

Work with Purpose Idea Grant Report: Submitted by Kyle A. Roberts to Chris Armstrong.

Report of Teaching Sessions:

I taught a two-hour session on the topic, “Eschatology and Work” in each of my TS503 course sections (afternoon and evening) on May 23. In the sessions, I opened with a reflective exercise using images of two very different cultural artifacts, or “products,” including a hand-made pulpit and Mt. Rushmore. I asked students which of these might “last” into the new creation—and why? Students had a vigorous discussion of the images, which opened up avenues of reflection on the meaningfulness of work. What makes the “fruit of our labors” significant? Is it their lasting value as cultural products—or is it the effect the process of work has on the worker(s)? Then we moved into a discussion of “meaningful / detrimental work,” which broadened the discussion to issues around the ethics of work and economics. Again, I used images which provoked reflection on the disparity of kinds of work and working conditions globally (i.e. a textile factory in India versus a modern office environment). I then used the work of Darrell Cosden (*Heavenly Good of Earthly Work*) and David Jensen (*Responsive Labor*) to develop an adequate theology of work as opposed to inadequate theologies of work.

Many students (in each section) reported that the topic of “theology of work” that we discussed is much needed for them. They noted how easily they jumped into the conversation, since they have all worked in some job or other. It is easy to transition from their own work experiences and various struggles with “bad jobs” to understanding the significance of pastors addressing the topic of work for their congregants. Some reported that they weren’t quite convinced of the connection between eschatology and the value of the *products* of our labor (some students are annihilationists and therefore find that connection more difficult to make). Other students found it a difficult topic since so much of work is alienating for so many (which was a point I raised in the lecture). They noted that it can be easier to convince the “privileged” of society to think of their work as ministry (and meaningful), whereas for much of the world that connection seems tenuous at best (since work seems a necessary evil, not a ministry). This is a question that the theology of work literature needs to address more deeply, in my opinion.