

The Christian Labor Ethic

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Every culture has a labor ethic, although often the people in that culture are unconscious of it. Koreans are world famous for hard work, but not many Koreans have stopped to think just why they work so hard or whether their attitude toward work is really the most healthy, much less whether it is Christian. I have recently been doing long distance telephone counseling with an old friend who is now in serious condition in the hospital, largely due to his being a “workaholic.” He cannot say “no” to work just as some others cannot say “no” to alcohol. To make a long story short, it seems to me that most Koreans are driven by a need to bring honor to their families by hard work and they would feel unfilial if they slacked up.

Immediately, we see that this is the effect of Confucianism, not of Christianity, and we can deduce what the basic work ethic of Christians would be. We work for God’s honor. Jesus warned his disciples that if they put their family ahead of God they were not fit to be his disciples. I don’t love my family because they are my God. I love my family because God has told me to love them. I also trust God, through the Holy Spirit, to give me wisdom to know how I am to express my love to my family. If my family don’t understand and feel betrayed because I am not putting them absolutely first, then I have to be prepared to be hated, perhaps reviled, perhaps persecuted, for Christ’s sake.

We not only work for God’s honor, we are not driven to do God’s work. If a Christian worker seems driven, the way many others are, it may be because he thinks of God as a ruthless boss, not a loving boss. He may not be hearing what God is saying to him, just imagining that God expects more and more of him until he is ready to collapse. This may be a psychological habit he has carried with him into his relationship with God that he learned in his relationship with his father or other family members. He may need inner healing to learn to rest. And we are not driven by a sense of obligation, but called to do God’s work and respond in love. Our work is a calling.

God created man on the sixth Day of Creation and then, immediately, the seventh Day began and man started his life from the Sabbath, from a day of rest! This day of rest was a day of quiet fellowship with God. The next day God, who had made himself known to man on the Day of Rest as a friend and loving father, now called him to work as a partner in his creation. Since man was made in God’s image, he also was to help God with his creation by naming the animals, distinguishing between species and varieties, doing what we call “taxonomic identification.” But God didn’t expect him to work overtime. There was no emergency. In the cool of each evening they walked together in the garden and rested at night. I’m sure that when God made Eve, she worked with Adam at the taxonomy but also devoted special time to caring for Adam’s personal needs, finding good-tasting things to eat, a comfortable place to sleep, and the like.

Thus we see that the Christian work ethic goes back to creation: man is created in the image of God and should be doing creative work. Man is working for his loving father and should be filled with enthusiasm for his work. Man is also obedient to God, and works only for as long as God tells him to and rests when God tells him to rest. The seventh day rest is part of the ethic. As time went on, there proved to be certain activities that could not be stopped on the day of rest. One had to eat, one had to nurse the baby, to give obvious examples. Usually, the woman prepares the food and always the woman suckles the baby, so the man must find some way of giving her a day of rest. One way has been by domesticating cattle and milking cows. But cows have to be milked on the Sabbath as well as every other day! How do we deal with this? I keep running into people whose work prevents them from attending church, yet that work seems necessary. The answer is to share it and to take turns ("share" = "koinonia," a key word).

Sometimes working on the Sabbath is not necessary. The man is forced to work because his employer is driven by greed or pride and makes his workers do it. The Christian knows from the Bible that this is contrary to the will of God, that this is idolatrous. What does he do? First, he tries to persuade his employer that he will get better work and more production in six days, if the workers have a chance to rest. He will ask for wisdom from the Holy Spirit as to whether he should form a union and join with the workers in bringing pressure on the employer for justice. Jesus told us to "seek first God's government and God's justice (and all these things shall be added to you.)" (Matt.6.33). On the other hand, the Lord may tell him to quit the company and find work with some other company or go to work for himself. This may put a real strain on his faith. Can he really trust God to "add all these things" to him? Our Christian work ethic is backed up by our Christian trust in God for his provision. We don't work for a living; we work because we are made in God's image and God works. Jesus said (John 5.17) "My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working." God created me to be creative and he set the example both through his manifestation of himself in nature (beauty and order and usefulness) and through Christ (reconciliation, making all things new). My work may take any of these forms, revealing God's order or his beauty as well as his concern for renewing what is damaged, whether physically, psychologically, esthetically, or spiritually. The most important work we may do, and we may not get any pay for it, is reconciling our fellow men with God. This is the kind of work that Jesus was doing and he said, "The work that I do you do, you will do, too." (John 14.12: *Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go to the Father.*) Let us rejoice in our work because it is God's work and he has called us to do it. Let us do it with all our heart because we love him.