

*The following article was originally published as a chapter in Leland Ryken's book *Worldly Saints, The Puritans as they Really Were*. For the Puritans, all of life was to be lived to the glory of God. This article provides a thought provoking overview of how they applied this principle to the economic life. Such thinking could become part of a Theology of Work for the 21st century Christian. We at JBIB thank Dr. Ryken and his publisher, Zondervan, for allowing us to re-print this chapter, which is used by permission.*

Yvonne S. Smith, Editor

WORLDLY SAINTS: THE PURITANS AS THEY REALLY WERE¹

WORK

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*God hath made man a societal creature.
We expect benefits from human society.
It is but equal that human society should
receive benefits from us.*

-Cotton Mather

Even people who know little about the Puritans bandy the phrase "Puritan work ethic" with confidence. When we explore what they mean by that phrase, it becomes apparent how little specific content the phrase holds for most people today. For many the phrase Puritan ethic is simply a catchall label for what they dislike about the Puritans.

Even when the phrase is restricted to the topic of work, it tends to be clouded with a host of misconceptions about what the Puritans really thought. The label Puritan work ethic is used today to cover a whole range of current ills: the workaholic syndrome, drudgery, competitiveness, worship of success, materialism, and the cult of the self-made person.

It has become such an axiom that the Puritans started all this that it comes as a shock to learn that what is called the Puritan work ethic is in many ways the opposite of what the Puritans of

the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries actually believed about work. For the past three centuries Western civilization has been dominated by a secularized perversion of the original Puritan work ethic. I begin my survey of Puritan beliefs, therefore, with the topic that is ostensibly best known to moderns but actually very misunderstood.

THE BACKGROUND: THE DIVISION BETWEEN SACRED AND SECULAR

To understand Puritan attitudes toward work, we must take a look at the background against which they were reacting. For centuries it had been customary to divide types of work into the two categories of sacred and secular. Sacred work was work done by members of the religious profession. All other work bore the stigma of being secular.

This cleavage between sacred and secular work can be traced all the way back to the Jewish Talmud. One of the prayers, obviously written from the scribe's viewpoint, is as follows:

*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*

¹Ryken, Leland, 1986. *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as they Really Were*. Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI. Used by permission from Zondervan.

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.¹

The same division of work into categories of sacred and secular became a leading feature of medieval Roman Catholicism. The attitude was formulated already in the fourth century by Eusebius, who wrote,

the housewife and shopkeeper.³ Calvin quickly added his weight to the argument.⁴ The Puritans were unanimous in following the lead of Luther and Calvin.

Like the Reformers, the Puritans rejected the sacred-secular dichotomy. William Tyndale said that if we look externally “there is difference betwixt washing of dishes and preaching of the word of God; but as touching to please God, none at all.”⁵ William Perkins agreed:

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.⁶

For the Puritans, all of life was God’s. Their goal was to integrate their daily work with their religious devotion...

Two ways of life were given by the law of Christ to his church. The one is above nature, and beyond common human living... Wholly and permanently separate from the common customary life of mankind, it devotes itself to the service of God alone...Such then is the perfect form of the Christian life. And the other, more humble, more human, permits men to... have minds for farming, for trade, and the other more secular interests as well as for religion...And a kind of secondary grade of piety is attributed to them.²

This sacred-secular dichotomy was exactly what the Puritans rejected as the starting point of their theory of work.

THE SANCTITY OF ALL LEGITIMATE TYPES OF WORK

It was Martin Luther, more than anyone else, who overthrew the notion that clergymen, monks, and nuns were engaged in holier work than

This Puritan rejection of the dichotomy between sacred and secular work had far-reaching implications.

For one thing, it renders every task of intrinsic value and integrates every vocation with a Christian’s spiritual life. It makes every job consequential by making it the arena for glorifying and obeying God and for expressing one’s love (through service) to one’s neighbor. Thus Hugh Latimer saw in the example of Christ the true dignity of all work:

This is a wonderful thing, that the Savior of the world, and the King above all kings, was not ashamed to labor; yea, and to use so simple an occupation. Here he did sanctify all manner of occupations.⁷

John Dod and Robert Cleaver wrote that “the great and reverend God despiseth no honest trade... be it never so mean, but crowneth it with his blessing.”⁸ The Puritan conviction about the dignity of all work also has the important effect of sanctifying the common. John Cotton said this about the ability of Christian faith to sanctify

common life and work:

*Faith...encourageth a man in his calling to the homeliest and difficultest...Such homely employments a carnal heart knows not how to submit unto; but now faith having put us into a calling, if it require some homely employment, it encourageth us in it... So faith is ready to embrace any homely service his calling leads him to, which a carnal heart would blush to be seen in.*⁹

William Perkins declared that people can serve God “in any kind of calling, though it be but to sweep the house or keep sheep.”¹⁰ Nathaniel Mather said that God’s grace will “spiritualize every action”; even the simplest actions, such as “a man’s loving his wife or child,” become “gracious acts,” and “his eating and drinking [are] acts of obedience and hence are of great account in the eyes of God.”¹¹

