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Christian Reflections on the Relationship of Leisure and Work

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Abstract

A Christian understanding of leisure cannot be developed in isolation from the other dimensions of life. In the creation account of Genesis we learn that both rest and work are basic to the created nature of humanity. The purpose of this paper is to explore a Christian understanding of the relationship between leisure and work. The paper begins with a brief review of biblical teaching on work and leisure. This teaching is then applied to a critique of five more recent perceptions of the relationship of leisure and work: work-oriented unilateral; leisure-oriented unilateral; split; integrated; and identity. It is argued that the identity approach, which is consistent with a holistic understanding of leisure, is most congruent with a biblical understanding of leisure and work. Our work is to flow from a quality of life, a spiritual attitude characterized by rest in God. In addition, some rhythm or cycle of work and leisure (in a quantitative sense) is necessary for well-being and wholeness. Thus in addition to leisure as a spiritual attitude, certain times and activities—ranging from silent contemplation to an active celebration and rejoicing in the gifts of creation—are necessary when an intensification of leisure is experienced.

Introduction

A Christian understanding of leisure cannot be arrived at in isolation from the other dimensions of life. In the creation account of Genesis we learn that both rest and work are basic to the created nature of humanity. The purpose of this paper is to explore a Christian understanding of the relationship between leisure and work. First this paper will briefly review biblical teaching on leisure and work. Then this teaching will be applied to a critique of more recent perceptions of the relationship between work and leisure.

Biblical Background on Leisure and Work

In preparation to explore a Christian understanding of leisure and work it is necessary to briefly review the main biblical teachings on leisure and then on work. A study of the biblical concepts of Sabbath and rest reveals that leisure should encompass two dimensions—a quantitative and a qualitative; one related to our doing and the other to our being (Heintzman, 2006). First, the Sabbath teaches a rhythm to life—six days of work and one of non-work. Second, the Sabbath inculcates a spiritual attitude for human's basic posture in relation to God—one of rest, joy, freedom and celebration in God and the gift of His creation. This qualitative dimension to life, descriptive of leisure, can also be seen in the biblical concept of rest. In fact Sabbath and rest are closely linked right through from the creation account (Gen. 2:2,3) to the idea of Sabbath rest in Heb. 4:9. In Hebrews 4:9-10 the writer refers to at least two distinct, but related types of rest: (a) "a Sabbath-rest for the people of God," (Heb. 4:9, NIV) and (b) God's own rest on the seventh day of creation. The bringing together of these types of rest suggests that the Sabbath-rest, which remains for the people of God, is similar to God's resting from all His works at the end of creation (Gen. 2:3). The rest for the people of God is now viewed as the realization of God's intention in the creation to bestow such a rest on humanity (Heintzman, 2006). Rest in its ultimate and deepest sense is available through Jesus Christ (Math. 11:28-29). This rest along with peace (John 16:33, 14:27; Phil. 4:7), abundant life (John 10:10), and freedom

(John 8:32) are descriptive of the quality of life Christians have in Christ, and as such explicate the qualitative dimension of leisure.

Turning to work, the biblical account suggests that work—in the sense of subduing the earth and of ruling over nature (Gen. 1:28), of tilling and caring (Gen. 2:15), and of ordering and organizing (Gen. 2:19)—is essential to God’s purposes for human life and is also an activity in which the divine image is displayed (Gen. 1:26, 27-28). At least three biblical reasons exist as to why we are to work (Stott, 1979). First, work provides for the needs of the individual (Gen. 1:3) and society (Lev. 23:22; Deut. 24:19-22). Second, work is a means of human fulfillment. The two parts of Gen 1:26 go together: “let us make human beings in our image” and “so that they may rule over...all the creatures.” Likewise the instruction to subdue the earth in Gen. 1:28 is introduced by the affirmation in Gen. 1:27 that God created humans in his own image. Thus human capacity for creative work claims Stott (1979) is an integral part of our Godlike humanness, and without work one is not completely human. The biblical account teaches us that work is something that makes us fully human, for it is part of our created nature to be a worker. Third, work is for the stewardship of God’s creation. From Gen. 1:26, 28 and 2:15, 19 we see that God calls us to be co-creators and co-stewards with him. God created the world but assigned to humans the work of subduing it. He planted a garden, but commissioned a gardener to till and keep it. God has so created life in this world as to rely on our work. Therefore we cannot reject work in favour of a life of leisure.

