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# Christians *in the* Workplace

## **The Post-Christian Work Ethic**

by

**Peter Thirkell**

There is a folk tale told in Africa that goes something like this. “Every morning in Africa when the sun comes up, a gazelle awakens and knows that it must run faster than the fastest lion, or it will perish. Every morning in Africa when the sun comes up, a lion awakens and knows that it must run faster than the slowest gazelle, or it will go hungry. It doesn’t make any difference if you are a gazelle or a lion. Every morning in Africa, when the sun comes up, you had better be running.”

Despite its traditional origins, this parable describes the world of work surprisingly accurately

for many people as the world begins a new millennium. In a part-time course that I recently taught at Victoria University, there was a student named Sonya (disguised) who consistently missed classes and, in the end, had to drop the paper. Following an enquiry about the apparent difficulties, Sonya reported that she was working 16 hours a day, six days a week – with no immediate relief in sight. So the question arises as to whether this “pressure to perform” has become the new work ethic in a post-Christian society.

Then I came across a book by Douglas Coupland entitled *Life After God* which makes the observation that people under age 35 represent "the first generation raised without religion." Coupland describes his life as one full of material trappings, but empty of love and meaning, resulting in a profound sense of hopelessness. He observes:

"I think I am a broken person. I seriously question the road my life has taken and I endlessly rehash the compromises I have made in my life. I have an insecure and vaguely crappy job with an amoral corporation so I don't have to worry about money. I put up with halfway relationships so as not to have to worry about loneliness. I have lost the ability to recapture the purer feelings of my younger years in exchange for a streamlined narrow-mindedness that I assumed would propel me to 'the top.' What a joke."<sup>i</sup>

So the question arises as to whether this sense of “the end justifying the means” has become the new work ethic in a post-Christian society.

Then I went into the University and was confronted by a picket line of academics who, apart from a half day of industrial action two or three years ago, have no previous history of industrial action. This is quite a shift from the days when academics would not even discuss pay and working conditions in any formalised sense, for fear that such matters might “taint” the level and calibre of intellectual pursuit. It is only recently for example that formal recognition has been made of the fact that academics actually take holiday leave.

So I asked myself whether the drift from the lofty ideals of Plato to the earthly concerns of mammon, even among academics, somehow characterises the new work ethic in a post-Christian society.

The point of these examples is that, once one begins to explore the idea of the post-Christian work ethic, finding a clear and unambiguous working definition of what that means in practice

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<sup>i</sup>: Coupland, Douglas and Judith Regan (editor), *Life After God*, Pocket Books; ISBN: 0671874349, 1997, p. 56.

is becoming increasingly difficult.

For the period of history commonly referred to as modernity, from at least the mid nineteenth century to the early 1970's, defining the predominant work ethic was relatively straightforward. In many parts of the world it was an ideal commonly referred to as the Protestant work ethic - a worldview that emphasised hard work, thrift, honesty in the workplace, and personal responsibility. Even among those that did not profess any particular religious faith, there was still a high degree of consensus about and acceptance of this work ethic within a high proportion of the population.

In the workplace the Protestant work ethic meant further that many people derived satisfaction and even intrinsic meaning from the work in which they were engaged. There was a sense of duty, and workplace loyalty was extremely high to the extent that 20, 30 or even 40 or more year careers with one employer were commonplace. As some social commentators have observed, the core societal value during this period of history was that most people of career age "lived to work."

During the final decades of the twentieth century however, we have been moving rapidly into what is popularly referred to as the post-modern era. In tandem with this change is a parallel development that identifies, at least within the western economies, a period known as the post-Christian era. Put simply, this means a period during which the Judeo-Christian values and world-view are no longer central to how people structure their lives. David Wells, in his book *God in the Wasteland*, puts it this way:

"The accumulation of value sets provides the texture of contemporary culture, its biases, its distinctive point of view. Yankelovich argued that the set of values that prevailed in the 1960's had been stood on its head by 1980. Traditional mores were routed. And at the heart of the change was a new emphasis on finding "The full, rich life, ripe with leisure, new experience, and enjoyment, as a replacement for the orderly, work-centered attitude of earlier decades."<sup>ii</sup>

Since post-modernism and the so-called post-Christian era are so closely linked for the purposes of our discussion, a brief highlighting of a few hallmarks of post-modernism are in

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<sup>ii</sup>: Wells, David, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., ISBN: 0802841791, 1994, p. 200.

order to provide a backdrop for subsequent discussion.

