

When is a job more than a job?

Teaching, selling, writing, nursing, building, repairing, cleaning, managing, planting, homemaking, computing. Thousands of jobs demand the time of millions of people each day. For some a job is a joy; for others it is a curse.

For Christians, work is more than just a way of putting food on the table. It is a call from God. We work because God created us with gifts and talents to be used for his glory in the world. But too often the pressures of day-to-day tasks sap our fulfillment.

How can a job enrich a marriage? How can it make life more rewarding for a single person? How can we use time more effectively? How can the church help us fulfill God's call? Judith Shelly looks at these and many other questions as she points the way out of the work dilemma. She provides guidelines for seeking God's will, and gives practical suggestions on balancing work with the rest of life.

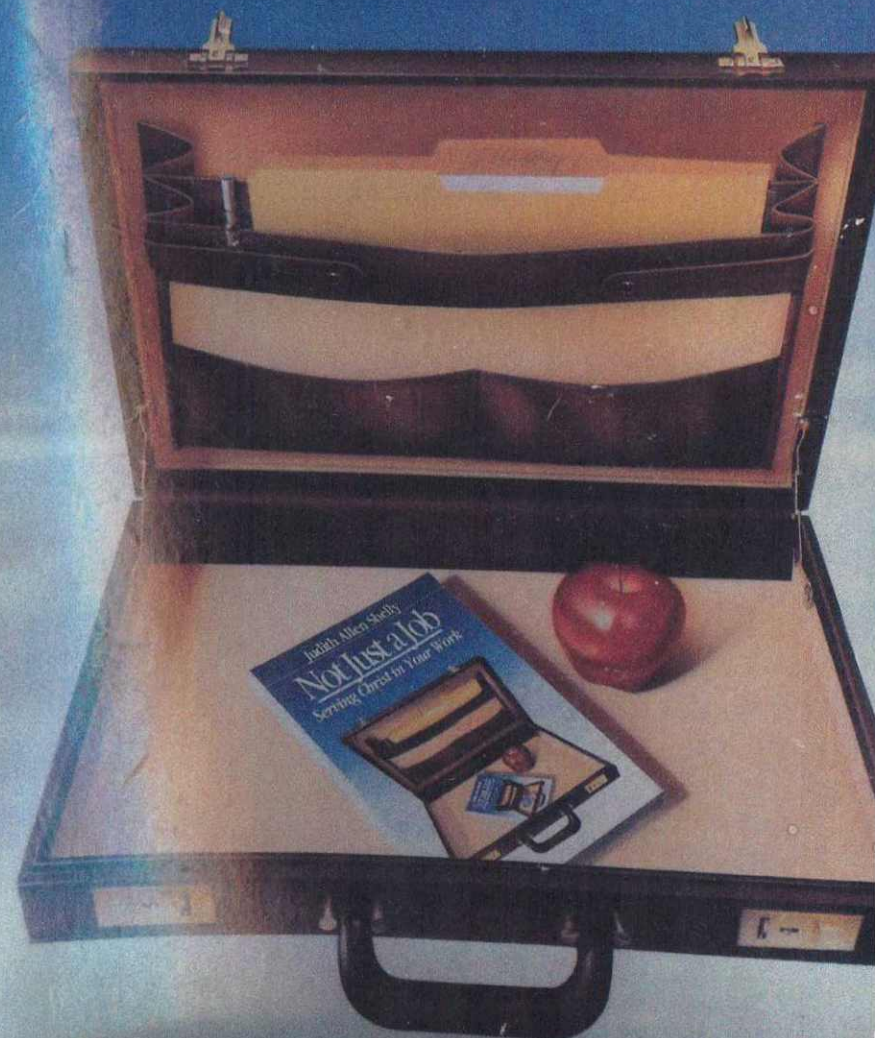
A book for people who want more from work than just a paycheck.

