



“Vocation is a summons to service—of God and neighbor. Here is the elixir to our economic woes, and the quiet strength still present in the American people.”

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THE 321

- 3 books that have influenced your life
 - *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Lesslie Newbigin
 - *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, John Stott
 - *The Mind of the Maker*, Dorothy Sayers
- 2 interests outside of your work
 - Spending time with my wife, Kelly, and my four daughters
 - Reading, writing, exercise, and piano lessons with my girls
- 1 goal you are striving for in 2017
 - Travel more with my wife!

THE QUIET UNRAVELING OF WORK IN AMERICA

Three Economic Challenges and What Christian Leaders Can Do

BY JEFF HAANEN

On August 1, 2007, the I35W bridge over the Mississippi River in Minneapolis looked like any other bridge in America. Commuters stuck in rush hour were waiting impatiently, talking on their phones, and assuming they would get safely to their destinations. Yet at 6:05 p.m., a strange noise was heard underneath the bridge. Suddenly it collapsed, sending 111 vehicles and 18 construction workers plummeting 115 feet into the river. In total, 13 people were killed and 145 injured in an unexpected tragedy.

In the same way, on the surface the American economy looks healthy. The Dow Jones is now over 20,000, unemployment rates are low, and economic growth is strong. But there are signs that the support system under the bridge of the American economy is beginning to wobble.

There are three worrisome signs that our economic support structure—the American workforce—is beginning to unravel:

- Prime age men are exiting the workforce at historically unprecedented rates.
- The “precarious” economy has made work for millions more part-time, less stable, and less connected to a coherent career-path.
- Work is now defined by a narrative of individual achievement rather than service, which puts stress on businesses, levels of public engagement, and our pension system.

This essay briefly explores each of these three challenges to work in America, in addition to what Christian leaders might do to heal these fissures in American life.

Men Without Work

There is a silent army of able-bodied men in America who have dropped out of the workforce. Nicholas Eberstadt’s new book, *Men Without Work*, shows that from 1948-2015 the percentage of prime age men in the workforce dropped from 85.8% to 68.2%, a rate lower than it was in the 1930s during the Great Depression.¹ Today there are 10 million men ages 25-54 who are either unemployed or have stopped looking for work altogether.²

Perhaps more overwhelming is the fact that these men tend to have no college degree, no wife or children, and live in economically depressed parts of the United States such as Appalachia, the Rust Belt, or the Deep South. Books like Charles Murray’s *Coming Apart: The State of White America from 1960-2010* show that the white working class is no longer the virtuous “blue collar America” of political lore. Murray notes that less than a third of children grow up in households with both biological parents, men claim disability benefits at alarming rates, and church-going rates have plummeted.³

J.D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family & Culture in Crisis* has pulled back the veil on what it’s like to live in white working class America. Raised by his Mamaw (grandmother), Vance grew up with a host of father figures, a drug addicted mother, and in a culture of hillbilly honor, often retaliating at every slight, especially toward outsiders.

Arthur Brooks, president of the American Enterprise Institute, notes that among America’s white working class—many of whom were the key swing voters for Donald Trump—suffering and resentment is rampant. Among this group, cirrhosis of the liver is up 50%, suicide has increased 78%, and drug and alcohol poisonings have skyrocketed 323% since 1999.⁴

“There is indeed a gap in this country, and it has now led to a political revolution, a significant realignment in American politics,” Brooks writes. “But the relevant gap wasn’t income.” For blue collar America that has seen manufacturing jobs go overseas and real wages decline, the relevant gap was a loss of dignity.

The Splintered Career

Another factor impacting the American economy is that the age of working for a single employer for a career is long gone.

Today, we live in the “gig” economy. In 2015, freelancers in the US labor force numbered an estimated 54 million, or as much as one third of the workforce.⁵ Researchers have dubbed this the “precarious” economy as they describe the massive shift toward temporary, part-time, or contract work. Today, the average job tenure is less than 4 years (and closer to 18 months for millennials) and a young worker can expect to have 11-12 careers over a lifetime.⁶

Both low-income and middle class workers have entered new territory. The challenge for the poor is trying to cobble together a variety of part-time jobs to support their families, most of which pay no benefits. Sociologist Allison J. Pugh found that many low-income families struggle to stay afloat financially as they try to navigate constantly changing social ties, relationships, and employers.⁷

For the middle class, the challenge is to “reinvent yourself” constantly, learning new technologies and skills throughout a lifetime. A college degree 20 years ago is no longer enough. The job you prepared for at university may no longer exist today. Technology is transforming the professions as much as it is the trades.

The challenge for both groups is to find a sense of vocational identity and social location in a community amidst constantly changing careers. “What do you do?” is now a hard question to answer at a dinner party. Even harder is trying to figure out what you might do for a paycheck tomorrow.

The “Big Me” Culture

A final worrisome sign of trouble in American workforce is that we now live in a work culture that prizes individual achievement and personal gain over sacrificial service.

