

# Our Daily Work

BY HOWARD E. BUTT, JR.

**As we study for a profession, let us sing the “Doxology”!  
Let’s play the “Hallelujah Chorus” as we drive to work!  
We are builders, following Jesus the builder—building  
our capacities and building other people up, building  
relationships and organizations, a company, a service,  
a breakthrough—building our ministry in daily life.**

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**I**t’s a truism to say that we live in a time of rapid change. As I scribbled my first notes for this article, I slipped and wrote “We live in a time of rabid change.” And so we do. The changes around us not only boggle the mind, they rearrange it. One of the great mental rearrangements of our time lies in the contemporary ferment about the purposes and philosophies of our work. We drown in books and articles about organization, leadership, time-management, at-home offices, flex-time, job fulfillment, workplace satisfaction.

We can’t get away from Tennessee Ernie Ford’s coal-miners’ lament:

You load 16 tons, what do you get?  
Another day older and deeper in debt,  
St. Peter don’t you call me for I can’t go  
I owe my soul to the company store.<sup>1</sup>

In recent years of corporate collapse, we see that the problem is not just restricted to coal miners. It also applies to a lot of hurry-hurry, go-go types and CEOs: we owe our souls to a company store. And all of it says that work is either a drudgery or a deity. But either way it’s a dead-end.

Over against that dismal workplace pessimism stands the gospel. The gospel by which work becomes a sacred calling. But my question today is: Why is that glorious reality not more widely known, believed, or enjoyed?

The explanation goes back to the Greeks, to whom we owe so much, but not—repeat not—here. Plato saw humanity as existing on two planes: a higher and a lower. The higher plane is, for Plato, the realm of rational thought and philosophic ideas. The lower realm is the realm of irrational, purposeless matter, and its observation. The higher level can never truly overcome the lower level.<sup>2</sup> And here's the tragedy: Plato's lower level—the unworthy, second-rate level—is the level of our daily, practical work. It's the world of material things, the world of stuff. The stuff that we discover, and see, and study. The stuff we take, shape, beautify, buy, sell, and use.

This Platonic thinking haunts us today because our early Christian theologians bought into its error. Neo-Platonic concepts influenced Augustine, just as Plato's pupil, Aristotle, later influenced Thomas Aquinas.<sup>3</sup>

So through the centuries of Western civilization, what has happened? The contemplative life is the spiritually *superior* life; the active life is the spiritually *inferior* life. This idea hardened, institutionally in our churches, into our hellish misunderstandings of clergy roles and laity roles: the spiritually higher clergy and the spiritually lower laity. It robs us today of a sense of sacred calling in our daily work. It's a vicious heresy, diametrically opposed to our Judeo-Christian Scripture.

For contrast, look at an ignored but strategic Old Testament figure. Do you remember Bezalel? He's the fellow, following the exodus from Egypt, who built the tabernacle, the portable sanctuary symbolizing God's presence with his people. It consisted of a series of massive hanging curtains. Seven-and-a-half-foot-high curtains formed an outer courtyard surrounding the interior tent-curtains which hung fifteen feet high. This sanctuary in the middle of the courtyard symbolized the dwelling place of God.

Bezalel and his big organization of assistants made these magnificent, multicolored linen curtains, covered on the outside with the choicest of leathers. He made the exquisite furnishings of select woods, sheeted and ornamented in gold, silver, and bronze. He made the lavish vestments of the priests. It took an army of 8,500 priests and Levites to use, maintain, and transport what Bezalel had created. He was an artist, a designer, a master craftsman, and a top-notch executive.

Exodus 31 quotes God explaining the Bezalel phenomenon: "Look, I have chosen Bezalel. I have filled him with the Spirit of God, giving him great wisdom, intelligence, and skill in all kinds of crafts." That's the first time the phrase "filled with the Spirit of God" is used in Scripture. It's not used of Moses or Joshua, or of any other priestly contemporary. As a matter of fact, God doesn't speak those direct words of anyone else in the entire Old Testament. "Filled with the Spirit of God" was describing a man who worked with his hands, leading people who were skilled in working with material stuff. *Take that, Plato!*

1 and 2 Chronicles tell us that Bezalel's tabernacle prefigured King Solomon's building of his father David's dream, the first temple. John's Gos-

pel says that in Jesus the eternal Word became flesh and “tabernacled” among us, and we have seen his glory. Jesus then spoke of his body as God’s temple, and Scripture teaches that his temple is your body and mine.

