

The Doctrine of God: Divine Fullness and Work

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Work and the Doctrine of God

There are some obvious pitfalls to avoid in relating the doctrine of God to the world of human labor. Certain clichés beckon: a simple schema that correlates an uncreated worker with created workers; collaborative cooperation in a shared task that spans the divine-human distinction; a great chain of working that traverses the great chain of being, and so on. Schemas like this are, if not quite mythological, at least not necessarily or distinctively Christian. It is important not to simply adopt one of them as the fundamental presupposition and then camouflage it with biblical and evangelical terminology (vocation, image of God, blessing, etc.). We know better than to repose in a too-direct or too-smooth linkage between God and human labor, we still need some way to discern and confess a meaningful connection between the two. How worthless would all work be if it were isolated from God, if the doctrine of God did not somehow “establish the work of our hands?” (Psalm 90:17)

Any connection between God and world—and this includes our theme of God’s work and human work—must be established from God’s side, and by God’s own free choice rather than by necessity. Theology comes to the interpretation of the human world not in search of necessary structures generated from the being of God, but rather in search of patterns marked by God’s operative wisdom, resulting from God’s free action working in ways that manifest not necessity but fittingness. In short, we do not move straight down from God’s own being to the world as such, but from God through the medium of the *oikonomia*, the economy of God’s ways with the world.

But to say God and human labor are linked by “the economy” is fatally equivocal: It might just be a bad pun.

Ephesians and the Language of Economy and Work

Or perhaps it is not so much a bad pun as a very elaborate one. In English, “economy” used to be a word used for the public virtue of “prudent conduct, or discreet and frugal management, whether of a man’s own estate or that of another.”¹ Since that 1768 definition, the word has expanded into its larger modern sense, indicating the whole field studied by that relentlessly mathematical “dismal science” of goods and resources, supply and demand, and the wealth of nations. But long before it was a broad financial term, it was already a theological word. And that word entered Christian theological usage largely from its significant use in Ephesians 1:10, which describes God’s great beneficence in human salvation as “a plan for the fullness of time” (ESV) or “a “dispensation for the fullness of the times” (KJV) [*oikonomian tou pleromatos ton kairon*]. God’s wise and orderly arrangement of his great blessing over the course of an unfolding history is an *oikonomia*, an economy—though no responsible translation would risk bringing the cognate “economy” directly into our

¹ From the original *Encyclopedia Britannica*, under the old spelling “oeconomy” (Edinburgh, Scotland, 1768).

English Bibles. The expansive explanatory phrase “economy of salvation” has helpfully worked its way down from patristic times into the modern seminary lexicon, and serves pretty well. The extra phrase “of salvation” helpfully reminds us that the Bible has in view not just any sort of wise arrangement, the one wise arrangement by which God saves.

Still, once the modern meaning of economics has been invoked, a quick look around Ephesians reveals an utter riot of related concepts and images. These are worth briefly surveying, not on general purposes but precisely because of how Ephesians models the way that the doctrine of God impresses itself on human affairs.

“Blessed with a blessing” is the early keynote, and even if we are instantly assured that the blessings in view are not physical but spiritual (1:3), the language of overflowing wealth takes hold here. We have “redemption...according to the riches [ploutos] of his grace” (1:7) which he “lavished upon us” (1:8) [*eperisseusen*] in this economy (1:10) [*oikonomian*]. As a result, the Spirit “is the guarantee of our inheritance” until we take “possession” of it (1:14) [*arrabōn, klēronomias, peripoiēseōs*]. Paul prays that his readers would be spiritually enlightened to know “the riches of his glorious inheritance” (1:18) [*ploutos, klēronomias*]. God is praised as “rich” [*plousios*] in mercy (2:4); he is the one who will display the “immeasurable riches” [*hyperballon ploutos*] of his grace (2:7) toward us. This grace is, in typically Pauline fashion, opposed to “works” [*erga*] (2:9), though in a way characteristic of Ephesians we are immediately told that “good works” [*ergois agathois*] are the active goal for which we were created as God’s workmanship (2:10) [*ktisthentes, poiēma*]. God’s unifying work evokes language of civic participation and even city construction: there is shared citizenship (2:19; 3:6) and the raising of a building (2:20). Paul describes his own part in this work as that of having a stewardship (3:2) [*oikonomion*] and of preaching “the unsearchable riches” (3:8) [*anexichniaston ploutos*] of Christ.² The leading idea of Ephesians (introduced in 1:20) is the exaltation of Christ, and in the fourth chapter this exaltation is expressed precisely as the ascended and conquering Lord freely distributing gifts [*domata*].

