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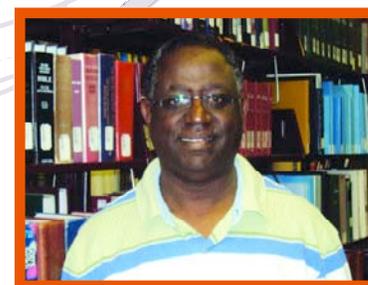


Hailu became a leader in the Merete Kristos denomination when communists ruled Ethiopia. During that time, Hailu and other church leaders were often imprisoned for their Christian beliefs. However, despite official disapproval and persecution, the church grew. Hailu's denomination increased from 5,000 to more than 50,000 members. After the fall of Communism, Hailu joined other pastors to found the Meserete Kristos College, where he then served as instructor, Academic Dean and President.

A contingent from the SCHOLARLEADERS board met Hailu in Ethiopia in 2004 and learned of his desire to gain further education. Hailu applied to SCHOLARLEADERS and was accepted for support during his studies. He has now graduated from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Illinois with a PhD in Systematic Theology. His dissertation focused on a proper theology of work to help combat economic challenges in Ethiopia, and this essay draws on his research.

Hailu will rejoin the faculty of Meserete Kristos College when he returns to Ethiopia in July 2011. He and his wife, Yeshi, have four children: Abenezer (25), Salem (21), Natnael (17) and Daniel (15).

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WORKING THEOLOGY
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INSIGHTS

Although work occupies much of our lives, few of us have thought about it theologically – and theological reflection on work is even more limited in the Eastern Orthodox tradition of my country, Ethiopia. This is important because a proper theology of work – in Ethiopia and in the West – is critical for the family and society, to avoid disintegration and build community.

Ethiopian society is characterized by loitering and Western society by toiling. Both extremes endanger harmonious and healthy community life. By contrast, a biblical understanding of work promotes healthy growth in families and communities.

Esteemed Too Little: Work in the Ethiopian context.

We Ethiopians face three primary challenges that have led to a distorted view of work. First, we are still overcoming the effects of the communist system that devastated our economy for decades. The system hindered creativity, ingenuity and efficiency by removing incentives for work. Second, economic disasters have resulted in a flood of outside aid from the U.N. and other organizations. This goodwill had the unintended consequence of creating dependence on outside support. Finally, the established Orthodox Church recognizes more than 200 feasts and holy days. With so many commemorative days, some Ethiopians do not work for two-thirds of the year. So our religious calendar prevents work, which erodes the economic and social health of the community!

These challenges are evident, first, in idleness. In Ethiopia, a large share of the people are unwilling or unable to use their time productively. Idle people abuse one of the strengths of our society, the extended family that cares for its weak and needy members. The idle weaken this safety net by using scarce resources and adding to the burden carried by productive people.

A society with lots of idle members will obviously end up poor, but the situation moves from bad to worse as working members of society reach a point where they can no longer keep up. Many of the working poor in urban Ethiopia care for so many idle dependents that they are unable to break out of poverty themselves. Moreover, this has produced a new and unattractive culture of parasitism. Some young people prefer to accept the support of those who are employed, or even to starve rather than work at menial jobs.

If these tendencies are not corrected, idleness, and the poverty and parasitism that it produces, will lead to community disintegration. Working members of

society – those who carry a disproportionate share of the burden – will cease to care for others. The safety net of the extended family will be destroyed.

A Relentless Master: Work in the West.

Dictatorship takes different forms in the West than in Ethiopia. Majority World dictators enslave people by force, but in the West mammon often enslaves people by attraction; i.e., by love of money and possessions. As Walter Wink argued, “Mammon is a dictator of this society.” (*Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, 1992)

Money is a good servant but a bad master; a wonderful tool but, when it becomes the ruler of our lives, the worst tyrant we have seen. As extreme idleness is the enemy in Ethiopian society, extreme toil is an enemy that endangers community life in the West. In Ethiopia idleness leads to parasitism that destroys the extended family. In the West, extreme toil, workaholism, generates wealth but destroys interdependence.

The 24/7 work schedule revolutionized Western society by elevating production over people. Everything seems to be evaluated in terms of production. That which is not productive is rejected, even if it might benefit society spiritually or relationally. In the academic community we hear ‘publish or perish’; even here we are driven by production.

Wealth is the reward of workaholism, but many are the costs to family, friends, and self. In the desire for more, people work to the exclusion of relationships with each other. The problem is not earning but thinking that the only purpose of life is to produce wealth. It is frightening to consider that the sole measure of success might be a large bank account and all that it can buy.

Moreover, wealth breeds an attitude of self-sufficiency, leading to radical independence. At the extreme, self-sufficiency pushes relationships with others and with God to the margin. From my vantage point as an Ethiopian fortunate to live for several years in America, independence in the West takes a significant toll on family and society. It neglects the fundamental truth that we are created to be in relationship with God and others. When this core purpose is lost, so is community.

When members of Ethiopian society embrace the culture of parasitism, it erodes interdependence by overburdening those who can and do work. And when Westerners chase mammon and exalt independence, they lose sight of the importance of interdependence. Either ultimately destroys community.

Hope: A Biblical Understanding of Work.

From the first page of the Bible it is clear that God made everything and it was good. He bestowed his creation on human beings with a charge to implement his intended purposes (Genesis 1:26-27). Understanding work must begin with this creative act of God and human beings as his co-workers. This leads to better understanding of work and its importance in family and society. Here are a few related, theological observations:

First, work is a blessing that originated from God the Worker. Work was created before sin entered the world. God invited human beings to enjoy the activities of work and reap its rewards even in the garden.

Second, work is a God-given responsibility. Human beings are invited to manage God’s business on his behalf. Work is a mark of those who bear the image of God and is to be done for his glory (Colossians 3:17). We are stewards of the gifts he has given us.

Finally, work involves cooperation with God in continued creation. Agriculture provides a great example: “God is at work during that time most critical, and most out of human control—gestation, when the seeds, having been planted, lie in the ground, and it is uncertain what sort of stand they will make. The gestation phase of agriculture is wholly in God’s hand (Isaiah 55:10).” (Armand Larive, *After Sunday: A Theology of Work*, 2004)

In work we are called into community with one another and into fellowship with God. The very labor of our hands joins God in work.

A final, quite vivid thought: In Ethiopia we used to kill rats, and thereby control the diseases they carried, with iron traps. These were effective but resulted in violent, painful deaths for the rodents. There is no good way of killing, but for the last few years we have instead used chemical poisons that rats enjoy eating; they die a pain-free and silent death. In a similar way, death in Africa is often noisy and speedy while in the West it is silent and slow. The evil one uses violence in Africa but takes life in the West by letting people enjoy the poisons of consumerism, materialism and self-gratification.

Let us discourage extremes of idleness and toil in our societies, extremes that erode relationships and interdependence. Rather, let us embrace a perspective of work that provides our needs and builds family and community.

Hailu Cherenet Biru
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia • April 2011