“We have seen a shift,” says *The New York Times* columnist David Brooks, “from a culture of humility to what you might call the Big Me.”⁸ In his book, *The Road to Character*, Brooks explains that since WWII America has shifted from a culture that was realistic about sin and personal limitation to one of self-centeredness, personal achievement, and “belief in yourself.”

As the positive psychology movement advanced in post-war America, the doctrine of sin was replaced with a doctrine of self-esteem. Today, fueled by social media, we tend to see work as the chance to make a mega impact or to build our LinkedIn profiles. Humility has become a lost virtue.

This view of work tends to have three economic consequences.

First, sustainable businesses (and economies) are built

on trust and the ability to serve the long-term needs of their customers. Business practices fueled by short-term thinking and personal gain can damage entire economies, as we saw in the Great Recession of 2007-2008.

Second, healthy economies need a robust civil society to provide for core social needs apart from government aid. In *The Great Degeneration*, historian Niall Ferguson shows that numbers of volunteers have plummeted in the past generation, putting more pressure on governments to pay for socially beneficial programs.⁹

Third, our aging American population is fast becoming an enormous economic liability. As Baby Boomers retire yet live longer—often for 20-30 years drawing on pension benefits—the economic stress on state and federally funded pension plans is fast reaching a tipping point.¹⁰

In each of these circumstances, when work is about personal benefit rather than contribution to the community, we see increasing stress put on the wobbly beams of our economic bridge.

“Meaningful work is a gift of God and a way we express our God-given value.”

Three Tasks for Christian Leaders

Considering these three trends—men without work, the splintered career, and the culture of the Big Me—what can Christian leaders do? I believe three things will help rebuild the structures of our shaky economic bridge.

1. *Recovery of Dignity (and the Doctrine of the Image of God)* - The Bible teaches that all people are made in God's image and have inherent dignity (Gen. 1:27-28). Moreover, meaningful work is a gift of God and a way we express our God-given value (Gen. 2:15; 1Pet. 2:10). In a culture of "men without work," we must not only praise the work of men but also work to provide quality jobs that allow them to provide for their communities. This needs to be the basis for new educational and workforce development programs across the US.
2. *Recovery of Mutual Responsibility (and the Doctrine of the Church)* - We need each other. Management and employees, customers and suppliers, products and producers: we depend on one another for our housing, our food, our laws, and our well-being. Calvinist

reformers saw social organization in terms of the Body of Christ, where members depended on one another. Christian leaders must resist seeing employees as mere "human resources," but seek ways to provide *good jobs* with meaningful work to men and women across industries. Projects like Zeynep Ton's *The Good Jobs Strategy* show that profit and compassion (business success and investing in employees) are not contradictory but can be complementary.¹¹

3. *Recovery of the Doctrine of Vocation* - "The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give himself as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Work is about service, not our own career success or quarterly shareholder reports. Just after WWII, theologian Elton Trueblood said, "A Church which seeks to lift our sagging civilization will preach *the principle of vocation* in season and out of season. The message is that the world is one, secular and sacred, and that the chief way to serve the Lord is in our daily work."¹² Vocation is a summons to service--of God and neighbor. Here is the elixir to our economic woes, and the quiet strength still present in the American people.

¹ Nicholas Eberstadt, *Men Without Work: America's Invisible Crisis* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2016).

² Derek Thompson, "The Missing Men," *The Atlantic*, June 27, 2016, accessed at: <http://theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/06/the-missing-men/488858/>

³ Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America from 1960-2010* (New York: Crown, 2012).

⁴ Arthur Brooks, "How Donald Trump Filled the Dignity Deficit," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 9, 2016, accessed at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-donald-trump-filled-the-dignity-deficit-1478734436>

⁵ Louis Hyman, "The Rise of the Precarious Economy," *The Hedgehog Review*, 18, no. 1, (Spring 2016):18-32.

⁶ Josh Bersin, "The Future of Work: It's Already Here – and Not As Scary As You Think," *Forbes*, September 21, 2016, accessed at: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/joshbersin/2016/09/21/the-future-of-work-its-already-here-and-not-as-scary-as-you-think/print>

⁷ Allison J. Pugh, *The Tumbleweed Society: Working and Caring in an Age of Insecurity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁸ David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (New York: Random House, 2015).

⁹ Niall Ferguson, *The Great Degeneration: How Institutions Decay and Economies Die* (New York: Penguin, 2013).

¹⁰ Tyler Durden, "'This is Going To Be A National Crisis,' - One of the Largest US Pension Funds Set to Cut Retiree Benefits," April 20, 2016, accessed at: <http://www.zerohedge.com/news/2016-04-20/going-be-national-crisis-one-largest-us-pension-funds-set-cut-retiree-benefits>

¹¹ Zeynep Ton, *The Good Jobs Strategy: How the Smartest Companies Invest in Employees to Lower Costs and Boost Profits*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2014).

¹² Elton Trueblood, *The Common Ventures of Life: Marriage, Birth, Work, Death* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949).