

Toward A Biblical Understanding of the Work Ethic

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Following a precise presentation of the role and goal of human work in God's creation, Dr. Ward discusses the Protestant Work Ethic and points out the inconsistencies between it and a biblically-based work ethic.

There appears to be a growing sense among business practitioners that the North American labor force is losing its attachment to the Protestant Work Ethic. When human resource professionals are asked to identify the issues facing them in the 1990s, the "work ethic, values, and attitudes of workers" is listed as a major concern ("HR Professionals" 23). A survey of managers indicates that, beyond the basic skills needed to do the job, a good work ethic is the most important factor when hiring an employee (Flynn 16). The work ethic is considered important because of its presumed and demonstrated relationship to work outcomes including performance and job satisfaction (e.g., Meglino, Ravlin, and Adkins).

The importance of the work ethic resonates with many Christians, including those both inside and outside the business world. On a superficial level, the fact that the dominant ethic

discussed is the "Protestant" Work Ethic may perk the ears of many Christians. On a deeper level, however, the concept of a work "ethic" seems to target what is essential to the Christian faith. With a saving knowledge of Jesus comes a new way of looking at the world: a Christian worldview. Therefore, the assumption that the set of values an individual brings to the workplace makes a difference in the way he or she thinks and acts is consistent with the claims of Christianity. But is the Protestant Work Ethic of the secular business world compatible with a biblically-based work ethic? In addressing this question this paper will explore a biblical perspective on work, trace the development of the contemporary understanding of the work ethic, and apply a biblical perspective to secular notions of the work ethic.

A Biblical Perspective of Work

For the Christian, the Bible is the starting point for understanding what is important about the work ethic. A biblical perspective on work acknowledges the integral role of human work in God's created order for his world. It also frames our understanding of why we work, or the goal of work; and how we approach work, or the means of accomplishing that goal.

The role of human work in God's creation

The Bible describes work as central to who we are as human beings. There is a danger that work will only be understood as it is described in Genesis 3, where God commits Adam and Eve to a work life of toil, filled with thorns and thistles. This is the situation effectively portrayed by Turkel in the book *Working*, in which many individuals describe a work day filled with exploitation and conflict. Thus many, including some Christians, view work as a curse. But Genesis 1 indicates that work was part of God's divine intent for his image bearers. Just as God worked in the act of creation and continues to work in sustaining his creation, so human beings work by exercising dominion over the creation. According to Henry:

Through his work, man shares the creation-purpose of God in subduing nature, whether he be a miner with dirty hands, a mechanic with greasy face, or a stenographer with stencil-smudged fingers. Work is permeated with purpose; it is intended to serve God, benefit mankind, [and] make nature subservient to the moral program of creation (48).

Therefore, work is not a result of the fall, although our current experience of work does reflect the consequences of Adam and Eve's sin. If the picture of paradise given in Genesis 1 and 2 gives us a glimpse of what the new heaven and earth will be like, human beings will continue to work in paradise, but without the sin that mars our current experience of work.

The goal of human work

The goal of human work flows naturally from its role in creation. Human beings were created to work, and through work we honor our creator. The Bible describes the goal of human work in both positive terms and negative terms. Positively, work is a way for us to show our love for God: we serve God by fulfilling his creation-ordained purpose for humans. We are called, in whatever our task, to work as serving the Lord and not

men (Colossians 3:23). This emphasis begins as we commit our work to the Lord (Proverbs 16:3) and continues through the choices we make as we work, “doing the will of God from the heart” (Ephesians 6:6). Through work we use our talents and abilities, thereby honoring the true giver of our talents and abilities.

But loving God cannot be separated from loving others, as Christ shows in the summary of the Law. Besides serving God in our work, we also serve one another. According to Schumacher, two of the biblical purposes for work involve service to others. First, through work we provide others with necessary and useful goods and services. Second, work requires us to establish relationships with others or, in his words, allows us to “liberate ourselves from our inborn egocentricity” to focus on others (4). The goals of serving God and serving others are most often met simultaneously. As we serve God, we benefit others: The good works for which we were created (Ephesians 2:10) bring blessing to others. Also, as we serve others we bring glory to God. According to Martin Luther, we encounter and thus serve God in our service to others (Hardy).

In contrast to serving God and others through our work, sin deceives us into serving ourselves. The Bible warns against making personal gain the goal of our work. For example, the parable of the rich fool in Luke 12 reminds us that focusing on personal gain can actually separate us from God. Thus the Bible, in negative exhortations and positive pronouncements, is consistent in describing the goal of work as bringing honor to God by serving others.

