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**Faith and Work:
From Jesus to the Reformation.**

by

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When it comes to explaining, "What is the meaning and purpose of everyday work?", Christians have come up with a lot of different answers during the last two thousand years. From the beginning Christians discovered themselves wrestling with two sharply contrasting views of everyday work in the cultures that their faith was birthed in.

1. Greeks.

In the Greek world work was considered to be a curse. Aristotle said that to be unemployed was good fortune because it allowed a person to participate in political life and contemplation. Today its probably

their fishing nets to follow him. But there are also examples of them continuing to fish at times. Certainly he gave no general call for all Christians to give up everyday work and much of his teaching drew on themes from the world of everyday work without any self-consciousness or apologies. Paul also emphasizes a positive view of work, commending all Christians to continue in their work and to work well. And he plainly continued in his trade as a tentmaker during his church planting ministry. This would seem to be the general Christian pattern for the first century after the Apostles.

4. A Distortion?

Gradually the Church Fathers began to draw more heavily on Greek and Roman motifs in their theology and the more positive view of work gave way to a much lower view. This is reflected in the view of Eusebius who wrote about his doctrine of 2 lives about AD300:

He says:

Two ways of life were thus given by the law of Christ to His Church. The one is above nature, and beyond common human living; it admits not marriage, child-bearing, property nor the possession of wealth, but 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 man to join in pure nuptials, and to produce children ... it allows them to have minds for farming, for trade, and the other more secular interests as well as for religion ... a kind of secondary grade of piety is attributed to them.

In a similar way Augustine distinguished between the 'active life' (*vita activa*) and the 'contemplative life' (*vita contemplativa*). While both kinds of life were good, and Augustine had praise for the work of farmers, craftsmen and merchants, the contemplative life was of a higher order. At times it might be necessary to follow the active life but, according to Augustine, wherever possible, one should choose the other: 'The one life is loved, the other endured ... The obligations of charity make us undertake righteous business (*negotium*)' but, 'if no one lays this burden upon us we should give ourselves up to leisure (*otium*) to the perception and contemplation of truth'.

This pattern shaped much of subsequent Christian thinking. Different interpretations have been offered to explain this.

According to Barnette, 'the Biblical view of calling in which every man is summoned to salvation and service without a basic distinction between "clergy" and "laity", is the pattern which prevailed into second century Christianity'. However, during the latter half of the second century, there developed an official clergy with Bishops possessing the sole right to ordain and rule the Church. And by the time Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, the distinction between clergy and laity was fairly well established. With the establishment of celibacy for the clergy in the 11th century this demarcation was complete and the laity were relegated to second-class status in the church (Barnette 1965: 39-42). Barnette attributes the bifurcation of calling into sacred and secular categories and the subsequent subordination of the laity to the creation of a professional priesthood and consequent loss of the New Testament view of the priesthood of all believers. This interpretation also sees the consolidation of spiritual power and privilege in the hands of the clergy, with the associated elevation of their spiritual status, reflected in the way the

the hands was not only allowed, it was actually demanded. However, its function was to ensure that idleness was avoided. And with the exception of the reading and writing of devotional literature, it was limited to purely mechanical processes which would not disturb a person's ability to hold fast to thoughts of God for every moment of life.

Because this also meant letting go of all other attachments, including friends and relatives, there arose a new consciousness of a personal calling from God to adopt this radically different, more spiritual, lifestyle. Hence biblical stories like the call of Abraham and the rich young ruler were used to illustrate the challenge and opportunity that God presented to a monk. Novices in their initiation were told that God had called them and made them worthy to be disciples of Christ. They were admonished to live a life worthy of this calling and only the monk was considered to have a *klesis* (calling) or *vocation* and monasticism became a *professio*. This latter term coming into regular use, not merely recalling the usual sense of *professio* as a trade or occupation, but emphasising that for the monk a vow or solemn promise defined their whole lives. But this seizure of the title *vocatio* by monasticism meant that there was no opportunity for a proper religious evaluation of secular occupations to develop, nor for the word *vocatio* to be applied to them. There is no passage in the writing of the early Fathers where *vocatio* means anything like occupation.