The ethical or paraenetic section of Ephesians³ features what scholars call a household code, and since “household code” is practically a synonym for *oikonomia* (how things are dispensed within a household), it is no surprise that fiscal, financial, and fiduciary concerns emerge. As Paul describes the ethical transformation of

² There is also in Ephesians an underlying interest in measurement and proportion. It is subtle but worth noting. The word *metron* occurs three times in the discussion of the ascended Christ’s distribution of gifts (4:7, 13, 16), as if to explore the idea that his giving, along with its effectiveness in stimulating growth to maturity, is incommensurable with anything but a standard set by himself. A similar gesture at what we might call a kind of measureless measure is the ecstatic prayer of 3:14-21, in which Paul asks that believers may come to know “the breadth and length and height and depth” [*platos kai mēkos kai hyposis kai bathos*] of something ineffable, and to be “filled with all the fullness” [*plērōthēte eis pan to plērōma*] of God. In this charged environment, even the characteristic use of “according to” and “just as” prepositions in Ephesians is probably significant for extending the idea of a divine measure measured only by itself.

³ Paul reminds the Ephesians that they have been called with a calling (4:1) [*klēseōs, eklēthēte*], but since his point is about their one unified call as a whole community, it would be inappropriate to press this language for a theology of “vocation” in the traditional sense of individual or distinct tasks.

believers, he exhorts the thief to stop stealing, but rather to “labor [*kopiatō*], doing honest work [*ergazomenos...to agathon*] with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need [*metadidonai...chreian*]” (4:28). Destructive vice is replaced with “honorable industry, with a view to generosity,” as one commentator says.⁴ Finally, Paul evokes the entire sphere of labor in exhorting “bondservants” [*douloi*] to obey their masters [*kyrioi*s] with a certain quality of work: “not by way of eye-service [*ophthalmoudoulian*], as people-pleasers [*anthrōpareskoi*],” but as to the Lord, both “from the heart” and “with a good will [*met’ eunoias*]” (6:5-7).⁵

Ephesians thus employs the images and terminology of economics and work in a particularly sprawling or dizzying way, which reaches from the heights of divine glory and fullness down to the details of physical labor. The key to all of this is a preeminent fullness, or a perfect blessedness expressed as richness, flowing over generously as an endless resource for the needy, a rescue for the lost, and an equipping of workers for service.

Ephesians has drawn its share of commentators alert to this tendency. Perhaps the most focused of these “economic” commentators on Ephesians was the Puritan Bartholomew Ashwood (1622-1680). His 1681 treatise on Ephesians 3:8 (the passage on “the unsearchable riches of Christ,” KJV) signals its intent in its title, *The Best Treasure*. It goes on to resolve all ambiguity in its elaborate, seventeenth-century-style subtitle: “Or, the way to be truly rich, being a discourse on Ephesians 3.8, wherein is opened and commended to saints and sinners the personal and purchased riches of Christ, as the best treasure, to be pursued and ensured by all that would be happy here and hereafter.”⁶ Ashwood had already published a book on the same general subject, using the same economic plays on similar biblical language. That 1679 book had been entitled *The Heavenly Trade*.⁷ But this second book, focused on Ephesians, earned a foreword from the celebrated John Owen. Owen announced the main idea: “The wisdom of God and Grace of God in Christ Jesus, are frequently in the Scripture expressed by the name of Riches and Treasures. These it is the duty of believers in all ages, diligently to search after, to enquire into and possess for themselves.”⁸

⁴ John Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians* (Glasgow: Richard Griffin, 1853), 351.

⁵ The context domain is Greco-Roman slavery, so “slaves” might be an appropriate rendering. But there is an underlying principle in this section applicable also to free, modern people employed within a market system. In some conservative African American churches, passages like this (including the Colossians parallel) are often preached with a main focus on the ethics of employment. Employees working for hire should work “as unto the Lord.”