For the Puritans, all of life was God’s. Their goal was to integrate their daily work with their religious devotion to God. Richard Steele asserted that it was in the shop “where you may most confidently expect the presence and blessing of God.”¹² The Puritans revolutionized attitudes toward daily work when they raised the possibility that “every step and stroke in your trade is sanctified.”¹³ John Milton, in his famous *Areopagitica*, satirized the businessman who leaves his religion at home, “trading all day without his religion.” Thomas Gataker saw no tension between the sacred and secular when he wrote,

*A man must not imagine...when he is called to be a Christian, that he must presently cast off all worldly employments...and apply himself wholly...to prayer and contemplation, but he must retain the calling still as well as the other, following the one still with the other.*¹⁴

The Puritan goal was to serve God, not simply within one’s work in the world, but through that work. John Cotton hinted at this when he wrote,

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.*¹⁵

And Cotton Mather said,

*A Christian should be able to give a good account, not only what is his occupation, but also what he is in his occupation. It is not enough that a Christian have an occupation; but he must mind his occupation as it becomes a Christian.*¹⁶

With the Puritan emphasis on all of life as God’s, it is not surprising that a late seventeenth-century pamphlet entitled *St. Paul the Tentmaker* could note that the Protestant movement had fostered a “delight in secular employments.”¹⁷

THE PURITAN CONCEPT OF CALLING

A second strong affirmation by the Puritans, in addition to declaring the sanctity of all types of work, was that God calls every person to his or her vocation. Every Christian, said the Puritans, has a calling. To follow it is to obey God. The important effect of this attitude is that it makes work a response to God.

To begin with, the Puritans’ emphasis on such doctrines as election and providence made it easy for them to assert that every person has a calling in regard to work. The Puritan divine Richard Steele wrote,

*God doth call every man and woman... to serve him in some peculiar employment in this world, both for their own and the common good... The Great Governor of the world hath appointed to every man his proper post and province.*¹⁸

William Perkins, in his classic *Treatise of the Vocations or Callings of Men*, wrote,

*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.*¹⁹

The doctrine of calling was even more prominent in American Puritanism. Cotton Mather asserted,

*Every Christian ordinarily should have a calling. That is to say, there should be some special business...wherein a Christian should for the most part spend the most of his time; and this, that so he may glorify God.*²⁰

John Cotton spoke in similar terms:

*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.*²¹

One effect of the Puritan concept of calling is to make the worker a steward who serves God. God, in fact, is the one who assigns people to their tasks. In this view, work ceases to be impersonal. Moreover, its importance does not lie within itself; work is rather a means by which a person lives out his or her personal relationship to God. "Whatsoever our callings be," claimed one Puritan source, "we serve the Lord Jesus Christ in them."²² Richard Steele viewed work as a stewardship when he wrote,

*He that hath lent you talents hath also said, "Occupy till I Come!" How is it that ye stand all day idle? ..Your trade is your proper province.*²³

"God is the General," Perkins wrote, "appointing to every man his particular calling.... God himself is the author and beginning of callings."²⁴ If God is the one who calls people to their work, then such work can be a form of service to God. John Cotton put it this way:

*A man therefore that serves Christ in serving of men... doth his work sincerely as in God's presence, and as one that hath an heavenly business in hand, and therefore comfortably as knowing God approves of his way and work.*²⁵

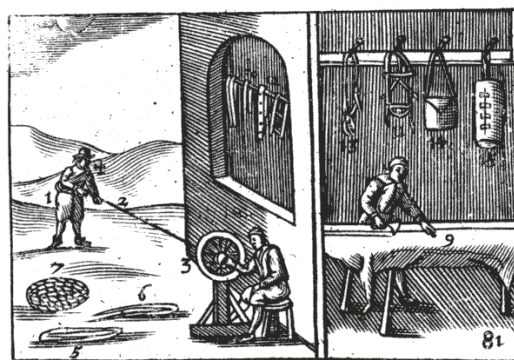
To work in one's calling, in the Puritan view, is to work in the sight of God. Cotton Mather exclaimed,

Oh, let every Christian walk with God when he works at his calling, act in his occupation with an eye to God, act as

*under the eye of God.*²⁶

Another practical result of the doctrine of Christian calling is that it leads to contentment in one's work. If a Christian's calling comes from God, there is inherent in that belief a strategy for accepting one's tasks. Cotton Mather wrote that

*a Christian should follow his occupation with contentment... It is the singular favor of God unto a man that he can attend his occupation with contentment and satisfaction... Is your business here clogged with any difficulties and inconveniences? Contentment under those difficulties is no little part of your homage to that God who hath placed you where you are.*²⁷



An etching of a roper and a cordwainer. From Johann A. Comenius, *Orbis Sensualium Pictus*; courtesy of the Folger Shakespeare Library [Wing C5525 p. 166]

The sense of calling as a stewardship and as a reason for contentment come together beautifully in the poem that a young Puritan wrote on the occasion of his twenty-third birthday. Milton's famous seventh sonnet opens with self-rebuke at the poet's lack of achievement to date. But the consolation expressed in the aphorism with which the poem concludes is typically Puritan:

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

The most plausible interpretation of the lines is this:

All that matters is that I have the grace to use my time as though I am always living in my great taskmaster's presence.

