

The Dignity of Work

By Oum Mark

In the article, 'Reflections on Finance and Ministry' (*Seedbed XVIII No. 1*), we looked at questions of finance and the danger of foreign help. Further consideration of this matter leads us to the important topic of the place of work for all of us as Christians.

Let us put ourselves in the shoes of the national church, and remember that individual church groups were started mainly through mission agencies and by the various ministries of mission workers. In the early 1960s, workers came in as missionaries, and in most countries they didn't even need a *raison d'être*. Through the years and decades that followed, the national church had these workers as examples of what a church is. Were the believers disciplined from the beginning and taught about work and the theology of work? I don't have an answer to this question, but I observe that the national church resembles more and more a mission agency rather than following the pattern for a biblical church.

Without casting blame on either the church or on the agencies, we need to see where things have gone amiss and then start to urgently fill the holes in the wall, so the structure does not become permanently distorted.

Why are we seeing increasing numbers of MBBs leave their secular jobs to be in full-time ministry? This is the case for a huge percentage of MBBs today! Does the national

church know that the workers who come to their country are really a very small minority of their sending churches? Does the national church realize that the majority of Christians in those sending churches are in secular jobs with only a very few called to the ministry? I think that they recognize this theoretically, but the visual aid provides a stronger influence on their thinking than does the theoretical knowledge. So we need to be sure to incorporate teaching about this subject in our discipleship materials and efforts.

What does the Bible say about work?

The book of Proverbs is full of passages that exhort hard work, including chapter 31 where women who work with their own hands are praised.

The very beginning of the Bible describes God's work and His rest. It was not a negative aspect of His being. His command to Adam was to cultivate the Garden of Eden. That was before the Fall, when everything was perfect and good. It was not a punishment, but a need that God fulfilled in Adam: it filled his time and life and brought fruitfulness!

But that is not all. Throughout the Bible, work is honoured. The Apostle Paul said about himself in Acts 20: 33-35:

I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs

of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'

He also said in 1 Corinthians 4:12 'We work hard with our own hands.'

In his teaching to the different churches, Paul repeatedly said this very thing, as in 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12:

Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.

Look also at 2 Thessalonians 3: 6-16, especially verse 7:

For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle.... On the contrary, we worked night and day, labouring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: 'If a man will not work, he shall not eat.'

Colossians 3:23: 'Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men' is addressed to slaves who have to 'obey earthly masters'. It seems to be a relevant verse – not only for MBBs who somehow think a spiritual ministry is better than a mundane job – but also for tentmakers who consider their tentmaking work a necessary

evil that they must do in order to do their real work.

I would like to outline some positive aspects of having a job and working and the blessings this brings.

Benefits for ourselves

- Work provides income to meet our needs.
- Our children see a good example.
- Work teaches us patience and self-control.
- Work widens our knowledge and experiences.
- It provides the necessary challenges that keep our lives effective and motivated and that enable us to grow and see success.
- Through work, we have dignity and self respect, which are essential for our mental well-being.

Benefits for society

- We will be a blessing to the place where we live when we use the abilities and gifts that God gave us.
- Our work contributes to the development of our society and country.
- We pay taxes that allow our governments to function and in this way we 'give to Caesar what is Caesar's'.

Benefits for our Christian witness

- Work gives us a wider worldview as it allows us to understand and identify with ordinary or 'normal' people.
- Work provides the opportunity for us to be salt and light in the world around us.
- As Christians, work is essential for us; it is something that we can have in common with others, enabling us to relate to them.

- It gives the opportunity to demonstrate how to conduct ourselves as Christians in an unjust environment and how to show respect for authority. We are examples of perseverance, faithfulness and trustworthiness in Christ. I dare say these Christian qualities won't be seen as much by the world if we are all in full-time Christian service.

Because of the nature of Muslim society, and because of the existence of poverty, it is harder for a person to be a good witness if he/ she is in full-time ministry. I am not saying that no one should be in full-time ministry, but I do not believe that this should be the *majority* of the Christians. Who will be salt and light? Who will be mingling with non-Christians and doing good, if we are all busy supporting each other within our Christian group? It is easier for any community, especially when it is a minority, to live in a

ghetto. But it is not healthy for the growth of the church or its ministry.

The phenomenon of *hagra* [contempt] of lower classes and of manual work exists strongly in some Arab countries. Thus, honest work has no dignity, even if it is called *khidma sharifa*, [honoured/honest work] while unjust gain and riches from dubious sources are admired. As Christians, we have to preach and live a different message, and help people to:

- honour honest work – whether it is esteemed or despised in their culture,
- take pride in work,
- find fulfilment in work.

I hope these reflections will stimulate all of us to action as we disciple people into churches and help them to become those who bless and transform their society.

