

What Should Professors Teach about the Protestant Work Ethic?

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this paper is to argue that Christian professors need to teach students to question assumptions underlying business constructs, even familiar constructs. The Protestant work ethic (PWE) is an important and influential work ethic, but after analysis, it will be shown to be neither biblical nor Protestant. By this we mean that some key definitional elements of the PWE are not Biblical and are not philosophically compatible with the theologies of Martin Luther or John Calvin. Our conclusion is that Christian professors should use the PWE as a cautionary tale to help Christian students evaluate worldviews. The authors suggest several classroom exercises to help students develop their skills in testing assumptions.

INTRODUCTION

Many business professors agree that the PWE is an important work ethic (Friedson, 1990; Ness, Melinsky, Buff, & Seifert, 2010). Work ethics are the intrinsic and extrinsic interpretations and preferences that individuals and groups place on economic performance (Pryor, 1981; Parker & M. Smith, 1976; Warr, 2008). Because work ethics are significant moderators of job satisfaction (Staw & Cohen-Charash, 2005) job commitment, and turnover (Morrow, 1983; Warr, 2008), they are important for business students to consider.

The PWE was created by Max Weber in his *Die Protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*), first published in 1904-1905. The 1930 English translation was an immediate hit in the United States (Parsons, 1958), and Weber's ideas made a significant impact in the larger U.S. society (Ward, 1996; Welsh, 2005). They also became embedded in large parts of the business literature (Greeley, 1964;

Moorhouse, 1987; Robertson, 1990).

What should Christian professors teach about this influential ethic? It is the argument of this paper that Christian professors should utilize this familiar and often misunderstood ethic to teach students to regularly question the assumptions behind ideas. Assumptions are the unarticulated presuppositions and premises (Chaplin, 1985) that underlie constructs, including those of business (Bovee & O'Brien, 2007; Lynn & Wallace, 2001; V. Smith, 2010).

It is particularly important that Christians learn how to question assumptions. In order to live in Truth, Christian thinkers must constantly question the worldviews and presuppositions behind events, ideas, discussions, and observed happenings. As Chewning (2001) argues, if an assumption is warped or incorrect, it produces deviant thinking. Truth, in large or small things, should be the aim of every Christian and it is important for those more skilled in discernment to teach others.

One of the purposes of this paper is to provide a small example of why the assumptions behind a familiar concept

need to be examined. We do not claim to be exhaustive in this examination nor do we claim to have the final word on Weber or the PWE. Rather, our intent is to apply scriptural and historic light to the assumptions underlying an often-invoked concept in order to demonstrate that, as the saying goes, “We don’t always know what we think we know.”

The paper makes its argument in four sections. In the first section, we define the PWE and examine its impact on the academic business literature. In the second section, we ask the question: Is the PWE Biblical? The third section discusses the historic assumptions regarding the “Protestantism” of the PWE. Weber argued that the PWE arose from the societies created by the Protestant theology of Luther and Calvin; he specifically discussed Luther’s view of calling (Weber, 1958, p. 79-92) and Calvin’s teaching on predestination (Weber, 1958, p. 95-154). We offer evidence that Luther and Calvin would have likely repudiated the ethic. However our main intent in this section and throughout the paper is to emphasize how necessary it is to examine presuppositions. The fourth section will be devoted to pedagogical reflection and a series of exercises to assist professors interested in teaching students how to evaluate assumptions and worldviews.

It might be clarifying to note what this paper does not do. It is limited to an examination of the PWE and therefore contributes modestly to the important discussion about the meaning of “work” or “vocation” for Christian professors and students (e.g., Huie, 1998; Klay, Lunn, & TenHaken, 2004; Lynn, 2006; V. Smith, 2004). The paper deals with only one small part of a larger conversation.

This paper also does not focus on the debate surrounding Weber’s thesis. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is controversial. Weber’s intent was to explain what Tawney calls “the psychological conditions which made possible the development of capitalist civilization” (Tawney, 1958, p. 2). Some scholars embrace Weber’s explanation (e.g., Attas & De-Shalit, 2004; Parsons, 1958; Manz, 1999; Muller, 2006; Parker & M. Smith, 1976; Tawney, 1958; Welsh, 2005). Others do not (e.g., Braude, 1975; Buchholz, 1978; Geare, Edgar, & McGrew, 2009; Greeley, 1964; Novak, 1993; Nord, Brief, Atieh, & Doherty, 1990; Poggi, 1983; Ward, 1996). However, our purpose in the paper is not to discuss whether Weber was correct in his assessment of the Protestant cultures of Northern Europe but whether his construct is biblical. Our goal is to examine the largely unconscious presuppositions of the ethic. With that understanding, in the next section we focus on the definition and influence of the PWE.

