



CAN LABOR  
CATCH UP?

PRESENTED

by

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on

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## CAN LABOR CATCHUP?

[Work] heartily, as serving the Lord . . .  
Colossians 3:23

The lid is off, the prices are rising, and labor is trying its level best to catch up.

In the United States, labor felt hamstrung during the period of artificial price controls and wage guidelines that cut into the real purchasing power of laboring people. The controls are gone now. So are the guidelines. And as they are being abandoned, double digit inflation is scaring us half to death. No wonder labor is on the move. It has been bit by the catch-up bug, and it has a bad case of catch-up fever.

Already the results are being felt. In Chicago, Illinois, cement truck drivers sat on their hands, champing at the bit for nine weeks, a strike for higher wages, while the best part of the year for building slipped away. In the United States, the man days lost by strikes has jumped dramatically. In January, there were 1.9 million days lost, in May, the figure was 6.2 million. There were more strikes in July than at any time since World War II. And what the last quarter will bring is anybody's guess. The coal miners' contracts run out in November, and with coal looking more attractive than ever, the men who go down into the mines and work the tipplers have never been in a better position to get a piece of the action.

The catch-up fever that now moves labor to seek higher wages in North America reflects similar events in other parts of the world. Great Britain has not yet recovered from the devastating strike in the coal industry that put its factories on reduced schedules. In Australia, the *Bulletin* carries articles that call 1974 "A black year for strikes." Down under the labor scene is very bleak.

I certainly am not in a position to comment on these matters specifically, for competence does not extend to making judgments about the precise details that have caused the present state of affairs. When it comes to labor and labor relations, I am a layman, as are most of us, in fact. Even laboring men are. Those who man the machines and who drive the big steel rigs are more often than not as confused as anyone by what's happening. The decisions regarding wage and fringe benefit packages are not made in the cabs of tractors and within the eerie, strange light of an underground mine. They are made by the labor leaders, and there is a great deal that goes into determining these packages. But I think all of us cannot help but feel that a few questions are in order.

What about the man who endures week after week of bitter strike to gain benefits that will pay him back for his trouble only after many years? What about him? What about the man who rides with fear when he takes his truck out on the Interstate, afraid he might get shot for doing his job? What about the rank and file people who would like to settle and get back to work, but who are threatened with violence if they do?

But an even more basic question is just this: where is all this going to lead us? It was very disturbing to notice that during the very same period the demands of labor were gathering momentum, productivity actually declined. There seems to be something extremely self-defeating about the pell mell rush to greater wages and greater fringe benefits, for as soon as higher wages are achieved, they are wiped out by the inflation the wages themselves have generated. Don't get me wrong. I don't want to blame inflation only upon the cost of labor. Not at all. But it is a major contributor to inflation which must not be overlooked. One economist, Alan Greenspan, pointed out that in 500

of the 600 strikes in which the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service is currently involved, cost-of-living clauses are being built into contracts. This builds inflation into the economy. Greenspan says, "We're getting this inflation so deeply entrenched."

In this situation can labor ever expect to catch up? I think we have to answer that question with a very frank and realistic negative. It will never catch up. Labor at the present moment finds itself in the position expressed in the curious but true aphorism, "The faster I go, the behinder I get." Catch-up fever is a very distressing disease. There is no cure for it, because that which labor wants so badly to catch is getting further and further away, the harder labor tries to catch it.

Before going further, however, we should notice that catch-up fever is very contagious, and there is no reason to think that it is found within labor only, nor that it will be contained within that sector of our society. As a matter of fact, labor itself very likely caught this disease from others. Catch-up fever is an expression of a very common malady called greed. And one can hardly blame labor for trying to achieve some of the advances which other elements in society have already achieved. Politicians seem capable of reaping great personal benefit and reward. And big business generates huge profits which seem out of line to many observers.

There can be no question that every area of our economic life is suffering from simple greed, and we must expect that from time to time this disease will break out in furious bouts of catch-up fever. This is an exceedingly vicious matter, actually, and it may not be very long before communities that have enjoyed relative tranquility may have the unwelcome opportunity of viewing the horrible civil chaos that results when economic events get out of

hand. If we are just going to go round and round, with each sector of society going after more and more, there is going to come a time when the pressures will become intolerable and something will have to give. When that happens, get out of the way.

So far as the game of catch-up is concerned, ultimately everybody is going to lose unless something entirely different enters the picture and there is a basic change in our attitudes and points of view. And, if I may say so, this is not going to happen unless more of us start taking Jesus Christ seriously and start finding out what the implications of Christianity are for earning a living.