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Judith Allen Shelly

Not Just a Job

Serving Christ in Your Work



stances from God's perspective. But we are people of promise, and we live with a purpose and a hope. Ephesians 1:11-14 tells us:

In him, according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will, we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, which is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

Now I have the answer to "Why am I here?" I am here to be a child of God and to do those things which glorify him—to live to the praise of his glory. In Christ I have an identity and a purpose, and this becomes the framework on which I plan my life and my work. In other words, I am not here to "do my own thing," but to bring everything I do under the lordship of Jesus Christ so that it will glorify him. My relationship with Christ is demonstrated not only in the number of Bible studies I attend or in the proper church affiliation or in mastery of spiritual disciplines, but in the way I live my total life. Religious activity is an important part of the Christian life, but it is only a small part of the picture. Work is my primary expression of faith and praise to God, my service to the neighbors he commands me to love, my responsible stewardship of his gifts, and the most effective means of communicating the good news of salvation to the world.

Work as Worship

Brother Lawrence, a French monk, once said, "The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer, and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquillity as if I were upon my knees at the blessed sacrament."²

As a Christian finds a new identity in Christ, work becomes the natural outgrowth of that re-creation (Eph 2:8-9). Just as a husband and wife try to do those things which please each other, Christians seek to glorify God through works. Verbal expressions of love and praise are important, but the true test of commitment comes through action. As James says, "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (2:17). *cf. Eph 2:10 James 2:17*

Marriage, like life in Christ, is a full-time relationship. I am not married only when I am at home, but also when I am at work and even when I am out of town. Marriage affects all my plans and all my relationships with other people. Sometimes it gets rather complicated. I cannot schedule meetings, agree to attend an out-of-town event or make decisions which will affect our life together without first consulting my husband. Sometimes I know he will be pleased if I accept a certain invitation, but I still check with him to make sure it will not conflict with a higher priority. Our relationship with God demands similar interaction. If our work is truly to be worship, it must be a day-by-day response to his will and grace.

The apostle Paul in Romans 12:1-2 described this dynamic: "I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

The concept was revolutionary. According to many of the popular religions in Paul's day (and to a great extent in our own), the body was evil and distracting. True worship meant denying the body and focusing on the divine spark which was believed to dwell within a person. Most people would certainly not see the body as "holy and acceptable to God." But in Christ the whole person, including the body, has been redeemed. That demands a response in our thoughts and in our behavior.

* SAVED BY GRACE NOT WORKS

2 *Worship* in the New Testament essentially means "service." The same word is used to describe the labor of slaves or hired servants.³ Jesus illustrated the concept by telling the story of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:30-37). He also explained that worship not only means being reconciled to God, but also requires us to forgive others (Mt 5:23-24; 6:14-15). He further taught that worship is not something we do only in a holy place, but that it is done "in spirit and truth" (Jn 4:24). Singing hymns and praising God with our lips is only the beginning of worship. If it does not lead to doing work which reflects the nature of God, we are not worshipping in spirit and truth. Faith must affect every fiber of our being, every hour of the day, every relationship and commitment, in order to exist in spirit and truth.

A friend once explained to me that she had decided to tithe her time as well as her income. That meant she spent ten per cent of her time doing something religious. At first, that seemed like a wonderful idea—especially since she intended to use part of her time-tithe to do volunteer work for Nurses Christian Fellowship and I was her staff worker. But gradually I realized that ninety per cent of my friend's time was not committed to the Lord at all. She had carefully boxed God into a ten-per-cent time slot.

3 In contrast, Paul appeals to us to be completely transformed in our thinking, rather than comfortably conforming to the world. That involves carefully evaluating the filters through which we view our values, goals and day-to-day activities and relationships. Our "spiritual worship" includes what we do on the job, how we spend our free time, the education we pursue, the way we treat other people and the way we measure success. It is so easy to slip into conformity with the world in each of these areas that we seldom recognize it happening.

On the job, we are subtly drawn into conforming by the attitudes and actions of the people around us. It is difficult to abstain from the petty dishonesty that often pervades the workplace. Using the photocopy machine for personal business, taking a few

pens home in your pocket, or stretching lunch and coffee breaks beyond their time limits seem so minor—especially when everybody else does it. On another level, we conform to the world when we are silent about our beliefs and values for fear of rejection. We also conform when we give in to negative forces instead of trying to effect change.