Milton obviously viewed himself as responsible to God, and the epithet “my great task-Master” vividly captures the Puritan awareness of God as the one who calls people to tasks.

If everyone has a calling, how can people know what they have been called to do? The Puritans evolved a methodology for determining their calling; they did not mysticize the process. Richard Steele, in fact, claimed that God rarely calls people directly “in the latter days,” and that anyone who claims to have had a revelation from God “must produce extraordinary gifts and qualifications, else it be but conceit and delusion.”²⁸

The Puritans preferred to trust such things as a person’s “inward endowments and inclinations,” “outward circumstances which may lead... to one course of life rather than another,” the advice of “parents, guardians, and in some cases magistrates,” and “nature, education, or gifts... acquired.”²⁹ They also believed that if people were in the right calling, God would equip them to perform their work: “When God hath called me to a place, he hath given me some gifts for that place.”³⁰

The Puritans believed in loyalty to a calling. A vocation was to be neither entered into nor abandoned lightly. On the subject of choosing a vocation, Milton, who from childhood had a strong calling to be a poet, wrote that

*the nature of each person should be especially observed and not bent in another direction, for God does not intend all people for one thing, but for each one his own work.*³¹

Richard Steele cautioned that it was “preposterous” to choose “a calling or condition of life without a careful pondering it in the balance of sound reason.”³² John Cotton stressed the idea of talents in choosing a vocation:

*Another thing to make a calling warrantable is when God gives a man gifts for it...God leads him on to that calling, 1 Cor. 7:17...When God hath called me to a place, he hath given me some gifts fit for that place, especially if the place be suitable and fitted to me and my best gifts; for God...would have his best gifts improved to the best advantage.*³³

The Puritan idea of the calling was equally resistant to the casual leaving of a vocation. While the Puritans did not generally believe that a person could never legitimately change occupations, they were clearly cautious about the practice. William Perkins spoke of “a perseverance in good duties” and warned against “ambition, envy, impatience,” adding that “envy... when we see others placed in better callings and conditions than ourselves... is a common sin, and the cause of much dissension in the commonwealth.”³⁴ Cotton Mather agreed:

*A Christian should follow his occupation with contentment. A Christian should not be too ready to fall out with his calling.... Many a man, merely from covetousness and from discontent throws up his business.*³⁵

To sum up, the Puritan idea of calling covered a cluster of related ideas: the providence of God in arranging human tasks, work as the response of a steward to God, contentment with one’s tasks, and loyalty to one’s vocation. These were admirably captured in John Cotton’s exhortation to “serve God in thy calling, and do it with cheerfulness, and faithfulness, and an heavenly mind.”³⁶

THE MOTIVATION AND REWARDS OF WORK

Puritan beliefs about the motivation and goals of work need to be carefully distinguished from what has passed for three centuries as the Puritan work ethic. From the time that Benjamin Franklin uttered his worldly wise proverbs about wealth as the goal of work to our own century when industrial giants have claimed that their success was proof that they were God’s elect, our culture has viewed work primarily as the means to wealth and possessions. This secularized work ethic has been attributed to the Puritans and their forerunner Calvin, and it has become accepted as an axiom that the Puritan ethic is based on wealth as the ultimate reward of work and prosperity as a sign of godliness.

But is this what the Puritans really believed? The rewards of work, according to Puritan theory, were spiritual and moral, that is, work glorified

God and benefited society. By viewing work as stewardship to God, the Puritans opened the way for a whole new conception of the rewards of work, as suggested in Richard Steele's comment, "You are working for God, who will be sure to reward you to your heart's content."³⁷ That those rewards are primarily spiritual and moral is abundantly clear from Puritan comments. William Perkins asserted that

*the main end of our lives...is to serve God in the serving of men in the works of our callings...Some man will say perchance: What, must we not labor in our callings to maintain our families? I answer: this must be done: but this is not the scope and end of our lives. The true end of our lives is to do service to God in serving of man.*³⁸

John Preston said that we must labor "not for our own good, but for the good of others."³⁹ Richard Baxter shared this view of the spiritual and moral ends of work. The purpose of work, he said, is "obeying God and doing good to others." Furthermore,

the public welfare, or the good of the many, is to be valued above our own. Every man therefore is bound to do all the good he can to others, especially for the church and commonwealth.

As for the riches that might come from work, they "may enable us to relieve our needy brethren and to promote good works for church and state."⁴⁰

American Puritans espoused the same viewpoint. According to Cotton Mather, the reason a person should pursue a calling is "that so he may glorify God, by doing good for others and getting of good for himself."⁴¹ And again,

*God hath made man a societal creature. We expect benefits from human society. It is but equal that human society should receive benefits from us. We are beneficial to human society by the works of that special occupation in which we are to be employed, according to the order of God.*⁴²

John Cotton stated that in our calling "we

may not only aim at our own, but at the public good...And therefore [faith] will not think it hath a comfortable calling unless it will not only serve his own turn but the turn of other men."⁴³

What is noteworthy about such statements is the integration among God, society, and self that converges in the exercise of one's calling. Self-interest is not totally denied, but it is definitely minimized in the rewards of work.

