

Renewing Our World

Why Is Our Work a High Calling?

By Howard E. Butt, Jr.

We all have difficulty imagining a world different from our own. We have difficulty imagining how different things would be if each Christian—each ordinary lay person—felt himself called by God to his daily work. Felt herself called to her daily work. As much called as any clergy, religious professional, or missionary. How different would the church be? How different would the world be?

That clear biblical commandment is the high calling for each of us. Yet Jesus said to his status quo opponents: “You’ve made the command of God null and void by your tradition” (Matt. 15:6). By now, the Christian church is encrusted with about 17 centuries of tradition. We lay people have abdicated our own personal sense of calling.

But all around us, something is happening. Lay people are waking up; clergy are waking up. There’s an explosion in a thousand ways of a new vision for our daily work.

Our three-line Laity Lodge Mission is:

**The renewal of society through
the renewal of the Church;
Church renewal
through renewal of the family;
Family renewal
through renewed individuals.**

Bare bones, these three lines sound complex, even audacious. But they’re not. They’re a shorthand description of the Kingdom of God—and the most logical steps toward it. Let’s amplify and explain.

I. THE RENEWAL OF SOCIETY THROUGH RENEWED INSTITUTIONS

The Bible is a book about institutions. It uses two cities, two opposing symbols, to represent all institutions: First, “Babylon”: that’s Institutional Evil. Second, “Jerusalem”: that’s Institutional Good.

You find these opposing Babylon-Jerusalem themes from Genesis to Revelation. Old Babylon, New Jerusalem—warring against each other all day every day—all mixed up within each other—and within each one of us. Babylon and Jerusalem, fighting it out in every government, every corporation, every school, every club, every home.

The Bible is the tale of these two cities. Who created the first city mentioned in the Bible? Cain, after he killed his brother, Abel (Gen. 4:16-17), to compensate for his guilt, loneliness, and isolation.

Cain felt driven to create some form of society—so he “built a city” and named the city for his son—an extension of himself.

Then Genesis 11 tells of Babel, the essence of Babylon, that great ancient city now buried beneath the sands of modern Iraq. You remember its intent: “They built a tower reaching to heaven, so they could make a name for themselves.”

The primary temptation in institutions is always idolatry. We worship our institutions—the corporation, the medical practice, the nation—we worship our institutions rather than the one true God who placed us in them. St. John’s Revelation

tells us each of these two cities’ ultimate destiny: “Babylon the Great is fallen, fallen” (Rev. 18:2) and “I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down from heaven” (Rev. 21:2).

It may take time, but Good will always whip Evil.

“Old Babylon” stands for: Miscommunication, Estrangement, Alienation, Loneliness, Rivalry, Fighting, Deceit, Betrayal, Disorder, Cynicism, and Negativity.

“New Jerusalem” stands for: Love, Joy, Peace, Gentleness, Goodness, Faith, Humility, Long-Suffering, Self-Control, Teamwork, Encouragement, Gratitude, and Trustworthiness.

Jerusalem stands for the High Calling of our Daily Work.

And it’s not just supposed to happen in some far-off future. Revelation 3:12 says that when we’re living the life of the spiritual overcomer, we’re citizens of the New Jerusalem right now. We strengthen every business, every club, every organization of which we’re a part. We bring it a heaven-sent success, power, and vitality. Whatever difficulty you may be facing right now in any part of your life, in Christ you’re an overcomer. You’re a conduit of New Jerusalem life.

II. RENEWED INSTITUTIONS THROUGH THE RENEWAL OF THE CHURCH

The word “church” is one of our most misunderstood words. It’s a word desperately needing redefinition and renewal. You ask me about my church? I’ll probably tell you about the white brick building on

the hill at Mulberry and Shook in San Antonio. That's where we meet on Sundays. But of course that's not our church. Our church is people, people who spend a minor part of their time in that high-steepled, stained-glassed building. (The early church didn't even have buildings.) Our people spend most of their time in other institutions, other buildings: homes, offices, universities, stores, banks. We desperately need a broader view of what the word "church" means—something more comprehensive, more adequately biblical. The church lives out its life in all of society's structures.

Modern life requires huge, impersonal government institutions. Over against their vast, monolithic bureaucracy stands the lone, unique, private individual. In that fearful polarization, how can a free, healthy, civil society possibly exist?

Sociologist Peter

Berger argues that our only hope for a positive civil life lies in our mediating structures: structures functioning between the government and the individual . . . structures buffering, cushioning, mediating between the all-powerful public sector and the solitary, private human citizen.

So—corporations are mediating structures. Schools are mediating structures. Hospitals are mediating structures. All free associations are mediating structures: YMCAs—Girl Scouts—Cancer Societies—Rotary Clubs—Bowling Leagues—Philanthropies are mediating structures. Only healthy mediating structures can produce a healthy society.

And the most crucial mediating structures of all are churches and families.

