

# Christians *in the* Workplace

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**Faith and Work:  
From the Puritans to the Present**

by

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For most of Christian history up to the Reformation the pursuit of the contemplative life was considered more spiritual and superior to the more mundane world of daily work. However, this evaluation was challenged by Luther and Calvin during the Reformation (see Faith and

*remains that this view of vocation, as developed in Puritanism, provided a very convenient rationale for the leaders of the capitalistic enterprise.*  
(Heiges 1984: 60)

Weber [1930] maintains that Protestantism, by legitimising and imposing an ethic of individual rational achievement in this world not just on an elite but on all, or at least the great majority of a population, was a contributing factor in the emergence of a capitalist economy. His work on India and China seems to bring some confirmation that religious factors hampered a similar development in the East. According to Weber a 'rational capitalistic' organisation of industrial labour was never known until the transition from the Middle Ages to modern times. Weber identifies what he calls the 'spirit' of modern capitalism and describes the 'protestant ethic', which he says preceded and gave impetus to the spirit of capitalism. This protestant ethic was particularly developed in Calvinism and was centered around a view of calling - the idea that faithfully following one's job or trade is the focus for a person's obedience to God. In this calling the world is accepted and sanctified and hence religious energy and asceticism, hitherto confined to a monastic expression, now find their expression in the world of everyday work. Thus people are encouraged to pursue their work diligently and systematically, but without seeking to live luxuriously. Weber maintains that Calvinists felt diligence (and perhaps success) in one's calling was proof (at least to oneself) of a person's election. This created a religious motivation for seeking salvation primarily through immersion in one's worldly vocation. One's faith is proven in worldly activity. Weber does not say that Protestants advocated money making. He acknowledges numerous examples of Puritans condemning the pursuit of money and goods. What he does attempt to show is that the 'protestant ethic' of vocation and worldly asceticism helped to shape the later, more directly acquisitive, virtues of the spirit of capitalism: 'It opened the way to a career in business, especially for the most devout and ethically rigorous people'. Weber does not argue that Calvinists promoted capitalism, but rather that they unwittingly smoothed its path.

Although Weber was not the first scholar to express such views, his work was the first systematically organised argument. Weber's writings provoked a storm of criticism from scholars who leapt into the debate from a variety of angles and with a variety of intents (see Little 1970: 226-237). This debate is still going on

Marshall notes that in England it was the Puritans who consistently led the way in

transformed into a disciplined vocation. The nature, purpose and priorities of labouring were redefined.(Marshall 1993:167-168).

However, with the passing of time, it seems that the Puritan impulse was weakened sufficiently for the Anglican view of the separation of calling from religion to become dominant again in England after the Restoration. With this weakening sense of the distinctive sanctification of work Christianity clearly begins to play a much less significant role in shaping the realities of economic life. As secularising tendencies, combined with wars and revolutions, began to wear them down, the Puritans retreated to a place outside the world, or to times taken apart for piety in the workshop. They kept their worldly callings, but now the world began to dictate what was expected in those callings. According to Marshall, 'Puritanism began to decay even as certain of its virtues triumphed'. At the same time Puritanism was influencing the creation of new economic attitudes, the ground beneath it was being eroded. After tracing these developments, Marshall concludes that there was a correlation between Protestantism, especially the new view of everyday work as religious vocation, and the rationalising of work, and that the move that resulted 'was similar to what Max Weber describes as the "spirit of capitalism", an economic asceticism increasingly devoid of religious heart'(Marshall 1993: 169).

Marshall maintains that Weber is correct in his suggestion that Calvinists unwittingly smoothed the path of capitalism, although he dismisses some of Weber's other observations, such as Weber's proposition that it was Calvinist doubts of predestination and election which led to ascetic, restless work habits driven by an attempt to reassure an uncertain soul.