In keeping with their view of the spiritual and moral ends of work, the Puritans drew the logical conclusion that these same goals should govern one's choice of a vocation. Richard Baxter urged:

*Choose that employment or calling in which you may be most serviceable to God. Choose not that in which you may be most rich or honorable in the world; but that in which you may do most good, and best escape sinning.*⁴⁴

Elsewhere Baxter wrote that

in choosing a trade or calling, the first consideration should be the service of God and the public good, therefore that calling which must conduce to the public good is to be preferred.

Furthermore,

*when two callings equally conduce to the public good, and one of them bath the advantage of riches and the other is more advantageous to your souls, the latter must be preferred.*⁴⁵

The counterpart of this emphasis on the spiritual and moral rewards of work is the frequent denunciation of people who use work to gratify selfish ambitions. Contrary to what many think, the idea of the self-made person did not appeal to the Puritans, if by self-made we mean people who claim to have been successful by their own efforts and who ostentatiously gratify their materialistic inclinations with the money they have made.

Baxter spoke slightly of ambitious self-aggrandizement:

Take heed lest, under the pretense of diligence in your calling, you be drawn to earthly-mindedness, and excessive cares or covetous designs for rising in

*the world.*⁴⁶

“Every man for himself, and God for us all,” wrote Perkins, “is wicked, and is directly against the end of every calling.”⁴⁷ He then added,

*They profane their lives and callings that employ them to get honors, pleasures, profits, worldly commodities, etc., for thus we live to another end than God hath appointed, and thus we serve ourselves, and consequently neither God nor men.*⁴⁸

The early Puritan Hugh Latimer said regarding wealth that “we may not do as many do, that greedily and covetously seek it day and night.”⁴⁹

And again,

*Far be it from us to think we have any right to vain confidence. Therefore, whenever we meet with the word ‘reward’ or it crosses our minds, let us realize that it is the height of the divine goodness towards us.*⁵¹

The same spirit permeates Puritan thinking about the relationship between human effort and divine blessing. Cotton Mather asserted, “In our occupations we spread our nets; but it is God who brings unto our nets all that comes into them.”⁵² Robert Crowley told an audience at London’s Guildhall that neither covetousness nor hard work

The Puritans believed in loyalty to a calling. A vocation was to be neither entered into nor abandoned lightly

SUCCESS IS GOD’S BLESSING, NOT SOMETHING EARNED

Did Puritanism and Calvinism more generally regard work as the means by which people earn their own success and wealth? It is commonly asserted that they did, but I look in vain for substantiation of the claim. Calvinism does not teach an ethic of self-reliance, as our modern work ethic does. It is instead an ethic of grace: whatever tangible rewards come from work, they are the gift of God’s grace.

Calvin himself had denied that material success is always the result of work. It was Benjamin Franklin, and not the early Protestants, who had the confidence that “early to bed and early to rise make a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.” In the Calvinistic view, not only does work not guarantee success; even if God blesses work with prosperity, it is his grace, and not human merit, that produces the blessing. In the words of Calvin,

*Men in vain wear themselves out with toiling, and waste themselves by fasting to acquire riches, since these also are a benefit only by God.*⁵⁰

could make them rich, since God alone blesses people with success.⁵³ According to George Swinnock, the successful businessman can never say that his own efforts were responsible for his success; even though humans play their active part, “there is not the least wheel in the frame of nature which doth not depend upon God for its motion every moment.”⁵⁴

It is true that the Puritan lifestyle, a blend of diligence and thrift, tended to make people relatively prosperous, at least part of the time. The important thing, however, is how the Puritans looked upon their wealth. The Puritan attitude was that wealth was a social good, not a personal possession - a gift from God, not the result of human effort alone or a sign of divine approval. Richard L. Greaves’s massive survey of the primary sources reveals that the Puritans “asserted that no direct correlation exists between wealth and godliness... Not riches, but faith and suffering for the sake of the gospel are signs of election.”⁵⁵

The Puritans never conceived of work apart from a spiritual and moral context of service to

God and man. Richard M. Nixon's much quoted Labor Day message of 1971 probably summed up the popular conception of the Puritan work ethic, but if so, it is an inaccurate picture:

The "work ethic" holds that labor is good in itself; that a man or woman becomes a better person by virtue of the act of working. America's competitive spirit, the "work ethic" of this people... the value of achievement, the morality of self-reliance—none of these is going out of style.

I trust that I have shown that the Puritans would not have been content with such a theory of work. Their ideals were obedience to God, service to humanity, and reliance on God's grace. In the Puritan ethic, the virtue of work depended almost wholly on the motives with which people performed it.⁵⁶

MODERATION IN WORK

A final inheritance that the Puritans bequeathed in their view of work was the need for a sense of moderation in work. They tried in theory to maintain a middle position between the extremes of idleness or laziness on the one hand and slavish addiction to work on the other. In practice, they may have often erred in the direction of overwork.