⁶ Bartholomew Ashwood, *The Best Treasure* (London: Printed for William Marshall, 1681). I have normalized the archaic spelling, capitalization, and punctuation to avoid distraction.

⁷ Bartholomew Ashwood, *The Heavenly Trade, or the Best Merchandizing: The Only Way to Live Well in Impoverishing Times* (London: Samuel Lee, 1679).

⁸ John Owen, “To the Reader” in Ashwood, *Best Treasure*, first (un-numbered) page.

Ashwood admits that “to cast up the total value of these Treasures, is beyond the arithmetic of saints themselves,”⁹ but this admission does not stop him from trying: *Best Treasure* runs to thirty chapters in 437 pages. Its structure sprawls somewhat, but the overall trajectory is clear. Ashwood begins with a very high doctrine of God, showing how that perfect divine fullness is communicated from the Father to the Son in the eternity of the divine being. Next, he moves to the incarnation, tracing how the riches of divinity are communicated to humanity in the person of Christ, not by some sort of direct union with human nature, but by the incarnational hypostatic union in Jesus himself. Rehearsals of Christ’s deity “abundantly prove the Lord Jesus to be perfect God: and so of infinite Perfection and Blessedness, to enrich all that come unto him; which will evidently appear, if we do but a little consider those Perfections of the Divine Nature, as opened in the Scriptures, all which are in Jesus Christ.”¹⁰

It is worth noting that Ashwood makes use of not just a high Christology, but first of all a high Theology, or a classical doctrine of God, into which he then elevates Christ. Cascading down from Father to Son to mediator to the redeemed, *The Best Treasure* emphasizes the sharing out of the riches, and guides readers to grasp and value what has been given to them. Ashwood lays special emphasis on the cross of Christ, displaying it as the event in which “Christ is become a Purchaser in the behalf of Believers, how he hath made this purchase, and what he hath purchased.”¹¹ The fruit of this purchase is “adoption-grace,” the excellency of which Ashwood opens “in several particulars.”¹² It must be said that Ashwood never quite descends to the home-economic realities to which Ephesians itself takes us, nor to actual money and wealth in the world of daily work, except to warn readers of “the Folly of such as pursue earthly things, with neglect of Christ,” and some advice about “the nature of those things; the terms on which they are to be enjoyed, the casualty that attends them, the guilt such contract.”¹³ We might say Ashwood has a good instinct for the surpassing value of the spiritual realities signified by the economic language of Ephesians, but not as good a grasp, or as focused an interest, in the positive difference those spiritual realities might make in the midst of actual financial wealth and poverty. Ashwood, and similar homiletical commentators, remain excellent witnesses to the overall vector of the Ephesians way of talking about riches: beginning at the top and then dropping down from an infinite height, moving out from the fullness (*pleroma*, Eph 1:23; 3:19) so that it funds the economy without emptying out into it.

⁹ Ashwood, *Best Treasure*, 7.

¹⁰ Ashwood, *Best Treasure*, 13.

¹¹ Ashwood, *Best Treasure*, 225.

¹² Ashwood, *Best Treasure*, 258.

¹³ Ashwood, *Best Treasure*, 370ff.

Divine Fullness

Pleroma is the Greek word for fullness, a concept so seductive that Gnostics latched onto it and made it all but unusable, by crowding it with fanciful content. Irenaeus remains a reliable guide to how much nonsense Gnostic teachers could stuff into the skin of that great word from Ephesians.¹⁴ But alert theological readers can retrieve the doctrine of divine fullness simply by returning to the source, taking their bearings from Ephesians itself, and attending to the ways in which the Bible gives content to the confession that God has fullness, or riches. One spirited attempt at such a retrieval has been made in recent years by Michael Allen. Allen describes it this way:

Divine fullness is first and foremost a reality within the divine life. God is rich and full with life, light, and all bounty. He possesses these realities in and of himself as the triune God, such that his fullness is that of the eternal triune relations and of the distinctly Trinitarian unity. His riches are owned by he [sic] who is without beginning or end and thus who is characterized by aseity. Yet his bounteous bliss goes beyond mere self-existence or self-sufficiency to also require that we attest his excess, wealth, and fullness. All that he has, he is, and he has all and more.¹⁵

In Allen's elaboration of the theme, we can see how it includes more traditionally well-worn doctrines like divine aseity and self-existence. Fullness is the more comprehensive category, and is more positive. As such, the category of fullness has the advantage (which aseity does not) of suggesting the way God freely moves out from his own perfection to become the saving and perfecting power of what he creates. Allen goes on to describe how this divine fullness is not just in God, but also lives from God, by God, and has its effects out before (that is, in the presence of) God.

