



**Council for Christian  
Colleges & Universities**

## **The Value of Work: A Case for Promoting Christian Service Opportunities to College Students**

**CCCU New Faculty Workshop**

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*The purpose of this paper is to discuss the historical evolution of attitudes toward work, the Protestant work ethic, a Biblical perspective on work, and to provide a rationale for why Christian colleges should offer multiple service opportunities for students to help them integrate faith into their everyday lives.*

### **Why Are You In College?**

Christian colleges across this country are populated with traditional-aged students struggling to earn a four-year liberal arts degree. These students have followed the advice of their parents and friends that college is the place to be. They come with high hopes, expectations, and dreams; and into our hallowed halls they come without ever articulating why they have personally chosen to invest four years of their lives in the pursuit of "a degree." This lack of personal articulation leads our students to adopt the conventional responses pertaining to the question, "Why are you in college?"

There are at least two popular responses to the question of why students attend Christian colleges. The first response is the need to obtain an education. This is how a majority of our students phrase the response. They do not seem to be driven by an internal desire to become educated; rather, they feel a college education is just a membership card that opens the door to a good job. Usually, students do not even know what jobs they desire; they simply know they need a college degree to get one. Most students have the unrealistic image that they will be able to secure top-paying jobs just because they happen to have the coveted degree. The student's focus is on the degree itself, not on its content.

Along with this need for education is the manner in which the average student secures this education. Students obtain it by buying it. Education is perceived to be a purchased commodity. Sometimes it is as if students are putting their tuition quarter in the professor's money slot so the professor may lecture on some important topic; and in so doing, deliver education to the student customer. The majority of students fail to understand the personal commitment and struggle it takes to truly learn a subject. This is one possible reason why many professors have lamented about students who do not apply themselves to the assigned work.

The second response is the desire to have a "good time". There are some students who perceive college as a four-year party. They attend our Christian colleges primarily to socialize with "good people." They see academic requirements as unnecessary, stifling, and secondary to their life. Unfortunately, these students often leave our institutions unprepared to handle life's expectations.

These responses all answer the question, "Why are you in college?" However, they show a lack of knowledge and understanding of what role a college education plays in the student's development as a human being. Not understanding the value of work creates confusion for students in regards to their college studies. In fact, most college graduates are probably not very satisfied with their full-time employment because they still do not understand how important work is in their life. Humans are to work and play in a world created by God.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this paper is to discuss the historical evolution of attitudes toward work, the Protestant work ethic, a Biblical perspective on work, and

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to provide a rationale for why Christian colleges should offer multiple service opportunities for students to help them integrate faith into their everyday lives.

### **Historical Evolution of Attitudes Toward Work**

The Greeks perceived that work was evil. Work was seen as binding humans to a physical level of necessity, and made humans just as the animals. Humans were to pursue more practical matters such as politics or military accomplishments. Indeed, Plato and Aristotle believed the highest form of life was the "contemplative life of the mind." This mindset toward work was supported with the use of slavery; thus, the hierarchy of the Greek society started with the forced labor of slaves, making it possible for men to hold public office. Likewise, the activities of men conducting public affairs were overshadowed by the supreme reign of the philosopher. With this concept of work, only a few elite individuals could reach the highest level of human potential.

The Greek attitude toward work carried over into the Medieval Era with the monks taking the elite role of the philosopher and the church clergy taking the role of the politicians. The highest human endeavor was to meditate and lead a solitary life: productive work had no religious significance. Because this meditation required isolation, the monastery was created and then supported by the work of the common man. This system created a hierarchy similar to the Greek hierarchy. Because common men did not engage in the religious life, they had to settle for having their lives sanctified from without by the church.

The Renaissance brought a refreshing change to the concept of human work. The new attitude was based on God as the creator of the universe. God was a craftsman and man could become like God through productivity, not merely by thinking. Work was performed for more reasons than just necessity: work was no longer considered as a purely animal endeavor. Work allowed humans to be free, creative, sovereign beings enabling them to reach divine status. Artists were highly regarded in Renaissance society because they did more than just think; they formed the idea into a physical reality.

In the Industrial Age, Karl Marx promoted a theory of work in which man, through the advances of technology, would be able to engage in free productive activity and control the world. Workers would contemplate themselves in the work of their own hands. The reality of the industrial age, during Marx's time, was that workers suffered long, hard work hours. They worked for mere survival rather than self-realization. The harshness of the work environment drove Marx to promote the rise of the working class to revolt and eliminate the cause of their hardships -- private ownership of the means of production. After the revolution, workers would be free to express themselves in productive activity and be in total control of the world, somewhat like God.

