

The domestic captivity of the church

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Why do churches easily distance themselves from issues of work, politics and ideas?

Why do churches focus on 'family values'?

Why are churches better at evangelizing families and friends than evangelizing the wider society and nation?

Why do churches flourish in the suburbs, and find ministry and witness in the city or the work-place more difficult?

Why do people find that they are living in two different worlds, and find it hard to make links between the two?

Why is child-care an increasingly difficult issue for our society?

The answer is the massive effects of the Industrial Revolution, which began in the 1750s. Here was the birth of centralized, mechanized and specialized work-places for the production of goods. Before that Revolution you had individual potters working from their homes: now you had mechanized potteries. Before you had a miller grinding flour at a local flour-mill: now you had a big mill, serving a larger area. Before you had a baker for a village, who would bake at home: now you had a big bakery, with up-to-date machines.

Furthermore this centralizing also increased the need for transport. People now needed to leave their homes and travel to factories and then home again; the raw materials had to be transported to the factories; and the finished products transported from the factories.

For before the Industrial Revolution, people worked where they lived, and lived where they worked. 'Home' and 'work' was the same place. And 'work' was often a family business, in which members of the family all took part in that business. And sometimes servants or apprentices were received into the family to help with the business.

After the Revolution, 'home' and 'work' were separated. While initially women and children went off to work at factories as well as men, eventually it was mainly men who left home each day to go to work. So for the first time there was a general and significant separation between 'home' and 'work'. And this separation was made more complete when there was an increasing separation between suburbs for homes, and industrial suburbs and city centres for work. People lived in the suburbs, and men went to work elsewhere.

This had widespread dramatic effects on our society:

1. Men went off to work, to a different world, with different issues and pressures. So they became absent husbands and fathers ['just wait till your father gets home'], and were valued for the money they brought home as the result of their work.
2. Women stayed at home, became domestic, and became the effective parent. They did not earn money, but became responsible for running the household. They were concerned with family and domestic matters, not issues of the work-place.
3. Children were raised mostly by mothers [with the help of aunts, and grand-mothers]. Child-rearing became women's business, and children suffered from the absence of fathers.

4. Churches flourished in domestic suburbs, because that was where people were on Sundays. So they focused on family issues, on domestic matters, and on issues of sexuality because of its power to break up families. So women felt increasingly at home in churches, and men felt an increasing gap between work issues and their local church, and so less at home in church.
5. Churches, because of their domestic focus, became increasingly distant from work-place issues and from non-home and family issues in general. They thought of evangelism in terms of suburban locations, and neglected wider society and its issues..
6. This post-Industrial Revolution picture of the roles of husbands and wives came to be regarded as the Christian norm, despite the wonderful picture of the wealth-making woman of Proverbs 31! And Titus 2:5, wives are to be 'busy at home' was read as reinforcing this view, even though originally to be 'busy at home' would have included working at the family business.
7. Conservative Christians became socially conservative, but only as far back as the post-Industrial Revolution age!
8. People who work, men and women, sometimes felt when they came to church, that they were in weekend, non-work mode, and that the last things they wanted to do was to have to think about work issues, about how Christianity impacts the work-place and the society. They may have been influenced by the home-work separation that is inherent in their lives more deeply than they realize.

The recent significant development has been that women have gone into the work-place. However this change has not changed the basic structure of the post-Industrial Revolution age. For there is still a massive separation between home and work, and that gap is not easier to cross for women than it is for men. And now the problem is not just absent fathers, but also absent mothers. Who is left to look after children? The effect on churches has been that most of their major work-force, women, have disappeared. And increasing work-hours has exacerbated the problem. Churches still tend to focus on domestic issues, and to forget issues of work-place and society evangelism.

What should we do?

It is not likely that we will be able to diminish the home-work dichotomy in the way we live, even if some people are able to work from home, and some live in cities. We need to find ways to minimize the harm.

- We need a vision of the Christian life that embraces home and work, the church and the society, the neighbourhood and the world.
- We need churches to address issues of work, society, and the world as well as issues of home and church.
- We need churches to escape their suburban captivity, and tackle work-place issues and work-place evangelism, and to value the daily work that people do.
- We need specialist ministries to focus on ministry in the work-place, witness in society, and witness in the world.
- We need patterns of work that do not consume people.
- We need a solution to the daily care of children, when parents are working.

- We need husbands to take increased responsibility for their marriages, and fathers to take increased responsibility for raising their children and for administration of the family and home.

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