THE PROTESTANT WORK ETHIC: A DEFINITION AND EXAMINATION OF ITS INFLUENCE

What is the Protestant Work Ethic and what is the extent of its influence? Researchers have found many different work ethics (England & Whitely, 1990; Warr, 2008). Individuals and groups have different perceptions about work depending on such things as national culture (Ali, 1987; Page & Wiseman, 1993), age (Cherrington, 1980; Ness, Melinsky, Buff, & Seifert, 2010), and social class (Maynard, Mathieu, Marsh, & Ruddy, 2007; Morse & Weiss, 1955).

However, in spite of the large number of work ethics, many business professors continue to have keen interest in the PWE (Miller, Woehr, & Hudspeth, 2002; Moorhouse, 1986; Welsh, 2005). This includes Christian professors. For example, an examination of paper titles from the 2005-2008 CBFA conferences yielded 11 papers that referenced the PWE in the title. Some Christian business writers even embrace the ethic as “our own” (e.g., Manz, 1999; Gooden, 2000). An examination of the presuppositions behind the PWE, therefore, should be of value to all of us.

In 1904 and 1905, Max Weber published two well received articles on the Protestant ethic. In 1920, he combined the articles into a book, *Die Protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*), affirming and expanding his original thesis and responding at length to critics. The 1930 English translation found a receptive audience, particularly in the United States, which was just entering the Great Depression (Poggi, 1983), and there were further editions. In this paper, we examine Weber’s work using the 1958 English translation of the 1920 edition.

Weber argued that the economic growth of the capitalist countries of northern Europe was a direct response to the values of the Protestant Reformation. Tawney (1958) summed up Weber’s argument thus:

“The tonic that braced [capitalists]...was a new conception of religion, which taught them to regard the pursuit of wealth as not merely an advantage but a duty.... Labor is not merely an economic means: it is a spiritual end” (p. 3).

In the first part of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber utilized the writings of Benjamin Franklin to describe what he called the “Spirit

of Capitalism.” He argued that this spirit was a response to Martin Luther’s understanding of *beruf*, or “calling” (Weber, 1958, p. 79-92). Then in the second part of the book, Weber (1958) contends that Calvin’s doctrine of predestination led to a society preoccupied with demonstrating worth to God through activity, specifically economic activity:

“For the saints’ everlasting rest is in the next world; on earth man must, to be certain of his state of grace, ‘do the works of him who sent him, as long as it is yet day.’ Not leisure and enjoyment, but only activity serves to increase the glory of God, according to the definite manifestations of his will” (p. 157).

In the next section, we will use Weber’s work to define the PWE, and then outline the influence of the PWE in the larger United States society generally, and in the academic business literature specifically.

Definition of the Protestant Work Ethic

Rather than defining the PWE in a few lines, Weber describes it throughout the first two chapters. Thus, a simple definition is not possible. However, according to Weber (1958), the PWE embodies the notion that “man is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his life” (p. 54). The PWE, declares Weber, is “above all the idea of a duty of the individual toward the increase of his capital, which is assumed as an end in itself” (p. 51).¹

There are many implications to the PWE. According to this work ethic, hard work is ennobling and valuable for its own sake (Braverman, 1974; Weber, 1958: 117), labor is the central part of life (Weber, 1958, p. 61), and self-reliance and delayed gratification are important virtues (Muller, 2006; Weber, 1958, p. 155-183). Weber (1958) notes that, “...he [the Protestant capitalist entrepreneur] gets nothing out of his wealth for himself except the irrational sense of having done his job well” (p. 71).

The PWE further incorporates the idea that an individual’s personal value and integrity can be judged by that person’s willingness to work hard (Nord et al., 1990; Welsh, 2005; Weber, 1958, p. 68-70), so that a good man “exists for the sake of his business instead of the reverse” (Weber, 1958, p. 70). The individual who has accumulated capital can achieve a sense of accomplishment, personal development, and even salvation (Cherrington, 1980; Weber, 1958, p. 113, 119).

Was Weber correct that there is, or was, a PWE? Partly because “the instruments designed to measure the

construct differ significantly” (Ward, 1996, p. 10), the evidence is inconclusive (Braverman, 1974; England & Whitney, 1990; Furnham, 1990; Furnham & Rose, 1987; Geare et al., 2009; Poggi, 1983). For example, researchers have found that an emphasis on hard work is uncorrelated with religious orientation (Novak, 1993; Miller et al., 2002) and that “work is rated as significantly more important by respondents in historically communist countries than by those in historically protestant countries” (Warr, 2008, p. 767).