1. *Relativism reigns.* There is a battle raging, at least in intellectual circles, over the nature of truth; between those who believe that truth is objective and can be known, and those who believe that we construct our own view of truth. What is true for you may not be true for me. If truth is relative then morality is also relative. If morality is relative then of course workplace ethics and behaviours, and people's attitudes to work more generally, also become relative and less of an imperative in preserving cohesion within the social order.
  2. *The loss of hope and idealism.* This is manifest in pessimism about the future and a corresponding trend towards nostalgia. As Kevin Ward observes, "When the future dries up we reinvent the past."<sup>iii</sup> This may be in part why we see the paradox of cyberspace and the rapid emergence of ebusiness at one end of the continuum, and the re-emergence of cottage and craft industries, with strong environmental links, at the other end.
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1. *Image and appearance.* This development means that you are what others see you as, where appearance rather than substance counts. As David Wells has noted: "during the 1970's, personal identity became increasingly associated not with the narrative of one's inner life but with the projection of one's public image ... in the popular perception, image and inner life were disengaged from each other entirely."<sup>iv</sup> In the workplace, this trend is showing up in a form whereby ability and skill become downplayed relative to the appearance of capability. We have witnessed the emergence of the "plausible" manager alongside what was historically sought in the "capable" manager.
  2. *Self-Centredness.* The quest for truth is turning inwards for many people - to the personal world of subjective experience. Here the question is no longer "does it make sense?" but rather "was it a good experience?" The popular ethical expression of this development is "If it makes you happy and doesn't hurt anyone, then it's okay." Or, how can it be wrong when it feels so right? When attention turns inwardly, it means that notions of working for a wider good become vague and even non-existent. One works to advance one's prospects rather than in fulfilment of any intrinsic benefits that may flow from the immediate task at hand.

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<sup>iii</sup> : Ward, Kevin, *Gospel and Church in a Post-Christian and Postmodern Society*, taken from session notes prepared for the Spreydon Leadership Conference, Christchurch New Zealand, 18-20 July 1997.

<sup>iv</sup> : Wells, David, *op. cit.*, p 146.

1. *The weightlessness of God.* The typical business and public sector workplace fosters little sense of transcendence, or indeed any awareness of God, as the author and sustainer of life and creativity who informs in a meaningful way the purpose for which an organisation exists. As Wells further observes: “It is one of the defining marks of ‘Our Time’ that God is now weightless. I do not mean by this that he is ethereal but rather that he has become unimportant. He rests upon the world so inconsequentially as not to be noticed. Those who assure the pollsters of their belief in God’s existence may nonetheless consider him less interesting than television, his commands less authoritative than their appetites for affluence and influence, his judgment no more awe-inspiring than the evening news, and his truth less compelling than the advertisers’ sweet fog of flattery and lies. That is weightlessness!”<sup>v</sup>

With this backdrop of the prevailing ethos that now by and large characterises society at large, we can now turn our attention to considering the extent to which these forces shape and influence the work ethic in post-Christian times. The method adopted is to compare and contrast the key characteristics of the Protestant work ethic with the identified characteristics of today’s work ethic.

### **The Protestant Work Ethic**

The Protestant work ethic could be characterised as having six key elements, leading in turn to specific workplace outcomes and behaviours. Each is identified in Table 1.

Table 1

*Protestant Work Ethic Characteristics and Outcomes*

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<sup>v</sup>: Wells, David, *op. cit.*, p 88.

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Workplace outcome</b>
Core motivations	Working for the welfare of both self and others Personal responsibility to contribute to common good
Hard work	People intrinsically motivated to “do a good job”
Thrift	Deferred gratification working to secure “the basics”
Loyalty	One or a few jobs during a lifetime
Ethical behaviour	Generalised acceptance of honesty and fairness
Sense of purpose	Generally positive and implicit

It can be observed that Protestant work ethic motivations tend to foster a collective approach and a sense of shared common purpose which transcends purely individual interests. For those of Christian persuasion, this is entirely consistent with the Scriptural view where believers are encouraged to “look not only to one’s own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2: 4). More directly, believers are encouraged to not only work hard when the boss happens to be looking, but also when no-one is watching (Ephesians 6: 5, 6). The other elements of thrift, loyalty and honesty on the job are also consistent with Biblical notions of stewardship, adopting a servant mentality in the interests of others and the wider good, and giving as well as receiving.