5. The Middle Ages.

During the Middle Ages a tension developed between the calling-consciousness of the monk and that self-consciousness which resulted from economic and political advances. Benedict laid down his *Rule* for a balanced life, including manual labour, intellectual exercise and prayer, in the sixth century. However all this activity is directed to the *Opus Dei* or 'Work of God' and the place of manual labour is clearly secondary. Nevertheless, a more positive evaluation of manual labour is plainly evident: 'Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore the brothers should be occupied according to schedule in either manual labour or holy reading ... They are truly monks when they must live by manual labour, as did our fathers and the Apostles (Benedict 1975: 86)'. And this Benedictine influence had a powerful civilising effect:

Previous to the institution of Monasticism labour had been regarded as the symbol of slavery and serfdom, but St. Benedict and his followers taught in the West that lesson of free labour which had first been inculcated by the fathers of the desert. Wherever the monks went, those who were not employed in preaching tilled the ground; thus whilst some sowed in pagan soils the seeds of the Christian faith, others transformed barren wastes and virgin forests into fruitful fields and verdant meadows. This principle of labour was a powerful instrument in the hands of the monastic pioneers, for it attracted to them the common people who learned from the monasteries the secrets of organised work, agriculture, the arts and sciences, and the principles of true government. (Alston 1907: 456)

However, Benedict also warns about the dangers of mastery in art and trade. He urges that any thoughts of pride or accomplishment must be suppressed and denounces greed and selling things at secular market prices. It is these reservations of Benedict's that cause Holl to conclude that Weber goes too far in maintaining that monasticism, by increasingly getting involved in scientific and economic tasks and relating

Yet, although the professions doing manual labour have been drawn into the order of providence, this does not mean they stand on the same moral and religious level as the higher professions. Even the most progressive medieval theologians who take the world and its work seriously and want to identify every human concern in the overarching order of God's creation (eg. Aquinas) seem to agree that, while the active have an indispensable service to render, and a service ordered by God, they still do not have a calling in the true sense of the word. The states closest to perfection remain those of the nun, friar and monk.

This is not to suggest that work was rejected. On the contrary, idleness was condemned and work was acclaimed. But although people must work and not dissipate their lives through sloth, religious energy should not be focused on a person's occupation unless they have a religious vocation. Hence the high calling, the truly religious vocation, is one of contemplation, and other work, especially manual work, has lesser derivative value.

6. The German Mystics

It is the German mystics who first push beyond the monastic understanding of vocation. This is because Eckhart and Tauler and others recognise a call of God which comes to a person completely independent of monasticism or entrance into an order. They are even willing to apply to the laity the highest title of monasticism, that of 'the friend of God', and, in spite of their fascination with the mystical, with all its joy in suffering and insistence upon that which is inward, they also acknowledge that at times external work is more useful than internal. Hence Meister Eckhart can say, 'If one were in an ecstasy, even if it were as high as that of Paul, and knew that beside him there was an infirm man who needed a bowl of soup from him, it would be better for him to abandon his ecstasy and serve the needy man'.

This is also demonstrated in the way that Eckhart and Tauler deal with the familiar biblical story of Mary and Martha. Medieval authors generally used this text to assert the superiority of the *vita contemplativa*. Eckhart and Tauler however take a much more sympathetic view of Martha's predicament. In his sermon on 'The Contemplative and Active Life' Eckhart uses the word 'calling' to refer to Martha's activity:

...One (means) ... without which I cannot get into God, is work, vocation or calling in time ... He who works in the light rises straight up to God without let or hindrance: his light is his calling, and his calling is his light. This was the case with Martha ... Temporal work is as good as any communing with God, for it joins us as straightly to God as the best that can happen to us, barring the vision of God in his naked nature. [Such works are] just as good and unite us as closely to God as all Mary Magdalene's idle longings.

In his sermon on 'Vocation' Tauler maintains Jesus rebuked Martha '... not because of the things she did, for these were good and sanctified; but because of the ways in which she did them, with too much worry and anxiety'.