Don't laugh. If it seems funny to you that I introduce the Bible and the religion of Jesus Christ into our rough and tumble world, you may be sure that the degree to which it seems funny is the measure of the depth of our trouble. The religion of the Lord Jesus Christ presented to us in the Bible is the religion of marvelous sanity and sense, and if we laugh at it or feel that it is not practical to talk about it, we reveal our own deviation from sanity. The dog-eat-dog mentality that we have come to accept as normal in our economic life is a perversion of what human life should be.

Those who feel that the religion of Jesus is fine for religious fanatics and those who make their living marrying and burying people, but it has nothing to say about terrifying economic events, have been dreadfully misinformed about the nature of Christianity. The religion that appears within the Bible is nothing if it is not practical—and I mean practical in the deepest, most significant sense. Let's take a look at the Bible, at Jesus, and at the powerful impact the Christian faith must have upon real life.

The God revealed in the Bible is concerned fully about the kind of justice we want to see in our

economic life. The first chapter of the Old Testament book of Isaiah records God's thundering address to a people who were very accustomed to holding solemn assemblies and conducting impressive liturgies, but who were blind as bats when it came to social inequities that were right before their eyes. We read, "I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your ... appointed feasts my soul hates. . . . When you spread forth your hands I will hide my face from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow" (vv. 13-17).

Immediately after this pulverizing rejection of religious formalities and this unmistakable call to social righteousness, there is the well-known gospel announcement of a salvation that God can bring to people who are encumbered with ugly sins: "Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord, though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become as wool" (v. 18). Those who properly apply these words to their own lives and use them to express their own hope for renewal and cleansing should understand that God's promise of cleansing was expressed initially in a context in which an entire nation was called to righteousness. There can be no question that the God revealed in the Bible is grieved by the selfishness, greed, injustice, exploitation, and economic chaos that now marks our day-by-day life. He calls us to change, and He provides the resources so that change can begin to occur.

If we meet a God of justice in the Old Testament, we meet the same God with a fullness in the New Testament that helps us even further as we

try to determine how we should approach our great economic problems. With the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, who lived, died, and rose again to establish a new creation, we see that it is possible for our day-by-day life to be transformed. Jesus established a religion that viewed all of life as a unity, a religion in which a person who believed in the Lord and who was filled with His Spirit was able to live His total life in the service of this Lord. Through Jesus, new motivations were introduced and new possibilities for full service to Christ all the time become a reality.

Jesus is the great King of creation, the person through whom all things were made and the person in whom all things hold together. Thus, He brought to the world a vision of a salvation that showed people how to do their daily work in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

An example of what Christianity and conversion can do for a person is given in the fascinating little book in the New Testament called *Philemon*. Let me tell you about it very briefly. Remember, that was a different world back then. There were slaves then. We are against slavery now, but that doesn't mean we don't have it. A person who has sold his life to a company and mortgaged himself to the hilt comes pretty close to what a slave was in the days when the Bible was written.

Philemon was a businessman in Colossae. He had a man who worked for him called Onesimus. Onesimus got fed up with working for Philemon and left. He stole from Philemon as well. In Rome, Onesimus came in contact with the apostle Paul in prison. There Onesimus was converted and became a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. He repented of his sinful ways and became a new man in Christ. When that happened, the apostle Paul sent him back to Philemon. This is what Paul wrote



when he sent Onesimus back: "[Philemon] am sending [Onesimus] back to you. . . . I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf ... but preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own free will. Perhaps this is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord" (12-16).

What all this means is that the apostle Paul viewed the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and the salvation which Onesimus had received as a power that was able to bring renewal between Onesimus and Philemon. Before Onesimus' conversion there had been conflict, opposition, and even dishonesty. Both Onesimus and Philemon were probably at fault. But when Onesimus came back, he came with a letter which showed how things would be different now that he had been converted. Now Onesimus and Philemon were brothers in the Lord Jesus Christ, and that made all the difference. The conflict, the opposition, the jealousy, the lack of consideration, the competition, the grudging servitude—all this was to drop away because both Onesimus and the man he worked for served Jesus Christ.

Christianity is able to bring something into the world of work and labor that can be brought in no other way. What can it bring? The book of Colossians in the New Testament answers this question when it shows us the attitude that can mark working men who know Jesus. This attitude is described this way: "Whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you are serving the Lord Christ" (3:23, 24).

