next arrival, consideration of the five lackadaisical bridesmaids is advantageous. In being as conscientiously prepared as one can be, contemporaneous with antennae on high alert, patience is required to absorb the shock of misplaced expectations of his timing. Not that Jesus gave any promises of when and where (Acts 1:7). Being at constant attention for his reappearance needs no corrective, but solely a complementary rootedness in conviction that he will arrive regardless of how long it seems to be taking.

Watchful work without longsuffering stability could easily drift into careless work if it is thought that the Master's return could be at any moment. There is a type of millenarianism which becomes dismissive of the present *precisely because* of being on such high alert. So all-encompassing is the thought that he might return at any moment that bridesmaids may, for example, pour paraffin in their lamps too swiftly so that the stream of fuel pours over the sides, with much of it wasted on the ground. Sloppy workmanship can result in a millenarian and distracted feverishness.<sup>28</sup> Such crazed workers are so heavenly minded that they are of little earthly use. Friedrich Nietzsche's 'passive nihilism' also evokes a similar display towards earthly work by 'bleach[ing] value and beauty out of ordinary life by making it a discardable ladder for the ascent to the divine'.<sup>29</sup> Nietzsche's assessment of the religious life is that it ensures a person (sub)consciously opts out of serious engagement with the earth by virtue of a mindset of dejection.<sup>30</sup> Such indifference to life and work sails close to the five ill-prepared bridesmaids.

Contrariwise, a patient watchfulness in one's work possesses both the readiness of the five wise bridesmaids but includes the careful

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<sup>28</sup> Neil T. R. Dickson, *Brethren in Scotland: A Social Study of an Evangelical Movement*, Studies in Evangelical History and Thought (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002), pp. 262–263, 310–312.

<sup>29</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Flourishing: Why we need Religion in a Globalized World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), p. 198.

<sup>30</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Viking, 1974), p. 181.

dedication of a watchmaker. It is such readiness which reveals the dogged determination to go about one's work with thoroughgoing excellence. It is because of who is coming that the quality of one's work must match one's working to attention. Indeed, in considering the five lamps which were trimmed and fully prepared, watchful patience at work might insist that the lamps were also buffed into a mirror polish and proudly wrapped in cotton muslin to avoid any tarnishing.

*Work That Grows*

In the second of the three Matthean 'eschatological discourse[s]' (chapter 25) the kingdom of heaven arriving in its fullness is likened to a man who delegated responsibility for his property to slaves while he travelled abroad (25:14–30). This story is often referred to as the 'Parable of the Talents'. The three slaves apparently had differing 'ability', but the property was nonetheless unevenly divided among them. Slaves 1 and 2 were ambitious and expanded their greater portion. This endeavour 'paid off' as they were able to exponentially increase what they were originally given. At the proprietor's return, slaves 1 and 2 were wholeheartedly affirmed for their initiative and hard labours. 'Good' and 'faithful' were the property owner's appraisal of their work. The third slave, however, out of fear did nothing with what he had been made responsible for. The proprietor calls him 'wicked' and 'lazy' for his unwillingness and lack of aspiration. As a consequence, he was 'throw[n] [...] into the outer darkness' because of his fear of the master and his correlative inertia towards a development of work.

It is important once again that we ask who Jesus is in this parable. Is Stuart Murray accurate in identifying Jesus as the 'lazy' slave who is misunderstood and condemned by the authorities around him?<sup>31</sup> What works against this theory is that in Matthew 24 and 25 the Master is always the one who is coming at an unspecified time. Further, if the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats informs the first two parables of Matthew 25, where the coming one is identified as 'the Son of Man' delegated by his 'Father' to have authority over heaven and earth (Matt

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<sup>31</sup> Albeit Murray relies more directly on the Lukan version of this parable. Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2005), p. 296.

25:31, 34), then the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats sheds some light upon the coming one's identity in the Parable of the Talents. Jesus is to be identified as the landowner and not as slave 3.