Scripture tells us to be good citi-

zens of the government. But in modern society, we spend most of our lives in these mediating structures . . . each of us in his or her particular mix of them. That's where we're called to be citizens of the New Jerusalem. That's where we can change the world . . . in bite-sized pieces . . . each one of us, grabbing our handful. We're called to strengthen each one of these mediating structures—to devote ourselves to their flourishing, to work for their success. And, gradually, the whole interwoven fabric of mediating and government institutional life changes. That's the vision of 1 Peter 2. That's the church changing the Roman Empire. That's our calling now . . . the New Jerusalem in action . . . the High Calling of our Daily Work.

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III. RENEWED CHURCHES THROUGH THE RENEWAL OF THE LAITY

Christ's intended church is an army of love. That army of love penetrates all the various structures of society. Jesus compared us with salt, light, and yeast—each one a permeating agent. Christ's army of institutionally penetrating love has three distinctive qualities:

1) The love is unconditional love. The Bible's Greek word for it is *agape* love. The other two Bible words for "love" are *eros* and *phileo*. *Eros* we know as "erotic, sexual" love. *Phileo* we know as "friendship, common interest" love. Both are selfish, conditional loves. Both are anxiety-producing loves. *Eros* and *phileo* both promote the fear of love withdrawn. *Agape* transcends both. It's the no-matter-what kind of love, the in-spite-of kind

of love. It's the divine kind of self-giving love—comforting, encouraging, the kind of love that builds others up.

2) Christ's army of love is not an assaulting army. It's on the offensive without being offensive.

We don't smash into people with a super-aggressive evangelism; we don't run over people and their individual, personal distinctiveness—like some sort of pious tank. That's not unconditional love. Nor do we judge and condemn people because we differ from them on moral or legal issues. Moralistic arguments kill unconditional love. Contentious legalism withers human relationships. If you need to, you state your position. But you don't do it looking for a fight. If you disagree, you agree to disagree. Unconditional love cultivates human relationships.

Think of Christ's army of love as a subversive plain-clothes army. We are subverting Babylon.

Each of us is in a particular special ops unit, going incognito behind Babylon's defenses.

The "High Calling of our Daily Work" is a guerilla army, penetrating the love-starved, dysfunctional status quo from behind its lines. We're an army of loving wisdom.

3) Christ's army of love is a Mobilized Army. In this, the church has failed across the centuries: Lay people don't realize they're in the battle at work every day. The army is not mobilized.

It's simple mathematics. Only a tiny percentage of the Church is the ordained clergy, the religious professionals. Yet Jesus said to all his disciples, "I have ordained you" (John 15:16). He ordains the good work all of us are to do every day (Eph. 2:10).

Of course we need leaders for the Institutional Church—elders, overseers, shepherds, bishops, pastors, rectors. But that doesn't mean the rest of us are not equally called. The word "clergy" comes from the Greek word *cleros*, meaning "called." The word "laity" comes from the Greek word *laos*, meaning "people"—the people of God. So the *cleros* are also *laos*, and the *laos* are also *cleros*. We're differently gifted; we're differently appointed. But we're all fully called.

IV. RENEWED LAITY THROUGH THE RENEWAL OF THE FAMILY.

Emotional intelligence is leadership's great need. But every day, we all bring our family of origin along with us to work. Strengths we learned relating to our mothers and our fathers strengthen us in our jobs. Weaknesses we learned relating to our parents—same thing. Even more complex are the conflicts we had with our parents—the rebellions, the rejections, the bitternesses. Have we gotten past them? Have forgiveness and gratitude moved us forward? If not, if we still harbor parental hang-ups, those resentful feelings will poison our working relationships. Unaware, they—and our tangled relations with our brothers and sisters—will always influence our unconscious attitudes at work.

The Bible is explosive on these issues—going far deeper than modern psychology. After Adam and Eve fell, in the Garden of Eden's primordial rebellion, they produced the first dysfunctional family. How do we know? One of their two sons killed the other. A small clue of family dysfunction. The Old Testament story re-

volves around families . . . Noah, his wife and sons, and their families . . . Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and their families . . . three of Moses' ten commandments discuss family relations . . . the Kings, their heritages, and their descendants. Why do

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you think we have all those interminable lists of begats? Why those long genealogical lists? Isn't all that trying to tell us something?

So does the way the Old Testament closes surprise you? It promises the coming of John the Baptist, an Elijah kind of figure. (Both the angel to Zechariah, John's geriatric father, and then, later, Jesus himself identified John the Baptist as Elijah.) John the Baptist is the herald, the advance-man, the forerunner of Jesus the Christ, the Son of the Eternal Father . . . a Trans-Generational God. John the Baptist therefore triggers the great revelation of God as Triune—the everlasting unity of *agape* love within the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Jesus was, is, and forever will be the Generationally Reconciling God. Listen to the very last words of the last chapter of the last book in the Old Testament, Malachi 4:5-6:

"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome Day of the Lord comes.