Marshall also criticizes Weber for being unclear about the degree to which the 'protestant ethic' was the direct production of Protestantism, or alternatively, would be better portrayed as a corruption of Protestantism. Weber accepts that 'Protestant asceticism was in turn influenced by the totality of social conditions, especially economic'. He also writes about a 'gradual modification of the doctrines of Calvin' and that 'Calvin's theology must be distinguished from Calvinism', but the relationship remains vague. This is not unimportant because it is precisely on this question that R. H. Tawney departs from Weber. Tawney maintains that it was the deterioration of Calvinism that produced the 'protestant ethic' (Tawney 1926: 313). Marshall's study supports this.

Hart maintains that the Puritan stress on the significance of work and the virtues and vices

Ultimately, this doctrine of calling becomes more prominent in American Puritanism, and it is in America that talk of 'calling' and 'vocation' have continued in popular usage (Mackenzie 1997:121).

Marshall and Tawney agree that, while Puritanism criticized greed and the accumulation of wealth, it also promoted a form of thrift and hard work that encouraged economic advancement, even though it sought to place limits on this. This leads Tawney and Marshall to conclude that Puritanism was a weak link in Christian resistance to the development of a self-interested economic culture, although it was by no means the principal dynamic in this development. It is not hard to see how a theology that emphasised a calling, taught the equality of callings, and elevated and advocated every day work as a direct service to God, would attract those who sought economic change and advancement through work. Tawney also links the development of the philosophy of individualism with the roots of the doctrine of calling. But Marshall rejects this on the grounds that in fact the relationship between calling and work was stressed most strongly by those who were most critical of anything resembling self-seeking because their views of social relationship also emphasised strongly the importance of service and stewardship. Overall, Marshall concludes that, 'There was a distinctively Protestant ethic, though not quite Weber's (Marshall 1993: 174).'

We may still debate the extent to which the corruption of the doctrine of vocation in the interests of money-getting which took place from the middle of the 17th century is a degeneration which results from elements in the Puritan doctrine itself, or is a corruption of it, but, whatever the case, it is clear that from the later part of the 17th century the old restraints on money-getting were corroded and the 'calling' doctrine was being forced to adapt to accommodate the interests of industrial and commercial acquisitiveness. While part of this pressure can be put down simply to human greed and selfishness, it is also true that industrialism was creating new forms of property and consequently new forms of work relations, which the older formulations of doctrine were unable to address. The older Puritan formulations were shaped by a proprietor class and by a clergy whose class-affiliation was with the proprietors. The code of the calling laid a uniform burden of hard work on both employer and employee. But the significant difference was that while the employer reaped the benefits of this the employees did not. Theologically this difference was considered insignificant since the hope of heaven and fire of hell burned equally for both. But employees were growing tired of postponing all thoughts of reward until the hereafter. Puritan stability could not maintain itself in the face of the growth of this more aggressively acquisitive capitalism on the one hand and the search for simple justice on the

turning point in the history of work. So sweeping were the changes that resulted that it is now difficult for people even to imagine work arrangements significantly different from those which we have inherited under the regimen of industrial society. The self-sufficiency of the traditional household gave way to dependence on wage labour, which had previously been despised and strongly resisted. The locus of economic work moved from the household to the factory.

While initially the hardship of the times required the involvement of women and children in factory work, as it still does in many contexts where industrialisation is still developing, eventually a family division of labour was created in which men undertook waged labour while women performed unpaid domestic work. Illich (1981) refers to this unpaid work which is the necessary complement of industrial production, as shadow work. He argues that this shadow work led to the domestic enclosure of women and to a form of alienation which, although distinct from that created by wage labour, was no less severe in its effects. Factory workers were also subjected to new patterns of authority, new work disciplines and new attitudes to time. Kumar (1984) notes that factory workers in 19th century Europe worked 70 and 80 hour weeks. It took 100 years for them to return to working hours equivalent to the guildsmen who were their medieval forebears. This period was also marked by a significant change in the relationship between workers and machines. As workers shifted from being the subject of the production process to adapting to the demands of large scale machines the character of economic work was drastically transformed.