This is addressed to working people; those who are charged with the often menial, arduous work that must be done in our society. Those who know the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord have the opportunity to view the very work of their hands as a service which they offer to the Lord. Christianity gives ordinary people the vision that enables them to see beyond their sales manager, their foreman or their boss, beyond their paycheck and their pension to the Lord Jesus Christ. They know that in some mysterious way, their daily performance passes continuously beneath His scrutiny, too, and they know that they are serving Jesus.

Now, then, let me ask you this: will labor catch up, as it is trying so desperately to do right now? Will anybody ever catch up with anybody else, if all they are motivated by is fear and selfishness and greed? Absolutely not. So long as we all keep trying to catch up with one another in terms of money and benefits alone, we will destroy ourselves.

What labor needs, and what every sector of our society needs is not to catch up, but to catch on to understand that unless we find something beyond material things, our society will self-destruct. It is as simple as that. And that is why we had better start making way for the gospel. Oh, the gospel of Jesus must be preached today more than ever before! It must be heralded from the housetops in all its fulness. We don't need more of a simplistic gospel, that reduces the Christian issue to a matter of personal salvation alone, but we need the total gospel which embraces man's total life and which lays its renewing touch on all society as men come back to God. We need a muscular, robust, relevant, and meaningful gospel, proclaimed as that which provides all of our lives with perspectives that can change men in their depths and

restore right action among us. We need the Biblical gospel. We need to apply this gospel fearlessly, even at the risk of being obnoxious and misunderstood to the pressing issues of this age, also to the massive issues that confront labor and management.

Do I hear you say, "It can never happen. Christianity is Hri for the sanctuary, but you can never take it into the pressroom or the foundry or to the bargaining table." Don't say, "It can never happen." It is happening.

Do you know that there are Christian labor unions that are operating right now? The Christian Labor Association, with headquarters in Grand Rapids, Michigan, is one of them. The Christian Labour Association of Canada is another. I don't want to suggest to you that these unions have got everything straight and ironed out. They don't have. Labor problems are exceedingly complex. But these organizations are trying to bring perspective of the Word of God to bear upon the problems that face us.

In the magazine called *Inside*, an article about the Christian Labour Association of Canada introduces a much needed viewpoint regarding the problem of the relationship of labor and management. It says: "The notion that labor-management relations are essentially a power struggle is contrary to the Scriptural norms for justice and human responsibility, and has created all kinds of problems. On the one hand, unions have traditionally used compulsion to bring all workers into line and to apply the cold rule that if you do not belong to the union you cannot work. On the other hand, companies have insisted that the over-riding purpose of the business enterprise is to make as large a profit as possible. As a result, work has been reduced to an economic commodity and a factor of production. Much work has been so organized

and fragmented that it cannot be experienced as a meaningful and rewarding task by any stretch of the imagination. The underlying issue of labor relations today is *work* itself."

Now that is a remarkable statement coming from a labor union, isn't it? But that is the kind of insight that is generated when labor leaders think under the control of Jesus and His Word. A shift in motivation occurs. The struggle and the class warfare that have frequently dominated labor relations begin to drop away and the fundamental issue becomes clear. Work itself becomes the issue - how to make it meaningful and important - how to bestow dignity upon those who work each day.

With this we begin to see that trying to catch up is demeaning and futile. The issue for labor is deeper.

During 1974, a monumental book about work appeared. Studs Terkel wrote it. I called *Working*. It consists of the transcripts of interviews with 133 workers. And one of them, Nora Watson, put the issue about as well as any of us could. She said, "I think most of us are looking for a calling, not a job. Most of us, like the assembly line worker, have jobs that are too small for our spirit. Jobs are not big enough for people."

Nora Watson is right. And the Bible too. We need Jesus in our world. We need His salvation. His vision. You need Him. You need Him as your Savior. You must confess your sins and repent and believe that He died for you at Calvary. And then you can begin to live differently. You can begin to work for Jesus and think in Jesus' name.

On the long run, it's not going to make any difference whether any of us ever catches up with whomever we are chasing. The issue is work itself. Too many people are longing for quittin' time. The monotony has become too depressing. The ashes of stifling materialism are drifting down, choking

us and accumulating around our ankles, holding us fast.

What we need now are men and women who work with all their heart and who work for Jesus. We must bring the insights of the Word of God into our workaday world. If too many of us think that what we've just heard is impractical, we will find that it won't be long and chaos and destruction will catch up with us.

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