

Institute for Christian Teaching  
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INTEGRATIVE INFLUENCE  
OF WORK  
ON FAITH AND LEARNING

by

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## INTEGRATIVE INFLUENCE OF WORK ON FAITH AND LEARNING

What is man that you are mindful of him,  
 the son of man that you care for him?  
 You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings  
 and crowned him with glory and honor.  
 You made him ruler over the works of your hands;  
 you put everything under his feet.  
 (Psalm 8:4-6 NIV)

In this powerful passage, the Psalmist portrays a comprehensive theistic world view, demonstrating the God who created man and assigned him work.

As the occupants of planet Earth stand at the threshold of the twenty-first century, this world view stands in contrast to commonly held views. Several polarities pose questions for thinking minds, not only in North America and other developed countries, but in developing countries as well. Is work a blessing or a curse? Is the worker a slave in the workplace or autonomous? Is mechanization or creativity the norm for humans at work?

A difficulty in defining work has been described by Neff, due to over twenty definitions of work as a noun, and over thirty definitions of work as a verb. (Neff:75-76) Work, for the purpose of this paper, will be defined as the labor, task, or duty that affords one his accustomed means of livelihood. (Gove:2634)

The three great issues of life which are addressed by one's world view are reality, morality and values. Work, as defined above, will be analyzed in terms of these issues, within a biblical frame of reference. Ethical issues relevant to work will be considered. Some ways in which work enhances the integration of faith and learning will be described. Finally,

implications for the teacher will be suggested.

#### THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

In response to the question "What is real?", the overarching answer is -- God is real! He spoke into existence this world and all that is in it. He is creator, sovereign, owner of all.

We are created beings, who live only in response to God's loving word. Inherent in personhood, with free will and creativity, is moral accountability. Both servanthood and authority are central to our humanness, providing a scriptural answer to the world view question, "What is man?"

Brian Walsh has stated that persons are "servant-lords." Humankind images God by developing and preserving the creational environment. There are two aspects of this responsibility. The first, to "work" or "till" the garden means that we "cultivate" the garden. Culture and cultivate refer to our human interactions with the world; modern evangelicals have described this as the "cultural mandate." The garden, then, includes the natural world and human beings. (Walsh and Middleton:54)

Genesis 2:4-4:26 gives examples of cultural development. Walsh is of the opinion that the generational statements, such as "These are the generations of the heavens and of the earth when they were created" (Genesis 2:4 KJV) are sometimes "generations" or "offspring" statements, but often headings in the sense of what was "generated" from them, a recording of examples of cultural development and innovation. Genesis 2 records examples of aspects of Adam's primitive culture, including gardening, marital relations, beginning of language, and even the first

poem. Genesis 4:20-22 gives accounts of three makers of culture, the originators of three traditions: Jabal, "the father of those who live in tents and raise livestock"; Jubal, "the father of all who play the harp and flute"; and Tubal-Cain, "who forged all kinds of tools out of bronze and iron." (Walsh and Middleton:56-57) These are accounts of cultural development. God placed these talents within these culture-formers.

The second aspect of the cultural mandate is preservation. Mankind historically has not consistently responded positively to this requirement. In consequence of his misuse of free will, disobedience is a reality in this world; the results of sin can be seen in mankind, in the earth, and the other creatures. The nature of work has changed because of sin. (Genesis 3:14-19)

God expects us to explore his creation, determine its operative laws, and think his thoughts after Him. Yet scripture does not support unbridled development of what is found on earth.

Because what we know as work comprises the creation mandate it bears eternal spiritual significance. It is enshrined in the Christian commitment.

#### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Beginning in New Testament times, the church has been confronted by Gnosticism, which claims that we are creatures of two worlds, mind and matter, that matter is the source of life's evils while mind is the source of what is rational and good, and that the two are locked in unending and unresolvable conflict. (Holmes 1987:14)

The Greco-Roman view of work is epitomized by the views of

Cicero and Aristotle. Cicero felt that the toil of a hired worker, not freely chosen, was "unworthy of a free man and sordid in character." Aristotle advanced this idea to imply that free people were not ordained to do necessary work.(Marshall:4-5)

Augustine maintained a clear distinction between the contemplative life (vita contemplativa) and the active life (vita activa), emphasizing the higher value of the former. Thomas Aquinas confirmed this distinction, with the result that the priestly vocation was idealized as the only true calling.