### **The Post-Christian Work Ethic**

During the latter decades of the twentieth century, some significant changes have taken place. Peter Drucker, arguably the leading management writer and thinker during the latter half of the twentieth

century, observes that: “The honest work of yesterday has lost its social status, its social esteem.”<sup>vi</sup>

An overriding change has been that, whereas previously people “lived to work,” the prevailing ethic today is that many people “work to live.” Paradoxically however, this can manifest itself in two distinct ways: either as an indifference to the work whereby it becomes simply a means of earning money, or in the form of a driving ambition which is ultimately self-centred but leads to a drivenness and extreme hours of work. The end result of both is well illustrated by the observations of Colson and Eckerd in their book *Why America Doesn't Work*:

“y the yuppies were not an aberration. Their behaviour was perfectly consistent with the philosophy of the [60's] revolution – their work became simply a means to an end. The more one worked, the more ends there were to enjoy. The aim was not producing goods for others or for the common welfare but acquiring things for one's own pleasure. ‘He who dies with the most toys wins’.”<sup>vii</sup>

Contrasting the Post-Christian work ethic with the Protestant work ethic, Table 2 illustrates that people are generally more individualistic in their motivations to work. There is an emphasis either on working hard to “get ahead,” or simply working as a means to an end. This shows up in reduced, or in extreme cases non-existent, employee loyalty, and little awareness of or commitment to the intrinsic purpose or common good of the organisation. It needs to be noted that many firms, as a result of downsizing and rationalisation during the 1990's, have in part brought reduced employee loyalty upon themselves. The end result however, for this and other reasons, is as described.

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vi. . Drucker, Peter, *Managing for the Future*, Penguin Books: New Zealand, 1992, p. 128.

vii. . Colson, Chuck and Jack Eckerd, *Why America Doesn't Work*, Word Publishing: USA, 1991, p. 52



Table 2

Post-Christian Work Ethic Characteristics and Outcomes

Characteristic	Workplace outcome
Core motivation	Individualistic approach with work as means to end Working for self more than others
Hard work	People work hard to “get ahead”
Thrift	Shorter-term gratification and “now” orientation
Loyalty	Minimal on part of many employers and employees
Ethical behaviour	Being eroded – corruption in high places and sense of injustice in wealth distribution.
Sense of purpose	A dichotomy: either strong ambition or pointlessness

An article on attitudes to work published in the *Listener* illustrates the prevailing viewpoints. Ana Samways, aged 29 at the time of interview, worked in public relations in Auckland. Her degree, from Otago, was in drama. She wanted to be a playwright, she wrote for TV and radio, she did a course in journalism and was using her skills now in a more "financially rewarding" way. Asked whether she felt that the post-Rogernomics generation was a selfish one, she replied: "I think our generation could be considered selfish, but I think it's part of having to be. It's look after number one, leading by example."

Expanding upon the example to which she was referring, she further stated: "The user-pays model - we're not going to help, you're going to have to do it yourself. That pervades all your thinking, your attitude to every thing. It goes even further than economically, it goes into your relationships with people. We're all islands. People who are getting ahead are looking after themselves and people who aren't, aren't."

Saddled with personal debt for what could be construed as a common good (tertiary education), there is also, she added, less loyalty: “Why not just take off and work overseas? The brain drain is so real, so understandable --- It does mean no loyalty, no nationalism. That's the real cost.”<sup>viii</sup>

## **Formulating a Christian Response**

Given the rapid shift in attitudes towards work and the work ethic over the last quarter century or so, it is important to define a Christian response to the changes we observe. This requires in turn some formulation of what we might term a Christian work ethic relevant to the culture and times in which we now live.

To begin with, it is important to recognise that work is ordained and approved by God. While work which directly advances Christ’s kingdom is of course to be commended and encouraged where possible, it does not follow that so-called secular employment is therefore of no value. Pope John Paul II observed that: “Man is made to be in the visible universe an image and likeness of God Himself, and he is placed in it in order to subdue the earth. From the beginning therefore he is called to work.”<sup>ix</sup>

John Calvin wrote: “All men were created to busy themselves with labour ÿ for the common good.”<sup>x</sup> Even Helen Keller felt compelled to comment on the inherent contribution to the common good of work in which most of us are likely to be engaged. She said: “The world is moved along not only by the mighty shoves of its heroes, but also by the aggregate of the tiny pushes of each honest worker.”<sup>xi</sup>

Perhaps unsurprisingly, King Solomon had strong opinions on the importance of work, noting that: “One who is slack in work is close kin to a vandal.” (Proverbs (18, 9). This emphasis is equally evident in the New Testament also. Paul the Apostle said: “He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.” - (Ephesians 4: 28). And to the Thessalonian church: “Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not

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<sup>viii</sup>. . . “Right On – The Generation who have Inherited the Rogernomics Revolution Come of Age” *Listener*, Oct. 9-15 1999, pp. 24-27.