It is expected by the coming Master that workers grow and expand what the master has bestowed upon them. Not ever acting on what one has been given is condemned in the harshest terms because the Master 'reap[s] where [he] did not sow, and gather[s] where [he] did not scatter' (Matt 25:26). But what is meant by 'growth' here? Is this teaching a kind of anachronistic endorsement for capitalistic upscaling? Some church denominations in the United Kingdom are content to relate passively and uncritically towards the 'invisible hand' of liberal market forces.<sup>32</sup> This cosy relationship with capitalism is not the position of Timothy Gorringer who calls for a complete replacement of the current capitalist order due to the vast levels of injustice this system births.<sup>33</sup> There are other voices which seek to 'transfigure capitalism'<sup>34</sup> or believe that there is 'scope for self-correction'<sup>35</sup> within the system itself. This is not unlike Miroslav Volf's belief that there are always 'alignments, tensions and incompatibilities' in following Jesus with any given economic system.<sup>36</sup>

But what might the Jesus who wishes work to grow have to say about profitable business which puts people out of work because robots do the work more consistently? An increasing number of humans are unemployed as a result of the human creation of robots. In creating intelligent machines to serve us, humans have purposely or inadvertently worked themselves into unemployment and poverty. There is some anxiety that humans have created machines in our own image, but through our obsession with new technologies what if humans begin

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<sup>32</sup> Eve Poole points this out in her detailed analysis of the hierarchy of the Church of England. Eve Poole, *The Church on Capitalism: Theology and the Market* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 154.

<sup>33</sup> Timothy J. Gorringer, *Capital and the Kingdom: Theological Ethics and Economic Order* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994).

<sup>34</sup> John Atherton, *Transfiguring Capitalism: An Enquiry into Religion and Global Change* (London: SCM Press, 2008).

<sup>35</sup> Richard Higginson, *Questions of Business Life: Exploring Workplace Issues from a Christian Perspective* (Carlisle: Spring Harvest, 2002), p. 42.

<sup>36</sup> Volf, *Flourishing*, p. 240, n. 92.

thinking like machines?<sup>37</sup> What does that mean for being human and for the work we ought to do? We may have grown and designed new machines that have never before existed, but is this commensurate with the growth the Master expects?

Profit may indeed be made, but what if it is at the expense of the health and very lives of humans, animals, or inanimate creation? For example, what if profit is made at a music concert but the content of the performer's songs promotes violence and hatred in the world? There are links between imbibing certain lyrical content and social behaviour.<sup>38</sup> Can we argue that entertainment value really trumps lyrical content when we have fundamental fears about what is being actively promulgated from the microphone? This situation immediately comes into direct contact with the issue of freedom of expression.

Again, we might question the lucrative popularity of Irn Bru (the 'pop'/soft drink of choice in the Scottish market). Some of its ingredients include stimulants which produce adverse behaviour in children.<sup>39</sup> Is such a drink good for us? Can we say that Irn Bru is of benefit to our bodies? Yet year upon year it remains Scotland's highest selling soft drink.<sup>40</sup>

Again, in terms of profit and growth, we might similarly ask what of the short-term forestry practices for timber in the construction industry which robs generations' worth of growth?<sup>41</sup> Such forestry understands trees only as a means to human ends. They are reared until they reach their earliest maturity and then are felled, ending up in a logging production line. Not all trees should be there for the taking,

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<sup>37</sup> Mark Boyle, *The Way Home: Tales from a Life without Technology* (London: OneWorld Publications, 2019), p. 151.

<sup>38</sup> Craig Anderson, 'Violent Song Lyrics may lead to Violent Behavior', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84, no. 5 (2003), 960–971.

<sup>39</sup> 'Irn-Bru to Carry a Health Warning', *The Scotsman*, 24 July 2010 <<https://www.scotsman.com/news/irn-bru-to-carry-a-health-warning-2442243>> [accessed 6 June 2023].

<sup>40</sup> 'Irn-Bru and Tennent's Lager Top Lists of Favourite Scottish Food and Drink Brands', *Scottish Daily Express*, 17 December 2022 <<https://www.scottishdailyexpress.co.uk/lifestyle/food/irn-bru-tennents-lager-top-28755145>> [accessed 9 June 2023].