Reformers rejected this view, the concept of the dignity of labor was restored, and the "Protestant work ethic" emerged. The dignity of common labor held a high value during this period in history. Martin Luther talked directly of God's vocation in any walk of life.(Holmes 1983:10) With the Enlightenment, secularization perverted the dignity of labor into a creed of personal success. Ryken has recently addressed six fallacies about the nature of the work ethic, which people falsely believe. These will be briefly stated here:

1. Work should absorb nearly all one's time.
2. Self-interest is the motivation for work.
3. Getting rich is the goal of life.
4. People can be successful through their own efforts.
5. Wealth is a sign of God's favor and evidence of one's salvation.
6. The Protestant ethic approved of all types of business competition.(Ryken:87)

There is a crisis in work today. The influence of the Christian work ethic does not impact, with a resulting decline in the morality of the workplace. The gods of our age--scientism, technicism, and economism--have caused shifts in the way humans approach work.(Walsh:132) With the triumph of the machine, and a

humanly governed economic system, dehumanization, alienation and mechanization of the worker are recurrent themes. Blamires has suggested that men can become so engrossed in performing functions in contemporary society that they don't have time or energy left to be human.(Blamires:163-165) Ryken has described the twentieth century work world a "secular wasteland."(Ryken:75)

Some segments of population complain of overwork or dissatisfaction with work, while others complain that they are unable to find work. Work is no longer viewed as either a blessing or a curse, but merely a means to an end. The whole area of work versus leisure is receiving increasing attention today. Ryken says these two concerns must be considered in conjunction, not as separate entities.(Ryken:15)

Marxism stated economic factors to be the determinants of history, defining history as class struggle. The worldview of Marxism has had great appeal to the human needs for community and fulfillment in work, but it is based on a premise that mankind is moving toward an ideal society. That is inconsistent with the biblical picture of reality.(Sire:78-81)

#### MEANINGS IN WORK

What, then, are meanings in work which are consistent with a theistic world view? Some of the emphases supported by scripture will be considered here, including the dignity in work, the approach to work as cultural mandate (which subsumes work as stewardship), the wholistic nature of work, work as a gift of God, the fact that people should be self-supporting, and help others. The Bible also speaks to excellence in work habits.

### Dignity in Work

The biblical concept of creation imparts sanctity to all realms of nature, human history, and culture. The fact of sin has infiltrated reality. At some levels, it is easy to identify what is good and true; in other situations, it is a matter of personal value. Modern evangelicals have suggested that perhaps the sin is in not valuing God's created resources. Meanings to be found in the world of work are subject to this problem.

What the reformers perceived was that there is value and dignity in industrious work. "Whatsoever is in thine hand to do, do it with all thy power." (Eccl 9:10) Service to God and society is viewed as the ultimate goal of work. There is sanctity in all legitimate types of work. A cogent summary from Leland Ryken--these ideas about work are not simply specimens in a historical museum; they remain a standard to guide Christian thought on work today.(Ryken:100)

### Cultural Mandate

The parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30 is significant when one considers himself as a "servant-lord." The master went on a journey, leaving his slaves in charge of his financial affairs, to invest in his absence. Inherent in this passage is the intent that creative thinking take place, in the completion of the assignment!

### Wholistic Nature

Work should engage the person's capabilities. A significant experience which demonstrates this was the building of the tabernacle in the wilderness. God himself was its

designer, and the work was done under his direction. He sought involvement of the workers' hearts, minds, and souls in the undertaking.

#### Gift of God

Several passages demonstrate that work is a gift of God. Solomon discussed this, in Ecclesiastes 3:9-13:

What does the worker gain from his toil? I have seen the burden God has laid on men. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end. I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. That every man may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil--this is the gift of God.

#### Self-Supporting

Jesus, who came as God-man, spent nearly thirty years of his life in common, mechanical labor. During those years, he set an example for humankind. During those years, he studied the word and works of God. (White 1903:267) The Bible tells us that "he increased in wisdom and stature," during that time. This suggests implications for use of leisure time.