Although not much is said about human work in the New Testament it is assumed throughout it, that daily work is not a hindrance in Christian living, but is a necessary element of it. The so-called “house-tables” found in the Epistles (Eph. 6:5-9, Col. 3:22-4:1, 1 Tim. 6:1-2, Titus 2:9-10, 1 Pet. 2:18-25) contain the only specific teaching that we find in the New Testament on the subject of daily work. These passages expound the attitude and responsibilities of Christian slaves (*douloi*, i.e. workers) who carried out the daily labour of the household, farm and workshop in the biblical world; basically they were laboring classes. The house-tables demonstrate that a new attitude towards work has been initiated through faith in Jesus Christ and that by following Christ’s example a Christian’s work is foremost something offered to the Lord and not to “earthly masters.” Here we do not simply have a rule or code of work that is to be legalistically followed but instead an attitude, a spirit. The house-tables suggest that the fulfillment of the creational ordinance of work is possible due to the transformed heart of the redeemed person. When a person repents and puts their faith in Christ, all areas of life, including one’s work have the potential of being sanctified. As such work is not to be done primarily out of a sense of duty or for economic self-interest but it is to flow from our being, from our life in Christ. Thus there is no need to dichotomize work and leisure, for they both flow from our life in Christ.

The Relationship of Work and Leisure

How do we relate a biblical understanding of work and leisure to more recent perceptions of the relationship of work and leisure? Kunjo Odaka (1966) has classified workers according to five types of living related to work and leisure. These five perceptions of the relationship

between work and leisure were defined as follows:

1. *Work-oriented-unilateral*: Work is man's duty. I wish to devote myself wholly to my work without any thought of leisure.
2. *Leisure-oriented-unilateral*: Work is no more than a means for living. The enjoyment of leisure is what makes human life worth living.
3. *Identity*: There is no distinction between work and leisure. I therefore have no need of being liberated from work in order that I may enjoy leisure.
4. *Split*: Work is work and leisure is leisure. Modern man gets his work done smartly, and enjoys his leisure moderately.
5. *Integrated*: Work makes leisure pleasurable, and leisure gives new energy to work. I wish to work with all my might, and to enjoy leisure. (pp. 81-82)

In his book, *The Christian at Play*, Johnston (1983) adapted Odaka's classification for the purpose of articulating a Christian approach to work and play. He advocated that Christians ought to accept an "integrated" relationship of work and play. Using these same five possible lifestyles as a framework I will discuss the relationship of work and leisure. Based on the understandings of leisure and work from biblical and historical sources, I will argue that the "identity" approach is the most appropriate response. Let us critique each of the five possible relationships individually.

Work-oriented-unilateral

In the "work-oriented-unilateral" lifestyle work is the supreme value in life, leisure is subservient. This "work-oriented-unilateral" approach to life is characteristic of the Protestant and secular work-ethics. In the religious and secular world views that have dominated western society since the Reformation, humans have been regarded as *homo faber*, i.e. humans as workers, and one's main function has been to work at one's particular place in society. The saying "one does not work to live; one lives to work," is a good description of this approach to life. The problem with the emphasis on humans as *homo faber*, is that the value of leisure is minimized. Margaret Mead (1958) observed that:

Within traditional American culture... there runs a persistent belief that all leisure must be earned by work and good works. And second, while it is enjoyed it must be seen in a context of future work and good works. (pp. 10-12)

When work becomes one's only focus it blinds one to the other dimensions of a person's created nature. Scripture suggests that work and rest are basic to the nature of humans. Although humans are workers, that is not the whole truth about humanity's nature and destiny, humans were created to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

Furthermore, for Christians work is never the central determinant of our worth. Pierre Berton (1968) has written: "Work seems to be the one thoroughly acceptable way that a man can demonstrate his worth to himself and his peers (p. 17). Yet as James Houston (1981) wrote, "The glorification of work and its rewards both distort the human psyche as well as obscure the true meaning of work. For the essence of man lies not in what he does, but in who he is" (p. 41). Therefore we cannot accept the "work-oriented-unilateral" approach to the relationship of work

and leisure for it exalts humans as *homo faber* to the detriment of the other dimensions of human's created nature.