Alexander Miller describes some of these challenges:

*By the end of the 18th century, the strong Puritan discipline had been emasculated in the interests of unregulated money-getting and adapted to become the ideology of a predatory industrialism, while the workers whom it had tutored to obedience were taken out of the patriarchal household and put to work at the machines, machines whose authority was to become as absolute as that of the old Puritan proprietors, and a good deal less considerate. It was the beginning of an enslavement. (Miller 1953: 126)*

An observer says:

*While the engine runs, the people must work - men, women and children are*

was not just an intellectual failure, but far more. And the contemporary church inherits this disaster. It has never really regained the ability to speak decisively to the concerns of workers in theory or in practice.

In part Evangelicalism attempted to redeem the position by importing a measure of meaning and community into working-class life; but the Methodist leaders ended up at odds with the Chartists and so, according to Miller,

*while the "chapel" produced religious and political forces which mitigated the worst effects of industrialism (notice the connection between chapel and the industrial organisations of labour), yet in another aspect of it both the evangelical and modern missionary movements represent a diversion - a "spiritualisation" if you like - of the Reformation drive for the provisional sanctification of secular life. (Miller 1953: 127)*

Historians still debate the extent to which Methodism ought to be accorded a positive role in the origins and development of working class movements. Most agree that Methodism at least taught the labouring classes a form of protest and leadership and organizing skills, but it would seem that organized political protest came from the radical fringes of Methodism rather than its heart. There was no strongly critical social ethic to inspire the masses to challenge the status quo.

It is significant to note that William Carey, who would help to launch the modern missionary movement in 1792, was encouraged to become a cobbler because his father feared the dire effects of work at the cotton-mill. Already it seems people were despairing that British industrial life would be responsive to Christian or humane concerns. Yet Carey and others discerned the possibility of responsiveness to the Christian message among people in pre-industrial societies overseas.

Thus, at the same time the foreign missionary movement was advancing during the 19th century, the church on the home front was losing its influence in societies becoming ever more industrialised. To workers who were reacting to the tyranny of machines and striving to keep their humanity intact, the church seemed to offer only well worn traditional responses. The church denounced attempts to escape through debauchery or revolution. But it failed to proclaim any other insightful or compelling interpretation of events from a Christian perspective that offered hope. Certainly there were some voices for Christian

evangelicalism, but for the manual worker it scarcely survives at all'. Miller makes this statement in the context of pleading for a critical restatement of the doctrine of vocation as it comes from Luther through Calvin and Puritanism. He acknowledges that the received doctrine was directed too exclusively to the relationship between a particular person and their work. The social matrix in which the work was done was taken for granted and assumed to be both wholesome and self-regulating. It was assumed that if each person worked well everyone would profit. Any warnings were directed at individual motivation and not at social issues. Proprietors were warned against the dangers of greed and ostentation. Workers were warned against sloth and envy. But the relationship between work patterns and developing social relationships and issues of social justice were not explored. Nor were these connected with faith issues or spiritual concerns. Also the high ethic of responsibility which was given its last influential formulation by the Puritan divines was developed in a way that only made sense to those in professional and middle-class occupations, and even then was interpreted much too narrowly. The doctrine of vocation expressed in this way made no sense to the industrial worker. It implied a measure of responsibility and freedom of choice and public influence that few workers enjoyed. Hence it would be developments through the thinking of Hegel and Marx that would connect more strongly with the everyday realities of working life for industrial labourers.

### **3. Hegel and Marx.**

Hegel's *Early Theological Writings* (1795-1799) date from the same period as Carey's initiation of the modern missionary movement. Although Germany had not developed industrially as rapidly as England, it is still worth noting that at the same time as the Protestant churches backed away from the challenge of interpreting the situation of people in industry this challenge was accepted by Hegel (a Lutheran turned philosopher) and then by Marx.

