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FAITH, FAMILY, AND THE FUTURE OF WORK

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Work for the Sake of the Family

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“Whatever you do, do it for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31). In my childhood home and church, this fragment of Paul’s advice to a fractious community of Christ-followers became a compact, all-purpose theology of work. Its wisdom applied, then, to stubborn math problems, sports competitions and household chores. It applies now to a whole host of daily tasks, from tackling a list of emails to tidying a messy kitchen. The smallest and most mundane tasks can honor God because work was designed by God for good purposes. When we work, we manifest the image of God, a God who works and creates. When we work, we take up a primal God-given task: “The Lord God took man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it” (Genesis 2:15).

In Scripture, this fundamental command is paired with another calling: the cultivation of family and community. Christian psychologist Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen reminds us that the two callings are linked in Genesis. God’s command that humanity steward and cultivate the earth is paired with “accountable sociability – the call to form families and communities within and across generations is another.” The womanist theologian Stephanie Buckhanon-Crowder weaves social and familial ends into the core definition of work: “... To work is to seek my benefit and the well-being of my community... an activity that brings wholeness and health to children.” Biblical poetry and prophecy link labor and its rewards with family and community. In a fulfilled and redeemed creation, people will build and live in their own homes, sharing the fruit of their labor with children and across generations (Isaiah 65, Jeremiah 29).

The connection between work and family well-being appears in a variety of Christian theological traditions, most notably in Catholic social teaching. Pope John Paul II’s 1981 encyclical extols work as what makes us human. Through work, God develops our humanity. Thus, “work is ‘for man’ and not man ‘for work.’” Because humans are made in God’s image as fundamentally relational beings, work finds its fullest expression in connection to others. One aspect of work’s dignity is its conduct in

service of others, including of family. In this way, the dual callings to work and to family dovetail, each mutually supporting the other.

Family flourishing and the purpose of work

Family life involves attention to both the everyday rhythms of togetherness as well as its extraordinary responsibilities. Social work professor Diana Garland, who interviewed hundreds of families for her research on faith and family life, observed that “there is nothing instant about becoming a family” and that “trust, respect, and entitlement to be in one another’s lives only develop with time and hard work.”

Garland’s scholarship, among others’, illuminates the host of talents, tasks and resources that are involved in living out the call to “accountable sociability,” particularly practicing a household faith. Eating together, praying before leaving or returning to the home and offering hospitality to those outside the home are among the regular activities that make for a home – alongside the many other tasks of childcare, elder care, and securing food, shelter and security. Family routines sustain us physically, and they make space for emotional connection and spiritual growth.

Although family life often proceeds on routine, it is not static. Familial responsibility draws persons into tasks that they did not foresee or prepare for: a sibling becomes seriously ill, a child faces learning disabilities or trouble in school, an aging parent develops dementia and needs extensive care. To be family to one another means sometimes shouldering extra work when needs arise. Although one cannot predict the degree or timing, those who are connected to families can expect periods of intense attention to family over the course of family life.

If work is to be done for the sake of family life, work needs to support both the everyday rhythms of family life as well as its predictable irregularities. Work must provide families with the capacity to uphold both their ordinary and extraordinary responsibilities.

Structuring work for the sake of the family

Sin corrupts human life and undermines God’s design for flourishing and wholeness. Thus, work on earth is sometimes marked by toil. Work can fall short of its calling to support and sustain family and community and, instead, strain them. However, we can strive for the intended complementarity between work and family.

This series explores several lenses and strategies for enabling a healthy, dynamic relationship between work and family life. Bekah McNeel describes families’ strategies for navigating the demands of work and together with the predictable irregularities of family life. Hannah Anderson shares three lessons her family has learned about building a work-wise family: one that puts the marketplace and the

home in right relationship to one another. Additionally, several articles highlight the institutions that can stand alongside families to promote a healthy relationship between work and family life. Irwyn Ince describes the role of the church in supporting members through the thick and thin of work and family life. An interview with Trish Douma and Susan Vandaalen, representatives of the Christian Labour Association of Canada, sketch the role that employee associations can play in mediating work-family tension. Moreover, Heath Carter positions this topic within the broader problem of deep economic inequality and decline of labor strength in the U.S., and Gideon Strauss offers a theological reflection on work as worship.

Our exploration of work and family life unfolds against the backdrop of a rapidly changing economy. Economists and pundits talk about “the future of work.” This conversation refers alternately to work mediated by technological platforms rather than traditional employers, to the potential for robots and artificial intelligence to supplant human work and to predictions of extreme inequality in the quality of jobs and their pay.

At a minimum, many predictions about work suggest a future in which work will be more fluid, more flexible and less structured around traditional work hours and rhythms. For example, forty-three percent of all children in the U.S. live with a parent who works a nonstandard schedule including night shifts, evening shifts or variable shifts. In the future, nonstandard work may increase. How will this affect family life? Will it be more or less difficult to structure work around the needs of families? What should be done to protect and bolster family life in the new economy? The contributions to this series and existing data suggest three considerations with respect to work being structured in relationship to the family:

1. Flexibility is important but may offer less than it promises

The new economy or ‘gig’ economy sometimes promises to free workers from the confines of the 9 to 5 job. Workers can bend their schedules to meet their unique needs. But we have to use care when talking about flexibility, clarifying on whose terms flexibility is offered and at what price.