Jeremy Begbie has undertaken a similar retrieval in his most recent foray into theology through the arts. In *Abundantly More: The Theological Promise of the Arts in a Reductionist World*,¹⁶ Begbie casts about for language to describe how God transcends the limitations we habitually impose on him, and settles on the category of "uncontainability." The notion is theologically helpful for Begbie in exactly the way fullness is helpful for Allen: it is unconventional terminology, sufficiently broad to cover a number of more familiar terms. Begbie elaborates uncontainability as a term that includes within itself divine simplicity, ineffability and sovereignty, and suggests that it could cover even more territory (perhaps abundantly more). Also parallel to Allen's use of fullness, Begbie leverages uncontainability to account for God's free and uncompelled movement to create and redeem; God's "uncontainable pressure" that is vitally generative of "ex-pressure" toward others. In a running polemic against

¹⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*.

¹⁵ Michael Allen, "Divine Fullness," Chapter 4 in *The Knowledge of God: Essays on God, Christ, and Church* (London: T&T Clark, 2022), 51-62; at 53.

¹⁶ Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023.

reductionism, Begbie appeals to this pressure as a “mode of power... that has the capacity to set in motion a form of life that spirals outward, not downward, as we discover ‘abundantly more [*hyperekperisou*] than all we can ask or imagine’ (Eph 3:20).”¹⁷

Between Contemplation and Action

There is a classic polarity in the theology of the Christian life between action and contemplation.¹⁸ Of these two ends, which is the highest, how are they related, and which one serves the interests of the other? While the conversation is rich and many-sided, and both sides have strong advocates, there is considerable wisdom in seeking an actual way of life in the world that combines the two. No less a monastic figurehead than Bernard of Clairvaux indicated the way toward this goal when one of his students was elevated to the office of Bishop of Rome (Eugene III). Bernard wrote a work called *On Consideration* to Eugene, explaining how to manage such great obligations without losing his soul. *On Consideration* is divided into five books; the early books feature meditations on virtue, practical advice on schedule management and delegation, an apology for the results of the second crusade, and plenty of pointed directions for how to reform the church’s own government. But the final book turns the reader’s attention to the things above, and especially to the triune God. It’s a deeply intelligent and beautifully written section. Bernard has been called “the last of the fathers,” and while that’s a dubious enough title for a theologian as late as the twelfth century, this section does serve as something of a capstone of early Christian doctrine, especially of the doctrine of God. The jump between the early books and this final book seems to be by design. Bernard refuses to let go of contemplation as the goal, but he freely admits that Popes are too busy and under too many obligations to contemplate deeply and uninterruptedly. So he offers consideration as a kind of mixed form, combining action and contemplation.¹⁹

A modern Trappist monk who carried out this Bernardine vision of active work and expounded it with special clarity is abbot Jean-Baptiste Chautard (1858-1935). His book *The Soul of the Apostolate*²⁰ is ostentatiously Roman Catholic, but useful for Protestants also because it articulates principles of broad application for the theology of work, and makes a special connection to the common doctrine of God and of contemplation. “Apostolate” is already a bit of jargon drawn from the cultural world of French Catholics. It means an organization for spreading the gospel and

¹⁷ Begbie, *Abundantly More*, 181.

¹⁸ For a recent attempt to broaden the theme to the whole field of education and culture, see Jennifer Summit and Blakey Vermeule, *Action versus Contemplation: Why an Ancient Debate Still Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

¹⁹ The full arrangement is a bit more complicated. Bernard offers one of his beloved ladder schemas, dividing the affairs of life into things beneath your station, things at your own level, and things above. See *Five Books on Consideration: Advice to a Pope* (Athens, Ohio: Cistercian Publications by the Liturgical Press, 1976). This is volume 13 in the Works of Bernard of Clairvaux series, and the translators are John D. Anderson and Elizabeth T. Kennan.