Hegel criticises Luther for the 'senseless, sophistic reasoning' which leads him to say in *Christian Liberty* that 'the soul will not be touched or affected if the body is maltreated, and the person subjected to another's power'. On the contrary, Hegel maintains, the subjection of individual workers to the tyranny of industrialism and the expropriation of their labour-power by the mechanical processes of the market represents a deep offence against the key centre of a person's personality. It is 'soul-destroying'; it robs life of meaning and purpose; it destroys the possibility of a true vocation. On this point Marx clearly develops Hegel's



Miller concludes his discussion of the challenge that Hegel and Marx represent with these words:

*what we have in the Hegel-Marx analysis of man-in-industrial-society is a refraction of the Reformation, lacking however the final dimension of forgiveness....This alienation of the worker from his work and therefore from himself is a situation which Reformation theology ought to have been able to understand and to interpret in its own more profound terms. It ought to have been able to relate the dimension of nature and society (which was the pre-occupation of Marxism) to the more ultimate dimension of forgiveness and justification by faith, but the implications at the secular and political level would have been revolutionary, and for this the Church was not ready. Nineteenth century German theology, which was confronted directly by Marxism, was not sufficiently governed by the doctrine of justification to spell out an intelligible relation of justification to justice. And it is clear that the later development of the Social Gospel in America was mis-directed by 19th century German theology into the shallows of a "Kingdom of God" progressivism which could not deal with the problem of the alienation of industrial man because it was informed neither by the full insights of the Reformation nor by the radical Marxist analysis of capitalist industrialism. In any event, in spite of the Copec movement in England, Rauschenbusch in America and Ragaz in Europe, by the present generation the church was without an adequate doctrine of vocation and had resigned itself to mitigating the worst excesses of industrialism by the doctrine of stewardship.*  
(Miller 1953: 129)

#### **4. Twentieth Century.**

A survey of twentieth century Christian responses to these issues would require more space than we have and can be found elsewhere (eg. Mackenzie 1997,:31-123). But what we can say is that a great variety of different theologies of work were developed during the last century. It was a period of rapid change in which work patterns underwent a succession of transformations. In just the last fifty years, for example, from the war economy, through the post-war boom and the Cold War, the confused and questioning Sixties and Seventies, and the pluralism of the Eighties and Nineties, changing economic circumstances demanded different responses and new theological perspectives. The variety of different biblical

is recognised that the experience of work is a difficult struggle for many people in our world. And at a time when most people are working longer hours in an increasingly competitive and stressful context we need to be able to confront those struggles with a realistic faith. We also need help to maintain a healthy balance between paid employment, family responsibilities, domestic work, community involvement and church work. And we need a reminder of the importance of the 'rest' and leisure elements in our faith. As a result theological reflection by twentieth century theologians has drawn on a whole range of themes from the past in attempting to bring forth a new synthesis with a more wholistic look about it, in order to speak to the wide range of different experiences of work that comprise life today, as we enter a new millenium.

### **5. The Way Forward?**

For twenty centuries Christian understandings of the relationship between faith and work have tended to oscillate between two opposite extremes. The first separates faith and daily work and clearly differentiates between 'sacred' and 'secular' work. It elevates the status of 'spiritual ministries' compared with 'secular jobs'. We see this in the way that the concept of calling has become more closely associated with the work of people who sense the 'call' of God to enter ordained pastoral ministry or missionary service. It is commonly accepted that these forms of Christian service involve a special 'calling' from God and are higher forms of Christian service. Christians who want to do serious business with God are inclined or pushed in that direction. And it tends to be people who fulfil these roles whose 'ministries' are given most prominence in the church. This does echo the sort of spiritualization of vocation that dominated the pre-Reformation period.

