



Work and rest

Work is a word that often elicits a groan. “Sorry, I can’t come. I’m at work.” “I’m working, I’ll be tired when I get home”. Yet people without work, who want to work, often feel aimless and unsure how to fill the day. People are often defined by their work. We describe them as a radiologist, a sales assistant, farmer, driver and they may derive a deep sense of purpose from their employment.

The Bible writers struggle to explain the need to work. Genesis 1, 28 ‘God blessed (human beings) and said, “fill the earth and subdue it, have dominion”’ and Genesis 3, 23 ‘So the Lord God banished him from the garden of Eden to till the ground’. When work is necessary simply to survive, and catastrophe is only around the corner, as it is for very many, then work can indeed be a burden. Unless you work you die. Western wealth has removed some of that pressure. Yet, are we satisfied? Indeed do we live to work, or do we work to live?

In a recent book, *Free Time: A Theology of Leisure* (University of Birmingham, 2004) Graham Neville points out that our identity is not in how we earn our living but in how we use our non-work time. He says for instance, that the question, “Anyone for tennis?” is a theological one. How we respond to it and to similar questions and ways of passing the hours, says far more about our true nature and where we place God in the scheme of things.

Each of us needs that balance between work and rest. It is indeed re-creational. Not only do our physical bodies need to use different muscles, even the ones to flop on the sofa, but our minds need stimulation in a different area. Just as our spirits need lifting to another plane. When the apostles were almost run off their feet, Jesus said to them, “Come with me, by yourselves, to some remote place, and rest a little” (Mark 6,31).

It is not just common sense that one in the seven days of a week

is given to re-creation, and yes, worship. It is essential. It is essential for us human beings to function as intended. Responsible employers realise that a productive work force needs a change and rest. Otherwise eventually they all become dull and ineffectual. But what of the self-employed, of which there are rather a lot in the countryside? Who gives them a break? And if they are able to snatch a few hours, can it be spent on real re-creation, or is there some demanding domestic task, some ‘must do’ job that gets in the way?

And what of the employer, official, buyer or supplier that demands that to be more efficient we give up our re-creation and rest? I am reminded of my grandmother’s words. “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.” Godly sense. ■

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