

Feminism and Fulfillment

by Susan Foh

The secular feminist movement has raised women's consciousness to ask the question, "Am I fulfilled?" Feminism has defined the meaning of existence as fulfillment; that is the goal. Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* defined the problem: modern women have a hunger that food cannot fill, a feeling that they are incomplete, left out, not alive. The woman has been told that her career, her reason for living, is marriage, family, and homemaking; but that is not enough.

But by choosing femininity over the painful growth to full identity, by never achieving the hard core of self that comes not from fantasy but from mastering reality, these girls are doomed to suffer ultimately that bored, diffuse feeling of purposelessness, non-existence, non-involvement with the world that can be called *anomie*, or lack of identity, or merely felt as the problem that has no name (Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963), p. 172).

What is the answer? Friedan responds that women need a sense of identity and commitment to a larger purpose. How do women get these?

The key to the trap is, of course, education... But I think that education, and only education, has saved, and can continue to save, American women from the greater dangers of the feminine mystique (Ibid., p. 344).

Friedan sees full-time homemaking as a trap, a limit to personal growth, a waste of talents' the intelligent and able woman confined to the home will shrivel up and die. She considers homilies on the potential creativity in homemaking or on the importance of motherhood part of the deception intended to keep women in their place. Nevertheless, the facts she uncovered did not completely support her view of homemaking. After interviewing her college classmates from Smith (class of '42), Friedan discovered "And yet most of these women continued to grow within the framework of suburban housewifery – perhaps because of the autonomy, the sense of purpose, the commitment to larger values which their education has given them" (Ibid., p. 346). Earlier, Friedan stated that education has kept women from adjusting to their role as housewife (Ibid., p. 296); and still, because of her experience with her college classmates, she suggests education as the key to successful (fulfilling) homemaking. But for Friedan, the real answer for women's *anomie* is participation in a career outside of the home. Women do not need busy work outside the home, such as addressing envelopes, charity bazaars, etc.; women need something to commit themselves to, something that society recognizes as beneficial (Ibid., pp. 335-337). The real answer is meaningful work, and ideally for Friedan, this work in most, if not all, cases would be outside the home.

There are several problems with Friedan's (and the secular feminists') solution to the woman's dilemma.

Friedan defines a person's identity in terms of his work, as does our society. "In our masculine-oriented culture a person is worth the market value of his skills and personality. One's

esteem depends not on the human qualities one possesses but on success in the competitive marketplace” (Judith M. Bardwick, *Psychology of Women* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 166, quoted by Scanzoni and Hardesty, p. 187.). One derives one’s sense of worth and purpose from one’s job. Therefore, if one’s job is unimportant or if one has no job, one feels unimportant, worthless, without purpose. One’s work need be worthy of total commitment and valued by society, if one is to feel worthwhile. Housework does not meet this standard; it cannot give one identity.

As Christian women, should we accept the world’s system of evaluation? No, a person should not be defined in terms of an occupation. Such an evaluation springs from a pragmatic or utilitarian philosophy, which does not account for a person’s character, his relationships with others, or less commercial abilities, such as the ability to listen to another’s problems. One lawyer may be satisfied to be known primarily as a lawyer, but another lawyer may find more satisfaction in being known as the little league baseball coach.

Friedan seems to assume that work outside the home is fulfilling, worthwhile. She condemns housework because it is repetitious (how many dishes do you wash?) and boring; such a dull routine stifles a person’s growth. She seems unaware that almost all jobs have boring, repetitious aspects and that many jobs are boring and repetitious in essence – more than are exciting and fulfilling. Consider how many people work in assembly lines or as typists. Somebody has to do these things (and somebody has to do housework). Few jobs give one the opportunity to increase one’s knowledge, pursue one’s interests or implement one’s ideas. Consider how many college graduates “use” their majors. The ex-housewife seeing a meaningful job may end up behind a typewriter typing meaningless (to her) combinations of numbers and letters. She may end up caring for and teaching another’s children instead of her own, wiping another’s tables, washing another’s dishes, etc. The only difference is that she is paid. Even if she finds a “good” job, she may find that after a year or so, the excitement wears off; as she catches on to the routine, the sense of purpose is lost in continuous and tedious red tape, the joy fades as a fear of failure or replacement creeps in, and she feels no more fulfilled than she did before she started. The person who expects automatic and lasting fulfillment from a job will be disappointed.