Families often choose night and nonstandard shifts in order to make ends meet and reduce child care costs. These include one parent working a night shift, working an evening shift, picking up rotating shifts or having other irregular schedules with varying start and stop times. Many families survive and thrive through grueling schedules. But, research also suggests that workers and families alike pay a price for nonstandard work.

On average, families in which one partner works a non-day shift are more likely to have strained marriages. Workers with odd hours report that they commonly bring work-generated stress and fatigue into their homelife. A comprehensive review of over twenty studies found significant correlation between parents’ work schedules and negative

outcomes for children. Although some research indicates little correlation between parents' nonstandard work and child-school engagement, other studies demonstrate that when parents work at odd hours, children are more likely to experience emotional and behavioral problems, poorer cognitive development, fewer hours of sleep and lower levels of school engagement. Notably, adverse outcomes for children and teens increase the longer a parent must work nonstandard shifts.

An increasing number of jobs involve a combination of odd-hour shifts as well as variable or short-notice schedules. According to one survey, seventy percent of all retail workers regularly receive their schedule with short notice. A 2006 analysis of employee records and interviews with female employees of a clothing retail chain found that forty percent of employees were given a variety of starting or ending times, and a sizeable portion worked shifts outside of the standard workday. The same retail survey indicates that employers drive some of the move toward nonstandard and variable work. Managers in the survey said that, in the hiring process, they prioritized workers' willingness to accept odd hours and often face their own organizational pressures to adjust worker hours and schedules to accommodate demand.

Other research points to an enduring preference among workers for a standard work week and work hours, particularly if it protects them from employer-driven, short-notice changes to their schedule. In one recent survey, job candidates across demographic groups were willing to give up a 20 percent wage increase to avoid employer-set schedules. Interviews with low-income parents currently working nonstandard shifts indicate that many would choose standard work hours if they could.

On the other hand, a recent analysis of data on worklife quality reached a strong conclusion about job flexibility: that the ability to set one's own working hours and the ability to change one's schedule easily was associated with a significant jump in worker happiness. So flexibility matters. But, family-connected workers may value flexibility because it allows them the ability to deal with extraordinary family responsibilities when they arise.

2. Families must make intentional choices about their relationship to work

As work arrangements become more fluid, families must make intentional decisions about how and when to work. Families will need to regularly weigh the costs and benefits of flexibility – perhaps accepting overtime hours or extra 'gig work' – as compared to stability and family togetherness.

Income stability, wealth, retirement and time off all may arrive from different sources, rather than a single benefits package handed down by the human resources department. Families have a responsibility, then, to develop financial (and relational) buffers to cover both the regular and irregular events of family life.

Families' important responsibility to plan and choose their relationship to work should provoke reflection on the impact of inequity on family choice. Families without access to wealth or significant savings face a narrower and harder set of choices. They cannot as easily trade off time at work for time at home when urgent family needs arise. They may be less positioned to wield flexibility to their advantage, and instead, find themselves beholden to a demand for flexibility from other actors in the market.

3. Institutions outside of the family can help families thrive

Some of the resources needed to enable a healthy relationship between work and family life may need to come from outside of the nuclear family. Public policies designed to boost the rewards of work (tax credits, job subsidies, living wages) might improve workers' abilities to make a living in jobs that are suited to family life or save up for future emergencies. The social safety net can serve a family-protective role, providing basic needs like food and health care while families search and secure for the kind of work that supports their family.

Informal, individualized or poorly publicized workplace policies place the burden on individual workers to secure family-supportive work. Institutions like unions can help improve the workplace for workers with families. A recent study found that, in the U.S., union-represented women were more likely to take maternity leave than women not represented by a union. Unions can help mediate the relationship between home and work, advocating for workplace policies and processes that respect worker dignity and workers' family responsibilities. Although some corporations offer family-supportive flexible work arrangements or are required to provide unpaid family leave by law, many workers fail to access these benefits. Lacking enough income to cover an unpaid leave is the principal reason workers forgo time for family care, but fear is also a major barrier. Sixty-five percent of low-wage workers said they did not take time off for family care because they feared it would jeopardize their job.

Unions and other institutions in civil society have an important role in reinforcing decent treatment for workers, educating workers about family-supportive policies and establishing family-supportive work as the norm, rather than a special privilege.

Conclusion

When we attend to a task, labor toward a good end, God rejoices, no matter how modest the act. Work was intended to give glory to God and to reflect God's image in us. God also intended work to be enjoyed with others, including the families we form and cultivate. In its ideal state:

“Work constitutes a foundation for the formation of family life, which is a natural right and something that man is called to. These two spheres of values - one linked to work and the other consequent on the family nature of human life - must be properly unified and must properly permeate each other” (Laborem Exercens, Section 10).

Work does not always fulfill its high calling. Some jobs strain rather than sustain family life. They may offer too little pay for a family to survive or place the worker at odds with his or her family. Because the world is corrupted by sin, the mutually supportive dynamic relationship between work and family is only ever partially realized and sometimes entirely obscured. Remembering family as one of work's core purposes might help families, employers and policy-makers navigate a future in which the shape of work continues to change.

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