Mention is made of the occupations of the disciples before they followed Jesus. Several examples include fishermen, physician, tax-collector. Jesus referred in his parables to several occupations, such as sowers (Matt 13:3), vineyard laborers (Matt 13:30), harvesters (John 4:35), house building (Matt 7:24), and women sweeping house (Luke 15:8).

#### Help Others

The apostle Paul was a tentmaker by trade, and supported himself in his preaching ministry by the work of his own hands.



"You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions."(Acts 20:34)

Paul highly valued work in the community of the early believers, stating that he who did not work would not eat.

#### Excellence in Work

An outstanding passage directed toward slaves, is not a mandate for slavery, but a suggestion for an attitude of carefulness that each of us should maintain in our work:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men.(Col 3:22-23)

#### WORK AND ETHICS

Work serves three main purposes in the world. It exists to provide for human needs, to fulfill our humanity, and to glorify God. These goals provide standards which we use to determine if the work is moral. Work that satisfies these purposes is moral. Some work fails to measure up.

Man is a reflective, thinking, valuing being, and a responsible agent.(Holmes 1987:29) To work is a moral duty. Industriousness is a positive attribute, while there is no praise for idleness. Biblical wisdom literature, especially Proverbs, draws numerous parallels to demonstrate this (See Prov 10:4; 12:24; 13:4; 21:5; 22:29). Specifically mentioned are unfortunate results to the sluggard (See Prov 6:6-11; 13:4; 19:15; 21:25; also Eccl 10:18, 2 Thess 3:11).

A value in life is to develop a balance between time for

work and time for contemplation.(Psalm 128). Ellen White states that Bible principles of diligence, honesty, thrift, temperance, and purity are the secret of true success.(White 1903:135-138) Work at its best will be personally fulfilling, although one should not worship success. People should find joy in their work (Eccl 12:24; 3:13; 5:12, 18-19).

In considering the work itself, the wise man has declared that it should be done with zest. (Eccl 9:10) It has been felt that work should be utilitarian, but with the increase in man's concern with leisure, it is valid that some work fulfill man's aesthetic need.

Moderation is advocated in work (Prov 30:8). Persons should not idolize their work, nor should workaholism prevail (Ex 20:3). The commitment to excellence is a mandate (2 Tim 2:15).

God is interested in all that interests his children. Indeed, God has given to men their several abilities, in trust, to be developed. It is appropriate for one to pray for wisdom and strength to accomplish work.(White 1903:258) Man's response to God's love suggests that work be approached with a sense of vocation, or calling. Work should be done "as to the Lord and not to men." (Eph 6:7) Every thought should be brought into captivity to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor 10:5).

The way that a child of God does his work in the world may be seen as standing above culture. The creation mandate is to image God in a fallen world. Contemporary culture, seeing a different attitude and application to work by Christians, could be transformed.(Niebuhr)

Gaebelein emphasizes that work well done, even as hobby or recreation, effort expended unselfishly, activity that contributes to a life of effective service to God and fellowmen belong to God's truth fully as much as the most carefully planned course in philosophy or Bible.(Gaebelein:88)

#### WORK, FAITH AND LEARNING

Learning occurs while people work. One's world view has an impact on the quality of such learning. There is conflict between liberal education and preparation for a career. The cultural mandate is relevant to thoughts as well as actions.

In what ways does work help a human being to integrate faith and learning? Considerations could be divided into three broad areas: reality learning, value development, and recreative aspects.

#### Reality Learning

Reality learning will be discussed first. This includes a deepening understanding of God and his world. It also includes a greater understanding of human nature, including self-awareness.(Holmes 1983:6) Work leads to a heightened awareness of one's own role in the world. A discerning student, in his/her work role, can see the effects of sin on creation.

As a worker engages in hands-on work experiences with materials in this world, God's revelation of Himself in nature becomes clear. His hand can be seen by close scrutiny of the things which He has made. Evidences of His orderliness and overall design become apparent.

