

THEOLOGY OF WORK No. 2

“Introduction, No. 2”

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Ephesians 4:28

We concluded last time by noting that the original idea of the early church seems to have been that of Christians giving glory to God in and through their occupations, doing the same jobs as unbelievers but performing them in a distinctly Christian way. That is the description we read from the mid 2nd century work *The Letter to Diognetus*. However, by the 4th century this view of a Christian and his work had been replaced by a two-tiered theory of Christian occupation. According to this second theory, the ordinary daily callings of ordinary Christians were second-class, of relatively little importance, and provided much less of an opportunity to serve the Lord. Ministers, monks, and nuns lived the Christian life on the higher level – they worked to serve the Lord – the rest worked to eat. The result of this view of Christian work was that the general run of Christians stopped caring very much about how they did their work – unimportant as it was in itself – and a genuine dichotomy between the spiritual and the secular was formed in the Christian mind. The work of most Christians belonged to the secular side of life and the idea that Christians should or even could serve the Lord in their occupations – that they should be ministers as farmers or shopkeepers or soldiers – that Christians should work out a distinctively Christian approach to their daily work and, in it, give glory to God; that idea gradually disappeared. The church, in an effort to find a deeper spirituality, turned its back, as it were, on the everyday world.

Indeed Jerome, in the 4th century would go so far as to say, “A merchant can seldom if ever please God,” and Augustine went further to say, “Business is in itself evil,” a necessary evil perhaps, but not the higher calling of a Christian. [Cited in Scott Quatro, *Business Practice and Human Resource Management as God’s Creation*, 1]

There is something very natural about this view of human work as a necessary evil rather than as a sphere of divine service. It isn’t only in the Christian church that one finds it. It is found in eastern religions in a certain form and in early Judaism as well. Here is a Jewish rabbi cited in the Talmud.

“I thank thee, O Lord, my God, that thou hast given me my lot with those who sit in the house of learning, and not with those who sit at the street-corners; for I am early to work and they are early to work; I am early to work on the words of the Torah, and they are early to work on things of no moment. I weary myself, and they weary themselves; I weary myself and profit thereby, and they weary themselves to no profit. I run, and they run; I run towards the life of the age to come, and they run towards the pit of destruction.” [Cited from Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables*, in Ryken, *Worldly Saints*, 24]

That such a view gained currency in the Christian church is especially sad for two reasons. First, it is a view that wholly lacks biblical justification, as we will see. And second, it has kept generations of Christians from bringing the gospel to bear in a powerful way on the affairs of the world. Efforts were made from time to time to contradict this false distinction – as in the life and work of Francis of Assisi – but with little success. True Christian work became church work or the work of those who were separated from the common life of the world to the life of contemplation, prayer, and charity. It took the Reformation and the rediscovery of the Bible’s viewpoint finally to make an effective attack on this spiritual/secular dichotomy.

Martin Luther began the attack and carried it out with vigor.

“When a maid cooks and cleans and does other housework, because God’s command is there, even such a small work must be praised as a service of God far surpassing the holiness and asceticism of all monks and nuns.” [Cited in Forester, 148]

Or again:

“The idea that the service to God should have only to do with a church altar, singing, reading, sacrifice, and the like is without doubt but the worst trick of the devil. How could the devil have led us more effectively astray than by the narrow conception that service to God takes place only in church and by works done therein... The whole world could abound with services to the Lord. Gottesdienste – not only in churches but also in the home, kitchen, workshop, field.” [Cited in R.P. Stevens, *The Other Six Days*, 77]

Here is Calvin.

“It is an ancient error that those who flee worldly affairs and engage in contemplation are leading an angelic life... We know that men were created to busy themselves with labor and that no sacrifice is more pleasing to God than when each one attends to his calling and studies to live well for the common good.” [Com. on Luke, at 10:38; vol. ii, 89]

I should say that scholarship does detect a difference between Luther and Calvin on this point. Here is one description of the difference.

“It must be admitted that Luther did not follow out the implications of his revolutionary view of the common life as a ‘calling’.... It was left to Calvinism to discover the close connexion between the actual callings with the work they entailed, on the one hand, and the love and the wisdom of God on the other. To Lutheranism these vocations were forms, within which a man did his Christian duty. To Calvinism they were the very means through which love and faith could become realized. As Max Weber says, Luther sees the Christian serving God in vocatione, not per vocationem. [R.N. Flew, *The Idea of Perfection in Christian Theology*, 252]

So, consider this from the Calvinist, William Tyndale.

“There is no work better than another to please God: to pour water, to wash dishes, to be a [cobbler], or an apostle, all are one; to wash dishes and to preach are all one, as touching the deed, to please God.” [Parker Society, vol. 42, 102]

This conviction – the repudiation root and branch of the sacred/secular dichotomy and the positive notion of serving God through one’s work – was then worked out in greater detail by the English Puritans who brought into English culture the radically Christian idea that work, everyone’s work, is holy and is to be performed for the Lord, according to his laws, and with the expectation of his blessing. Still today people talk about the “Puritan work ethic,” though few any longer have any idea of what the Puritan ethic of work actually was.

