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### **When the Positive Result Becomes the Ultimate Good**

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**Your Life Your Health**

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Every Labor Day, and particularly this Labor Day, we are reminded of those who quietly went about their duties building this great nation and providing sustenance and support for their family. Almost all of us remember our fathers and some of us our mothers diligently and without complaint going to work each day, plying a trade for decades, never asking for anything but an opportunity to keep working.

We say particularly this Labor Day, as the value of labor and work is not consistently affirmed today. Self-reliance, on the part of able-bodied men and women, is not the absolute good and standard of conduct expected of everyone any longer. There was another time when labor and work were not honored. In the Middle Ages and before, the necessity of labor was often seen as a judgment upon one's life, such that if you had to work to live you were not honored in society.

#### **Origins of the concept of the nobility of labor**

It may surprise some that the western ideal of the value and nobility of labor came through the Christian faith. Martin Luther rejected the medieval idea that any form of work was superior to another. He rejected the idea that the monastic and the contemplative life were superior to commerce and artisanship. He actually argued that withdrawing from the world into a monastery was an egotistic exercise. Luther was the first to argue that a person's vocation was his calling, and that all callings were of equal spiritual dignity. Luther also affirmed the dignity and nobility of manual labor.

In his work early in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, sociologist Max Weber argued that it was John Calvin who introduced the theological doctrines which combined with those of Martin Luther to form a significant new attitude toward work. Calvin taught that the only outward evidence of being one of "the elect" was a person's daily life and deeds, and that success in one's worldly endeavors was a sign of possible inclusion as one of the elect. For those who study the history of ideas, this is the root of the modern distortion of orthodoxy which is called Prosperity Theology. It is the ultimate exaltation of wealth accumulation as the absolute good.

Calvin taught that all men must work, even the rich, because to work was the will of God. It was the duty of men to serve as God's instruments here on earth, to reshape the world and to become a part of the continuing process of creation. Calvin argued that men were not to lust after wealth, possessions, or easy living, but were to reinvest the profits of their labor into financing further ventures.

The norms regarding work which developed out of the Protestant Reformation, based on the combined theological teachings of Luther and Calvin, encouraged work in a chosen occupation with an attitude of service to God, viewed work as a calling and avoided placing greater spiritual dignity on one job than another, approved of working diligently to achieve maximum profits, required reinvestment of profits back into one's business, allowed a person to change from the craft or profession of his father, and associated success in one's work with the likelihood of being one of God's Elect.

The foundation of capitalism was in the doctrines formulated during the Protestant Reformation and Weber and others called this "The Protestant work ethic." It emphasized hard work, frugality and diligence as demonstrations of a person's religious beliefs. Weber coined this phrase in his 1904 book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Of course, commerce and capitalism have long lost or forgotten their roots, but they are nonetheless deeply rooted in the Reformation.

## **Movements and their origins**

As we observe and experience social movements in our modern communities, we often forget that these ebbs and flows of human interactions have existed since the beginning of time. It is easier to examine these events over a long period of time and at some distance than it is to understand them as they are occurring. Few if any of these movements are isolated in their occurrence but most are a reaction to a prior and primary movement, i.e., the labor movement was a response to the excess of the industrial revolution, which was the result of the rise of capitalism, which was the result of the "protestant ethic," which was the result of Lutheranism and Calvinism's effects upon northern Europe.

The Labor movement was a response to the excesses of the industrial and commercial revolutions. Those excesses arose when each revolution's positive results became the ultimate good in human endeavor, i.e., rather than innovation and creativity being the good and the results being profit, profit and wealth became the ultimate good and all other concerns were subordinated to the pursuit of the new good, i.e., profit and wealth. All other interests were made subservient to this new "good," without regard to principle or values.

When a generation arose which had no knowledge of, nor experience with, the beliefs and events from which the Protestant Ethic arose, the **absolute good** of the ethic – diligence, industry, hard work – was replaced with **the results** of the ethic: profit and wealth, as the good. Previously, profit and wealth had only been the result of the pursuit of the good. Often when the incidental result of a prior movement becomes the absolute good of the subsequent movement, the excesses of the new movement are simply an exaggeration of the results and effects of the prior movement without that movement's principles and values.

## **The Labor Movement**

Remember, Winston Churchill's famous saying: "You make a living by what you get; you make a life by what you give." As we celebrate the Labor Movement today and as we recognize the results of those who exercised the good of diligence, industry and hard work, let us all be cautious about making the result of that movement – profit and wealth – the good. Let us honor work and labor. Let us thank those who labor and work. Let us honor all labor and work, regardless of its nature, for it is those who exercise diligence, industry, and hard work, who contribute to the wellbeing of us all. And let us be cautious lest, as we appropriately pursue a **living**, that we not substitute the **result** of profit for the **good** of service, of work, of labor and in so doing, we diminish our **life**.