His Holiness Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens - Encyclical on Human Work*, September 14, 1981, p. 1.

Calvin, John, quoted from his “Commentary on Luke 10:38.”

<sup>xi</sup>. . . Helen Keller, *Optimism - Part 1*, (1903).

doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.” - (2 Thess 3:10-12).

A notable characteristic of what we might term the Christian work ethic should be enthusiasm for the task at hand, however menial or grand it may be. Paul was clear in his instructions to the early believers: “Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women, knowing that whatever good we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free.” (Ephesians 6: 7, 8).

From these examples we can note two key factors that should characterise the attitudes of believers towards work.

Firstly, we should all if fit and well be engaged in some form of work. This does not necessarily mean paid employment. Full-time parenting, or volunteer work, or care for a failing parent all would easily qualify. The underlying principle suggests that even unemployed people should be engaged in some form of work while receiving a benefit or other form of social assistance. Research has shown that, when someone is unemployed and idle for more than about a six months period, an attitudinal shift occurs which makes re-entry into the workforce very difficult. Yet if some form of regular work is maintained, then this effect can be substantially moderated. Whether it’s mowing lawns or helping out at the local community centre doesn’t much matter. The point is that a sense of dignity and self-worth are inextricably tied up with engaging in work.

Secondly, the purpose of our work should generally be outer-directed, and beyond even the needs of our immediate family. Notice that Paul says we should work, in part, so that we can share with those in need. This is not to disparage or diminish the work of the many agencies, volunteer and church groups that do excellent work for all sorts of individuals and groups in our society. Yet there is a suggestion that limiting such work just to social agencies is in a sense too remote. Part of giving thanks in our working lives requires a direct relating to and, as appropriate sharing with, those who are in need.

Colson and Eckerd in their book develop the idea that giving thanks for working opportunities is attitudinally based. “The loss of the work ethic does not begin in the workplace; it begins in the hearts of people – in the values that motivate them or fail to motivate them.”<sup>xii</sup>

An interesting example of a firm that operates by clearly enunciated Christian values is the US-based ServiceMaster, an out-sourcing company for both residential and business services that has

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Colson, Chuck and Jack Eckerd, *op. cit.*, p.27.

specifically defined both methods and motives in its value statement:

- to honour God in all we do
- to help people develop
  - to pursue excellence
  - to grow profitably<sup>xiii</sup>

More typically however most people work in secular organisations with all sorts of pressures which come to bear in the workplace as a result of the rapid changes described in the earlier analysis. This includes the sheer pressure and demands made of people in many jobs today.

An article published out of Silicon Valley summarises the situation confronting many workers today:

“I worry that all the external changes of the 1990s do not capture the erosion of interior life, that all of this fast money has weakened the foundations we take for granted. One friend ran into a couple from her old neighbourhood, and found them distant and cold. "I think we're more dichotomized now," she says. Another is cutting back her work at a software company to spend more time on photography. She tells me a familiar story of the inhuman pace of work, the 12-hour days that have aged her and left her depleted. "It's crazy," she says. "I don't think I can take it for another 10 years.”<sup>xiv</sup>

While these are perhaps extreme examples, there are also people in New Zealand, such as Sonya mentioned earlier, who work in jobs with incessant and growing demands. In response to the present situation, I conclude with several pointers as to how we might remain “people of good cheer” and exhibit a God-honouring work ethic in the work-force environment.

(1) Be content rather than complacent.

A remarkable passage of Scripture is Paul’s humble assertion to the Philippian church (4: 11, 12). “For I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed

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<sup>xiii</sup>. . . ServiceMaster, Dec. 10 2000, - <http://www.servicemaster.com/story.htm>

<sup>xiv</sup>. . . Sylvester, David, Mercury News, “Bad Times, Boom Times – is the Price Right?” Part III, June 26 1999, <http://www0.mercurycenter.com/svtech/news/special/svboom/boom3.htm>

and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need.” This attitude does not imply that we should be complacent in our work and our achievements, but it does make clear the sense of contentment that can arise from accepting whatever work circumstances we find ourselves in at different phases of our lives.