Nowadays one is likely to find the Puritan work ethic to be invoked as the foundation for workaholicism or hyper-competitiveness in modern business or for materialism, none of which the Puritans would have

approved. Their position was that work is holy and that in doing work in a distinctively Christian way, one served the Lord in the field or the shop or the home as surely as one served the Lord in the church. For that reason one's work had to be done as unto the Lord. That is the Puritan work ethic. The Puritan understanding of work was founded on the absolute rejection of the medieval distinction between spiritual and secular work.

As William Perkins, who might be called the father of English Puritanism, put it:

“The action of a shepherd in keeping sheep...is as good a work before God as is the action of a judge in giving sentence, or a magistrate in ruling, or a minister in preaching.” [Cited in Ryken, *Worldly Saints*, 25] Now the biblical argument for this conclusion is straightforward and compelling.

1. God made man to work and gave him work to do. We read that in Genesis 2:15 last time – the very first command ever given to man, indeed the very first word spoken to him, was a command to work, to perform a particular job. The inclusion of work here in the description of human life in Eden makes it what theologians call a “creation ordinance.” It is one of those fundamental structures of human life – along with marriage, family, and Sabbath rest – designed to ensure that a man or a woman's life will fulfill its purpose and bring man to happiness. Man was made by his Maker to be a worker. So in doing work men are being obedient to God and so should give their obedience to him in that way most pleasing to God. You can work cheerfully and willingly or sullenly and half-heartedly, but only the former pleases God. And, of course, this command is repeated many times in the Bible – Old Testament and New Testament; in all parts of the Bible – and illustrated everywhere in Holy Scripture. Let me mention a few of the most important places where the Bible returns to this theme of man as made to work.

It is interesting that the curse pronounced upon man after he sinned bears directly on his existence as a worker: “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it... By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food.” Man doesn't cease to be a worker because of his sin, but his work becomes more difficult, more frustrating. In any case it is obvious that the curse is not that man must work – he was a worker before sin entered the world – but that his labor has become laborious, grueling, and so often unsatisfying.

It is also to be noted that in the Ten Commandments, that greatest summary of human obligation, work again takes its place as a fundamental part of the purpose of human life. The fourth commandment, which we ordinarily think of as a commandment to rest on the seventh day, is, of course, also a commandment to work the other six. “Six days you shall labor and do all your work.” The 8th and the 10th commandments also, at least indirectly, speak to the issue of labor. You are not to set your heart on what others have worked for nor are you to avoid work by stealing what is the fruit of someone else's labor.

As you know, the Proverbs, in their directions for wise living, have a great deal to say about the virtues of hard work and the folly of the idle.

“He who works his land will have abundant food, but he who chases fantasies lacks judgment.” (12:11)

Obviously, it becomes one of the sacred duties of parents to teach their children to find satisfaction in hard work.

And it is the same in the New Testament. New life in Christ is to make of any person not less a worker but more. Take, as one example, Paul's statement in Eph. 4:28:

"He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his hands so that he may have something to share with those in need."

It is because a good and holy God made us for work that work, at its best, can be so fulfilling and so satisfying.

Blest work! If thou dost bear God's curse,
What must his blessing be!

2. Jesus himself was a carpenter and so sanctified all manner of occupations. If the perfectly righteous life of the Son of God was a life of work – and not "spiritual" work, but the ordinary work of ordinary human beings – if the only perfect human life ever lived in this world was a life of a working man, then plainly that is to be our life as well. Imagine what the church would have thought about ordinary work – the work of the first Adam, for example – if Jesus had been a rabbi instead of a carpenter. But he was a carpenter and, by being so, sanctified every sort of ordinary occupation: made it holy.
3. Work is the sphere of man's service to God, every man's, every Christian's. From the time of the Reformation through the Puritan period, the first and foremost biblical text employed to prove that occupations are divine callings to be fulfilled in faith, love, and obedience, was 1 Corinthians 7:17.

"Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him."

Now, it is to be admitted that the issue Paul is dealing with is not occupations per se. The passage up to that point has been about marriage, the single life, and divorce and the matters mentioned afterward concern circumcision and slavery. But slavery was an occupation even if it was also a station in life. However, it is also to be admitted that the text can be translated in different ways and that Luther's use of it to justify the sanctity of every Christian's calling is certainly not the main point that Paul is after. However, what the reformers took from this text and the Puritans after them was the notion that God calls us in concrete life circumstances and that we can give answer to his call in those circumstances. That does seem to be the clear implication of Paul's statement. If our occupations are not explicitly said to be divine callings here, they are the setting in which we work out our calling from God. God had called them to this. We have an assignment from God in the circumstances of our daily life. A man could view his work as a divine calling, something God himself had summoned him to do, give him to do, and so in doing it he was both obeying God's command and fulfilling his purpose.