<sup>41</sup> Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate: Discoveries from a Secret World*, trans. by Jane Billinghurst (London: William Collins, 2016), pp. 31–36.

burning, or reshaping for industries such as construction. Trees exist for themselves too. Further, trees are instrumental in the air humans and other animate and inanimate species breathe. So ruthless has Scotland been over the last one hundred years in chopping forests down that the remaining one percent of the original Caledonian forest now has to be fiercely protected to prevent its permanent disappearance.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, great efforts partnered with political agreement have become mandatory to regrow what we have so recklessly utilised with short sightedness.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, why is the habitat of many animate and inanimate species, who forge homes in these short-lived forests, frequently overlooked when timber is ‘required’ for human needs?<sup>44</sup> Scotland’s extensive deforestation is the consequence of rolling out an unquestioned utilitarianism. With few advocates for them, would there be a situation where there were few to no trees in existence to clap their hands (Isa 55:12) at Christ’s eventual *parousia*?

At this juncture, we might pause to consider the symbolic value of trees in the Bible that might illustrate the link between human work and the *parousia*, and what this might indicate about appropriate growth. Two trees mark out the Edenic period of creation, namely the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:9); the Abrahamic blessing was given by God to Abram at the oak of Moreh (Gen 12:6); Abraham was visited by YHWH under the oaks (or terebinths) of Mamre (Gen 18:1 — incidentally, one of these trees still lives near Hebron today); the prophetess Deborah judged Israel from underneath a palm tree between Ramah and Bethel (Judg 4:5); Saul and his sons were buried under an oak in Jabesh (1 Chron 10:12); and the eschatological hope to come promises to include the tree of life which will salve the wounds of life from this present age (Rev 22:2). This is nothing to say of the particular species of tree highlighted as native to the nations surrounding the Promised Land (e.g. the cedars of Lebanon,

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<sup>42</sup> A huge proportion of trees in Scotland have been felled for three main reasons: (i) production during war efforts; (ii) as a consequence of the historical Highland Clearances from the mid-to-late 18th century into the mid-19th century; (iii) and overgrazing by deer due to lack of culling.

<sup>43</sup> ‘An Ancient Wilderness: Reversing Centuries of Ecological Damage’, *Mossy Earth*, <<https://www.mossy.earth/projects/reforesting-scotland#an-ancient-wilderness>> [accessed 9 June 2023].

<sup>44</sup> Boyle, *The Way Home*, p. 77.

cypress, wild olive, and juniper — 2 Sam 5:11, 6:5; 1 Kings 19:4; Neh 8:5).<sup>45</sup> In other words, trees in and of themselves add value to human and non-human creation under God's sacred canopy. Work which cultivates, appreciates, and lives peacefully alongside local, verdant woodland is more befitting of a coming Jesus. God's people are to be propagators of the good, not agents of systematic destruction in the name of vice regency.

Therefore, work as naked profit cannot be work's *telos*. Left solely to the devices of the liberal market forces, all kinds of twisted endeavours eventuate at the hands of the human race, spoiling society and broadly denigrating creation.<sup>46</sup>

Consumer capitalism has stooped to conquer, endorsing an ethos of unrestrained acquisitive materialism merely in order to transform independent citizens into supine subjects. It has served as a mechanism for the manufacture first of endless desires and then of the endless flow of commodities that alone would (however partially) gratify those desires.<sup>47</sup>

What is meant by working growth as per Matthew 25:14–30 can surely be work which *propagates* the kingdom of heaven. What might this kind of work look like? It might initially look like a preparedness to ask critical questions of any work project or initiative regarding their benefit and for whom at the conception or planning stages. Good practice would include adaptation, acceptance, or rejection of projects at design and concept stage rather than rushing ahead to force a project into reality without first asking how beneficial it might be. Would we have the same proportion of dissatisfying or detrimental initiatives in our society if followers of Jesus were assessing ideas at embryonic stages? This necessitates the question of whether there are (i) enough followers of Jesus in Scottish workplaces and by extension, (ii) whether there are

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<sup>45</sup> Thanks to Richard Bauckham who sent me this unpublished paper “‘All the trees of the forest sing for joy’: God and the poetry of trees”, which he delivered at the *Society for the Study of Theology Conference 2010*, 12–14 April, Manchester, England, which informs this paragraph.

<sup>46</sup> Michael J. Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2012); Andrew Glyn, *Capital Unleashed: Finance, Globalization, and Welfare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>47</sup> Wilfred M. McClay, ‘Where Have we Come Since the 1950s? Thoughts on Material and American Social Character’, in *Rethinking Materialism: Perspectives on the Spiritual Dimension of Economic Behavior*, ed. by Robert Wuthnow (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 25–71 (p. 52).

