



## **PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE: OBAMA, ROMNEY JOB RHETORIC MISSES TRUE VALUE OF WORK**

**HUGH WHELCHER**

In the debate Tuesday night, both President Obama and Governor Romney said they wanted to create jobs – *good jobs*. But what does that really mean?

If you listen to the rhetoric of both candidates, you will hear about jobs that pay the bills and let us do what we want to do, but not much more. It's a self-centered view of work which has been so prominent in the last 40 years. It has brought us big government, crony capitalism, and greedy Wall Street bankers, all of whom are just looking after their own interests. It is this "it's all about me" perspective that has our nation heading in the wrong direction. It is found in the board rooms of corporations and in the halls of the local labor unions.

In my Christian tradition, the Bible tells us that work should do more than just pay the bills. Theologian John Stott defined work as "the expenditure of energy (manual or mental or both) in the service of others, which brings fulfillment to the worker, benefit to the community and glory to God." We should not just work to live, but live to work, seeking not only to improve our own circumstances but also those around us as well.

This is the message the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah told God's people who were taken into captivity by the Babylonians. He challenged them to work for the peace and prosperity of the city, for if it prospered, they too would prosper (Jeremiah 29:7). If they worked hard at their jobs with the mindset that their work would benefit their community, they would also benefit from their work.

Unfortunately, instead of "seeking the peace and prosperity of the city," we're seeking our own comfort with no real concern for our communities.

This outdated Christian understanding of work has fallen on hard times in our modern contemporary culture, but it was not always so.

Many Americans, from the “Founding Fathers” to the “Greatest Generation,” embraced this view of work, often called the Protestant work ethic. Harvard historian Niall Ferguson suggests in his recent book, *Civilization: The West and the Rest*, that the rise of Western dominance over the past five centuries is a product of six “killer applications,” one of them being the Protestant work ethic. Ferguson writes, “Through a mixture of hard work and thrift the societies of the North and West Atlantic achieved the most rapid economic growth in history.” This positive view of work, which promoted both the individual and the community, was embraced by more than just Protestants and made our country one of the greatest nations in the world.

If we want to restore the American economy, we obviously do need more jobs. But more importantly, we need to restore a vision of work that has been lost in this country – a vision of work that can make a positive, sustainable difference in our nation for the flourishing of all mankind as well as for the individual doing the work.

Jesus commanded us to love our neighbor. With that in mind, the 16<sup>th</sup> century reformer Martin Luther taught that the number one way we love our neighbor is by doing our jobs well. Today’s politicians and workers would do well to follow this counsel.

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