On the other hand, at other times daily work has become idolized. So that a Christian fulfills their Christian calling just by succeeding in their job. It is this tendency that encourages workaholism from the person who is employed, while at the same time depriving the unemployed person of worth, when employment is seen as essential for a true vocation and for personal fulfillment. When defining our identity and feeling good about that depends on us being able to answer the question "What do you do?" clearly in terms of our employment because identity has become so closely associated with having an identifiable job, we are headed for trouble. And it would seem that both Capitalism and Marxism encourage us to find salvation in this way through the work of our own hands.

One extreme divorces faith from connection with daily work, while the other marries them

'New Age' associations (eg. Ferguson 1980). If we want to resurrect the Christian concept of 'vocation' or 'calling' it will need to be rehabilitated and given Christian content.

(b) Sunday-Monday dualism: The world of the marketplace is seen as 'secular' and depraved: the world of the church as 'spiritual' and divine. They are two unconnected worlds. In some ways this is reinforced by the way faith has become individualised as a private and personal leisure time pursuit that is considered out of place in the public sphere of a pluralistic and secular society. At the same time inside the church there seems to be a struggle going on between those who want it to be a place of escape from everyday realities and those who want it to engage more seriously with everyday concerns.

(c) Workaholism and unemployment are not only problems because of the way that faith and work have become fused ideologically, but also because the prevailing culture around us has tended to measure worth more and more in economic terms and proven productivity. When the pressures to become more productive are constantly being cranked up we end up with a majority of people overemployed while a significant minority remain underemployed. Both represent serious problems which any worthwhile Christian view of faith and work must address.

(d) The traditional view of helping people to discover a vocation for life no longer makes sense if it is tied to identification with a particular job. It needs to be more tied to the person and offer some sense of stability in the midst of job changes. An inflexible view of vocation that is not adequate to cope with changes in work patterns and career paths and gender roles, etc will be no help in the world of rapid changes that we now find ourselves in. There is great danger in defining ourselves by the work we do in a society that doesn't allow most of us to hang on to just one job for life. On the other hand a Christian perspective that can help us find a secure identity in spite of changes in the work we do, but still helping us to make sense of it, would be a great asset.

(e) Most Christian views of faith and work seem to foster either a strong personal spirituality or a strong social concern, but do not often combine these two essential elements effectively. Both are needed.

## **6. A New Reformation?**

We need to find a path that will lead us between the twin heresies of divorcing faith from

We must also strive to maintain a broad definition of work that encompasses not only paid employment, but also domestic work and voluntary work. In this way we can seek to live a more radical yet also more balanced discipleship through the whole of our lives. The balance will be different for different people and different at different stages in our lives. Therefore we need a view of our vocation as Christians which includes some constant elements but is also flexible enough to help us make sense of lives in which the nature and mix of work that we do is regularly changing. Employment remains an important part of life through which we express our Christian discipleship. But it is only one part of a multi-faceted life of discipleship. Unemployed people, home makers and voluntary workers have a vocation too! Our vocation as Christians does not depend on paid employment, but it must be expressed through our employment. We also need to understand that living out our vocation was never meant to be a solitary task. That we need the encouragement of committed companions to assist us. The church is the community of faith that was designed by God to assist us in living out this calling in and to the world. But to become a community that is intentionally committed to equipping and supporting its members for their daily work in the world some serious rethinking and reinventing will be required of the church. Perhaps then our work might be better connected to our worship. Anyway, this is my dream.

## **QUESTIONS**

1. What elements of Puritanism and the ‘Protestant Work Ethic’ have been influential in shaping the way that you and others around you approach work today?
2. This study suggests that Christian understandings of the relationship between faith and work have tended to either separate faith from work or idolize work. What sort of view predominates at the moment? Are there things that need to be done to restore a better balanced approach.
3. Section 5 identifies a number of problems which need addressing. Which do you identify as being most important? Are there other problems that you have identified that you would like to see added?
4. Section 6 suggests a number specific elements that may be important in helping Christians to establish a stronger sense of connection between their faith and their work. Which ones do you think are important for you? What other elements would you like to see added to help Christians experience more satisfaction and purpose in their daily work?

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