²⁰ Original title *Apostolat des catéchisme et vie intérieure devenu L’âme de tout apostolat*

Christian influence in the world, especially an organization by laypeople. Chautard would probably call the work of priests and religious their actual “ministry,” reserving that word for the ordained in a way that evangelicals would not. But then he makes use of the broader term “apostolate” which refers to the extended work of all believers intentionally carrying out the work of propagating Christian truth and influence in the world. We are all sent, apostled, into the world to work for Christ. The most important document on the subject is probably Vatican II’s *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity*. Chautard, recall, is writing decades before that 1965 decree, but popes as early as Pius X have commended his book, and popes as recent as Benedict XVI).

The idea of the apostolate is that Jesus sent out the original apostles, and their work is continued through the ages: “In the front rank of this apostolate stands the clergy, with its hierarchy forming the main body of the army of Christ,” says Chautard. Around them are “the volunteers,” especially the contemplative and preaching orders of monastics, and then a variety of teaching institutes, missionary societies, and so on (“sodalities and confraternities”). “Then, too, at every stage of her history, the Church has received valuable help from the whole body of the faithful.”

The vision here is of a great sending-out that starts with Jesus and involves every believer down through the ages. It involves plenty of activity, multiple projects, plans, organizations, and active work in all parts of the world: that’s the apostolate.

But Chautard’s book is not about the apostolate; it’s about the *soul* of the apostolate. It’s about the inner life of this outer work. The point is that Christians who are busy in the outer world need a rich, inner spiritual life to sustain them. Chautard is arguing for a particular kind of spiritual formation that prizes the inner life precisely as the foundation of an active outer life. In the ancient contest between the contemplative life and the active life, he takes the side of the contemplatives, or those pursuing the interior life. But he always has in mind the interior life of busy people with a great extension of exterior life and work:

May these humble pages go out to the soldiers of Christ, who, consumed as they are with zeal and ardor for their noble mission, might be exposed, because of the very activity they display, to the danger of not being, above all, men of interior life! ...The thoughts developed in this book have helped us ourselves, to fight against an excessive exteriorization through good works... May they show that we must never leave the God of works, for the works of God.

Here Chautard warms to his subject. Busy workers for Jesus need to remember that in their work they hope to transmit supernatural life, and this cannot be done by merely natural means. The work of the apostolate is not mechanical, but spiritual, and behaving as if this weren’t true is tantamount to denying its truth:

For a man, in his practical conduct, to go about his active works as if Jesus were not his one and only life-principle is what Cardinal Mermillod has called the “Heresy of Good Works.” ...Is this not, in practice, a denial of a great part of the Tract on Grace?

The “heresy of Good Works” is the idea of “a feverish activity taking the place of God; grace ignored; human pride trying to thrust Jesus from His throne; supernatural life, the power of prayer, the economy of our redemption relegated, at least in practice, to the realm of pure theory.” This is not just an imaginary possibility, but something busy Christians fall into regularly “in this age of naturalism, when men judge, above all, by appearances, and act as though success were primarily a matter of skillful organization.” The very principle of life has vanished from this hyperactive busy-ness. To hear such people talk and scheme and plan, “one might imagine that God Almighty... cannot get along without their co-operation.” Chautard calls such workers “activistic heretics” and says, “we can almost hear them say, ‘God finds me pretty useful.’”

The solution offered in *Soul of the Apostolate* is cultivation of the interior life. Most of the book is an account of how busy people can take proper care of their spiritual lives by devoting their mental lives to Jesus, practicing the presence of God, guarding their hearts, shepherding their thoughts, relying on the leadership of the church, and participating in its liturgical life. Translating this kind of wisdom into an evangelical Protestant idiom requires some skill. Evangelicals would probably reach for conventional language like devotions and quiet time, and would be very comfortable with the strongly emotional and interpersonal language of fellowship with Jesus (“All that Jesus wants is our heart,” says Chautard). The fundamental soundness of Chautard’s counsel is evident, and anybody who’s been around very active Christians who have lost touch with their deep reasons for serving Christ will instantly recognize the type, and be grateful for the clear account of the only cure.