Of course it is also clear in that same passage that a man does not have to stay in the station or occupation or situation he was in when he became a Christian. Paul says to slaves there that, if they can gain their freedom, by all means they should do so. The idea of God having called you in a particular set of circumstances does not mean that you must remain in those circumstances. That has sometimes been thought. In the medieval church, in the Victorian English church with its strong sense of social class, in the Indian church today with its residual sense of caste, one encounters the idea that God has fixed one's place in life, perhaps including the occupation that goes with that place.

The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate,
He made them high and lowly,
And ordered their estate.

But that is never taught in the Bible. It is never said or implied that a man or woman has but one occupation or station and is to remain there for life. A calling is not a man's lot or fate, it is, rather, the set of circumstances in which he finds himself and there he is to serve the Lord. [Paul Helm, *The Callings*, 47-48]

4. Work will be our calling in the world to come as several texts make a point of teaching (e.g. Isa. 65:21-22; Micah 4:3). So much is work the calling of a human life, so much is it what we were created to do, that it will continue to be the business of our life when sin is conquered and mankind has risen to a perfect state. Work was assigned to man in Eden; it will be required of him in heaven.
5. The Bible often addresses the believing man or the church man in terms of the way in which he does his work, whether or not he is doing it in a way that pleases God. So work falls under the authority of God's law and is to be done in that way that pleases God and to accomplish his purposes. So the man who mistreats his employees is condemned by the prophets as is the businessman who takes advantage of his customers by cornering the market and driving up the price. A merchant with rigged scales or a lender who bargains too hard are both condemned as doing their work in a way that violates the law of God. As we saw in Titus 2 a few weeks back, even the slave is to perform his work in a distinctively Christian way and serve his master willingly and conscientiously. It is not only that a greedy man is condemned or a man who conducts his business in less than scrupulous honesty or who does not treat his employees or customers fairly. Very clearly in the Bible such workers do not meet God's requirements for the life of work and so do not please God but bring down upon themselves his condemnation. Work must positively be offered up to God as work with which he will be well pleased.
6. And, finally, the Bible's general view is that there is no part of life, no human endeavor concerning which Christ does not say "It is mine!" As Paul writes in Col. 3:7: "Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." When one does something in the name of Jesus one is doing that thing for Jesus, in his place. For example, we are told that if we give a cup of cold water to a thirsty person in Jesus' name we will not lose our reward. The sense is that we have given that cup on Jesus' behalf. We have given that cup as Jesus' follower. Well, we are to do everything in our lives as Jesus' followers and do everything we do to his glory. That means that our working lives must be lived as Jesus' followers and performed to the glory of God.

The Puritan's point, however, was not simply to assert the holiness of work. They went on to insist that, taking all of these facts together, one must conclude that a Christian could serve God not only while he was tending sheep but by tendingsheep, as well as serve the Lord with the wealth that comes from one's work. The Puritan's goal was to integrate their work, their trade, their occupation with their service to God and devotion to him. "Every step and stroke in your trade is sanctified," as Richard Steele said in his work, *The Tradesman's Calling*. [Cited in Ryken, 25]

John Cotton sums up the thought this way for the Puritans:

“A true believing Christian...lives in his vocation by his faith. Not only my spiritual life but even my civil life in this world, and all the life I live, is by the faith of the Son of God: He exempts no life from the agency of his faith.” [Cited in Ryken, 26]

This view was then further developed or elaborated in the Puritan idea that every man had a calling or a vocation from God. “Vocation” comes from the Latin word “to call.” Now the Puritans didn’t imagine that God “told” every Christian what job he ought to have. They had a sensible view of how a person finds his or her way to an occupation. They didn’t turn it into a mystical process the way some Christians have. But they believed deeply in divine providence. They knew it was no accident that Lydia was a seller of purple cloth or that Aquila and Priscilla were tentmakers or that Apollos was a scholar. God’s providence, they said, used such prosaic things as a person’s abilities and interests, outward circumstances that may lead a person to one course of life or another, the advice of parents and others a person trusts, and so on. [Ryken, 28-29] God brings men and women into occupations and because he does so they become callings, a vocation – work that the Lord himself has summoned us to do and that we are to do for him.

Here is William Perkins in his Treatise of the Vocations or Callings of Men.

“A vocation or calling is a certain kind of life, ordained and imposed on man by God, for the common good....Every person of every degree, state, sex, or condition without exception must have some personal and particular calling to walk in.” [Cited in Ryken, 27]

This was an emphasis of Puritan preaching in America during the colonial period. Here is John Cotton.

