

REFLECTIONS ON FAITH AND WORK

Expanding Our Vision About Our Work

One of the most significant books written in the 1980s was entitled *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. The team of authors, led by Robert Bellah, focused on the fundamental question of how to preserve or create a morally coherent life. Their research resulted in one of the most insightful studies of life in the United States that I have ever read. I used to tell my students in the American Studies Program that this was one of those "must read" books -- in fact, if you graduate from college without reading it, your diploma should be withheld until you read the book!

"Habits of the Heart" Concerning Our Work

While the study conducted by Robert Bellah and his associates covered a whole range of issues in both the private and public lives of Americans, their discoveries about how most of us view our work were particularly helpful. After interviewing many Americans on this subject, they concluded that the vast majority view their work in two different ways: as a "job" and as a "career." In the sense of a "job," Americans perceive work as a way of making money and earning a living. A job provides a sense of economic success, security, and "all that money can buy." In the sense of a "career," work traces one's progress through life by achievement and advancement in an occupation. A career provides social standing and a sense of competency which gives self-esteem.

The dominant strand which the authors identified in American culture was individualism. The authors argued that this American quality was evident in our society in two forms: utilitarian individualism and expressive individualism. In American history, Benjamin Franklin and Walt Whitman provide the best examples of these two forms of individualism (pp. 32-35).

This insight helps us understand how most of us think about our work. The reality is that we have been shaped by American culture in ways we rarely notice. The utilitarian approach to work is to view it as a means to enhancing our self-esteem, a way to make the money to buy the things we desire in order to achieve the "good life," and as a vehicle for stimulating and challenging our minds by "mastering" problems and learning new things. Many people who operate on this utilitarian basis become workaholics, because their jobs gradually consume larger portions of their time until there is little left for others, either family or friends.

There is, however, another approach which is also very prevalent in American society, especially among the twentysomethings -- expressive individualism. These people have no desire to "make it" like the "Babybusters" of my generation. They view their work largely as a way to pay the bills and finance their weekends. There is no way expressive individualists are going to become workaholics. Work is something you have to do, but it is not seen as a primary means of establishing self-esteem. This is accomplished in other ways, through sports, leisure-time activities, or even total

dedication to a world limited to one's family.

Replacing What Has Been Lost in American Culture

With the advent of the modern industrial age and now the information age, our society is constantly growing more complex. As a result, it is much harder for us to see our work as a contribution to the whole community. Modern culture encourages us to view our work only as a segmented, self-interested activity. But this segmentation has increasingly led to a "culture of separation" which, according to the authors of *Habits of the Heart*, in turn results in a world that lacks coherence, a world in which people lose their ability to "connect" with others who are not like themselves.

The authors remind their readers that while individualism is clearly a part of the American character, there are other strands as well which are losing ground in our contemporary society. These other strands are best described as "Biblical" and "republican." They are most clearly represented in American history in the persons of John Winthrop, the great Puritan leader and first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence.

The Biblical and republican strands in American culture emphasize the idea of work as a "calling." The Biblical strand, in particular, has much to offer because it provides an understanding of "calling" which links work activity to character development, as well as relating self to a sense of community. According to Scripture, work is more than output or profits. Work is a way in which we can contribute to the common good, to the community -- an understanding we have lost because of the dominance of individualism in our time. The Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, in its prayer for Labor Day, reads: "So guide us in the work we do, that we may do it not for self alone, but for the common good." As the authors of *Habits of the Heart* point out, the sense of calling provides "a crucial link between the individual and the public world. Work in the sense of calling can never be merely private" (p. 66).

This is the same point which the Apostle Paul makes in Ephesians 4, when he discusses the need for unity in the Body of Christ. After stressing the importance of unity, the Apostle Paul gives five practical illustrations (verses 25-32) on how to achieve peace between individuals. One of the examples he uses concerns a man who steals. Paul instructs him to stop stealing and start working, "doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need." Work, according to the Bible, is never just a self-centered, individual undertaking, but rather a way for helping others "in need."

In contrast to the way our popular culture portrays work, the Biblical perspective offers a healthy alternative. Work, when viewed as a "calling," expands our understanding and helps us to see beyond ourselves. It helps us see our work as a contribution to our families, community and nation. It helps us to remember to use the resources we earn to help those in need.