Christian workers who are senior enough across working all sectors to be at the table to influence such decisions. Moreover, do wise working agents need to be Christian to necessitate a beneficent outcome? There are many who would argue that this is not a prerequisite for the efficient ordering of projects.<sup>48</sup> Part of the struggle, too, is that liberal market forces demand we sell ideas swiftly to make money so that salaries can be paid at the end of each month. This ‘invisible hand’ squeezes out early analysis because no employer wishes to reduce their workforce due to pregnant deliberation of ideas, even if it is only because making redundancies costs so much emotional energy.<sup>49</sup>

Beyond the consideration of ideas, what might propagate the kingdom of heaven, displaying evidence that this reign is long since inaugurated on earth and that it might soon culminate with Christ’s reappearance? A useful stratification to test working projects is offered by the identification of a fourfold nature to the kingdom of heaven.<sup>50</sup> The kingdom of heaven is a new order of life which evinces: (1) a harmony of relationship between God and humankind; (2) a pattern for how human-to-human relations can flourish; (3) a peace between human work and the rest of God’s creation; (4) as well as a serenity and tranquillity in relating to oneself while working. I will briefly comment on each in their turn as a way of probing at types of work which might propagate the kingdom of heaven.

(1) The work of the church is vital in fostering and training its people in its ancient disciplines in order to relate to the God who has come near in Jesus Christ. ‘The end of all things is near; therefore be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers’ (1 Pet 4:7). Because the structural motif of the Christian faith is *trinitarian*, the correlation as God’s people to his triunity is an *ecclesial*, communitarian

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<sup>48</sup> Weir, *Good Work*.

<sup>49</sup> Scotland’s economist Adam Smith (1723–1790) is the originator of this term. Adam Smith, *The Invisible Hand*, Penguin Great Ideas (London, Penguin Books, 2008).

<sup>50</sup> Credit must go to Darrell Cosden who seeded this thought in his lectures at the International Christian College, Glasgow in 2001.



integration, and always with an *eschatological* bent.<sup>51</sup> As Grenz quite rightly emphasises, ‘believers sense a special solidarity with one another. Within the context of the church, this solidarity works its way out in the practical dimensions of fellowship, support, and nurture that its members discover through their relationships as a communal people.’<sup>52</sup> In a time when churches across Scotland of all traditions cannot recruit and train enough leaders who will shepherd existing flocks of sheep, it appears that much is to be done to have in place adequate, let alone healthy, Christian leadership who can orchestrate spiritual verve and vitality among God’s people. Done well, there are no people better suited to facilitate human relations with the triune God than the church.

(2) Not that the work of the church should be unlinked from repairing relationships, but any work which seeks to bring people together who are estranged is work befitting of this layer of his new order of life. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of the Republic of South Africa was and is a laudable attempt not only to deal with realities as they were perceived to have happened, but as a dual process which sought to encourage those involved to acknowledge culpability and seek out the possibility of restitution and reconciliation in the wake of the truth. Because the act of reconciliation is first and foremost an act of Jesus dispelling enmity to bring parties back together (Rom 5:8, 10–11; 2 Cor 5:19), any correlating act which genuinely facilitates and enables human relationships to mend themselves is work which echoes the reign of God on earth. Family mediation and marriage counselling, for example, done with the aim of restoring relationships must surely speak of God’s realm at work.

We might add to this the difficult and fraught work of restorative justice and attempts to reintegrate prisoners back into society, along with, in rare cases, attempts at encouraging confession to their victims. With Scottish prisons overcrowded and with no end in sight to the continual incarcerations,<sup>53</sup> our society needs to attempt something

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<sup>51</sup> Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), pp. 169–273.

<sup>52</sup> Grenz and Franke, *Beyond*, p. 236.

<sup>53</sup> ‘Overcrowding in Scottish prisons among worst in Europe’, *Scottish Legal News*, 8 April 2021

completely alternative. Retributive justice with no thoroughgoing attempt at rehabilitation or restoration has not shown any benefit. Restorative justice, on the other hand, is a type of work which nudges in the direction of the kingdom of heaven. Real attempts at aiding fellow human beings to flourish in society, where people learn to give as well as receive, is surely one way of loving one's neighbour against their track record. Even if attempts are ultimately unworkable, the instinct to not assign someone to a dark fate speaks of a human-to-human spilling over of God's *hesed*.