Leisure-oriented-unilateral

In the "leisure-oriented-unilateral" approach to the relationship between work and leisure, the experiencing of leisure is the primary value in life. This approach can be seen in classical Greek culture where leisure was idealized and work despised; in some expressions of medieval monastic culture where the contemplative life was emphasized at the expense of the active life; and in some expressions of the modern anti-utilitarian concept of leisure (Murphy, 1974) wherein hedonistic and narcissistic pursuits are valued above responsible participation in society. In both the classical and monastic cultures the notion of *homo faber*, humans as workers, was minimized in favour of the contemplative life. In the anti-utilitarian view of leisure the idea of *homo faber*, humans as workers, is rejected in favour of *homo ludens*, humans as players. In all three cases, a human's 'being' is emphasized above human's 'doing.' The creational intention of humans as workers is minimized. But to emphasize leisure at the expense of work is contrary to our nature as Jacques Ellul (1964), among others, noted.

To assert that the individual expresses his personality and cultivates himself in the course of his leisure is to accept the suppression of half of the human personality. History compels the judgement that it is in work that human beings develop and affirm their personality. When the human being is no longer responsible for his work and no longer figures in it, he feels spiritually outraged... The annihilation of work and its compensation with leisure resolves the conflicts by referring them to a subhuman plane... To gamble that leisure will enable man to live is... to cut him off completely from part of life. (pp. 399-400)

The biblical account teaches us that work is something that makes us fully human, therefore the "leisure-oriented-unilateral" approach to life with its narrowing of work to a means for living, is not acceptable to the Christian.

Split

The "split" approach to life views work and leisure as two separate categories. In this approach the human is both a worker, *homo faber*, and a player, *homo ludens*, but there is a clear distinction between the two roles in life. In earlier societies, which reflected *Gemeinschaft*, there was no clear distinction between work and leisure, rather this distinction came about historically through a variety of influences which included: (1) the fixed times in monastic culture for manual labour and for spiritual activities; (2) the Reformer's confusion of vocation, work and job where the Christian's calling (1 Cor. 7:20) tended to be narrowed to the work associated with a specific position in society (Marshall, 1980) which contributed to work being defined as time devoted to a job; and (3) the glorification of work that accompanied industrialism, through which work came to be the most significant aspect of life while leisure was relegated to free time. The divorcing of work and leisure, is characteristic of the average worker today, who often despairs of finding satisfaction in or through one's job, but believes work is a necessity in life in order to earn an

income to provide for the good life.

Johnston (1983) noted that "a biblical notion of Christian vocation will have nothing to do with such compartmentalization and secularization" (p. 132). Rather than separating work and leisure we are to "do all to the glory of God." Consistent with a Christian critique of the free time concept of leisure, all of life is freely given by God, and therefore we cannot divide life into distinct segments of work and leisure. Furthermore, Ecclesiastes teaches that all of life, including work is to be enjoyed (2:24-26, 3:12-13, 3:22, 5:17-19, 7:14, 8:15, 9:7-9, 11:9-12:1; Johnston, 1976; Whybray, 1982). It is not suggested that work is to be compartmentalized from the other elements of life that are to be enjoyed. Therefore I conclude that the "split" approach to life is not appropriate for the Christian.

Integrated

In the "integrated" approach to life "Work makes leisure pleasurable and leisure gives new energy to work. I wish to work with all my might, and to enjoy leisure" (Odaka, 1983, p. 82). Johnston (1983) advocated that this is the style of life God intended for us: "Christians are created and called to consecrate both their work and their play" (p. 134). However Johnston (1983) proceeded; "play is God's appointment, his gift to humankind which is meant to relativize and refresh our endeavours, putting them in their God-intended perspective" (p. 134). Although throughout his book Johnston has spoken of play as non-purposeful activity and that it has intrinsic value in itself, he now portrays play as a means "to relativize and refresh one's endeavours" (p. 134). In this view humans are still both humans as workers, *homo faber*, and humans as players, *homo ludens*, however the worker serves the player and the player serves the worker.

Identity

The "identity" approach to life in which work and leisure are merged is more consistent with the holistic concept of leisure. The holistic perspective suggests that one's life is not fragmented into a number of spheres such as work, leisure, family and religion but that all aspects of life are considered as part of the whole. In the holistic view of life, work and leisure are related to each other. This does not mean that work and leisure, especially when leisure is considered as a spiritual attitude and a condition of being, can be equated with each other, but rather that they can be experienced at the same time unlike the "work-oriented-unilateral," "leisure-oriented-unilateral," "split," and "integrated" approaches to life that all make a clear temporal distinction between work and leisure.