The Soul of the Apostolate excels in describing how powerful and attractive the deeply grounded life will be as it expresses itself in the outer world. But it connects more profoundly with our theme of divine fullness because it rests on a trinitarian foundation, and takes its point of departure from certain presuppositions about God’s own God-centered spiritual life.

The apostolate referred to in the title is an extended sense of “sentness” that can characterize the lives of all committed Christians, as they pick up the forward momentum of the apostles, who in turn carry on the work of Jesus (“so send I you,” John 20:21), who was himself the Sent One (“As the Father sent me, so send I you”). Chautard makes the point that the church “carries on, down through the ages, the apostolic work of her Divine Model.”²¹ The book’s theology is, in other words, part of an overall “theology of sending” that begins in the Trinity and ends in the Christian’s active life; it bridges from the doctrine of God through Christology to discipleship. Chautard repeatedly goes back behind the sending, to draw attention to the source. The Son, he says, was sent forth from the “sovereign liberality” which is “inseparable from the divine Nature;” the divine nature has sovereign liberality because “God is infinite goodness. Goodness seeks nothing except to give itself and to communicate the riches which it enjoys.”²² What Chautard has to say about these riches is that they are unspeakably great, and that they are in fact the Trinitarian life itself:

²¹ Chautard, *Soul*, 26.

²² Chautard, *Soul*, 26.

There is no metaphor capable of giving any idea of the infinite intensity of the activity going on in the bosom of Almighty God. Such is the inner life of the Father, that it engenders a Divine Person. From the interior life of the Father and Son proceeds the Holy Ghost.²³

You see what Chautard is indicating here: in a book about how your busy outer life needs a strong inner life (your apostolate needs a soul), he is saying that God's outer works, including the Father's sending of the Son, are anchored in an unimaginably rich interior life. Prior in every way to God's outer works, God has an "infinite intensity of ...activity going on" within the divine life; the internal actions of the Trinity transcend the external actions. Most of the book is not about the richness of this inner life of God, but nothing in the book works without it. So at several points, it becomes thematic:

In God is life, all life. He is life itself. Yet it is not by exterior works, by the creation, for instance, that the infinite Being manifests this life in its most intense form, but rather by what theology calls *operationes ad intra*, by that ineffable activity of which the term is the perpetual generation of the Son and the unceasing procession of the Holy Spirit. Here, pre-eminently, is His eternal, His essential work.²⁴

Once Chautard gets to the superiority of the contemplative life, or even of the contemplative side of a life that is mostly active, he gladly spends several pages expounding it. He makes use of Bonaventure's list ("Bonaventure accumulates comparatives") of the ways the inner life excels the outer life: It is "more sublime, more secure, richer, pleasanter, and more stable."²⁵ His powerful exposition gains more force from its increasingly explicit trinitarian background. He asks us to consider the ways in which the interior life of God excels all creation: it excels in sublimity, security, wealth, pleasure, and stability. In all these, ways, how good it must be to be God! But the apostolate is all about God moving toward us from within that fullness, on the trinitarian mission of intervening in our self-inflicted misery.

Here Chautard returns to the key words, soul and apostolate, from his title: "By contemplation the soul is fed; by the apostolate, it gives itself away. *Sicut majus est illuminare quam lucere solum, ita majus est contemplata aliis tradere quam solum contemplare.* ("For even as it is better to enlighten than merely to shine, so is it better to give to others the fruits of one's contemplation than merely to contemplate.")²⁶

And then Chautard, on purpose, bumps into the paradox that the Son is sent to us without leaving the Father, and the Father sends out the Son without losing him:

²³ Chautard, *Soul*, 45.

²⁴ Chautard, *Soul*, 60.

²⁵ *Vita sublimior, securior, opulentior, suavior, stabilior.* Chautard, *Soul*, 62.

²⁶ Chautard, *Soul*, 78; citing Aquinas, ST 2a 2a4, q. 188, a. 6, respondeo).