(3) With the post-flood reiteration of the cultural mandate to Noah and his sons, God states a change in relations between humans and animals: 'The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth [...] every bird [...] on everything that creeps [...] on all the fish' (Gen 9:2). Sin entered God's good creation and has marred it significantly. The 'dread' which animals experience in relation to humans is one major difference between prelapsarian Eden and Mount Ararat. Yet there is a hope that these relations are reconciled at the new creation where even the vulnerable 'nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp' (Isa 11:8). Here we see momentarily the reversal of human/animal dynamics as well as predator and prey animals put on peaceable terms. There are flashes and glimpses of these surprise relations in the present day, but wherever there is work being done to better human/animal relations and the management thereof, this might be conceived of as the propagation of the kingdom of heaven *de jure*. In Scotland we could consider the reintroduction of beavers in Knapdale, which has received both plaudits and criticism. Despite disagreement, the human decision was made to reintegrate them back into our country. Beavers instinctively carve out new wetlands, benefit and help to organise woodland, and consequently (perhaps intentionally?) encourage a richer equilibrium for other living species.<sup>54</sup> Although some humans object to their wetland reorganisation, there may be no grounds for any moral high ground given the historically destructive stance of

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<<https://www.scottishlegal.com/articles/overcrowding-in-scottish-prisons-among-worst-in-europe>> [accessed 23 June 2023].

<sup>54</sup> 'Scottish Beavers', Scottish Wildlife Trust <<https://scottishwildlifetrust.org.uk/our-work/our-projects/scottish-beavers/>> [accessed 23 June 2023].

humans towards them that led to the extinction of beavers on our island by the sixteenth century.

(4) Work which aids people in the task of better knowing and understanding themselves, not only in relation to others but also in order to healthily and accurately think of themselves, can be work befitting of the kingdom of heaven. Loving others as we love ourselves only functions on the assumption that we do love ourselves. For those whose default setting is self-loathing or self-hatred, society as well as the person themselves are set up for disaster. The work of self-understanding and self-love, or ‘inner work’, with the goal of learning to love oneself, when done well will then precipitate the ability to genuinely love others. An example of an avenue to understanding ourselves and each other that has Christian roots is the Enneagram of personality, which ‘illustrates the nine ways we get lost, but also the nine ways we can come home to our True Self.’<sup>55</sup> The wisdom that this system of thought offers is that ‘when properly used as a lens, [it] can both increase our self-awareness and foster compassion for others’.<sup>56</sup>

Such working examples and motivations nudge, in broad contours and with hopeful instincts, towards the kingdom of heaven. Before Jesus’s *parousia* unalterably takes place, so the Parable of the Talents warns, human work ought to somehow expand. Illustrations of what growth could and should not mean are roughly outlined above.

## Conclusion

Each Matthean ‘eschatological discourse’ from chapter 25 provides edges of their own sort. Correspondingly, they inform any eschatology of work. *Watchful patience* holds in tension the need to be on alert in the

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<sup>55</sup> Christopher L. Heuertz, *The Sacred Enneagram: Finding Your Unique Path to Spiritual Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), p. 25.

<sup>56</sup> A. J. Sherrill, *The Enneagram for Spiritual Formation: How Knowing Ourselves Can Make Us More Like Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2020), p. 25. However, Richard Rohr offers a caution that this benefit can be compromised. Deviated from its Christian roots unhinges the practice from the Source and secularises its packaging as one of a plethora in the psychological world. ‘Richard Rohr’, Enneagram Mapmakers with Christopher Heuertz, 29 June 2021, podcast <<https://enneagrammapmakers.podbean.com/e/richard-rohr/>> [accessed 23 June 2023].

endeavour of work without denouncing the tasks at hand. Indeed, by continually attending to this tautness, work can be present and at its best without distraction and fecklessness. *Expansive work* demands a critical assessment of the liberal market and unbridled capitalism, while also having an adequate replacement definition. I have offered a fourfold stratification of God's kingdom as a prism by which to determine whether certain projects are in keeping with the divine realm intended for this earth.

Jesus's *parousia* necessarily sharpens the focus of the form(s) of work his followers aim to perform (or get involved in) in concert with the intensity by which said work is delivered. Allowing for and enquiring how the coming *parousia* informs human work vitally incorporates this oft-forgotten component of final state eschatology into an eschatology of work.