However, any work, including housework, can be enjoyed. The key is attitude - how you do it. In an article about Dorothy Sayers, Cheryl Forbes says:

“Whether it is possible for a machine-worker to feel creatively about his routine job,” she [Dorothy L. Sayers] says, “I do not know; but I suspect that it is, provided and so long as the worker eagerly desires that before all things else the work shall be done.” Or, as the author of Ecclesiasticus says, the craftsman “watches to finish the work.” Each of us can have that attitude. The typist looking (almost lovingly) on clean, error-free letters, reports, or manuscripts, neatly stacked and assembled. A secretary who efficiently schedules and guides her supervisor’s day for the greatest productivity. The grocery clerk who rapidly and accurately checks out foodstuffs. Or the waiter who enhances the pleasure of a well-prepared meal by cheerful, courteous service. A housewife who knows that cleaning is a never-ending job and proudly views shining floors and polished tables. All these are jobs considered by our society as menial, yet they can be done creatively and can produce satisfaction (Cheryl Forbes, “Dorothy L. Sayers

– For Good Work, for God’s Work,” *Christianity Today*. 21:11 (March 4, 1977), 18.).

To the Christian, each task is important and purposeful. Why? Every job that brings order out of chaos reflects God’s image in humanity. Every task is to be done for God’s glory and in his presence. Paul’s explanation of how the body of Christ functions (I Cor. 12) is relevant here. God has given each member of Christ’s body various gifts to perform various jobs, some of which seem less “honorable” (cf. I Cor. 12:22-26) than others. Nonetheless, every job must be done if the body is to function properly, and so each member and each member’s task are important. In addition, knowing that one is doing what God has appointed to him to do is a source of fulfillment; there is no larger purpose in life.

Friedan also refers to larger values, but she is not clear as to what they are. Perhaps what she has in mind is that a hospital’s cleaning crew should remember that they are contributing to the health of patients, that one should consider and remember how his or her job contributes to the good of society. The good of society is a worthy aim, perhaps the worthiest, according to the secularist. Such a goal raises a question the secularist cannot satisfactorily answer, “Why should I help others?” Perhaps because this question is not often asked, “for the good of society” is not the motivating force for most workers. For most, questions of high ideals, lofty purposes or even self-fulfillment do not come up, because most people work because they have to – to feed themselves and their families, etc. With such pragmatic motivations, finding a job, any job, is often the important thing, not the job’s fulfillment potential or its contribution to a higher purpose.

At this point, it becomes obvious that Friedan is addressing an elite, an elite in terms of finances, education and talents or intellect. Only such an elite would be qualified for “meaningful” careers; only an elite would be inclined toward or able to afford further education. Friedan does not address the problems of the majority.

Friedan mistakenly sees *anomie* as the woman’s problem. As a result, she sees the solution as something men have: freer access to meaningful work. She avoids the fact that men (and women) with important, worthwhile jobs still suffer from lack of fulfillment or *anomie*. It is a case of “the grass is always greener on the other side.”

What is fulfillment and how does one find it? Generally, fulfillment involves feeling complete, content, useful, at peace; it means feeling that life has meaning, and you have a part in it. The need to be fulfilled is universal, but how it is handled varies. Some give up and live in resigned disappointment; they consider its pursuit adolescent, something one gets over with age and maturity. Some try every “new” thrill in a frenzied effort to find “the real thing.” Some think they have it; and then in some crisis, in sickness or at the ultimate crisis, death, they find what they had will not fill the bill.

Friedan’s answer is that meaningful work will bring fulfillment. There are other suggestions – love one’s children, the acquisition of material things, art. Those who advocate a shorter workweek must see personal fulfillment in leisure time.

From a Christian perspective, none of these goals is sufficient. Ecclesiastes, which is a critique of secularism, effectively dooms the world’s search for fulfillment, including feminist hopes. The preacher pronounces, “I have seen everything that is done under the sun; and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind” (Eccl. 1:14). There is nothing in the created world to give fulfillment; when the world is considered an end in itself (secularism), when it is thought to be all

there is, life makes no sense and yields no satisfaction. The two facts of life, evil and death, deprive life of its meaning. Not stopping with generalities, the preacher enumerates man's vain attempts at fulfillment. He has tried wisdom (Eccl. 1:16-18; 2:14-16), pleasure (Eccl. 2:1-11), "meaningful work" (Eccl. 2:10-11, 18-23), wealth (Eccl. 4:7; 5:10-17), and none of them satisfy. All is vanity, futility.

Ecclesiastes systematically destroys all of humanity's false hopes. But he hints at something better:

Every man also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and find enjoyment in his toil – this is the gift of God. For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart (Eccl. 5:19-20).