(2) Work as if you were an apprentice in Jesus’s carpentry shop.

It is easy to overlook the fact that the Jesus of the Gospels spent around 15 years practising as a village carpenter. It is a helpful meditation to think about the implications of this example, and then translate those implications into your present work situation. What attitude did Jesus have towards his customers; how did he work when his father was not there to supervise; what quality of materials did he select; when did he work and when did he rest?

Paul was quite direct about the workplace attitudes and behaviours that Christians should exhibit: “Servants, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ” (3:22-24). It appears that, when people are willing to believe that the work in which they engage is not limited to material goals and outcomes alone but is also done ‘for the Lord,’ then God’s Kingdom is extended.

(3) Think in terms of seasons

There are always pressure periods in our lives, including our work circumstances. It seems reasonable to propose that busy phases don’t do us any harm, provided we keep a wide perspective and take into account the broader circumstances of our lives and commitments. For example, whether we are married or single; with or without children; or in what might be termed a development phase versus settling into a typical pattern of work that could go on for years. For example, during the late 1980’s I held down a job in Christchurch which was very demanding time-wise and limited my ability to be much involved in Christian ministry. I did however have a clear sense that it was for a certain season only – as it turned out for a two year period – and that there were some skills and capabilities that I needed to learn during this period. The lessons learned during that period have subsequently proven to be invaluable in all sorts of ways, both in terms of secular employment and Christian ministry. By recognising that the pressures of work were for a season only, I was able to manage the commitment for that time and also become equipped for

more effective work later in life.

#### (4) Prioritise what really matters

James Dobson provides an overarching definition of what really matters in his own life, and it is a useful philosophy of life that would serve most of us well. He identifies as his priorities: “a loving family; a consistent investment in the lives of other people, and an earnest attempt to serve the God who made me,” concluding that: “Nothing else makes much sense.”<sup>xv</sup> This provides a broad framework within which to prioritise. All the same, specific decisions need to be made. When asked to take on a new commitment, it can be useful to apply a simple set of “filters” to the decision. Firstly ask yourself: “three years from now, will it really matter whether or not I took on this commitment?” Then decide: “does this mean that I am at risk of frittering away my time rather than doing fewer things well?” Finally, ask the question: “does this mean that things which are really important to me will suffer or be short-changed?” In certain instances the implications of such soul searching can be profound. Some people for example have deliberately reduced their working hours or taken a lower-paying job so that time remains for other key priorities. Reviewing personal priorities every six months (or at least annually) should hopefully minimise the prospect of things getting seriously out of balance.

#### (5) Realise that God is more concerned about the development of character than what we achieve.

A full discussion of this point is beyond the scope of this paper. It is another way however of thinking about how we shape and determine our work priorities. It also helps to shift the focus away from the nature of our work and achievements, and towards a realisation that who we are and what we are becoming as a child of God is, in the end, what matters most. In assessing the factors that shape our character, there are three questions posed by writer and preacher Bob Buford that serve our purpose well. I personally have found times of reflection on these questions beneficial both to reassessing personal priorities, and in seeking to define the will of God in terms of work commitments and how I spend my time.

(i) How much of my time and money am I using over and over to prove to the rest of the world that I am adequate and capable. How much is enough?

(ii) Can I hear the still small voice of God. How much time do I spend on this?

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Dobson, James, *Dr. Dobson – Turning Hearts Towards Home*, Word Publishing: Sydney, 1989.

(iii) Do I have an eternal perspective to fit my life together, to give me a way of understanding even tragedy if it comes?<sup>xvi</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This paper set out to examine what has been referred to as the Post-Christian work ethic, and then to formulate a Christian response in terms of our attitudes and behaviours. The overriding imperative comes down in the end to one of work involvements that lead to balance and harmony in the way that we use our talents and express our gifts and passions. Little or no regular work (whether paid or unpaid) can lead to laziness and diminished motivation. Too much work can result in ‘driveness’ and blind ambition that corrodes relationships and stunts the development of character. By prayerfully seeking a balance in the level and types of work that we undertake, varying perhaps by the seasons of our lives, we make room for God’s grace to find expression through us. One definition of grace is, “the empowering presence of God enabling you to be what He created you to be and to do what He wants you to do.” In our daily work, what will grace enable us to be?

“Commit your work to the Lord, and your plans will be established.” (Proverbs 16:3).

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Buford, Bob, *What’s in the Box?* A taped address given to Willow Creek Church, 1988.