There is one point at which the modern interpretation of the Puritan work ethic is correct—that the Puritans scorned idleness and praised diligence. Baxter displayed his usual curtness on the subject of idleness: "It is swinish and sinful not to labor."⁵⁷ Robert Bolton called idleness "the very rust and canker of the soul."⁵⁸ "God doth allow none to live idly," wrote Arthur Dent in his influential book *The Plain Man's Path-way to Heaven*.⁵⁹ Elizabeth Joceline wrote in *The Mother's Legacy to Her Unborn Child*, "Be ashamed of idleness as thou art a man, but tremble at it as thou art a Christian."⁶⁰ It is obvious from such statements that the Puritan work ethic made work an individual responsibility as well as a social obligation.

The Puritans' critique of idleness was matched by their praise of diligence in work,

not so much because it was inherently virtuous but because it was God's appointed means of providing for human needs. Baxter wrote, "God hath commanded you some way or other to labor for your daily bread."⁶¹ Thomas Watson theorized that "religion does not seal warrants to idleness.... God sets all his children to work.... God will bless our diligence, not our laziness."⁶²

Part of the Puritan revulsion against idleness and praise of work was their conviction that labor was a creation ordinance and therefore a necessity for human well-being. "Adam in his innocence had all things at his will," wrote William Perkins, "yet then God employed him in a calling."⁶³ According to John Robinson,

*God, who would have our first father, even in innocency...to labour...would have none of his sinful posterity lead their life in idleness... Man is born to sore labour, in body or mind, as the spark to fly upward.*⁶⁴

And Baxter wrote, "Innocent Adam was put into the Garden of Eden to dress it.... And man in flesh must have work for his body as well as his soul."⁶⁵ By viewing work as a creation ordinance as well as a calling, the Puritans recognized the dignity of labor for its own sake as well as a response to God.

Even spirituality was no excuse for idleness in the view of the Puritans. Richard Steele spoke against "neglecting a man's necessary affairs upon pretense of religious worship."⁶⁶ Thomas Shepard had the following advice for a religious zealot who complained that religious thoughts distracted him while he was at work:

*As it is sin to nourish worldly thoughts when God set you a work in spiritual, heavenly employments, so it is, in some respects, as great a sin to suffer yourself to be distracted by spiritual thoughts when God sets you on work in civil... employments.*⁶⁷

But doesn't the Puritan ethic lead inevitably to the workaholic syndrome? Not according to the Puritans. They attempted to balance their diligence with definite curbs against overwork. Once again their ideal was moderation. "Take

heed of too much business or intending it too much, or inordinately,” warned John Preston.⁶⁸ Philip Stubbes cautioned that “every Christian man is bound in conscience before God” not to allow “his immoderate care” to surpass “the limits of true godliness,” adding,

*So far from covetousness and from immoderate care would the Lord have us that we ought not this day to care for tomorrow, for (saith he) sufficient to the day is the travail of the same.*⁶⁹

The Scottish divine Robert Woodrow commented,

*The sin of our too great fondness for trade, to the neglecting of our more valuable interests, I humbly think will be written upon our judgment.*⁷⁰

On the subject of moonlighting, Richard Steele claimed that a person ought not to “accumulate two or three callings merely to increase his riches.”⁷¹

The goal of the Puritans was moderation between extremes. To work with zeal and yet not give one’s soul to his or her work was what they strove for. John Preston expressed it thus:

*You might meddle with all things in the world and not be defiled by them, if you had pure affections, but when you have an inordinate lust after anything, then it defiles your spirit.*⁷²

The middle way between the idler and the workaholic was also the ideal of John Cotton:

*There is another combination of virtues strangely mixed in every lively holy Christian, and that is diligence in worldly business and yet deadness to the world; such a mystery as none can read but they that know it...Though he labor most diligently in his calling, yet his heart is not set upon these things, he can tell what to do with his estate when he hath got it*⁷³

SUMMARY

For a summary of the Puritan doctrine of work, we do well to turn to John Milton’s epic *Paradise Lost*. Milton embodied much of what the Puritans believed about work in his portrayal

of Adam and Eve’s life of perfection in the Garden of Eden. Milton repeatedly emphasized that work in paradise was not only pleasant but also necessary. Someone who made a thorough comparison of Milton’s paradisaical vision with those of earlier writers found that to portray work as necessary was “the most strikingly original feature of Milton’s treatment.”⁷⁴ What set Milton apart from his medieval predecessors in this regard was his Puritanism.

There is no better summary of the original Puritan work ethic than these words of Adam to Eve in *Paradise Lost*:

*Man hath his daily work of body or mind Appointed, which declares his dignity, And the regard of Heaven on all his ways.*⁷⁵

We can glimpse here the Puritan belief about God as the one who calls people to tasks, about the dignity of work, about how the proper attitude toward the goals of work can transform every task into a sacred activity.