The holistic or Odaka's "identity" approach to life in which there is a fusion of work and leisure is a more helpful approach than the traditional approaches that place work and leisure in an antithesis. From a Christian perspective, the ultimate meaning in life is found neither in work nor leisure. As Arthur Holmes (1983) wrote:

In the final analysis a human being is neither *homo faber* nor *homo ludens*. A person at the heart of his being is *homo religeous*, his life to be lived in responsible relationship to God, and it is worship that is his most distinctive activity, not work and not play. (p. 228)

And as Pieper (1963) has shown, worship is the well-spring of leisure. Leisure originates in a right relationship with God. Thus leisure is primarily seen in a qualitative sense, as a spiritual attitude and as a condition of being.

When leisure is considered as a spiritual attitude and a condition of being then work and leisure may occur simultaneously. In fact our leisure, as a condition of our being, is reflective of the quality of life we have in Christ and from this life in Christ flows our work, our activity, our doing. "Leisure is both the source and climax of genuine work" wrote Banks (1983, p. 194). Work is an expression, in the form of service to God and humanity, of thanksgiving and gratitude to Christ, one's divine master. Thus James Houston (1981) could write:

True leisure then is the expression that we give to the Lordship of Jesus Christ... the constant recognition that our identity does not lie in our work roles, that our identity is only in Jesus Christ, and that the stronger our identity grows in Christ, the less neurotic our activities will become and the freer we shall be from the enslavement of work....Our vocation will then look less and less like a job to do, and more and more a source of rejoicing in gratitude of what we are privileged to do to the glory of God. (pp. 45-47)

But how, in our daily lives, do we resolve the tension between 'being' and 'doing,' rest and work? Scripture teaches that both rest and work are basic to the created nature of humanity. To resolve such a tension William Still (n.d.) advocated "Simultaneous Rest and Work":

Therefore we must learn to act properly, with a due balance of rest and work, which we may say is to work *from* a position and attitude of rest ... as Christians we ought to live with a restful ease, even in busyness and in energetic activity, which not only ought to enable us to get through our work, but to do so more efficiently and therefore also more enjoyably. (pp. 39-42)

So our work is to flow from a quality of life, a spiritual attitude characterized by rest in God. Still (n.d.) also mentions that we are to have a "due balance of rest and work." This brings us to the second dimension of leisure, the quantitative dimension and the idea of rhythm to life. So far we have been emphasizing the qualitative dimension, leisure as a condition of our being.

While most of the biblical material related to leisure supports a qualitative definition of leisure, the Bible also supports a quantitative dimension to leisure (Heintzman, 2006). The Sabbath teaches a rhythm to life--six days of work and one of non-work. The implication is that the Sabbath suggests some rhythm or cycle of work and leisure (in a quantitative sense) is necessary for well-being and wholeness. Thus, in addition to leisure as a spiritual attitude that undergirds all of life, "periods are necessary when leisure is lived more intensely" (Doohan, 1990, p. 36). Doohan (1981) wrote:

We have a leisurely approach to life which must be nourished by times of intensified leisure. The latter will include, among other things, play, friendship, sharing, an absence of oppression in favor of a happy and cheerful affirmation of oneself, a feeling of at-homeness in the world, and a capacity to steep oneself in the beauty of the universe. It will demand a form of silence and inward calm leading to a receptive attitude of mind above all; it will be a varied celebration of life-men's and women's looking upon creation and seeing that it is good. (pp. 165-

166)

In conclusion then, a Christian holistic conceptualization of leisure has two dimensions: a qualitative and a quantitative. The qualitative dimension is the spiritual attitude and condition of being that reflects the quality of life available in Jesus Christ. This qualitative dimension of leisure is not limited to a certain time period, thus it may be experienced simultaneously with work; and in fact work may be conceived as an expression of this attitude. The quantitative dimension of leisure consists of certain times and activities--ranging from silent contemplation to an active celebration and rejoicing in the gifts of creation--in which an intensification of leisure is experienced. Thus all of our life should be characterized by a spiritual attitude of leisure, but at the same time our life should exhibit a rhythm of periods of work and periods of intensified leisure.

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