To man, God does more than grant exterior gifts: He sends him also His Word. But here again, in this act of supreme generosity which is nothing else but the gift of Himself, God abandons and can abandon none of the integrity of His nature. In giving us His Son, He keeps Him, nevertheless, even in Himself. ‘Take, as an example, the All-highest Father of all, sending us His Word, and at the same time keeping Him for Himself.’²⁷

This was what Chautard was after all along: a self-giving that does not diminish the self, but flows out into active life without emptying itself of life. If you are looking for the ultimate instance of a rich interior life that makes a difference in the world, you can look to God. It’s a remarkable claim, and though Chautard only occasionally makes it explicit in the book, he does actually begin with it, in a prologue which is a prayer to God in exactly this respect:

O God, infinitely good and great, wonderful indeed are the truths that faith lays open to us, concerning the life which Thou leadest within Thyself: and these truths dazzle us. Father all holy, Thou dost contemplate Thyself forever in the Word, Thy perfect image –Thy Word exults in rapt joy at Thy beauty– and, Father and Son, from your joint ecstasy, leaps forth the strong flame of love, the Holy Spirit. You alone, O adorable Trinity, are the interior life, perfect, superabundant, and infinite. Goodness unlimited, You desire to spread this, Your own inner life, everywhere, outside Yourself. You speak: and Your works spring forth out of nothingness, to declare Your perfections and to sing Your glory.... Your Word offers Himself for the fulfillment of this work... And yet, O Word, Thou has not left the bosom of Thy Father. It is there that Thy essential life subsists, and it is from this source that the marvels of Thy apostolate are to flow.²⁸

Here is the secret of your own interior life: Confessing to God, “you alone, O adorable Trinity, are the interior life.”

Conclusion

Bernard of Clairvaux once advised that “the man who is wise...will see his life as more like a reservoir than a canal,” recognizing his need to be filled from above before he can give to others around and below. “Learn to await this fullness before you pour out your gifts. Do not try to be more generous than God.”²⁹ This is the secret of work. The relation between God and our work is that God’s utter fullness and inner plenitude is the fountain of our work. The richness of the divine life is what grounds

²⁷ Chautard, *Soul*, 65; citing Bernard’s *On Consideration* II:3.

²⁸ Chautard, *Soul*, 23-4.

²⁹ Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs*, volume 1 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1979) , Sermon 18, I:2, 134; followed by II:4, 136.

God's active, outgoing work in the world, as well as the work done in the world by Christians.

This meditation on God and work began with the fullness-theology of Ephesians and some commentary on it by the Puritan Bartholomew Ashwood. As we considered the dynamic of contemplation and action, we understandably drew lessons from certain monastic theologians, Bernard and Chautard. But we can close with a more obviously Protestant author, and one well situated in the modern faith-and-work movement. Tim Keller frequently outlined the Gospel as a drama in multiple acts. In some contexts he would allude to a four-act drama;³⁰ in other contexts as three.³¹ But his point was always to encourage Christians to think bigger: to protest against shrinking the gospel down to just the two acts of sin and forgiveness, and to establish a bigger picture reaching back to the goodness of creation and forward to the purpose of creatures. Where does God fit in a Keller-style schema of the gospel as a multi-act drama? God might be introduced as the ultimate answer to the question "where did we come from?" and be the solid basis of a purposeful creation.³² In this approach, Keller could teach about the nature of God as part of the first act, creation. Or God might be envisioned as the great goal toward which all things move as in a purposeful, eschatological dance. In this approach, Keller could teach about the nature of God as the content of the final act of the drama. These are all fine ways of orienting the discussion of work toward the reality of God. But we might also consider making the point about divine fullness, riches, and God's own inner life by saying that it simply bursts through the plot outline and explodes the dramatic metaphor. When we turn our thoughts to the God who creates and conducts the acts of the drama, we turn our thoughts to the reality that utterly transcends the story itself, however many acts it has. We lift our minds and hearts to the one who is God "from everlasting to everlasting" (Psalm 90:1); only in this upward glance do we glimpse the reality that can "establish the works of our hands" (Psalm 90:17).

³⁰ Tim Keller, *The Reason for God*, chapter 14, "The Dance of God." The four acts he briefly alludes to here are creation, fall, redemption, and reconciliation.

³¹ Tim Keller and Katherine Leary Alsdorf, *Every Good Endeavor*, chapter 9, "A New Story for Work." The world is good, the world is fallen, the world will be redeemed.

³² Tim Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your Church* (Zondervan, 2012), 31ff.