The means of accomplishing the goal of work

Because work is central to our role as image bearers of God and because work is an important means through which we glorify our creator, we must take seriously the manner in which we approach work. God has ordered his creation in such a way that there is a natural relationship between effort and outcome. This relationship was evident to the Old Testament mind. The biblical narrative is filled with examples of how positive and negative outcomes can be traced back to the specific actions taken (David’s life alone contains several examples). More specifically, the relationship between work effort and work outcome is described in Proverbs

21:5: diligence leads to abundance.

The importance of hard work continues in the New Testament. The apostle Paul goes so far as to tell the Thessalonian Christians that those who do not work should not eat (2 Thessalonians 3:10). But Paul also tells the Thessalonians that hard work is also a barometer of the heart (1 Thessalonians 4:9-12). Others judge us (and to a certain extent judge Christ whom we represent) by the way we work.

Placing a high value on hard work can result, in its extreme form, in the stereotypical, humorless Puritan who treats work as a burden, not a joy. More appropriately, our approach to work should be one that incorporates the sense of privilege and meaning that we derive from work. Christians should be diligent in their work because of the unique opportunity God has given humans to carry on the work of creation and because work gives us a tangible way to show love for God and neighbor.

The Contemporary Understanding of the Work Ethic

The idea of a work ethic was popularized by Max Weber's influential work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Modern secular understandings regarding the role of a work ethic have largely been framed by Weber's work but display a divergence of opinions regarding its significance for contemporary life.

Weber's notion of the Protestant Work Ethic

Weber attempted, with the concept of the Protestant Work Ethic, to explain the origins and development of capitalism. An important aspect of this development was one's orientation toward work. While many factors contributed to this orientation toward work, Weber believed that Protestantism served as the primary influence. This approach toward work and economic activity in general is termed the Protestant Work Ethic. According to Oates:

The so-called Protestant Work Ethic can be summarized as follows: a universal taboo is placed on idleness, and industriousness is considered a religious ideal; waste is a vice, and frugality a virtue;

complacency and failure are outlawed, and ambition and success are taken as sure signs of God's favour; the universal sign of sin is poverty, and the crowning sign of God's favour is wealth (84).

On the surface, Weber's notion of the Protestant Work Ethic appears to be commonly understood. However, there is little consensus regarding its exact nature and significance. First, there is not a consensus on what is meant by the term, "Protestant Work Ethic." Weber never provided a definition that is sufficiently limiting or easily measured. As a result, many attributes have been assigned to the Protestant Work Ethic, and instruments designed to measure the construct differ significantly. Some frame the work ethic as means-oriented: those with a strong work ethic work hard, don't miss work, etc. Others frame the work ethic as ends-oriented: those with a strong work ethic value work over leisure and value the act of working more than the outcome of working. As a result, there are confusing and sometimes contradictory claims about the substance of the Protestant Work Ethic.

Second, Weber's understanding of the relationship

of religion to economic activity has been questioned. Some find little support for Weber's thesis regarding the relationship of Protestantism and capitalism. They do not see evidence to support Weber and argue that other (i.e., non-religious) factors explain the development of capitalism (Robertson). This criticism has been leveled both against Weber's representation of Protestantism, particularly Calvinism (Hardy), and his perceived unwillingness to consider the impact of other factors, such as changing economic and social relationships. The result is a misguided understanding of the role of Protestant Christianity in the development of culture.

Despite the problems in Weber's approach, the Protestant Work Ethic has played a major role in framing the discussion of the factors contributing to the development of capitalism. It also has contributed to discussion about the existence and makeup of a dominant value structure in capitalistic societies. Consequently the Protestant Work Ethic exists, although nebulously and open to controversy, as a powerful construct in the collective consciousness of Americans.

Modern understandings regarding the importance of the work ethic

The world of the late twentieth century is very different from the world that Weber described. Attempts to understand the current importance of the work ethic can be viewed as a response to two questions. First, was Weber correct in identifying a distinct “Protestant” work ethic? Second, how does the Protestant Work Ethic help us understand the motivation of workers in the current age?

Existence of a distinct work ethic. Modern scholars have struggled to identify what, if anything, the Protestant Work Ethic actually represents. An examination of work ethic measures indicates that several divergent approaches are being applied. In the most comprehensive analysis of work ethic measures, Furnham examined the content of seven commonly employed work ethic measures. Five distinct content areas emerged: belief in hard work; the role of leisure, religious, and moral beliefs; a stress on independence from others; and asceticism. None of the measures covered all five of the content areas, and some measures only focused on two of

the areas. Thus, scholars are asking the question: Is there, and was there ever, such a thing as the Protestant Work Ethic?