The great and reverend God despiseth no honest trade. -John Dod and Robert Cleaver

The main end of our lives...is to serve God in the serving of men in the works of our callings. -William Perkins

Man hath his daily work of body or mind Appointed, which declares his dignity, And the regard of Heaven on all his ways. -John Milton

FURTHER READING

Several key Puritan texts have been excerpted in modern anthologies, and these texts are such a succinct and organized version of Puritan attitudes toward work that they are well worth consulting. They can be found in these places:

Cotton, John, (1963). *Christian Calling*, p. 319-27 in vol. 1, rev. ed., of *The Puritans*, ed., Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson

Mather, Cotton, (1969). *A Christian at His Calling*, p. 122-27, in Michael McGiffert, ed., *Puri-*

tanism and the American Experience

Perkins, William, (1970). A Treatise of the Vocations or Callings of Men, p. 35-59, in Edmund S. Morgan, ed., *Puritan Political Ideas, 1558-1794* (1965), or p. 446-76 in Ian Breward, ed., *The Work of William Perkins*

SECONDARY SOURCES

INCLUDE THESE:

Tawney, R. H., (1926). *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*

Schlatter, Richard B., (1940). *The Social Ideas of Religious Leaders, 1660-1688*

Michaelsen, Robert S., (1953) "Changes in the Puritan Concept of Calling or Vocation," *New England Quarterly* 26, 315-36.

Robertson, H. M., (1959). *Aspects of the Rise of Economic Individualism*

George, Charles H. and Katherine, (1961). *The Protestant Mind of the English Reformation, 1570-1640*

Hill, Christopher, (1964). *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England*

Kitch, M. J., ed., (1967). *Capitalism and the Reformation*

ENDNOTES

¹Quoted in Joachim Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables* (New York: Scribner, 1966), p. 113.

²*Demonstratio Evangelica* [Forrester, p. 42]. Forrester comments, "The sacred and secular on this view differed not merely in degree but in kind. Within the monastery or convent, the 'religious' who had a 'vocation' aimed at perfection, devoted themselves largely (though not exclusively) to contemplation, while outside in the family, in the market-place, in the field and on the seas, the others kept the wheels of the work of the world running, at the cost of condemning their souls to a second-best spiritual life" (p. 45). As Forrester shows, there were individual

attempts by churchmen (notably Francis of Assisi) to sanctify ordinary work, but these attempts never became the dominant position of medieval Catholicism.

³Luther claimed, for example, "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" (Works [Forrester, p. 148]). Again, household work "has no appearance of sanctity; and yet these very works in connection with the household are more desirable than all the works of all the monks and nuns.... Seemingly secular works are a worship of God and an obedience well pleasing to God" (Commentary on Gen. 13:13). Further, "Your work is a very sacred matter. God delights in it, and through it he wants to bestow his blessing on you" (Exposition of Ps. 128:2 [Plass, 3:1493]).

⁴Calvin wrote such things as this: "It is an 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" (Commentary on Luke 10:38).

⁵The Parable of the Wicked Mammon [Louis B. Wright, *Middle-Class Culture*, p. 171]. Thomas Shepard wrote, "Seeing yourself thus working in worldly employments for [Christ], you may easily apprehend that ... you honor God ... more by the meanest servile worldly act, than if you should have spent all that time in meditation, prayer, or any other spiritual employment" (Works [Edmund Morgan, *Puritan Family*, p. 70-71]).

⁶Works [Davies, *Worship and Theology*. . . 1534-1603, p. 66]. Perkins also wrote, "Hereby is overthrown the condition of monks and friars, who challenge to themselves that they live in a state of perfection, because that they live apart from the societies of men in fasting and prayer: but contrariwise, this monkish kind of living is damnable; for besides the general duties of fasting and prayer, which appertain to all Christians, every man must have a particular and personal calling that he may be a good and profitable

member of some society and body” (A Treatise of the Vocations or Callings of Men [Edmund Morgan, Political Ideas, p. 52]).

⁷The Third Sermon Upon the Lord’s Prayer [Louis B. Wright, Middle-Class Culture, p. 174]. Luther had expressed the opinion that if we would look upon all work as a form of service to God, “the entire world would be full of service to God, not only the churches but also the home, the kitchen, the cellar, the workshop, and the field of townfolk and farmers” (Sermon on Matt. 6:24-34 [Plass, 2:560]).

⁸A Godly Form of Household Government [Walzer, p. 214].

⁹Christian Calling [Miller/Johnson, 1:322-23]. “Our Savior Christ was a carpenter,” preached Latimer; “therefore let no man disdain...to follow him in a...common calling and occupation” (Sixth Sermon Preached before King Edward VI [Green, p. 70]).

¹⁰Treatise of the Vocations...[Edmund Morgan, Political Ideas, p. 51]. Elsewhere Perkins noted that “God looketh not at...the work, but at the heart of the worker,” and therefore common tasks, “howsoever gross they appear outwardly, yet are they sanctified” (Works [George, p. 138, 139]).

¹¹A Sermon...[Elliott, p. 179].

¹²The Tradesman’s Calling [Tawney, p. 245]. Calvin had said that “there is no part of our life or conduct, however insignificant which should not be related to the glory of God” (Commentary on 1 Cor. 10:31).

¹³Steele, The Tradesman’s Calling [Kitch, p. 115].

¹⁴Sermons [Kitch, p. 155].

¹⁵Christian Calling [Miller/Johnson, 1:319].

¹⁶A Christian at His Calling [McGiffert, p. 124].

¹⁷Quoted in Hill, Society and Puritanism, p. 136.

¹⁸The Tradesman’s Calling [Tawney, p. 240, 321].