Eckhart also maintains that it is the nature and purpose of our occupations to lead us to God: 'We are brought forth into time in order that our sensible worldly occupations may lead us nearer and make us like unto God'. 'Not everyone is called to God in the same way' is how Eckhart translates 1 Cor 7:20. Even the

Here for the first time we discover the thought of a secular calling and the possibility that a person can experience the highest ideal of the nearness of God in the practice of secular work. However, it is still a very restricted view of secular calling because in the end the mystics never really dispute the superiority of monasticism, although some of Tauler's thinking is starting to move in that direction. A monk who completes a genuine conversion undoubtedly stands at the pinnacle of spiritual achievement. For the mystics, suffering is better than service, and work in the calling is more renunciation, more martyr-like living, than joyful service. Diligence in secular work is called for, so that a person can return as quickly as possible to inner contemplation. The mystics still consider themselves friends of God in a special way. They consider themselves 'noblemen', a nobility set over against the common heap of ordinary Christians. Hence it is still the monastic ideal that dominates. And there is still no hint of a universal priesthood to which each individual is called.

But, in spite of this, the German mystics clearly did contribute to raising the religious evaluation of secular work in the last centuries of the Middle Ages. And sermons from Dominican preachers from the latest part of this period show that 1 Corinthians 7:20 begins to have a greater influence in shaping thinking, as the words 'vocation', 'calling' and 'religious' (which previously had been used only within monasticism) begin to be applied to those who work faithfully in the secular positions in which God has placed them.

So by the time of Martin Luther the word 'vocation' or 'calling' in the sense of class or profession, was already in general usage. But this is not to suggest that the division of labour which emphasises that some care for the necessities of life while others pray for them was overthrown so early. The contemplative life was still considered superior to the active. Mary chose the better way, even if Martha is indispensable. The monk's prayers do result in the granting of a higher level of blessedness in eternity. Clearly, despite the skirmishes with its Renaissance critics, the ideal of Monasticism was still flourishing and dominant when Luther came on the scene.

7. Martin Luther.

Martin Luther's life is the story of an ongoing struggle with the meaning of vocation. He entered the monastery with a strong feeling of a personal calling. Luther was conscious that God had encountered him and commanded him to embrace the monastic life.

However, once in the monastery, Luther was forced to examine the monastic ideal. Surely there is only one will of God and it is binding on every person. And there is only one level of relationship with God. A person either has God and has God completely, or they do not have God and therefore stand under God's wrath. The way to God is not through some mystical experience but attention to the clear word of God that shakes the conscience. It is faith which takes this call of God seriously and leads to a true and secure relationship with God.

Even before 1517, in his lectures on Romans, Luther's thinking is clearly moving in this direction, as he uses the example of Abraham to emphasise the sort of faith that needs imitating. Previously the example of Abraham leaving his home in response to God's call had been used to support the monastic ideal. But Luther emphasises that a calling like that of Abraham's is available not only for the monk but for all

housewife performed in sincere faith. It was only later, in 1521, that Luther condemned monasticism. And this was prompted by the suggestion that by their vows monks offered something to God that moved along a more certain way to salvation.

For Luther, with his emphasis on justification by faith alone, this suggestion was abhorrent. As a result he dismissed belief in the special calling of the monk and started to assert that all Christians, in so far as they belong to a class or profession, should feel themselves called to that vocation. And the duties which this vocation involves are to be accepted as the command of God directed to them.

So it is Luther who first uses this terminology previously only connected with a priestly or monastic calling, and applies it to all worldly duties. He was emphasizing that being a husband, wife, peasant, or magistrate was also a duty assigned by God. No longer is there something uniquely spiritual about the traditional priestly estate:

All Christian men are priests, the women priestesses, be they young or old, masters or servants, mistresses or maids, learned or unlearned. Here there are no differences unless faith be unequal ... Therefore the estate of a priest is nothing else in Christendom than an office...Hence it follows from this that layman, priest, prince, bishop and as they say, spiritual and worldly, have no other difference at bottom than that of office and work, not of estate, for they are all of the spiritual estate, truly priests, bishops, popes.