For example, Sue lasted four weeks on her first job. The competition, backbiting and general negative tenor overwhelmed her, reinforcing her own sense of inadequacy. She soon found another job in a nearby town. There she adjusted well and gained confidence in her skills with the encouragement of her colleagues. After about six months a new supervisor took over her team. The newcomer was deceitful and abrasive. Sue's former encouragers decided that it was easier to ask for a transfer than to confront the woman about her offensive behavior. Perhaps Sue could have either helped the woman to change or stayed to encourage newcomers so that they would be able to withstand the supervisor's negative influence. Instead she joined the crowd and decided to resign.

Conforming to the world in our free time takes many forms, some more obvious than others. Mike, for instance, came home from work each evening and switched on the television. He ate his dinner in front of the TV, usually falling asleep on the sofa afterward. When he awoke around nine o'clock he seldom had the energy to start any new projects, so he went to bed. Despite all the sleep he got, he always felt tired. He refused to become involved with activities at church or in the community because he felt he just did not have the energy to do anything more.

On the other hand Meg prided herself on her full calendar. She led a high-school Bible study every Wednesday morning at six o'clock, took the teens on weekend retreats, taught Sunday school, sang in the choir, was active in the singles group at church and attended postgraduate classes two evenings a week. Since many of her commitments fell on the same dates, people who

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mindless obedience. It is a lifelong process whereby the rough edges of the "old nature" are chipped away and we become more and more like Christ (2 Cor 3:18; 4:16). It takes place in the context of everyday life and work.

Work as Service

If work is a response of worship and worship is essentially service, then the type of work we do is important to God. Jesus provided clear guidelines when he summed up the commandments: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. . . . You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt 22:37, 39). Our work must be a service to God and to our neighbors. Theologian T. A. Kantonen explains, "Christian saintliness is not a monastic withdrawal from the world for the sake of sinlessness for oneself. It is self-forgetting service to others by the power of him who uses imperfect instruments to accomplish his holy purposes."⁴

Christian service does not necessarily mean going to a foreign mission field or becoming a pastor or doing some other "full-time Christian work." It means that whatever we do should be in keeping with God's purposes and plan. It must be a means of showing God's love to our neighbors. It must reflect God's righteousness and power. We are to go out into the world as "salt" and "light," but we are not to be of the world (Mt 5:13-14; Jn 17:15-16). In other words, we are to work side by side with non-Christians without getting caught up in their philosophies and values. We are to work within society to preserve human dignity and worth, to strive for justice, to care for the suffering and oppressed, and to communicate the good news of God's love and forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Often that means we will get stuck with the dirty work. Sometimes it will lead us into conflict with supervisors and colleagues. It may mean standing up for unpopular causes or people. It may lead to ridicule or threaten our job security.

For some, it may involve playing along with the system in order to gain enough power to change that system. A university professor once told me, "the pressures to get a doctorate and to publish scholarly articles are just a matter of educational politics in my field. It doesn't have anything to do with being a good teacher—but I had to do those things myself before I could criticize with any credibility."

Brother Lawrence could serve God and his neighbor by working in the kitchen. Christians can serve in business, politics, engineering, the arts, the helping professions, education and industry. Opportunities to serve are endless. No area of society should be left uninfilitrated by the salt and light of a Christian presence. However, Christians working in particularly "worldly" settings may face criticism and misunderstanding from other Christians. In such cases they may begin to feel out of place both in the church and in the secular world. A support group of Christians in similar work can be a tremendous encouragement (see appendix for a listing of such groups).

Perhaps more important than the type of work in which a Christian serves is his or her attitude and motivation for that work. A person can appear to be making great sacrifices by going to the mission field while operating from a motive of personal glory and prestige. On the other hand, another Christian may mount a high-pressure political campaign, travel the party circuit and appear to be seeking personal power and acclaim—all in order to make important changes in government policy which will benefit underprivileged people. Motivation for organizing a union can range from materialistic greed to a deep concern for justice and fair labor practices. What is right for one Christian may be inappropriate, or outright sinful, for another. A person's attitude and motivation can make the difference.

Servant attitudes are not very popular in our society. Even the traditional serving professions like nursing are trying to shake off the servant image. Christians are called to buck the trend in the

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