¹⁹Edmund Morgan, Political Ideas, p. 36, 51.

²⁰A Christian at His Calling [McGiffert, p. 123].

²¹Christian Calling [Miller/Johnson, 1:319].

²²John Dod and Robert Cleaver, Ten Sermons... [Davies, Worship and Theology... 1534-1603,

p. 66].

²³The Tradesman Calling [Tawney, p. 245].

²⁴Treatise of the Vocations...[Edmund Morgan, Political Ideas, p. 37].

²⁵Christian Calling [Miller/Johnson, 1:322].

²⁶A Christian at His Calling [McGiffert, p. 127]. This is reminiscent of Luther’s comment in his sermon on Matthew 6: “Be content with the fact that your Father up there in heaven sees it... The life of all Christians is intended for the eyes of God alone... It is enough that our action is intended to satisfy and to glorify the One who sees it” (Sermon on Matt. 6:16-18 [Plass, 1:241]).

²⁷A Christian at His Calling [McGiffert, p. 127]. Contentment in one’s calling had been a major theme of both Luther and Calvin. Luther wrote, “Nothing is so bad ... but what it becomes sweet and tolerable if only I know and am certain that it is pleasing to God” (The Estate of Marriage [Luther, Works, 45:491]). Calvin wrote thus about the contentment that comes from an awareness of God’s calling: “In all our cares, toils, annoyances, and other burdens, it will be no small alleviation to know that all these are under the superintendence of God... Every one in his particular mode of life will, without repining, suffer its inconveniences, cares, uneasiness, and anxiety, persuaded that God has laid on the burden. This, too, will afford admirable consolation in following your proper calling. No work will be so mean and sordid as not to have a splendor and value in the eye of God” (Institutes of the Christian Religion, 3.10.16).

²⁸The Tradesman’s Calling [Kitch, p. 158].

²⁹These suggestions came from, in order, William Ames, The Marrow of Theology, p. 322-23; Richard Steele, The Tradesman’s Calling [Kitch, p. 158]; Thomas Dudley to John Woodbridge [Foster, p. 100].

³⁰John Cotton, The Way of Life [Edmund Morgan, Puritan Family, p. 72]. Samuel Willard told his Old South Church, “God doth never call any to service but he fits them for it, hence we have a rule to judge our calling” (Boston Sermons [Edmund Morgan, Puritan Family, p. 72]).

³¹Commonplace Book [CPW, 1:405].

³²The Tradesman’s Calling [Tawney, p. 241]. Tawney comments, “The calling is not a condition in which the individual is born, but a strenuous and exacting enterprise, to be undertaken,

indeed, under the guidance of Providence, but to be chosen by each for himself, with a deep sense of his solemn responsibilities” (p. 241).

³³Christian Calling [Miller/Johnson, 1:320].

³⁴Works [George, p. 135]. Calvin had written that “each should be content with his calling, and persist in it, and not be eager to change to something else,” adding that Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:20 “wishes to correct the thoughtless eagerness which impels some to change their situation without any proper reason” and to condemn “the restlessness which prevents individuals from remaining contentedly as they are” (Commentary on 1 Cor. 7:20). Luther likewise castigated “fickle, unstable spirits” who “cannot continue in their calling” (Sermon on 1 Peter 4:8-11 [Plass, 3:1497]).

³⁵A Christian at His Calling [McGiffert, p. 127].

³⁶Christian Calling [Miller/Johnson, 1:326].

³⁷The Tradesman’s Calling [Kitch, p. 115]. Luther had similarly theorized that “work should... be done to serve God by it, to avoid idleness, and satisfy his commandments” (Sermon on the Fourth Petition of the Lord’s Prayer [Plass, 3:1494]). Calvin said that “we know that men were created to busy themselves with labor... for the common good” (Commentary on Luke 10:38).

³⁸Treatise on the Vocations... [Edmund Morgan, Political Ideas, p. 56-57]. William Tyndale said that a person should “refer his craft and occupation unto the common wealth, and serve his brethren as he would do Christ himself” (The Parable of the Wicked Mammon [Louis B. Wright, Middle Class Culture, p. 172]).

³⁹The New Covenant [George, p. 137].

⁴⁰A Christian Directory [Perry, p. 307, 315]. Richard Steele asserted that people have been given a calling “both for their own and the common good” (The Tradesman’s Calling [Tawney, p. 240]).

⁴¹Two Brief Discourses [Perry, p. 312].

⁴²A Christian at His Calling [McGiffert, p. 122].

⁴³Christian Calling [Miller/Johnson, 1:320]. A group of ministers meeting in Boston in 1699 agreed that no occupation “is lawful but what is useful unto human society” (Cotton Mather,

Magnolia Christi Americana [Edmund Morgan, Puritan Family, p. 71]).

⁴⁴A Christian Directory [Green, p. 72].

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 60.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 59.

⁴⁷Treatise of the Vocations... [Edmund Morgan, Political Ideas, p. 39]. Luther had similarly spoken slightly of people who “do not use their talents in their calling or in the service of their neighbor; they use them only for their own glory and advantage” (Sermon on 1 Peter 4:8-11 [Plass, 3:1497]).