A contemporary theory of work comes from the analysis of Sigmund Freud. Freud believed we are primarily pleasure-seeking creatures. This primary nature is in direct conflict with the requirements of work. Therefore, the modern worker is merely postponing immediate gratification of their desires. They work so that they may earn enough money to subsequently enjoy the benefits of our modern society. We live our lives in conflict: the benefits of work are self-preservation and enjoyment, but the immediate reality of work is self-denial (Hardy 1990).

### **Protestant Work Ethic**

The Reformation brought a new perspective of work that has become known as the Protestant work ethic. Martin Luther promoted a new concept of the meaning of work that shattered the restrictive medieval

hierarchy of human value. God's providential presence was discovered in the work of the individual's hands. This new concept was rooted in the doctrine of salvation by grace.

All people are called to enter into a relationship with God -- the Kingdom of God, while all people are restricted to live and work in relationships with their neighbors -- the Kingdom of Earth. Luther saw each human as being called to a vocation, a specific call to love one's neighbor through the duties which are attached to our social station here in the earthly kingdom. God calls us to serve others, and we serve others while performing our work.

According to Luther, our station in life is seen as a divine vocation. When we perform the duties required of our station, we are actually acting as God's hands in this needy world. God is perceived as ordering all humans into specific

stations in life in order to supply the world's need of food, clothing, and shelter. From Luther's perspective, work is filled with spiritual significance.

John Calvin extended the biblical context of work by emphasizing that humans are free to use their vocation as a means to serve God. The emphasis is not so much on serving God within a person's station as it is serving God by one's station. God has planned for humans to live in an interdependent society where each member contributes according to their talents. Therefore, the value of work does not come from fulfilling the requirements of a static position in life; rather, the value of work is found in the free exercise of our gifts and talents given to us from God (Hardy 1990).

### **The Biblical Ideal of Work**

God's will for each and every human is to respond to His two-part call; the general call and the particular call. The general call is the call to sainthood (Romans 1:7; 8:28; 8:30; Cor. 1:9; 2 Thess. 2:14; 1 Peter 2:9). All individuals are invited to live a personal relationship with God. The call to serve our neighbors with our gifts is the particular call of vocation.

Through our work we (1) continue the work of creation by subduing the earth and participating in God's ongoing creative activity, (2) realize ourselves as image-bearers of God, and (3) serve God Himself. Work is not considered as debasing ourselves to the level of animals, nor is it elevating ourselves to a god-like position; rather, it is living in harmony with God's ordered plan.

Creation is the work of God. "By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work" (Genesis 2:2). We can see ourselves as continuing the work of God's creation by God's words, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule...over all the earth" (Genesis 1:26). The act of ruling suggests a process of dominion, management, or work. Adam was placed in the Garden of Eden, "to work it and take care of it" (Genesis 2:15). We should see our work as an instrument to affect positive good in our society.

Jesus was a carpenter until the age of thirty. Early in his ministry the people even called him a carpenter (Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3). Although Jesus' physical efforts changed from carpentry to evangelism, he still considered himself to be at work. "My Father is always at his work to this day, and I, too, am working" (John 5:17). Jesus must have been compelled to work because his heavenly Father was working. We become image-bearers of God when our attitude toward work reflects our knowledge that God is pleased with our endeavors.

We should see our work, no matter how insignificant, as our service to God here on Earth. Jesus set the model by praying to God, "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do" (John 17:4). God can give us work that glorifies him if we just ask. The Psalmist prayed, "establish the work of our hands for us -- yes, establish the work of our hands" (Psalm 90:17). The scriptures clearly instruct us to work as if we are working for God himself. "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward" (Col. 3:23,24).

### **The Contemporary Response to Work**

There are two extreme positions evident towards work in our society: an undervaluing of work and an overvaluing of work. Both extremes are positions to be avoided. An undervaluing of work results in laziness and poor performance. This may be the most popular position taken by students in our colleges today. This lack of significance for work can be overcome only by seeing legitimate work as being honorable and worthy of one's best effort. The Christian principles of vocation, stewardship, and commitment to excellence can help give work the importance it deserves in the human life.

The overvaluing of work results in work dominating and controlling an individual's life. The worship of work is usually brought on by an acquisitive lifestyle that could be simplified if people chose to do so. Work is not the highest value in life. When humans consider work to be the primary importance in life, it becomes a destructive force in their relationship with God. The highest value of our life should be our relationship with God and the identity this gives us in being God's children and new creatures in Christ.