"And he will turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the hearts of children to their parents, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction." We see that destruction all around us. Generational healing is essential to healthy social structures—through our Daily Work.

V. RENEWED FAMILIES THROUGH RENEWAL WITHIN MARRIAGE

Emotions are infinitely contagious. Think of a husband and wife having a dinner-time disagreement.

It starts over something trivial, but rapidly escalates. Words become tense, then harsh, then extreme.

He throws verbal javelins at her; she throws verbal javelins back at him. They wind up screaming at each other.

They go to bed . . . each tossing and turning . . . replaying the fight, both reformulating what they wish they'd said. They get up. They go off to work. Of course, you know the rest of the story. May God help their coworkers that morning. The quality of our marriages colors our emotions on our jobs every day. Our marriages follow us to work.

The nicest compliment on our marriage ever paid to Barbara Dan and me came from our daughter Deborah—David Rogers' wife—when she was a teenager . . . a rebellious teenager. Some position we took had infuriated her. I still remember her standing in the door, those big, beautiful eyes flashing: she spat the words out at us through clenched teeth: "The trouble with you two is that you always stick together!"

We've stuck together for 58 years now. And the credit all goes to Christ . . . and to Barbara Dan. My wife is a wise woman, full of both common sense and spiritual wisdom. She takes the fifth chapter of Ephesians seriously—I mean, seriously, not some shallow, tight, legalistic distortion of it. We practice mutual submission. We practice mutual servant-leadership. We practice a flexible reciprocal common-sense on who leads and who follows. But we practice that within a context of my leadership.

I'm the leader because Barbara Dan has chosen to make me the leader. And, I tell you—after long experience—if she doesn't choose to make me the leader, I ain't going to be the leader!

Barbara Dan knows that marriage is a *feminine* institution. The old Mexican proverb says, "A house does not rest upon the ground, but upon a woman." Women are the great communicators. In marriage, wives socialize and civilize their husbands. In marriage, the lone buck that chases every doe wandering by gives up the chase. He ceases to prowl. He confines himself to one house and one bed. He sinks back into the ocean of femininity from which he came. In such a feminine institution, if the male is not the leader, he's not an equal. Barbara Dan knows that and has chosen to dignify me as the leader . . . even as I dignify her.

Mutual submission and servant-leadership have kept our marriage improving across 58 years.

VI. RENEWED MARRIAGES THROUGH RENEWAL BETWEEN GENERATIONS

Marriages fail today partly because of their cultural opposition. Hollywood morality attacks biblical values. Recreational sex fights loyalty to marriage vows. Extremist feminism battles marital unity. Male tyranny subverts servant-leadership.

But marriages fail even more because we do not recognize their complexity. Marriage is never between just two people. It's always between six people at least: the woman and her mother and her father—and the man, with his mother and his father. We all come to marriage toting along our families of origin, their patterns, and their dynamics. Marriage is between six people at least.

Barbara Dan's parents were Christine Hanks and Rex Gerber. Mine were Mary Holdsworth and Howard Butt. Barbara Dan and I have discussed for decades now—*ad infinitum*—how their personalities and their marriages are affecting our own—

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discussed, sometimes with grim tension and much heat between us! Forgiveness and gratitude have deeply changed our attitudes—and our understandings toward our parents. And—surprise!—in the process, our own marriage has kept improving. And—surprise again!—both of us have become more effective in our own daily work.

VII. GENERATIONAL RENEWAL THROUGH RENEWED INDIVIDUALS

The only way any of us experience New Jerusalem marriage . . . the only way we truly learn generational reconciliation . . . the only way we practice socially transforming work . . . is when we're each progressively becoming New Jerusalem people (2 Cor. 5:17).

At a critical point in my college life, this powerful hymn touched me deeply:

*When I survey the wondrous Cross,
on which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
and pour contempt on all my pride.
See, from his head, his hands, his
feet, sorrow and love flow
mingled down.*

*Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
or thorns compose so rich a crown?*

The last stanza convicts me:

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were a present far too small.
Love so amazing, so divine, demands
my soul, my life, my all.*

So now Barbara Dan and I survey that wondrous Cross each morning. We start afresh with Christ. We build on Bible study, Christian friendships, worship, and more and more prayer. We face our personal issues: Am I living a life of daily obedience? Is there an apology I need to make? A sin I need to confess? A relationship I need to repair? Some problem for Christ to overcome? Some Babylon to forsake? New Jerusalem to share? Surveying the wondrous Cross, we overcome. Now, enthusiastic and excited . . . every day we rejoice in our own work's High Calling.

Can you imagine this vision taking hold? Can you envision how different the church and the world could be—could be if each Christian—each ordinary lay person—felt called by God to whatever his task? That's the renewal of the *laos*—the people. That, my friends, is the High Calling of Our Daily Work.