A consideration of the lives of some great persons helps us

to recognize how one's work helps to integrate faith and learning. These are examples of situations in which individuals were "transformed by the renewal" of their minds. (Romans 12:2) Each of these individuals was separated for a time from their usual setting to be freed of defective patterns of thought. As a result, their life focus became different. Elisha had a training in life's common duties. He learned obedience himself, before he was able to be a leader. Faithfulness in little things is the evidence of fitness for greater responsibilities. (White 1903:58,61) Moses had to work as a fugitive and exile in a strange land, before he was able to learn dependence upon God's power. (White 1903:62) Paul, also, worked and lived for a time in a solitary setting; in this environment he was able to empty his soul of its prejudices and traditions, and learn of God. (White 1903:65)

Jesus' life was an example for all, with practical as well as theoretical development. He was useful in the home as a child, working with Joseph in the carpenter shop. He demonstrated common work to be the "exercise that develops mind and character, that teaches the hands to be useful, and trains the young to bear their share of life's burdens" and also "gives physical strength, and quickens every faculty." (White 1923:417-419)

As human beings work, learned theories impact the real world. This forces thinking, leading to development of wider ranges of coping resources. Intellectual smugness will be prevented, as individuals learn of the finiteness of their own

abilities, and as they learn of the innumerable varieties of practical applications.

Jesus derived spiritual truths from the work world of his hearers. He used parables to illuminate people's understanding of His Father's love and goals in the world; he made applications the hearers could understand--examples of sowing seed, cleaning house, caring for children. The value of work in this context is as a reference point to support spiritual truth.

Counsel has been given that individuals do their work wisely and well, doing best the work that lies closest, watching for indications of God's providence. These are "rules that ensure safe guidance in the choice of an occupation."(White 1903:267) This is a beautiful promise, that through application to work, a person can learn their capabilities and interests, affording greater certainty about their role in the world.

Regarding evidence of sin, "even the child, as he comes in contact with nature, will see cause for perplexity. He cannot but recognize the working of antagonistic forces."(White 1903:101) In the defacing of nature, man recognizes that "an enemy hath done this." (Matt 13:28) The mind is drawn to the Creator.

#### Value Development

Moving to a consideration of value development, we can see that working with a variety of people helps individuals to see varying attitudes and practices. Through reflection and interpretation, one learns to appreciate characteristics such as humility, craftsmanship, integrity, honesty, godliness.

Conversely, one can learn to hate pride, arrogance, corruption, deceit, evil.

In modern Western culture, young people often do not have significant contact with people beyond the nuclear family. Peter Benson, of Search Institute, suggests that young people, ages 12-18, who engage in guided practice in service develop more positive attitudes toward other population groups, such as persons of age.(Benson:7)

Certainly, as one works with God's creation, he becomes witness to the grandeur of God. Work, done to the glory of God, would develop the attitude of humility in the worker. In addition, it would tend to destroy prejudice.

There is "science in the humblest kind of work" (White 1923:315); people who recognize this learn to discern nobility in labor. When a person determines to improve the method of work, serving the Lord, the work will be ennobled, and the character refined. "It is by training in the common duties of life and in ministry to the needy and suffering, that efficiency is assured."(White 1903:268) Excellence may be demonstrated, even in humble tasks. "Conscientious attention to the little things will make us workers together with Him, and win for us His commendation who seeth and knoweth all."(White 1903:114)

By contrast, youth who are allowed to follow their own inclination, to shun responsibility, "lack stability, perseverance, and self-denial."(White 1903:279)

In the book of Proverbs are two significant verses. Chapter 16, verse 25, from the King James, states, "There is a way that

seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death." In the same version, same chapter, verse 32 admonishes, "The hoary head is a crown of glory, if it be found in the way of righteousness." The Lord in His wisdom has given us the power of choice, but in His Word, the certain results of a course of action are clear to the discerning student!

#### Recreative Aspects

The final area in which work can impact on faith and learning is that of recreative aspects, that is, making persons anew.

One of the simplest applications in this area is implied in the phrase, "practice makes perfect." One becomes changed from novice to expert through repeated work in an area. Through work in any field of endeavor, a person discovers new learnings and new insights which stimulate further growth.

Approaching work in a thinking way will stimulate thinking, capture the imagination, and help a person to discover fresh ways of dealing with problems. Whatever captures interest and attention will improve motivation. Many young people today spend many hours sitting in front of the television; educational pursuits and real life lack interest for such individuals.