The Influence of the PWE in U.S. Society

Regardless of these difficulties, the practical influence of the PWE remains strong in western cultures, particularly the United States. Researchers note that the PWE is a common element in the social fabric of the United States (Ward, 1996; Welsh, 2005). For example, a recent Google search found more than 250,000 references to the PWE from websites as diverse as the United States government and sermons by John Piper on YouTube. Politicians and media pundits refer to the ethic as the “work value that made our country great.”² There is even a song titled “Protestant Work Ethic.”³ However, more importantly for the Christian professor and student, the influence of the PWE is strong in the academic business literature.

The Influence of the PWE in the business disciplines

The PWE has had a strong influence in the business research literature – indeed, some scholars go so far as to say that assumptions based on the PWE underlie most of the western research on organizations (e.g., Moorhouse, 1987; Robertson, 1990). Since assumptions are largely unconscious, evidence of this contention will be, necessarily, implicit (Chaplin, 1985). However an impressive number of scholars suggest that the PWE is a core, though unstated, presupposition in various business disciplines.

For example, Nord and colleagues say that much of the organizational theory and organizational development research is based on the premise that “work is...noble, and that psychologically engaging work is a necessary condition for human development” (Nord et al., 1990, p. 25). Several researchers argue that much of the motivation and job satisfaction literature is based on PWE assumptions (Judge, Thoresen, Bono, & Patton, 2001; Katzell & Thompson, 1990; Wright, 2006). Examples of such assumptions include high pay creating a sense of accomplishment (Wright, 2006) and personal development being necessary for job satisfaction (Friedson, 1990; Judge et al., 2001).

According to Aldag and Brief (1979), the unstated

assumption of the job enrichment literature is that work can be redesigned to become more meaningful, as the PWE argues it should be. The assumption that hard work generates personal integrity is said to be embedded in the human resource management literature (Geare et al., 2009; Greeley, 1964). Influenced by the PWE, organizational behavior professors continue to teach that managers should empower employees in spite of the fact that there is considerable evidence that employees from some cultures and social classes strongly resist empowerment (England & Whitney, 1990; Maynard et al., 2007).

An example might make this argument clearer. As the feminist literature demonstrates, assumptions are often revealed by language (Heim & Murphy, 2001). Moorhouse (1987) suggests that PWE-influenced value judgments about work are often concealed in “common sense” phrases such as “‘serious reading,’ ‘shallow routine pastimes,’ . . . ‘serious quests for knowledge,’ and the like [emphases his]” (p. 238). Many such phrases can be found in management textbooks, academic business journals, or popular business books. These are undiscussed moral evaluations that imply that work is noble and intrinsically valuable, even though many people do not find it so (Attas & De-Shalit, 2004; Buchholz, 1978; Maynard et al., 2007).

A full examination of the PWE assumptions in the organizational literature is beyond the scope of this paper. However, interested readers might find it helpful to examine Miller and colleague’s (2002) *Multidimensional Work Ethic Profile* (MWEP) instrument, which was constructed using seven dimensions associated with the PWE. The MWEP can be used to think more deeply about PWE assumptions in a particular discipline.

Institutionalization

The scholarly bias toward the PWE should not be unexpected. Researchers have consistently found that individuals with higher education and more meaningful jobs see work as more intrinsically valuable (Buchholz, 1978; Furnham, 1990; Morse & Weiss, 1955; Warr, 2008). Highly trained academics, including Christian academics, are not immune to this effect. In fact, Christian university professors would be among those more likely to see work as worthwhile because, for them, work is largely worthwhile.

Institutionalization may increase this effect. Institutionalization is the notion that the more widely shared a perspective is within a particular group, the more likely it is to be accepted without question (Beyer, 1981; Lawrence, Wing & Jennings, 2001). For many years, much of the organizational literature has been based on

the implication that labor is a central part of life (Weber, 1958, p. 61), that self-reliance and delayed gratification are virtues (Weber, 1958, p. 157), and that individual value and integrity can be judged by a willingness to work hard (Weber, 1958, p. 68-70). It might be predictable that professors — who largely find work fulfilling, tend to be self-reliant in their academic disciplines, and are familiar with the necessity to delay immediate gratification for future rewards (for example, when writing papers) — do not question that assumption. Indeed, in conversations with the authors, some professors have implied that the Bible, itself, agrees with PWE’s view of work.