Christianity can provide an alternative to the contemporary response to work. God can supply new attitudes that transform how we regard work in our lives. The biblical perspective assures us that God intended for us to

work and that to perform work honorably is to obey God. Work can be considered fulfilling because it is performed from a transformed inner attitude of the worker. Work becomes an expression of God's love and transforming power (Ryken 1987).

### **The Average Student and The Value of Work**

If a proper understanding of work is essential for a fulfilled and obedient life, then it becomes imperative for young people entering the work force to be fully aware of the value of work. The college education needs to be understood as being a part of the Christian vocation. It is an opportunity to serve our neighbors with our gifts and talents, but it is also a time of preparation for a lifetime of service to mankind and to God. In this context, pursuing a college education takes on a divine meaning and calling. Those that pursue a higher education should pursue it with commitment and devotion because of the opportunities of service and personal expression it will offer.

Students embracing the concept of Christian vocation should see a college degree as more than just society's membership card, a time to socialize, or a guarantee to a "good" job. Even though a college degree may offer all of the above, it also offers more. It offers the student an intervening step between childhood and adulthood: a place to develop lifetime habits of Christian vocation. Students should be encouraged to see the "work" involved in attending college as an opportunity to express their talents and gifts given to them by God. Friendships and social activities should be promoted as opportunities to support each other in Christian love. Preparing for a lifetime occupation should be seen as more than just learning technical skills but also learning what it means to faithfully and joyfully serve God through the work of human endeavor.

Obviously, teaching this concept of work is difficult and without guarantee. Students must internalize the concept of a God-ordered world in which humans function best when following biblical principles. The internalization of this concept will enable students to regard their time in college, and their entire future careers, as a divine calling. The question arises then, "How do Christian colleges help students internalize the biblical view of vocation?" The immediate and fundamental response includes a Christian perspective taught in the classroom, in relevant chapel convocations, and in a caring campus environment. In addition, students must be encouraged to take on Christian and community service projects during their college tenure.

College students cannot develop lifetime service habits by being preached at. They must be encouraged to be actively involved in viable service activities so they can internalize what it means to serve God through human actions in a world desperate for love. Summer is an ideal time for concentrated full-time service. College students should commit to at least one summer during their college years to working for a Christian service organization.

Many of our college students are passing through our Christian colleges without truly learning the fundamental purpose of work in the Christian life. Christian colleges need to take an active position in encouraging students to implement an attitude of lifetime service and offer these students multiple service options in which they can express their varied talents and interest.

### **Sources of Christian Service Opportunities**

There are many Christian service opportunities of which our college students can take advantage. Two categories should be identified. The first category is part-time opportunities located near the college so students can engage in service to the community while attending school. The second category is full-time opportunities for summer or post-graduate service.

Local service opportunities can be found easily by contacting the school's chaplain or student missionary organization. Existing programs are probably already in place. In addition, each discipline within the college should evaluate how they can use their skills and talents to minister to the community. Service to the community, using the knowledge and skills of a student's major, would be a tremendous learning experience for students and help them internalize the biblical concept of vocation.

Full-time service opportunities are available in many disciplines, through various organizations, which offer diverse experiences. The first place to look for full-time service opportunities is the college's affiliated denomination. Many denominations have developed summer and postgraduate opportunities for college students. Similar to existing local programs, these full-time programs would welcome support and assistance from faculty in recruiting students. Outside of the denominational affiliation there are multiple opportunities of which students should be made aware. Two wonderful directories that list and briefly describe these opportunities are (1) the Urbana Options Guide compiled by InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, P.O. Box 7895 Madison, WI 53707-7895, (608) 274-9001; and (2) the Summer Missions Handbook 1991, compiled by the Student Missionary Union of Biola University, La Mirada, CA 90639, (213) 903-6000. There may be a small charge to obtain these directories. These publications offer a listing of agencies, the service opportunities that are available, special requirements, and the person to contact for additional information.

One method of implementing the internalization of Christian vocation on our campuses is to appoint an individual who will facilitate the placement of students in quality service opportunities. This individual would have the responsibilities of assisting each discipline in developing local service projects, investigating full-time service opportunities, and promoting these Christian service opportunities to the college community. Brochures could be developed, special chapel convocations could be held, and short presentations in various classes throughout the year could be offered. By developing a systematic method of informing students of the many opportunities available to them, they would be better equipped to follow God's leading in their lives during their college tenure.

#### Notes

The reader is encouraged to examine Leland Ryken's book, Work & Leisure in Christian Perspective, for an excellent argument concerning the balance of work and leisure in the Christian's life.

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Top >>

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