

The Need for Social Capital

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Haggai 1-2, and Hosea 11-13

One of the challenges we face in work is the temptation to put self and family ahead of society. The prophet Haggai paints a vivid picture of this challenge. He confronts people working hard to rebuild their own homes while neglecting to put resources into the rebuilding of the temple, the centre of the Jewish society. “Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your panelled houses, while this house lies in ruins?” (Haggai 1:4). He says that this failure to invest in social capital is actually diminishing their individual productivity.

You have sown much, and harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and you that earn wages earn wages to put them into a bag with holes. (Haggai 1:6)

Investing in social capital reminds us that there is no such thing as a “self-made man.” Although individual effort may create great wealth, each of us relies on resources and social infrastructure that originate ultimately in God. “I will fill this house with splendor, says the Lord of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the Lord of hosts” (Haggai 2:7–8). Prosperity is not a matter only—or even primarily—of personal effort, but of a community grounded in God’s covenant. “In this place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of hosts.” (Haggai 2:9).

How foolish if we think we must provide for ourselves before we can afford to take time for God and the society of his people. The truth is that we cannot provide for ourselves except by the grace of God’s generosity and the mutual work of his community. This is the same concept behind the tithe. It is not a sacrifice of 10% of the harvest, but a blessing of 100% of the amazing yield of God’s creation.

In our own day, this reminds us of the importance of putting resources into the intangible aspects of life. Housing, food, automobiles, and other physical necessities are important. But God provides richly enough that we can also afford art, music, education, nature, recreation and the myriad of things that feed the soul.

This also suggests that investing in churches and church life is crucial to empowering Christians’ work. Worship itself is intricately tied to doing good work, and perhaps we should engage in worship as formation for good work, rather than merely as private devotion or leisure. The Christian community can be a powerful force for economic, civic

and social well-being if it can learn to bring the spiritual and ethical power of God's word to bear on matters of work.