IS THE PROTESTANT WORK ETHIC BIBLICAL?

Does the Bible indeed agree with the PWE? In this section, we will examine the question: Is the PWE biblical? Like others (e.g., Novak, 1993; Olson, 1986; Poggi, 1983; Ward, 1996), we will conclude that though some distinctives of the PWE are “Christian-friendly,” there are at least two key elements that are not.

It should be noted that our intent in this section is to provide a demonstration of several possibly questionable assumptions, not to attempt an exhaustive biblical critique of all PWE assumptions. We leave it to others to provide an in-depth theoretical discussion of the assumptions behind the PWE.

A Christian-Friendly Distinctive

One “Christian-friendly” distinctive in the PWE is the affirmation that work is important to life (Weber, 1958, p. 117). Many Christians would agree that while work is not central to life — only God is central (Luke 10:27) — it is an important part of life and was given by God to humanity before the fall (Chewning, 2011; Gen 1:27; Gen. 2:15). The distinctions between God “working” or “creating” (Huie, 1998) or the nature of work before and after the fall have been extensively discussed elsewhere (e.g., Lemler, 2003; Lynn, 2006). The point we make here is that God affirms the value of work, most importantly in the person of Christ Jesus, who was a working man. “It is a wonderful thing,” said Hugh Latimer, “that the Saviour of the world...was not ashamed to labor.... Here he did sanctify all manner of occupations” (cited in Ryken, 1986). Christ’s disciples were also working men: owners of small businesses, fishermen, and government workers. Many of Jesus’ parables concerned occupations such as farming (Mark 4: 1-20), building (Luke 6:26-48), or managing (Luke 16:1-13). Paul, a maker of tents by trade,

also affirmed the value of diligence in such passages as II Thessalonians 3:10 "...if anyone will not work, neither shall he eat."

Distinctives Contrary to Scripture

However, at least two major distinctives of the PWE are contrary to Scripture.

As expressed by Weber (1958), they are:

- "Man is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his life" (p. 53).
- "Labor must...be performed as if it were an absolute end in itself" (p. 62).

According to the Calvinist, "Not leisure nor enjoyment but only activity serves to increase the glory of God, according to the definite manifestations of his will. Waste of time is thus the first and in principle the deadliest of sins" (Weber, 1958, p. 157).

Utilizing these ideas, Weber (1958) sums up his definition of the PWE:

"In fact, the *summum bonum* of this ethic, the earning of more and more money, combined with the strict avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of life...is thought of so purely as an end in itself that from the point of view of the happiness of, or utility to, the single individual, it appears entirely transcendental and absolutely irrational. Man is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his life" (p. 53).

We selected these two issues because Weber made them central to The Protestant Ethic and because they are issues that most Christian professors would agree need examining. There is much that can be said about both ideas. In the following section, we will present a few suggestions of ways biblical evidence can be used in class.

PWE Distinctive 1

"Man is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his life" (Weber, 1958, p. 53). This statement sums up Weber's primary definition of the PWE; variations of it ring throughout the first two chapters. For example, Weber (1958) says that the Protestant ethic is that making money is an end in itself (p. 51), and that a good man "exists for the sake of his business, instead of the reverse" (p. 70).

This is an excellent example for Christian professors to use to emphasize why it is important to examine assump-

tions. The great majority of Christian students would readily agree that this viewpoint is not biblical. The Scripture is unambiguous that God should be central to the Christian. Jesus states this directly in his paraphrase of Deuteronomy 6: 4-5: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength ... and your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37, 39).

Jesus is also unambiguous that the making of money is not the purpose of the Christian. He says: "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money" (Matthew 6:24).

Indeed, some of Christ's deepest condemnations were reserved for those who pursued money rather than God. For example, He calls the rich, prudent farmer a fool. "You fool!" says God, "This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" (Luke 12:20). Jesus adds, "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God" (Luke 12:21).

When Weber says that the Protestant ethic is that "acquisition is the purpose of life," it is clear that the PWE is not biblical, and it not something that Christians should embrace. When the acquiring of capital is the central part of a Christian's life, it takes the place of God — which is idolatry.

PWE Distinctive 2

The second distinctive is that activity increases the glory of God:

- Not leisure nor enjoyment but only activity serves to increase the glory of God, according to the definite manifestations of his will (Weber, 1958, p. 157).
- "Good works...are indispensable as a sign of election. They are the technical means, not of purchasing salvation but of getting rid of the fear of damnation. . . . Thus the Calvinist, as it is sometimes put, himself creates his own salvation, or, as would be more correct, the conviction of it" (Weber, 1958, p.115).