“Faith draws the heart of a Christian to live in some warrantable calling; as soon as ever a man begins to look toward God and the ways of his grace, he will not rest till he find out some warrantable calling and employment.” [Ryken, 27]

God gives the talents, the strength, and the opportunity and so our work is a stewardship performed for him. That was their view. John Milton’s seventh sonnet, written to commemorate his 23rd birthday, ends with the famous couplet

All is, if I have grace to use it so,
As ever in my great task-Master’s eye.

Milton’s idea is that I must use my time and spend my life conscious of the fact that I am living in the presence of the one who has given me my tasks to perform. I must perform them, therefore, in that way that pleases him. That is the Puritan idea: that we perform our work – all our work – before the eye of the one who has both given us our calling and summoned us to fulfill it as unto him. Now, let me put some flesh and blood on this doctrine of the holiness of work and of an occupation as a divine calling for a Christian.

Calvin Seerveld, the Christian Reformed Church scholar tells this story about his father.

“My father is a seller of fish. We children know the business too having worked from childhood in the Great South Bay Fish Market, Patchogue, Long Island, New York, helping our father like a quiver full of arrows. It is a small store and it smells like fish. I remember a Thursday afternoon long ago when my dad was selling a large carp to a prosperous woman and it was a battle to convince her. ‘Is it fresh?’ It fairly

bristled with freshness, had just come in, but the game was part of the sale. They had gone over it anatomically together: the eyes were bright, the gills were in good colour, the flesh was firm, the belly was even spare and solid, the tail showed not much waste, the price was right...Finally my dad held up the fish behind the counter, 'Beautiful, beautiful! Shall I clean it up?' And as she grudgingly assented, ruefully admiring the way the bargain had been struck, she said, 'My, you certainly didn't miss your calling.'

Unwittingly she spoke the truth. My father is in full-time service for the Lord, prophet, priest, and king in the fish business...When I watch my dad's hands – big beefy hands with broad stubby fingers, each twice the thickness of mine, they could never play a piano – when I watch those hands delicately split the back of a mackerel...when I know those hands peddled fish from the handlebars of a bicycle in the grim 1930s...twinkling at work without complaint, past temptations, always in faith consecratedly cutting up fish before the face of the Lord – when I see that I know God's grace can come down to a man's hand and the flash of a scabby fish knife." [Christian Workers, Unite! 7-8]

That is the Puritan work ethic and its consequence in a man's life. No better summary of the Puritan work ethic can be found than these lines from Milton's Paradise Lost. Here Adam is speaking to Eve in Eden before the Fall.

Man hath his daily work of body or mind
Appointed, which declares his dignity,
And the regard of Heaven on all his ways.
[Book iv, 618-620]

Max Weber, the German sociologist famous for his assertion that it was Calvinism that led to the capitalistic prosperity of the Protestant West, precisely because of its view that all of life was to be given to God and all was the sphere of God's blessing upon faithfulness to him, points out the difference between the great medieval Christian epic, Dante's Divine Comedy and the great Puritan epic, Paradise Lost. He notes that the Divine Comedy ends with Dante finally in the very heart of heaven and transfixed by the beatific vision of God whereas Paradise Lost ends with Adam and Eve leaving Paradise with, as Milton says, "all before them."

"One feels at once that this powerful expression of the Puritan's serious attention to this world, his acceptance of his life in the world as a task, could not possibly have come from the pen of a medieval writer." [The Protestant Ethic and the Rise of Capitalism, 87-88]

I realize that this has had the character of a lecture, more than a sermon, but there is a great deal to cover and I wanted to do it, as much as possible, in a systematic way. We will need one more Lord's Day evening to finish our introduction. But remember the point we are working out from Scripture and the reflection of the church: work is holy. It is not the case, as Jerome said, that "a merchant can seldom if ever please God." Quite the contrary. The merchant is called to please God in his work; heaven help him if he does not please God in his work. His work is as holy as the minister's work is holy. Indeed, to put it another way, as Calvin Seerveld said of his father, the Christian merchant is as much a minister as the pastor is, in his own field and in his own way. But, if so, if his work is so holy, then it must be performed in and by faith and for the glory of God.

Now the challenge of all of this material is precisely this: Am I working to give glory to God? Am I serving the Lord in my occupation? Am I a minister of Christ in the daily work that I do? Not only in the way in

which I do my work, but is my work itself a service offered to God? Am I treating my fellow workers, my boss, my employees, my customers, my children, if I am a homemaker, in a distinctively Christian way? And am I setting out each day to perform my labor, whatever it is, "under my great Task-master's eye?" Do I see myself as answering God's call when I begin my work each day? The answer to all of those questions should be "Yes!" And to the extent that it is not, then we have need to set out to sanctify our working life so that it too and in every way belongs to the Lord.