

REFLECTIONS ON FAITH AND WORK

The Significance of Our Work

The Bible has an amazing number of references to work. There are fifteen Hebrew words which are translated "work" in the King James Version of the Bible and one of those words is used more than 150 times! The Greek word *ergon*, meaning "work," is also used frequently in the New Testament. The God of the Bible was not silent on this subject.

The First Job Description

From the first two chapters of the Bible, the reader cannot escape the conclusion that men and women were created to work and that work was a function God built into humanity right from the start. It is fascinating to note that God gave people a hoe before a candle; God laid out a job description before giving instructions about how to worship. In the 28th verse of Genesis 1, God commands humanity to "fill the earth and subdue it" (NIV).

This job description comes from One who is portrayed in the Bible as a worker. The psalmist describes God in the following terms: "He appointed the moon for seasons... You made darkness... O Lord, how manifold are Your works" (Ps. 104, NKJV). No other religion in the world holds to a belief in a God who works. Yet the Bible begins with God busy designing the universe, with the seas, the skies, the earth, and even animal and human life, and ends in the Book of Revelation with God again creating "a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev. 21:1).

It is of considerable significance that, in the middle of this description in Psalm 104 of the working, creating God, there is a reference to human labor. Verse 23 reads, "Man goes forth to his work and to his labor until the evening" (RSV). The Bible suggests that human labor must be seen as part of God's ongoing creative activity. By our work, we become co-creators with God! This is an essential part of what it means to be truly human.

Whether we are a marketing person for a computer services company, a lab technician or a production manager for a biochemical firm, a homemaker, a weatherman, a school teacher, or a doctor, in our work we are co-creating with God. We are contributing to God's continuing work of sustaining creation. This gives our work tremendous significance in God's sight.

Reformation Insights

Fifteen centuries after Jesus walked on earth, the leaders of the Protestant Reformation brought new insights to this subject. Reacting against the monastic life-style which was viewed as the highest form of spirituality at that time, Martin Luther and John Calvin both emphasized that it is in our work, whatever that work is, that we bear within us God's image as Creator. It is through our work that we serve as God's representatives on earth, God's stewards, who are entrusted with the job of developing the resources of this world for the benefit of all people.

Martin Luther was the first Christian to fully develop this insight about work, an insight which emphasized that our daily work is a way in which we can "love our neighbor" as Jesus commanded us. Luther believed that God created the world and gave people different tasks or jobs to complete, which was God's way of seeing that the needs of men and women were met on a daily basis. When we work, we actually participate in God's ongoing care for others. In Luther's view, the bottom line is this: all human work is charged with religious significance, except -- of course -- the work of criminals, prostitutes and monks(!?).

According to Luther, and later to John Calvin, all occupations are really "full-time Christian service." All jobs are important and holy because God is in charge and has assigned different jobs to each one of us. Each job is vital to a properly functioning society. There are no jobs which are "holier" than others. Everything we do becomes holy when it is done in obedience to God's command to "love the Lord your God and your neighbor as yourself." We can respond to God's command both through our worship and through our work.

Bringing Dignity to Monday Through Friday

The exciting news of the Bible is that the work we do every day, when done in obedience to God, has great significance. The Christian faith is not limited to attending church services on Sunday; it is related to every sphere of our lives, including our work. Each one of us has important work to do in God's sight. When we work, we use the skills and abilities which God has given us; this is part of who we are, part of our being human. Work can be more than just making ends meet or underwriting the expenses from the weekend. According to the Bible, our work not only has dignity and importance, but is also a way in which we are co-creators with God.

The Bible has much more to say on this subject. It describes work as both a "blessing" and a "curse." I have focused on one dimension of work: the "blessing," and not on Biblical warnings about work. More on that later.

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NOTES: For an excellent summary of the Reformers' insights on work, see chapter two in Lee Hardy's *The Fabric of This World* (Eerdmans, 1990).

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