Weber devoted Section II of his book to Protestant asceticism. He says that asceticism, the view that man should deny his desires (Chaplin, 1985), "expresses a type of feeling which is closely connected with certain religious ideas" (Weber, 1958, p. 53) and these came to their fruition in the PWE.

This section of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* provides the professor with a wealth of material to teach the more subtle aspects of examining assumptions. Asceticism has a rich history in the Christian church and some of what Weber says about that history is, to our knowledge, correct. However, mixed into his discussion are some clearly unbiblical ideas. Because of the subtle nature of Weber's arguments, the professor might consider it more appropriate to leave the analysis of this section of *The Protestant Ethic* to graduate students.

Below are some thoughts to help the professor as he or she guides students through this section.

"Deny yourself and follow me." Christ made it very clear that His followers should deny their own desires in order to follow him: "Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever would save his life shall lose it: and whosoever shall lose his life for my sake shall find it" (Matthew 16:24-25, NKJ).

He told the rich young ruler that "if you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me" (Matthew 19:21). He spoke emphatically about the cost involved in following him: "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:57-62).

However, according to Weber (1958), Protestant⁴ asceticism does not involve a personal relationship between the Christian and Christ but is rather a "life of good works combined into a unified system" (p. 117). His contention is that the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination created "the idea of the necessity of proving one's faith in worldly activity" (p. 120). Activity, he says, is the key to the Protestant capitalist spirit.

According to the Calvinist or Puritan:

"The span of human life is infinitely short and precious to make sure of one's own election. Loss of time through sociability, idle talk, luxury, even more sleep than is necessary for health...is worthy of absolute moral condemnation.... Every hour lost is lost to labour for the glory of God" (Weber, 1958, p. 157-158).

"Not leisure nor enjoyment, but only activity serves to increase the glory of God" (Weber, 1958: 157).

Weber may, or may not, have been accurate in his assessment of how some branches of the Protestantism of his day viewed asceticism. However, the real question

is whether this view is biblical. We would argue that it is not, for many reasons. Two will serve as brief examples: 1. According to the Scripture, outward asceticism has only minor value to God, and 2. God desires the believer to live joyfully. The discerning professor and student will be able to discover many more reasons as to why Weber's argument is not biblical.

Outward asceticism has only minor value. Can Christians gain virtue through aestheticism? According to the Bible, it depends on the goal. For example, the practice of the spiritual disciplines allows God to deeply change a Christian's life (Willard, 1991). Paul reminds Timothy that while there is some value in self-discipline, "godliness has value for all things...." (I Tim. 4:8). Commenting on this verse, Jamieson, Fausset, & Brown (1997 [1871]) say:

"Paul admits that fasting and abstinence from conjugal sexual intercourse for a time, so as to reach the inward man through the outward, do profit slightly (Acts 13:3; 1 Cor 7:5,7; 9:26-27); but asceticism, dwelling solely on the outward (1 Tim 4:3) is injurious" (Col 2:23).

"Food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat and no better if we do," says Paul (I Cor. 8:8). A person can be self-denying to the point of martyrdom, but without the agape love given by God, self-abasement is worthless (I Cor. 13: 3).

God wants us to live joyfully. In contrast to what Weber calls the spirit of asceticism, the Bible enjoins the Godly man to enjoy the physical and spiritual world. For example, Bible a database search of the words "pleasure" and "joy" brought up seven pages of references on these topics. According to the Scripture, pleasure and joy can come from physical things (Ecclesiastes 2:24), such as pastures filled with flocks and valleys covered with grain (Psalm 65: 13), as well as spiritual things such as wisdom and access to God. A summation of that discussion can be found in Psalms 16:11: "You have made known to me the path of life; / You fill me with joy in your presence, / With eternal pleasures at your right hand."

Ultimately, of course, we find our confirmation for the importance of joy in Galatians 5:19, 22-23 where Paul lists the fruit of the Holy Spirit: "The acts of the sinful nature are obvious But the fruit of the spirit is love, *joy*, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control. Against such things there is no law"[emphasis added].

Summary: Is the PWE Biblical?

The conclusion of this discussion is that the PWE, as defined by Weber, has at its heart ideas that are not biblical. Neither acquisition nor asceticism should be central to a Christian's life. Willingness to work hard is biblical; however, hard work does not create personal value or integrity, both of which come from God.