The idea that daily secular work is spiritually inferior comes to its ultimate destruction in the person of Jesus of Nazareth—the carpenter. The word translated “carpenter” is also the word for builder, someone in the construction trades. The Greek word is *tehton*, from which we get our word “technology.”

Traditionally we’ve thought of Nazareth as a rural village and the carpenter’s shop as a quiet, rustic place with a limited number of employees. That may not be the real picture.

In 1931 the University of Michigan began archeological digs at the ancient city of Sepphoris, just four miles northwest of Nazareth. From that research we know today that Sepphoris was a burgeoning, upscale Greco-Roman metropolis of 30,000 or more, located on the powerful east-west trade routes.<sup>4</sup> Sepphoris was a moneyed city full of Jews, but also Greeks, Arabs, and Romans. Following an uprising around the time of Jesus’ birth, the Romans destroyed the city. Sepphoris was being rebuilt during Jesus’ lifetime—during his *building business* lifetime. Herod Antipas made Sepphoris his capital for ruling Galilee. During Jesus’ later public ministry, he avoided Sepphoris, probably because of its Herodian politics, and the fact that Herod had his friend and forerunner, John the Baptist, beheaded.<sup>5</sup> Above all, Jesus knew that his ultimate human destiny lay in Jerusalem, not in Sepphoris.

But during his years in the building business, I find it hard to believe that Jesus and his team didn’t work in Sepphoris. In construction, it was the biggest thing going in his area—not far from his home. Among the artifacts found at Sepphoris are a dozen colors of imported marble, fragments of bright frescoes, artistically molded limestone columns, and intricate mosaics. The Sepphoris digs have been continued the last twenty-plus years by the University of South Florida and now by a team of universities and schools. Archaeology has thus revealed to us what the Roman historian Josephus talked about so long ago. He called Sepphoris a jewel of a city, “the ornament of all Galilee.”<sup>6</sup> Sepphoris had a large theater carved into a hillside. Scholars differ on when it was built,<sup>7</sup> but can you envision Jesus attending that theater,

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and finding there his word, “play actor,” that he would later use to describe his enemies as *hypocrites*? Sepphoris sat high on a hill overlooking a valley. It was clearly visible from the outskirts of Nazareth. Could that be the “city set on a hill that cannot be hid?”

Whatever picture we may choose of Jesus at work, one fact is clear: the Almighty God, who created us all, became a human being and did ordinary, secular, hands-on work just like you and me. He died on the cross for our sins on Golgotha’s hill outside Jerusalem’s wall, according to the Scripture; and he rose from the dead the morning of the third day when the stone rolled back from Joseph of Arimathea’s tomb, according to the Scripture. This makes one truth eternally real for you and me. His living Spirit has been outpoured into our hearts today—a reality that makes our secular work sacred too.

So, as we study for our career or profession, let us sing the “Doxology”! Let’s play the “Hallelujah Chorus” as we drive to the office! Think of ourselves as builders—building our capacities and building other people up, building relationships and building organizations, building a company, a service, a breakthrough—building our *ministry in daily life*. In our values, honor, and integrity, in the excellence and usefulness of our work, in the quality of our dealings with people, our sensitivities to others, and the love we radiate from our life to everyone around us, we’re following Jesus the builder. And in so doing, my friends, every secular day of our lives we’re building the Kingdom of God.

#### NOTES

1 From “Sixteen Tons” written by Cliffie Stone and sung by Tennessee Ernie Ford.

2 Samuel Enoch Stumpf, *Socrates To Sartre: A History of Philosophy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 48-84.

3 Diogenes Allen, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1985), 39-59.

4 The significance of Sepphoris was called to my attention by the work of Dr. James F. Strange, the University of South Florida archeological scholar.

5 See Richard A. Batey, *Jesus & the Forgotten City: New Light on Sepphoris and the Urban World of Jesus* (Pasadena, CA: CenturyOne Media, 2000).

6 *Ibid.*, 14-15.

7 Eric M. Meyers, *The Surprises of Sepphoris*, accessed at [www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/jesus/sepphoris.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/jesus/sepphoris.html) (November 5, 2003).



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