Joy and enjoyment are possible, but they are not produced by acquiring the right job (or finding one's true love, etc.). Joy is a gift of God; the only way to have joy is to receive it from God. In spite of all the negative things he has said, the preacher affirms, "Yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him" (Eccl. 8:12). C. S. Lewis describes the universal search for fulfillment:

Most people, if they had really learned to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want, and want to acutely, something that cannot be had in this world. There are all sorts of things in this world that offer to give it to you, but they never quite keep their promise. The longings which arise in us when we first fall in love, or first think of some subject that excites us, are longing which no marriage, no travel, no learning, can really satisfy. I am not now speaking of what would be ordinarily called unsuccessful marriages, or holidays, or learned careers. I am speaking of the best possible ones. There was something we grasped at, in that first moment of longing, which just fades away in reality. I think everyone knows what I mean. The wife may be a good wife, and the hotels and scenery may have been excellent, and chemistry may be a very interesting job: but something has evaded us (C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), p. 119.).

The Christian response to this desire, this need for fulfillment is: "If I find myself in a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world" (Ibid., p. 120.). That is, the Christian knows he is made for heaven, to know and be known by God. Perfect communion with God is the only thing that will satisfy human beings. All earthly blessings are only shadows of the real thing; they point to it, but they should not be mistaken for it. The preacher indicates the universal need for God: God has put eternity into man's mind (Eccl. 3:11). Augustine calls it the God-shaped vacuum. Even Christ speaks to the problem of fulfillment:

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life? (Matt. 16:24-26).

The person whose interests and efforts are spent trying to make his life meaningful by buying nice clothes, meeting the right people, visiting the right vacation spots, taking the right courses or

even defending the right causes, will not succeed. He who would save his life, keep it and use it for himself (self-fulfillment) will lose it; he will not find happiness and he will ultimately lose his life at death. But the person who gives up his life, who gives up all the world's ways to fulfill himself, who does not see his own satisfaction as the ultimate good, and who puts Jesus Christ and his kingdom first will find true and infinite happiness; and his life will never end. Real fulfillment is possible only for those who know the God of the Scriptures; and to those, fulfillment is possible in whatever circumstances they find themselves.

Knowledge of Jesus Christ meets every desire of the human heart. The Christian's identity is primarily that of a Christian; he knows he has value because he is created in God's image and has been bought at an awful price. His existence has a purpose because every Christian has the task of spreading Christ's gospel and every Christian is given gifts to perform a function in the body of Christ (I Cor. 12:7ff). To the Christian belong peace (Isa. 26:3; John 14:27), joy (Phil. 4:4), and contentment (Phil. 4:11-13) that does not depend on external conditions. In addition, the Christian knows what this world is not the final reality; the Christian's sure hope is a heavenly city in which his joy will be complete and untarnished. The goal of the Christian life is not self-fulfillment. It is not even the use of our God-given talents *per se*. Though our talents are not to be buried, they are to be used according to God's will (this means that even if a woman is a good speaker, an able exegete, and a wise counselor, she is not to be a minister). God's choice is for our talents may not seem wise according to the world's standards; it may involve losing one's life for Christ's sake. According to Judas, the woman who anointed Jesus with costly oil misused her resources; Jesus thought it was a beautiful act. The goal of a Christian living is righteousness, holiness, conformity to Christ's image. This is Paul's major concern (II Cor. 11:2; Col 1:28). For the Christian, satisfaction is found in obedience to God.

The Christian woman should not be deceived by feminist dreams and promises. Women will not automatically become immune to *anomie* when they are given equal opportunities in the work world. Meaningful work will not cure their ills nor satisfy their longings. The Christian who lacks fulfillment lacks it because he or she is sinning by not fixing his or her mind and trust on Christ, the only one who fulfills. To recognize that satisfaction comes from God frees persons to do their own work, without worrying about whether or not it is fulfilling them or is of cosmic value. One does not have to feel guilty if he or she lacks the desire or talents to become a doctor, lawyer, minister, or college professor. The feminists have made many women feel ashamed and guilty to be "only housewives." Motherhood has been degraded to only a biological necessity, which science should and is about to eliminate. In the Christian scheme, there is room for both women who work at home and women who work outside of it. The primary work directive for the Christian is that everyone work. The idle housewife who spends the mornings on the phone and the afternoon in front of the TV munching chocolates has no justification. The homemaker, like those who work outside the home, is to work; as Ecclesiastes 9:10 reminds us, "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might. ..."

What all this means is that the Christian woman or man has fulfillment apart from job or any other temporal source. It means that whatever one does, whether it is cancer research or changing diapers, it has significance. How? As we have said before, it is significant when it is done for God's glory (I Cor. 10:31). Paul's exhortation to slaves, who for the most part had menial jobs, was: "What every 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” (Col. 3:23-24).

Source

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