Said differently, it is possible and even desirable to gain a sense of accomplishment from one's labors, but it is not hard work that creates the satisfaction but rather following the will of God. Arguments for thrift, self-discipline, and accountability can be found in Scripture. A righteous man will display these traits, but if they are done in the flesh, these traits can become idols and can corrupt the character. In sum, while some aspects of the PWE are "Scripture compatible," at least two of the key definitional elements are not. Christians who unthinkingly embrace the PWE and its constructs will, in this matter, find themselves flirting with heresy.

IS THE PROTESTANT WORK ETHIC "PROTESTANT"?

In this section, we discuss whether, as Weber claims, the PWE is philosophically compatible with the theologies of Martin Luther and John Calvin. The readers of the *CBAR* will understand that if the PWE is not biblical, it will be unlikely to be theologically compatible with Luther and Calvin. However the issue needs more consideration than that, so for the sake of clarity we, chose to first present the biblical evidence and then the historic evidence. Again, we emphasize that our intent is not to decide whether Weber correctly assessed the Protestant societies of Europe. Rather our purpose is to consider if something that has been called "Protestant" has any right to be so called. Also, we seek to give an example of one way professors might use historic evidence to assess whether the assumptions of the PWE are appropriate for Protestant Christians to embrace.

Luther and Calling

Weber (1958) attributed the philosophical origin of the PWE to Luther's use of "*beruf*" or "calling" in his translation of the Bible from the Latin Vulgate into German (1521-1522). Weber devoted the third chapter of *The Protestant Ethic* to the argument that this idea secularized work and allowed the Capitalist Spirit to emerge. He says that Luther preached that man was summoned by God to a secular calling or job which Luther identified with the German term "*beruf*." Weber says that Luther's defined "*beruf*" as "an obligation which the individual is

supposed to feel...towards the content of his professional activity...no matter whether it appears on the surface as a utilization of his personal powers, or only of his material possessions (as capital)" (p. 79).

Weber said further that Luther supposed that God assigned each person to a task that was part of the existing order of things; work was immutably willed by God. "For Luther the concept of the calling remained traditionalist. His calling is something which man has to accept as a divine ordinance, to which he must adapt himself. This aspect outweighed the other idea which was also present that work in the calling was a, or rather the task set by God" (Weber, 1958, p. 85).

The idea of *beruf* or calling, is a minor part of Luther's theology as Weber, himself, acknowledged (p. 201-207). Indeed, the authors of this paper searched 18 biographies and studies of Luther and found only one that listed either *beruf* or "calling" in the index. However, Luther did discuss the idea in some sermons, as well as the Bible translation (Steinmetz, 1984).

When placed in the context of Luther's theology, however, the idea of *beruf* changes from Weber's idea of obligation toward a secular profession to the idea that everything a Christian does, even his or her mundane job, can be used to glorify God (Klay et al., 2004; Wingren, 1957). Luther, who for many years was better known as Brother Martin of the order of Augustinian monks, talked about *beruf* in terms of the "holy calling" of the monks and nuns. He enlarged the idea of God's calling of Christians into the clergy, into the concept that if a Christian served God in his secular job, his service would be as holy as the as the "holy calling" of the clergy (Chadwick, 1964; Forrester, 1953; Steinmetz, 1984). Because God called, *beruf*, any honest job could become an arena to glorify and honor Him (Klay, et al, 2004; Ryken, 1986; Wingren, 1957). In a society where the caste system locked most people into an occupation, the Christian would find it meaningful to understand that secular jobs could also be used to honor God (Cherrington, 1980; Steinmetz, 1984). Whether the result of this minor part of Luther's theology was to break down the moral neutrality of work for entire societies, as Weber suggests, is a matter of conjecture.

John Calvin and Capitalism

John Calvin was born in 1509, eight years before Luther's famous posting of 95 debate theses. He became a professor at the prestigious University of Paris, but when Francis I burned six Protestants at the stake in 1534, Calvin fled to Switzerland. There he wrote the first draft of *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Chadwick, 1964).

Calvin and Luther never met, but Luther said he read Calvin's books with special pleasure (Steinmetz, 1984).

When Geneva became a Protestant city, Calvin envisioned the Geneva churches becoming a "holy community" in which each member would place the whole of his or her life under the control of God (Chadwick, 1964; Olson, 1989). This included the economic part of life. At the time, Europe was changing from an agrarian, feudal society to a commercial, urban society. Church members had to deal with the emerging economic realities and, as a church leader, Calvin gave guidance where he could. He wrote that people in salaried occupations could aid the unfolding of God's kingdom by providing the basic goods and services needed to sustain a just and orderly society (Klay, et al., 2004; V. Smith, 2004). Following Christ in obedience, he taught, could be reflected in loving service to one's neighbors. The "neighbors" of the businessman were his customers, suppliers, distributors, employees, and superiors (Ryken, 1986). This placed the motivation to work as a desire to serve God's kingdom by serving others (Chewning, 2011; Lynn, 2006).