For Luther, the religious aura which surrounded the clerical vocation now permeates all worldly tasks. To work in one's estate is a divine calling. A person's 'estate' is their divine appointment to serve God by fulfilling the duties of the office that this estate requires. If some object that they have no calling, Luther replies, 'how is it possible that you should not be called? You will also be in some estate. You will be a husband, or wife, or child, or daughter, or maid'. Hence, 'everyone should take care that he remains in his estate, looks to himself, realises his calling, and in it serves God and keeps his command.

For Luther all work is understood to be divinely appointed, not just some particular offices. Everyone is called. No calling is more spiritual than any other. Work is part of God's creation. Work was instituted not just because of sin, but even before the fall. So Adam 'had work to do, that is ... plant the garden, cultivate and look after it'. Work is honourable and a blessing. Work has fallen under the curse of sin and so is wearying and disappointing and involves toil and trouble. But the Christian sees work beyond the curse. And a person is blessed when they work industriously.

Althaus summarises Luther's view in this way:

Work in our vocation or station is our appropriate service to God. Since God has commanded this work, it certainly pleases him. As a result Luther rejects any piety that tries to find especially "holy" works ... Let each "fulfill his duties in his vocation" - then he will have enough and more than enough to do ... If we take that requirement seriously we have neither time, nor space, nor energy to seek out special works for ourselves. There is no special outward characteristic that distinguishes the Christian's activity in his vocation from that of other men...What he does is Christian because he does it in the certainty that God has called him to serve his neighbour and that God is pleased with what he is doing.

Vocation is not the Gospel and does not give us heaven. Luther is most concerned that people should not place ultimate confidence in the work of their own hands. There is a marked difference between the certainty that our work matters to God and is part of Christian discipleship and the certainty of our salvation which only the Gospel can give. Luther separates the heavenly and earthly (eternal and temporal) realms so that work is not over valued as a means of salvation or eternal identity, significance or status. While Luther speaks about God's continuing work of creation through a person's work in their various estates, he also makes plain this only refers to a person's co-operation in response to God's initiative in the earthly realm (Wingren 1958: 17-18).

For Luther the 'religious' quest is over - there is no need to work to earn salvation any more: 'God has taken care of my salvation....The Christian no longer works to seek his own advantage or salvation ... what is done is done just to please God (Miller 1953: 119-120)'.

How is this loving service of God expressed? Firstly, as a loyal member of the church, the community of the justified, and secondly, through serving God in the orders of creation, the family, the political order and the economic order of property and labour. The work of citizenship expresses both love of neighbour and service of the commonwealth. Whatever is necessary for social health is good work for the Christian. Ian Hart concludes his study of Luther's view of work with this summary:

The most obvious and most important element in Luther's overall teaching about work is the high valuation he placed upon it: the life God wants most people to lead is the life of daily work, and therefore such a life is holy and sacred and fully pleasing to God - in no way of less value in God's eyes than a life spent in prayer or church work. His other important thrusts were that each person should regard their job as a calling and stay in it; that menial work is of equal value to work more highly regarded by men; that one's work must serve one's ... neighbour; and his concern for honesty and fair dealing in one's work. (Hart 1995a: 51)

From this point on, in Protestant circles, the word vocation signifies something quite different to the meaning it held throughout the history of Monasticism. Monasticism suggested the monk alone had a true calling through pursuit of the contemplative life. But Luther ends up maintaining that the only true calling of God must be realised within the everyday world and its work and hence it is monasticism which has no genuine calling. Not that Luther secularises calling the way the Enlightenment would do later, as if God's will is done just through fulfilling the simple secular demands of a job. Rather, Luther was attempting to renew the original monastic ideal that God is to be held present in every moment of life. But, in opposition to monasticism, Luther maintains this is most fully experienced where believers participate most fully in everyday life with all its pressures and disappointments and struggles. A truly moral life can only be achieved in the consonance between the inner call, which a person receives in the Gospel, and the voice which forces its way through to us from our circumstances and what they demand of us. And this is no longer true just for those who hold high office, such as the statesperson, but for every office and service when it is exercised genuinely as a calling, i.e. as an office assigned by God and therefore to be carried out by God's Spirit. Luther elevated the status of the everyday discipleship of ordinary Christians, including their daily work.

