

# REFLECTIONS ON FAITH AND WORK

## *Meaningful Work in an Entertainment Culture*

One of the most insightful analyses of American culture I have ever read is Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. In his book, Postman focuses his attention on television and how it has conditioned us to "tolerate visually entertaining material measured out in spoonfuls of time." But his reflections go far beyond just evaluating the impact of television -- they hit much more deeply into the spirit of our times. Although the book was published in 1985, its message is still relevant today, perhaps even more so.

### ❖ Living in an Entertainment Culture

Postman observes that there are two ways to destroy a culture. The first, the Orwellian, is when a culture becomes a prison; the second, the Huxleyan, is when a culture turns into a burlesque. George Orwell's depiction of totalitarian societies, so graphically portrayed in *1984* and *Animal Farm*, is a frightening one in which small elites build the machinery of thought-control and forcibly impose their will on a nation. I have seen the impact of this during the years I worked in the former Soviet Union. The devastation that Marxist-Leninist leaders perpetrated on the people under their rule is staggering. While taunting the ideal of a "New Socialist Man (and Woman)," they committed atrocities against their own people unseen in human history. I now have a much greater appreciation of the devastation of these seventy years of Marxist rule. Several years in graduate school reading books about 20th century Russia did not compare with my first hand exposure to the realities of the "rubble" left by the collapse of Communism.

In sharp contrast to the Russian experience, where the spiritual and moral devastation of tyranny did damage which will take generations to repair, the threat to American culture comes from an enemy with a smiling face, rather than one exuding suspicion and hate like Orwell's "Big Brother." As Postman points out, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* is a more relevant prediction of where our society is headed than George Orwell's. Huxley warned that democracies will dance and dream themselves into oblivion, narcotized by technological diversions. Television is a powerful narcotic, followed by the "wonders" of the worldwide web. In contemporary America, Orwell's Big Brother is replaced by Michael Jackson, the Howdy Doody of the 1990's.

In an entertainment culture like ours, the threat is not from government authorities trying to force us to think in certain "politically correct" ways. The real threat is when we become distracted by trivia, when cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainment, and when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby-talk with thirty-second soundbites. As Postman warns, a nation is at risk when its "people become

an audience and their public business a vaudeville act.

## ❖ Living Life with Purpose

Aldous Huxley's warnings deserve our serious consideration. Unlike the traumatized world of post-Communism, we live in an "age of show business" in which we are constantly urged by television and other mass media to "Just Do It," to seek our own pleasure without guilt. Huxley warned that what afflicted people in *Brave New World* was not that they were laughing instead of thinking, but that they did not know what they were laughing about and why they had stopped thinking.

In sharp contrast to this preoccupation with entertainment, the Bible calls us, as followers of Jesus Christ, to live much more seriously, with a sense of purpose. This does not mean we are to live life without joy, but rather we are to live with greater ambition than merely entertaining ourselves, buying "toys," or experiencing some new physical or emotional sensation.

In an entertainment culture, work becomes a way of financing the weekends or bankrolling vacations. It has little intrinsic value other than paying the bills, big bills piled up on credit cards paying for things which we desperately hope will satisfy our urges for pleasure and fulfillment. The reality, however, is that we are never satisfied, at least not for very long. The writer of Ecclesiastes was right: "all is vanity -- everything is meaningless, a chasing after the wind" (2:11).

## ❖ Faith Makes Work Meaningful

One of the great contributions of the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century was the re-articulation of the Christian faith in ways which took life in the world seriously, rather than seeking to escape the world and hide in monasteries. The Reformers challenged Christians to make a difference in world, to make the world a better place, as an important facet of their calling as followers of Jesus Christ. The world, judged by God's standards, is evil and in need of reform, and Christians are called to play a role in this renovation process. One way of doing this is through our daily work. Work, broadly defined as paid employment, homemaking, pursuing studies or voluntary labor, is a means through which we can help improve the world in which we live. Work has much more significance than just paying the bills. Our work gives us a meaningful role to play in God's world, a world which needs people less concerned with entertaining themselves and more attentive to helping those around us. Helping others is what will bring us true joy.

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