Love of work transforms mind and character. This is a thought-provoking passage:

The working of the land will be a special blessing to the worker....To develop the capacity of the soil requires thought and intelligence. Not only will it develop muscle, but capability for study, because the action of the brain and muscle is equalized. We should so train the youth that they will love to work upon the land, and delight in improving it. The hope of advancing the cause of God in this country [Australia]

is in creating a new moral taste in love of work, which will transform mind and character. (White 1923:323)

Habits of industry help people to resist temptation. Busy minds and hands need nothing else to fill them!

Wisdom literature discusses how work leads to development of common sense and good judgment. Right thinking and right living are self-recreative, self-nurturing activities. To capture this idea and close the discussion of work as an integrator of faith and learning, words from Proverbs 4: 7-13 explain the results to the life of a person who seeks wisdom:

Determination to be wise is the first step toward becoming wise! And with your wisdom, develop common sense and good judgment. If you exalt wisdom, she will exalt you. Hold her fast and she will lead you to great honor; she will place a beautiful crown upon your head. My son, listen to me and do as I say, and you will have a long, good life.

That is not all; there is more to this magnificent passage!

I would have you learn this great fact: that a life of doing right is the wisest life there is. If you live that kind of life, you'll not limp or stumble as you run. Carry out my instructions; don't forget them, for they will lead you to real living.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR THE TEACHER

The Christian liberal arts setting is the appropriate battleground in which restoration of balance between the acquisition of knowledge and putting it into practice (didactics versus praxis) could best occur. The academic dean of one Christian college has claimed that the primary goal of education should be an understanding of the meaning of work in God's economy. (Erickson:167-179)

Jesus' teaching methodology utilized both theory and practice. For example, the periods of instruction devoted to the



disciples were punctuated by periods when they were sent out to apply what they had learned (Matt 10:5-15; Luke 10:1-20).

Ellen White says that every youth should be taught the necessity and the power of application.(White 1903:232) George Akers repeated a succinct old adage: "What I hear, I forget; what I see, I remember; what I do, I understand!" Development of experience-oriented education has deep roots in the theory of John Dewey. He saw experience to be immersion in natural processes which demand solutions. Such a situational approach to learning is important, but inadequate, because experience alone is not enough. Humans have been created as responsible agents. Prerequisite to responsible action are reflection and valuing. Resources of a discipline must be brought to experience, with internships after introduction to the discipline, followed by careful consideration of theoretical and ethical assumptions and their consequences. Experience, to be fully educational, needs historical, theoretical, scientific, and ethical input and scrutiny.(Holmes 1987:89)

Several limitations of experience have been extracted from educational thinkers. Plato has emphasized that experience alone is not understanding. David Hume has pointed out that experience is always limited in scope. Immanuel Kant has added that experience is not self-interpreting. The Christian educator should realize that presuppositions brought to experience, whether they are Christian or not, help to shape the learner's understanding.(Holmes 1987:87-89)

The teacher may nurture faith in the work experience.

Experiences may be structured in a way which helps the student recognize that many of today's mechanistic and acquisitive attitudes toward work are hollow, unethical, and unbiblical. Hopefully, students can be helped to catch a vision of work as stewardship of God's creation in service to others.

Values are transmitted more from example than precept, more from peers than elders, and more by being involved than from being spectators.(Holmes 1987:82) Structuring situations in which exchanges between students may occur are important in this context. The modeling role of the teacher is also invaluable.

The Bible identifies man as a wholistic being. Within the hearts and lives of each, the struggle between good and evil continues. Christian education is redemptive. Balanced development between social, spiritual, mental, and physical aspects has a clear mandate. Work represents one part of this balance, which helps contribute to the restoration of the image of God in each student.

The function of the Christian school is to educate persons who are able to relate well to others in the world, who will serve God and their neighbor, and who will see all things in relationship to God as Creator, Redeemer, and Lord.

Holmes has said that education provides one with a critical appreciation of the past, freedom from the present, and the ability to creatively participate in the future.(Holmes 1987:33) Surely a Christian student, educated by Christian teachers, will live and work in the world as a transformer of culture!

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by

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