



CANADIAN CONFERENCE
of Mennonite Brethren Churches

ARTICLE 16 [MB Confession of Faith]

Work, Rest and The Lord's Day

COMMENTARY

Work and leisure are among the central concerns of North American Christians. We believe that God created people for both work and rest, but in our rebellion we have corrupted both labor and rest. As a redeemed people, the church is called to restore labor and rest to their proper places in human life.

Work

Work is a pervasive and essential element of human existence. The action of God in the creation of the world is described in Genesis as work (Gen. 2:2-3). In the Garden, Adam is given the work of naming the animals (Gen. 2: 18-20). Similarly, Psalm 104:23 indicates that it is the nature of persons to engage in labor. Thus work itself is not a consequence of the fall into sin. One of the consequences of sin is that God cursed the ground, thereby changing work from joyful participation with God into a painful struggle against the elements (Gen. 3:17-19). Work can be corrupted by human injustice as in the case of Egypt enslaving Israel (Exod. 1-13).

Human beings are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27). One of the ways in which people are made in God's image is that they are by nature social. It is by being both male and female that humans reflect the image of God. The connection between social nature and work is seen in Genesis 2. God seeks a helper for Adam. That is, it is not good for Adam to work alone in the garden. The only suitable helper for Adam is another person (Gen. 2:18-25). Work is part of the created social nature of human beings.

Genesis 1:26 explicitly links being made in the image of God with having dominion. Two things should be noted about the notion of dominion. First, dominion implies action. Humans are to be responsible for the proper use of and care for creation. Second, the command to have dominion over the "fish...birds...every living creature...the whole earth" (Gen. 1:28-30) should be understood to involve responsibility for all of creation. While it is not explicit in the biblical text, it is fair to understand human responsibility to extend to the products of human culture as well as to the natural world. In addition to caring for the creatures which God has created, humans are also responsible for use of such elements of human culture as economics, art, music, sport, education, politics, and the like. Work of all sorts is the responsibility and proper end of human beings.

In 2 Thessalonians 3:10 Paul articulates an important principle for understanding work: "We gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat" (NRSV). Individuals are responsible to work as they are able. Paul is also clear that providing for personal needs is not the only, or even the primary, reason for working. In 1 Corinthians 16:2 he indicates that at the beginning of the week believers should set aside a portion of what they have to help those who are in need. While people are responsible for themselves, they are also responsible to use their work to provide for others.

Paul's instructions to slaves and masters in Ephesians 6:5-9 and Colossians 3:22-4:1 give some indication of how Christians can redeem the corrupted world of work. Paul does not directly condemn slavery. However, he does give instructions to slaves which command them to live as if they are not slaves. Rather than shirking their duties, stealing, and being insubordinate, the slaves are to act responsibly and faithfully. They are to act as if they are free people. Similarly, masters are to treat their slaves justly, fairly, and in the way that one would treat an equal. Paul told Christians to act in such a way that the evils of slavery were significantly undermined and disarmed.



The consumer capitalism of contemporary North America lends itself to another kind of slavery. Some people find themselves working in factories which provide very little meaningful connection between worker and product. Others find themselves selling products that they realize are of little ultimate significance. Some find themselves in management being pressured to demand more productivity with less compensation for workers. A variety of social pressures combine to make work seem like meaningless drudgery. The words of Paul provide a light for the Christian worker in our society. God calls workers to use their time honestly in performing work, to do quality work even if they have little control over the final product of their work, and to remember that their performance functions as a witness to God.

Rest

Exodus 20:11 and Deuteronomy 5:15 give complementary explanations of the command to rest on the Sabbath. In Exodus 20:11 the command to honor the Sabbath is grounded in the pattern of creation demonstrated by God. Deuteronomy 5:15 recalls God's delivering Israel from slavery in Egypt. These two passages remind us that rest is an opportunity to thank God for creating us and also for redeeming us.

Sabbath laws remind us that observance of Sabbath rest is an act of trust. When the Israelites wandered in the desert, they were required to trust that manna would not rot when kept for the Sabbath (Exod. 16:22-30). Similarly, when Israel was commanded to observe Sabbath years in which they did not plant or harvest grain, the people were called to show by their actions that they trusted in God to provide for them (Exod. 23:10-11; Lev. 25). Economic and military security provide contemporary temptations to put our trust in something other than God. The call to Sabbath observance calls us to examine carefully whom we as a people rely on for provision.

Hebrews 4 reminds us that rest is not yet fully realized (4:1). The future rest promised by God is the result of faith in Jesus (4:2) and on obedience to God (4:6). The future rest will be a time when rest and work are no longer at odds (4:9-10). This provides believers with the strength to redeem both work and rest in a culture which corrupts both aspects of life. Hope sustains people in the face of adversity.

The Lord's Day

The only use of the term "The Lord's Day" in the New Testament occurs in Revelation 1:10. Roman culture set aside certain days as "emperor's days." The commitment of the early church to celebrate a "Lord's Day" is in direct contrast to the idolatrous pagan culture in which they found themselves. Today one of the idolatrous temptations that North Americans face is to worship the god of leisure. Leisure is a counterfeit rest. Many of us have confused rest with leisure, glorying in our own accomplishments rather relying on God as our provider. We believe we have earned leisure, not recognizing rest as a gift from God. Contemporary North American Christians are again called to proclaim a day of the week as the Lord's Day rather than thinking of the weekend as "time for myself."

It is clear that New Testament believers gathered on the first day of the week to remember the resurrection of Jesus (1 Cor. 16:1-2; Acts 20:7). It is a long tradition of the Church to imitate the practice of those believers. The first day is appropriate as a day set aside for worship in that it reminds believers of the creation (Gen. 1:1), the resurrection, (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1), and the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). As noted earlier, Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 remind us that there is an intimate connection between rest and worship. This suggests that a regular part of worship should be remembering the mighty acts of God on behalf of His people. One of the ways that we remember the acts of God is through the celebration of the Lord's Supper. In other ways our worship should also involve remembering what it is that God has done in creating and sustaining a new people.

As counterpoint, however, it is useful to remember the words of Paul in Romans 14:5: "Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds" (NRSV). Paul reminds us that our observance of a day of worship is a convention that we adopt. It does not matter which day is used. Clearly it is essential that Christians set aside some day to worship.

As new creatures we are called to redeem our work. As a redeemed people, we are called to tangibly show our thankfulness, trust, and hope by setting aside our work for a time. Our rest should be characterized



by worship of God and fellowship with other people. Our worship and fellowship should be a foreshadowing of the time when believers of all nations and languages rest in the presence of the triune God.