propose this as an iron rule, but only as a caution to prevent undue 'restlessness' and 'fickleness'. Moreover, the way Calvin uses the word 'adopted' with regard to the calling a person occupies in his commentary on 1st Corinthians 7:20,24 seems to imply a definite choice. For Calvin, a Christian might, with 'proper reason', change a calling and choose another. Calvin encourages Christians to examine the social consequences of their work. He challenges them to seek out a truly Christian vocation. He is explicit about a person's right to change occupations. Here are the beginnings of an understanding of vocation which suggests a certain voluntarism in deciding on the Lord's calling. It is a freer conception of the nature of callings.

Another development in Calvin's understanding of vocation is his stress on the utility of callings. He talks about the 'advantage', 'utility', 'profit', and 'fruit' of Christian works. This is not an expression of ambition for worldly success, but rather Calvin's sense that things of importance are always for something: 'It is certain that a calling would never be approved by God that is not socially useful and that does not redound to the profit of all (Little 1970: 60).' This is underlined in the way that Calvin exegetes the parable of the talents (Luke 10:11-27):

Before Calvin the talents of gold, which one should use to glorify God, were seen as spiritual gifts and graces that God had bestowed on Christians. Calvin made a revolutionary change in interpretation when he understood the talents in terms of one's calling and in terms of people's 'talents': the particular instance he considered was trading. Calvin stressed the historical nature of these gifts and talents and in doing so helped shape the modern meaning of the word 'talent'. (Marshall 1993: 30)

Accompanying this awareness of usefulness is an emphasis on activity. Calvin stresses that the contemplative life is not better. He stresses that God is very active. God is 'not the vain, indolent, slumbering omnipotence which sophists feign, but vigilant, efficacious, energetic and ever active'. According to Calvin, God put us here to work and 'the nature of the kingdom of Christ is that it every day grows and improves'. And Calvin is clear that this activity is not restricted to the church or to pious duties, but encompasses the whole of creation. Its purpose is '... to establish the heavenly reign of God upon the earth'. Hence Calvin's emphasis on utility and activity and the purposeful nature of God's work in the world, give his doctrine of callings quite a different ethos to that of Luther. While both emphasize the importance of quietly accepting the labour and duties that go with one's estate and abiding in one's calling, Calvin's approach to the understanding of callings is much more aggressive and busy. Calvin challenges believers 'to work, to perform, to develop, to progress, to change, to choose, to be active, and to overcome until the day of their death or the return of their Lord'. He writes as one who is eager to apply his theology to the realities of life in a bustling city.

For Luther the primary reason God gives a Christian a vocation in the world is to encourage a life of loving service, whereas for Calvin the reason is more related to the proper ordering of human life, to maintain order in response to the threat of confusion and chaos and to transform a corrupt status quo to reflect God's purposes. Therefore, Calvin's view of vocation encourages a degree of self-consciousness to examine and calculate which actions are most proper and likely to prove the most effective, whereas Luther's approach provides more room for spontaneity borne of the dynamic of love which has its source in God. Calvin sees

followers must serve in the world, but largely accepting the status quo. Calvin's followers were called to transform the world as Christian activists. The extent of the longer term social impact of these differences between Luther and Calvin is still being debated. Also up for debate is the extent to which we are likely to further the unfinished business of the Reformation in our own day. Unquestionably, serious recognition of the ministry of all believers still demands urgent attention, especially as it applies to ministry in daily life.

QUESTIONS

1. In what ways do you see the differences between Greek and Jewish understandings of the significance of daily work still impacting on our understanding today?
3. For most of medieval church history the 'contemplative' life was considered more spiritual than the 'active' life. What do you think about this? Are some sorts of work today considered more spiritual than others?
 1. Luther and Calvin attempted to forge a strong connection between the daily work of Christians and their Christian calling. Did the Reformation succeed in this, or are there other moves that still need to be made?
4. What have you learned from this study about the place and meaning of daily work in the life of a disciple of Jesus?

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