In contrast to what Weber said was the Protestant spirit of capitalism, namely acquisition (Weber, 1958, p. 54), Calvin said that wealth was not a reward from God or even a goal for working. The goal of work, he taught, was first to serve God and then to serve one's neighbor. Economic advantage, or even a living wage, was incidental (Ryken, 1986). Everyone should think of the common good; no member should be lacking while another found personal prosperity. Regarding personal wealth, Calvin (n.d. [1534]) said:

"No member has its function for itself, or applies it for its own private use, but transfers it to its fellow-members; nor does it derive any other advantage from it than that which it receives in common with the whole body. Thus, whatever the pious man can do, he is bound to do for his brethren, not consulting his own interest in any other way than by striving earnestly for the common edification of the Church" (Book 3, Ch 7.5).

When discussing human efforts to attain worldly sustenance and luxury, Calvin noted that:

"He who makes it his rule to use this world as if he used it not, not only cuts off all gluttony in regard to meat and drink, and all effeminacy, ambition, pride, excessive shows and austerity, in regard to his table, his house, and his clothes, but removes every care

and affection which might withdraw or hinder him from aspiring to the heavenly life, and cultivating the interest of his soul" (Book 3, Ch 10.4).

Neither Luther nor Calvin would have accepted the idea that acquisition was an end in itself. The purpose of work was to glorify God and serve others.

Work as salvation — Contrasting Luther, Calvin, and Weber

As an example of how philosophies can influence outcomes, professors can ask students to consider the PWE premise that work is a path to salvation (Morrow, 1983; Nord et al., 1990; Weber, 1958, p. 113). Weber's contention is that Calvin's doctrine of predestination leaves the Christian in a dilemma:

"The world exists to serve the glorification of God and for that purpose alone. The elected Christian is in the world only to increase this glory of God by fulfilling His commandments to the best of his ability. But God requires social achievement of the Christian because He wills that social life shall be organized according to His commandments, in accordance with that purpose" (p. 108).

The Christian who wants to demonstrate that he or she is among the elect, responds with acts of "labour in the service of impersonal social usefulness" (Weber, 1959, p. 109). "Intense, worldly activity is recommended" as the best means of demonstrating good works. "It and it alone disperses religious doubts and gives the certainty of grace" (Weber, 1959, p. 112). "In practice this means that God helps those who help themselves. Thus the Calvinist, as it is sometimes put, himself creates his own salvation, or, as it would be more correct, the conviction of it" (Weber, 1958, p. 115).

Christian professors understand that both Luther and Calvin would have recoiled from the notion that work is a path to salvation. Luther built his entire theology around the axiom that salvation comes not from hard work, good works, or any work of a man (Luther, 1963 [1529]), but is a free gift of God through Jesus Christ (Romans 3: 21-29). After salvation, Christians will do the good works that God has prepared for them (Ephesians 2:10). In the late 1520's, Luther and Melanchthon drew up 15 articles, which became the foundation of the Confession of Augsburg (Luther/Melanchthon, 1963 [1530], p. 210-211). Two articles are of interest here:

IV. Of Justification — “They teach that men cannot be justified in the sight of God by their own strength, merits, or works, but that they are justified freely on account of Christ through faith.”

XX. Of Faith and Good Works — “Our works cannot reconcile us to God or merit remission of sins and grace and justification. This we obtain only by faith Because the Holy Spirit is received through faith, and hearers are renewed and put on new affections so they can accomplish good works.”

Likewise, Calvin (n.d. [1534]) is emphatic that salvation has nothing to do with work, good works, or any work of a man. In *The Institutes of the Christian Faith*, he wrote:

“The foundation of salvation [is that] believers without paying any respect to works, direct their eyes to the goodness of God alone...[and] rest in it as the completion” (p. 413).

“The minds of men must be specially guarded against two pestiferous dogmas — viz. against putting any confidence in the righteousness of works or ascribing any glory to them” (p. 411).

As noted above, Weber’s (1958) analysis of these writings is that:

“Good works...are indispensable as a sign of election. They are the technical means, not of purchasing salvation but of getting rid of the fear of damnation. . . . Thus the Calvinist, as it is sometime put, himself creates his own salvation, or, as would be more correct, the conviction of it” (p. 115).

In short, Weber treats Protestant theology as if it assumes salvation is by labor, which has the effect of turning the actual beliefs of Protestantism on its head.