⁴⁸Treatise of the Vocations... [Edmund Morgan, Political Ideas, p. 56].

⁴⁹A Sermon... [Louis B. Wright, Middle-Class Culture, p. 174].

⁵⁰Commentary on Psalm 127:2. Luther, in commenting on the same text, wrote, “You must, of course, labor - but the effort is futile if you do nothing but labor and imagine that you are supporting yourself... Labor you should, but supporting and providing for you belongs to God alone” [Plass, 3:1496].

⁵¹Commentary on Luke 17:7. Luther wrote in a similar vein, “When riches come, the godless heart of man thinks: I have achieved this with my labors. It does not consider that these are purely blessings of God, blessings that at times come to us through our labors and at times without our labors, but never because of our labors; for God always gives them because of His undeserved mercy” (Exposition of Dent. 8:17-18 [Plass, 3:1495]).

⁵²Sober Sentiments (Perry, p. 312).

⁵³A Sermon... [Greaves, Society and Religion, p. 549].

⁵⁴The Christian Man’s Calling [Schlatter, p. 200].

⁵⁵Society and Religion, p. 550.

⁵⁶Robertson, Aspects of the Rise of Economic Individualism, presents evidence for a thesis that would be widely held in scholarly circles today - that what people mistakenly call the Puritan work ethic is a secular development that set in with the eighteenth century. Robertson writes, “The doctrine of the ‘calling’ did not breed a spirit of capitalism. The spirit of capitalism was responsible for a gradual modification and attrition of the Puritan doctrine; and this attrition had barely

begun in England before the Restoration” (p. 27).

⁵⁷The Catechizing of Families [Hill, Society and Puritanism, p. 139]. Luther had been equally vivid on the subject of idleness: “God... does not want me to sit at home, to loaf, to commit matters to God, and to wait till a fried chicken flies into my mouth. That would be tempting God” (Exposition of Exod. 13:18 [Plass, 3:1496]).

⁵⁸Works [George, p. 130]. Dalby Thomas believed that “only industrious and laborious people are the riches of any nation” (An Historical Account of the Rise and Growth of the West India Colonies [Hill, Society and Puritanism, p. 136]).

⁵⁹Hill, Society and Puritanism, p.139.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 124.

⁶¹A Christian Directory [Tawney, p. 262]. On the subject of viewing the necessity to work as a command of God, Calvin had written, “How few are to be found who, were it left to their own choice, would desire to live by their own labor.... The Prophet therefore bids the fearers of God be content with ... the assurance that having God for their foster-father they shall be suitably maintained by the labor of their own hands” (Commentary on Ps. 128:2).

⁶²The Beatitudes, p. 257. Richard Bernard wrote that to refuse to work is “contrary to God’s injunction that men should labor, contrary to the practice of all the godly.... Let him or they who-soever, which think themselves religious indeed, make conscience to take pains in some calling and beware of living idly” (Ruth’s Recompense [Hill, Society and Puritanism, p. 140]).

⁶³Works [George, p. 132]. Luther had the same idea: “How much more perfect [work] would have been in that garden in the state of innocence. But it is appropriate here also to point out that man was created not for leisure but for work, even in the state of innocence” (Exposition of Gen. 2:14 [Plass, 3:1494]).

⁶⁴Observations of Knowledge and Virtue [Reinitz, p. 66].

⁶⁵A Christian Directory [Kitch, p. 156].

⁶⁶Quoted in Tawney, p. 245.

⁶⁷Quoted by Miller, Seventeenth Century, p. 44. Baxter held the same view: to neglect work “and say, ‘I will pray and meditate,’ is as if your servant should refuse your greatest work, and tie

himself to some lesser, easy part” (A Christian Directory [Tawney, p. 242]).

⁶⁸The Saint’s Qualification [George, p. 172].

⁶⁹The Anatomy of the Abuses in England [Tawney, p. 216].

⁷⁰Quoted in Tawney, p. 238. Such self-accusations became common among the Puritans. Foster rightly claims that as long as the Puritans “continued to denounce themselves, as long as they were sure they had deserted their ideal, they were faithful to it. When they stopped bemoaning their worldliness and no longer felt a sense of guilt, at least one part of the Protestant ethic had finally given way to the spirit of capitalism” (p. 125).

⁷¹The Tradesman’s Calling [Tawney, p. 244].

⁷²Quoted in Miller, Seventeenth Century, p. 42. Luther had a similar ideal of the golden mean: “The right middle way is not to be lazy and indolent or to rely on one’s own work and doing but to work and act and yet expect all success from God alone” (Exposition of Ps. 147:13 [Plass, 3:1495]).

⁷³Quoted in Miller, Seventeenth Century, p. 42.

⁷⁴Evans, J. M., (1968). *Paradise Lost and the Genesis Tradition*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 249.

⁷⁵*Paradise Lost*, bk. 4, lines 618-20. Max Weber draws an interesting contrast between the ending of the Catholic poet Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (which ends with the protagonist transfixed by the beatific vision of God in heaven) and the ending of Milton’s Puritan epic (which ends with Adam and Eve leaving Paradise with the world “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” (p. 87-88).



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