

Finding Christ in Our Work

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Human beings are situated in a world structured by small and large systems of hidden powers. On the physical side, the wheel and the lever, heat (fire, steam, internal combustion engines), electricity, and the atom are all illustrations of the unfolding destiny of humanity upon the earth. That destiny is, in biblical language, “to have dominion” (Genesis 1:26). That is, we are to be responsible for the earth and life upon it. Human inventions or discoveries are all related, in straightforward ways, to work. Work is the production of value by the actions of our thoughts and bodily efforts upon available resources.

What’s more, work is a good thing, and it is a natural disposition of human beings from early childhood on. Work is simply human creativity. It is a special type of causation through which goodness and blessing can be promoted in our surroundings.

Except in the rare “desert island” kinds of cases, the values produced by work, and the particular activities involved in work, are social or communal in nature. They are strictly inconceivable except in a communal setting, from the family on up. They depend upon others for their existence, and they are for the benefit of others as well as of the individual worker. This too is “a good thing” and part of God’s arrangement for the virtue and prospering of human beings. Without a “division of labor” and suitable human relationships in community, human life can barely rise above the level of animals. So the great question is: What is the “resource” that will enable human beings, developing the powers of nature, to live in a community where there is dignity, love, and provision for everyone?

We know very well some of the human answers to this vital question, and we have the bitter experience of their failures. The modern answers all focus upon the matter of “ownership.” That is, upon the question of who shall have the right to say what will be done with the “resources.” One says that the state or government should own the means (including money and human labor) by which goods are produced. That is Socialism. (But the “state” turns out in practice just to be certain people, who may be neither wise nor competent nor good.) Communism says that no one should own those means of production. (But then it turns out that certain people do, for all practical purposes—regardless of the “official” arrangement.) Unrestrained Capitalism says that enterprising individuals should own them, catch as catch can in “fair” competition. (But then “fair” gets defined by those who have the goods.)

None of these “answers,” we should now know, provides a moral solution to the human problems posed by work. In simple terms, this is because none of them deal with the fine texture of human motivation: with what men and women care about and live for. They are a form of the proverbial “brain surgery with a meat cleaver.” The popular theories of human action now taught in our best schools of “management” do little better.

We must address the fundamental problem of finding appropriate community-in-work for human beings. That community is the resource without which all other resources languish or become dangerous. Finding this community must be addressed at the level where work is done in a world not really structured around doing what is good and right, but around doing it my way and for my benefit. That is the level of the job. (Spelled, incidentally, just like the name of the all-time leader in suffering, Job. What a coincidence!) The only meaningful solution is that of Jesus Christ and His followers. It is the recognition of, and intelligent reliance upon, the community (Kingdom, Family) of God. That community is already there at your job, waiting to turn it back into

rich and rewarding and meaningful work, creativity, shared production of goods to be shared. You don't make God's community, of course—you receive it, by counting on it and acting with it.

The accessibility of life in the community of God to every person was the message of Jesus, in His words and in His deeds. Everything else fits into that: forgiveness of sins, redemption from sin, transformation of character into "righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17), transformation of society, and the development of history into everlasting life. In His efforts to help those around Him understand the message and reality of the community of God, Jesus on one occasion remarked that the community of God is not recognized by eyesight. It isn't something localizable in the world, like a human social group, a government (buildings), or an army. Rather, He said, it is already there, "in your midst" (Luke 17:21). That is to say, it is already where you are, wherever that may be, right now.

Now that was not a new thing in the time of Jesus, though it was for Him alone to manifest and to be its full meaning. In Deuteronomy, we read that God's word, and doing what He wants and supports, "is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe [do] it?' Nor is it beyond the sea.... But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe [do] it" (30:11-14). The twenty-third psalm is a poetic celebration of this life in "the Everlasting Arms" (Deuteronomy 33:27).

Paul, taught by Christ Himself, reclaims and enlarges this vision of our life in God (Romans 10:8). He tells his Philippian friends: "Our citizenship" (πολιτευμα)—our "socio-economic" order, if you wish, or our "commonwealth"—is in the heavens (3:20). That means it is right around us ("in our midst"), not something far away and at some later time. We are now, as disciples of Jesus, members of a divine community that, when we seek it, we find with us in our job and throughout life: and thereby we turn all that we do into work for and under God. Thus, Paul advises: "Whatever you do, do your work heartily—literally, 'from the soul'—as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve" (Colossians 3:23-24). We are not to try to look good (do "eye service"), as men-pleasers, but on our job we simply "do the will of God from the soul" (Ephesians 6:6-8).

So how do we apply this Kingdom community truth in the real-life context of the job: on what really goes on there, and how, for our part, we can turn it into divine work? It requires a life that is spiritual throughout, full of meaning, strength, and joy. We must seek to find a way to stand in the solid tradition of Christian teaching throughout the ages. We must do so with the freshness of personal experience and with the forcefulness of careful thought.

Phillips Brooks was a great American pastor and teacher of a century ago. He was for a long time the pastor of one of the greatest churches in the United States, and sometimes the Anglican Bishop of Massachusetts; but he was also a man of national prominence and influence. In his sermon, "Best Methods of Promoting Spiritual Life," he acknowledges the role of special religious practices, activities, and experiences. But he goes on to emphasize that to limit spirituality to these is to omit most of our life from spiritual living. To promote spiritual life, he says, is not to be more religious where one is already religious:

It is to be religious where he is irreligious now; to let the spiritual force which is in him play upon new activities. How shall he open, for instance, his business life to this deep power? By

casting out of his business all that is essentially wicked in it, by insisting to himself on its ideal, of charity or usefulness, on the loftiest conception of every relationship into which it brings him with his fellow man, and by making it not a matter of his own whim or choice, but a duty to be done faithfully because God has called him to it... God chose for him his work, and meant for him to find his spiritual education there.¹

Brooks closed his sermon with these words: "The Christian finds the hand of Christ in everything, and by the faithful use of everything for Christ's sake, he takes firm hold of that hand of Christ and is drawn nearer and nearer to Himself. That is, I think, the best method of promoting spiritual life."

This steady stream of Christian spirituality through vocation flows down through the ages, and it alone is sufficient to the soul and to the world of humanity today. We have only to step into it, to set ourselves to learn it, and we will see its radiant power at work on the "job" where we are. If one will simply learn from Jesus how to do our work we will find the promise, "I am with you always," to be the sure basis of abundance of life, whatever the "job."

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[1] Philips Brooks, *Best Methods of Promoting Spiritual Life*, (New York: Thomas Whittaker 2&3 Bible House), 12-13, 35.