



At Work and at Prayer

by Jonathan Aitken

WE ARE APPROACHING the season of New Year's resolutions. Alas, for me and many others this ritual is embarrassingly like the old joke that compares keeping the commandments to taking an examination paper: "Ten are set but only four need be attempted." Even so the endeavour of making resolutions is usually worthwhile. Less enduring, perhaps, in areas of physical denial such as "drink less scotch; cut out desserts," but more so in personal disciplines of the spiritual life.

So on a wing and a prayer one of my resolutions for 2013 will be: to bring God into work. This is not a generalized call to evangelize the workplace. It is a quest of personal exploration to see if the path of God-centeredness can be followed as one goes about the often mundane task of earning a living. What has encouraged me to search for this path is that no fewer than four friends of mine have recently produced writings or set examples in this unusual field.

"Unusual" is the right adjective, because so many people, including people of faith, do not give much thought to the connection between their work and their God. They think it natural that God might be at work in their churches, their family lives, or their prayer groups. They may well believe that God cares for them as they work. But most of them, when they go to work, feel they are entering a secular space that has little to do with God's purposes or presence.

One of the voices most effectively contradicting the notion of our work and faith as separate silos is Howard E. Butt. He is a legendary Texas business leader and spiritual bridge builder whose mission for over 60 years has been to champion what he describes as "the holy calling of our daily work." His family's commercial success in creating the H-E-B supermarket chain enabled him to set up the H.E. Butt Foundation, which hosts some of America's most distinguished seminars on this theme at Laity Lodge near San Antonio. (I have attended four of these gath-

erings.) Their message is a straightforward one: God calls us to servant leadership in our daily lives at work.

One of the finest addresses I heard on this theme came from C. William Pollard, who at the time was chairman and CEO of ServiceMaster. So I was intrigued when I heard he had written the foreword to a new book devoted, as he put it, to the question, "How do we function as an ambassador of Christ in a work environment that has as its purpose to produce goods and service for a profit?"

The novice author of the book, who has made a convincing attempt at responding to Bill Pollard's challenge, is Chris Evans, a successful high-tech entrepreneur from Raleigh, North Carolina, who made his fortune in computer software design. Wrestling with whether he had to make a choice between growing spiritually or growing professionally, Evans found a biblical formula that provided him with a framework to do both. He took a well-known text from St. Paul's letter to the Galatians, which defines the Fruit of the Spirit as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). Then he applied it to his own working life. The result is one of the best "how to" guides to life with God at the workplace I have ever read: *Fruit at Work: Mixing Christian Virtues with Business* (Lanphier Press).

This book, published in October, is full of good personal anecdotes mingled with thoughtful commentaries on each one of the above-mentioned virtues, with suggestions for original approaches on how to bring them into the office. The chapter on Peace, which Evans compares to a cure for stress and to a personal spiritual immune system, is particularly telling for those struggling under the pressures of the workplace. The author's combination of homespun or perhaps high-tech wisdom firmly rooted in biblical truth, complete with a study guide, makes *Fruit at Work* an excellent reading companion to my New Year's resolution.

MANY SCHOOLTEACHERS and parents have for generations proclaimed the virtue of hard work, implying to their charges that youthful industriousness has God's approval. To give one example, the devout Quaker mother of Richard Milhous Nixon presented her son with a volume titled *Poems of Inspiration*, which was largely about work. One poem the future president was made to learn by heart began:

Work!
 Thank God for the might of it
 The ardour, the urge, the delight of it
 Work that springs from the heart's desire
 Setting the brain and the soul on fire.
 (Angela Morgan)

Admirable though such exhortations are, they are unlikely to achieve the desired result of bringing God into one's work unless the mental and physical efforts of the daily tasks are directly connected to biblical and theological study. This is one of the strengths in Chris Evans' book. It also appears in the writings of Dennis Bakke, the former CEO of a world-class energy company, and Ken Costa, a well-known London investment banker who in his spare

time manages to be a hyperactive chairman of Alpha International. Their respective titles *Joy at Work* and *God at Work* are important books in the contemporary literature of workplace theology.

This column so far has concentrated on words of wisdom from specialists on God and work who have lived in the 21st century. It is an era dominated by new technologies that seem to have made our world even busier and faster. But however much the workplace changes, God does not. So perhaps we should end with a reminder about one of the earliest and most celebrated workplace theologians, 15th-century Carmelite Brother Lawrence. He found God in the pots and pans of his monastery's kitchen, calling himself "a servant of the servants of God" and writing beautifully about his experiences of the divine presence there.

Brother Lawrence had even more impressive forbears whose hands did manual work while their hearts loved God. St. Paul was a tent maker. The disciples were fishermen. Jesus Christ was a carpenter. There's nothing new about God in our working lives. We just have to rediscover him there in our own age. ❧

Jonathan Aitken is *The American Spectator's High Spirits* columnist.

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