At least in this aspect, Weber’s treatment of the PWE has nothing to do with its purported originators. Nevertheless, the Protestant origin of the PWE remains largely unquestioned by the academic community, even the Protestant Christian academic community. Given the biblical problems with the PWE, this is a serious matter.

IMPLICATIONS: HOW SHALL WE THEN TEACH?

What should Christian professors teach about the PWE? One important conclusion from this discussion is

that Christian students need to learn that the assumptions behind even familiar constructs should be checked.

In any discipline, a set of beliefs and assumptions drive how scholars and students think (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Unless assumptions are actively questioned by professors, students become subject to attitudes and beliefs that are accepted without awareness. As professors, it is our desire to teach students to think critically. We want our students to realize that assumptions and worldviews matter. The PWE can become a cautionary tale to make the point that assumptions behind even apparently desirable constructs are not always as they seem.

What is truth worth? Christ saw truth as being so important that he identified with it: “I am...the truth...” (John 14:16). It is important that Christians should dwell in truth in big and in small matters. However Christian scholars, who like everyone else have biases, are not always aware of unreliable assumptions, particularly in treasured concepts. Problems arise when widely held assumptions are not accurate or when nuances in the construct are not well understood. Most researchers would agree that when basic assumptions are not reliable the outcomes are not reliable, and that is a problem. However, a bigger issue for Christian scholars is that when our basic assumptions are not reliable, we are not dwelling in truth but are rather building on a lie.

In the rest of this paper, we present three exercises (including variations) that professors can use to teach students to become aware of worldviews and assumptions.

Exercises to Build Awareness of Worldview and Assumptions

In order to help fellow professors in this “good work” of building critical thinking and awareness of assumptions, we have created three exercises designed to help students think more critically about assumptions. The first exercise is designed to raise awareness of the importance of assumptions. It can be used for undergraduate or graduate students, either as an in-class problem or an outside assignment. The second and third exercises are more extensive and are designed to help the student dig deeply into his or her own assumptions.

Exercise 1: Define and evaluate the PWE

The first exercise for the student is to become aware of the importance of assumptions. To do this, we have them define and evaluate the PWE. As an in-class exercise, give the students a copy of the definition of the PWE presented in this paper, or create your own from Weber. Ask the students to find two elements in the definition and examine

them in the light of Scripture. Summarize the examination in class discussion.

Variation: Out of class assignment. Ask the students to read Chapter 1 and 2 of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and create their own definition of the PWE. Have them write a short paper discussing two of Weber's key ideas in the light of Scripture.

Exercise 2: Write a paper on Christian asceticism

This exercise deals with the importance of personal assumptions and may best be done with graduate students. Use Section II of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* as a laboratory to help students untangle their own assumptions regarding Christian asceticism. Many Christians have conflicting ideas about what God asks in regard to "denying yourself." Some would resonate with Weber's thesis that "not leisure nor enjoyment, but only activity serves to increase the glory of God..." (Weber, 1958, p. 157). Others would repudiate it. Ask students to write a paper setting out their reasons and reasoning on asceticism in light of the Scripture.

Variation: The threads of truth and untruth in Weber's thesis are fairly clear in Section I of the book. However in Section II, the arguments are subtle. Ask students to read the section on asceticism, outline five assumptions that Weber makes, and evaluate those assumptions in light of historic fact and biblical truth.

Exercise 3: Create a personal, biblically derived, work ethic.

Ask students to create their own work ethic. They should begin by examining Scripture to find what God's assumptions are about work and workers. Articles in the bibliography of this paper or other articles or books suggest by the professor or that students find can be utilized.

CONCLUSION

A final conclusion is inescapable. If a construct as central as the PWE has distorted assumptions, there may be other key constructs that are similarly questionable and unquestioned. For example, the idea that power is, by definition, coercive is assumed by many business scholars. This assumption bears examination. As another example, a nuanced examination of competition in the light of the trust and spiritual management literature would almost certainly prove fruitful.

Because of the impact of assumptions, it is important to teach the skill of discernment and critical thinking to

every business student. We offer this small essay as a way to assist our fellow workers in the kingdom.

ENDNOTES

¹ It should be noted that Weber (1958) does not appear to admire the PWE. He calls it a "reversal of what we should call the natural relationship" between work and economic needs and a "peculiar idea" (p. 54).

² http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_XePyV5hDAU&feature=related.

³ <http://www.last.fm/music/Protestant+Work+Ethic>.

⁴ It should be noted that in this discussion, Weber primarily focuses on Calvinism and Puritanism.

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