

WORK AND WORSHIP: THE BECOMING OF THE SONS OF GOD

Delbert Wiens*

What follows is half myth, half history, and half homily. The fractions are not wrong. Myth and history have never been separable, and sermonizing creeps into the most objective of accounts. Suffice it to say that what will be described as past and present and future were all possible then—and now.

I. THE RELATION OF WORK AND WORSHIP.

A. Work as Worship.

Nearly ten years ago an uncle told me, "In the old days, I would work for my neighbor for several days when he needed help, and then he would work for me. We never thought of paying each other. We never even kept track. I guess it all came out even." But then he hesitated and was silent. For, just below the surface, there was the recognition that "coming out even" didn't really matter. "Work" was not that important.

In the past we were almost all farmers. More to the point, we were prescientific farmers. We prepared the soil, put seed into it, and then waited. We did a lot of waiting. Some years there would be a bumper crop. In other years, though we planned just as carefully and worked just as hard, there was nothing.

It was literally true. Work was not all that important. It was necessary, of course. But our own skill and sweat was not sufficient to guarantee a reaping. The more important part was what God did, not what we did. The rain came or it did not come. Hail and killing frosts came or they did not come. Insects and disease moved through the fields or they did not. And there was nothing we could do about it.

"Success" was God's doing, not ours. We learned to look up, not at ourselves. Through the anxious days of waiting and the agony of watching hopes being blasted, we either learned to be bitter—or to trust. And in this trust we learned to see our work as not our own. Our energy flowed out from us into the greater energies of God, that Force which was—had always been the source of our own strength.

Our work was not so all-important. And then again it was. For it united us with God. There were times when work was worship, and this was its ultimate meaning. There were mornings when the fences of the soul swung wide their gates to mystic interpenetration while the body moved along the furrow made by horse and plow. There were also afternoons, for one must learn endurance. And there were times at close of year when, moving through the smokehouse and the granaries, one felt the rhythm of the year summed up as psalm of celebration.

There was even a word for this attitude of effortless action and of

* Dr. Wiens is Associate Professor in the Department of Humanities at Pacific College.

caring serenity. It was called **Gelassenheit**. A man who had it could share his action as freely as God dispensed His bounty. And he could kneel while standing straight even as he stood up straight while kneeling. For he knew himself to be a child of God who shared in the creating power. When Sunday came he shared his worship and his celebration with those who understood with him the Sabbath rest of God.

B. Work As Idolatry.

My uncle then went on, "But nowadays you can't work for each other without being paid immediately, cash on the line." Work is valuable; it has been measured—in money. Few of us are farmers. We perform fixed tasks for fixed wages, or sell on commission, or manage businesses. Those who are farmers are not helpless. They irrigate, fertilize, mechanize, and if they fear what cannot be controlled, they insure themselves against potential "acts of God."

The meaning of work has changed for us. It is **our** work, and the results are **our** results. Success and failure are in our hands. For work is not only necessary, it has become the sufficient condition of my success. (Of course one must also be smart. But even thinking has become "work," **brain-work**.) And now I can identify myself with my production. Who am I? I am the person who—does "such-and-such" and for "so much." The work of my hands defines my meaning. I create myself and am my own idol.

But he who would create himself must also be his own sustainer. That which begins in the fierce exaltation of creation passes over, little by little, into the grinding toil of the daily rut. Only "relaxation" (rest for the sake of the coming work) and "recreation" (as driving and hectic as the work itself) can now replace the work one wishes to escape. Here there is no **celebration**; for there is no summing up that is not a death.

If work must end, then meaning must end. Retirement is a living death, and the coffin — ? He who would create himself must be his own redeemer. The fence I draw around myself becomes a solid wall, for interpenetration is a losing of control. There can be no worship that carries a man outside himself. It is only the threat of the grave that drives me to church. There my idolatry becomes complete. There I make God the rewarder of my finest labor—my **spiritual** work. Anxiety fuels my part in the "work of the church." And the work of all works is my "work" of faith.

II BROTHERS AND SONS

A. Being Brothers.

About three years after the conversation with my uncle I asked my then ninety-year-old grandfather what it was like to be a deacon when he was young. "Well, I'd take the wagon and load it full of stuff, and go over to the people who needed it, and give it to them."

I doubt that it is ever easy to give and to receive help. But for grandpa and his neighbors it was still possible for charity to be direct and personal. As brothers in a fraternity of common dependence, we could share freely if God had, unaccountably, given some a larger handout than others. Nor did it destroy our sense of belonging to the community and of being needed by it if we had to receive. All was a gift and could therefore be shared.

But it is no longer an inconvenience to be poor. It is a tragedy. What it now means is, "I have succeeded. **You** have failed. I do not need you, but

you need me. You are not really a man." To be poor now means almost to be destroyed as a man.

And now it is just as terrible to give as to receive. Giving separates me from my brother. Not only is my success the result of an individualism that isolates me, it is also the result of a competitiveness which makes my conscience uneasy. Is it not true that my success comes at the price of another's failure? Does not my larger operation doom several smaller ones? Who now has the brass to face his poor brother—with a sack of potatoes?

"Freely ye have received, freely give." But when we lose the sense that what we have is really a gift—is something **received**—then it is no longer possible to "freely" give. And so we organize to make charity faceless. Our deacons operate in mysterious silence, if they operate at all.

Actually, their whole position is undermined. Once we had a task and sought the right man for it. Now we have the positions and seek for a task. As long as we could believe that what we had was a gift from God, then the qualifications needed by those who handled the goods of the church were spiritual ones. But now that superior management brings forth our wealth, the qualifications needed are much more practical. Trustees and boards take over property management and church administration. Mutual-aid programs take over charity. What we now require are businessmen-banker types who can read actuarial tables, not the old men of God who understood the soul. For the pastors we hire preacher-administrators or player-coaches, not prayer warriors.

And so "church," having ceased to be a place for the sharing of our daily worship, ceases also to be a place for fellowship. Having lost our sense of dependence on God, we have also ceased to be brothers. Having lost our brothers, we must now lose even ourselves. That is an inevitable logic.

B. Being Sons.

I was wrong at the beginning. This essay has more than three halves. It is also biography and prophecy. Neither our fathers nor we are wholly dependent children or independent men. What this is all about is also the layers in our souls. Where, then, do we go from here?

1. About the same time I asked my grandfather about deacons there was a serious dry spell in the area, and the pastor announced a special day of prayer for rain. When this was explained to the Sunday School, a kindergarten pupil raised his hand and proclaimed, almost arrogantly, "We don't need rain. My father uses fertilizer."

He was right, of course. To the extent that we become guarantors of our success, we do not need to depend on an unpredictable God. And the aim of technology is precisely this kind of independence. We all wish to control rather than to be controlled. The boy had caught the meaning of our idolatry. But he was also wrong. If his father had used fertilizer, the rain was needed all the more. To those who are older, the boy's statement is humorous because it naively implies its own negation.

It is this negation that some of his older brothers and sisters now express. Some of our children have been more impressed with the spiritual and personal effects of our idolatry than with our success in bending the elements to our will. They trust feeling more than thinking and prefer the commune to independence. They have gone to the poor and the dispossessed for their songs and their ideas I do not know whether God will arrange always to keep the poor (and therefore the despised) among us. There

may, after all, be no others to whom the children of the successful can go to find their souls again.

They are telling us also that our vaunted mastery is an illusion. We are dependent forever on the thin and fragile skin of earth which we may almost have destroyed. Our grandfathers were right. The goods of earth are gifts which can be shared but which must not be snatched. The first truth for the future is this: we must go back, back to the way of work and faith our fathers knew, back to the simple trust we knew as children.

2. True, and yet not true. Or, rather, a half-truth. We cannot simply go back again to old simplicities. Even five-year-olds know better. In a nearby town another five-year-old was overheard discussing with his playmate whether Jesus lived up in the sky. Quite scornfully he clinched his argument, "Jesus isn't really up there. What would hold him up? They [grownups] just say that because it makes them feel better."

And yet many are asking us to return to the old simplicities. Even the most naive childishness is boldly proclaimed by people who are reacting against past complexity and idolatries. Some of the Jesus people may be making a religious virtue out of ignorance. But, if so, they are doing nothing more than following the lead of many in the churches.

We are not meant to remain "children in understanding" but to become men. God means us to become His Sons, fellow heirs of Christ. Five-year-olds cannot comprehend any space that is not three-dimensional or any dependence that is not physical. To them we must talk of Jesus "up there" or be silent. We can regret that some are bright enough to realize too soon that we cannot literally mean what we say. We must regret even more that some seem never to have the spiritual insight to realize it at all. But we must not refuse to grow up, to manage, to create ourselves. The second truth for the future is this: we must not allow the fear of possible idolatry to keep us from becoming strong and free and independent. We must be men, not children.

3. The two truths contradict each other. 3 cannot be helped. They will be harmonized only as we affirm them both—and go beyond them. We cannot choose between them. Neither the idolatry of self-sufficiency nor a regression to childish dependency can make us Sons of God. We must stand on both to find a higher ground.

I cannot tell what that will be. "Brethren, I have not yet attained . . ." And yet, have we not all had glimpses? And greater saints have given sketch maps of that high place.

What we learn then is that our ultimate dependence is deeper than dependence on the gifts of God. Our self-sufficiency will not be measured by our mastery over things. Then we will know that the realms of childish trust and prideful acts are part illusions, the dreams and nightmares meant to lead us toward the truth.

There our nakedness will be revealed. In the poverty of soul we then discover will come a reaching out toward rediscovered brothers. There we will receive our selves again. Together we will celebrate and worship, not His gifts alone, but the God who is Himself the ground of our own being.

There we will find a deeper trust and know that higher action which the saints call prayer. (That word too, like "Jesus up there," is a metaphor. It is something quite beyond the thing I do before I go to sleep.) And we will then discover that Sabbath rest of which our Sunday is a feeble image.

Emptiness and blessing, crucifixion and resurrection. Our Lord has

taught us that they go together in the realm of Spirit as surely as they do in the spheres of daily life. It is no wonder that the gate is strait and the way is narrow.

*When he saw the crowds he went up the hill. There he took his seat, and when his disciples had gathered round him, he began to address them. And this is the teaching he gave:
"How blest are those who know their need of God;
The Kingdom of Heaven is theirs."*