This question has become significant as Protestantism appears to be losing its hold on American culture. Ditz argues that the work ethic has become secularized over time and now functions as a manifestation of an economic, not a religious, philosophy. Because of the ambiguous content of work ethic scales, some scholars have begun to assume that no underlying structure exists for the work ethic and that the term work ethic refers to nothing more than a collection of independent value dimensions (e.g., McDonald and Ganz).

The ethics of the age. If a work ethic does in fact exist, what does it tell us about the nature of work in the culture at large? For some, the Protestant Work Ethic is one measure of a worldview that existed in early capitalism but is losing dominance in recent years. For example, Inglehart argued that the success of the materialist values identified by Weber led to a “silent revolution” in values: the rapid economic growth resulting from the Protestant Work Ethic led to a period of

prosperity that in turn promoted post-materialist values. Others argue that the work ethic is manifested in different ways during different eras. Maccoby and Terzi identified four manifestations of the Protestant Work Ethic related to periods of socio-economic change: the original Protestant Work Ethic, the “Craft Ethic” representing the rationality exemplified by individuals such as Benjamin Franklin, the “Entrepreneurial Ethic” exemplified by Horatio Alger, and the “Career Ethic” of post-World War II. Maccoby and Terzi suggested the emergence of a fifth and latest manifestation, a “Self-development Ethic” that appears to correlate closely to Inglehart’s post-materialistic values.

The Protestant Work Ethic has also been used to represent one world view among many in a pluralistic society. Buchholz identified five belief systems existing in the United States in the late 1970s: the Work Ethic, representing the traditional Weberian approach of valuing hard work and work as an end in itself; the Organizational Belief System, valuing work for the way in which it serves the interests of the group or organization; the Humanistic Belief System,

valuing work in as far as it allows individuals to discover their full potential as human beings; the Leisure Ethic, not valuing work but rather valuing leisure activities and the personal choices those activities allow; and Marxist-Related Beliefs, valuing work as necessary for meeting human needs and realizing human potential, but seeing the current system as exploitative of the working class. Although Buchholz found that the traditional work ethic is still the most strongly held of the five, the other belief systems are represented in a significant way in modern America.

The modern discussion of Weber’s Protestant Work Ethic has become more divergent in both its analysis and conclusions. This makes it increasingly important for the Christian scholar to critically evaluate contemporary notions of the work ethic in light of a biblically based work ethic.

Applying a Biblical Perspective to Secular Notions of the Work Ethic

The biblical perspective on work, as previously outlined, begins with the understanding that work is part of God’s created order for humans. The goal of work is

service to God, and the means of accomplishing this goal is through diligence in our work efforts. How does this perspective relate to the secular notion of the work ethic?

Weber's notion of the Protestant Work Ethic is commonly considered to represent a traditional Protestant expression of the role of work. However, in both its original form and in its modern manifestation, the concept is inconsistent with a biblical understanding of work. In spite of its inconsistencies, the Protestant Work Ethic does present opportunities for presenting a Christian work ethic to a secular audience.

Inconsistencies between the Protestant and a biblically-based work ethic

The emphasis placed on work in the Protestant Work Ethic is inconsistent with a biblically-based ethic. As a result of this misplaced emphasis, biblical elements of work are distorted in the Protestant Work Ethic.

For the Christian, the goal of work is to serve God. The

Protestant Work Ethic removes the emphasis on God and replaces it with an emphasis on man. In Weber's original conception of the work ethic, the outcome of work appears to be more of a report card for man rather than an offering to God—the result of one's work is a measure of God's favor, not a gift to God. With the goal of work transformed from serving God to serving self, work loses its larger significance, and the Protestant

Work Ethic becomes little more than a measure of self-worth as experienced through work.

Because God is not the focus of human work in the Protestant Work Ethic, even those elements that are biblically-based become distorted. For example, both the Protestant and biblical work ethic place a value on hard work. However, a biblical approach sees hard work as a means of accomplishing the goal of serving God through work. In other words, hard work is of no benefit if the work itself does not bring honor to God. In the secularized Protestant Work Ethic, hard work becomes an end

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in itself. The usefulness of the work itself is not considered. Therefore, the positive notion that hard work is important becomes converted into the goal of work, not the means to a larger end. Also, the Protestant Work Ethic takes the biblical expectation that God will bless the work of his people and converts that blessing into a test of God's favor. This can lead either to works righteousness, in which humans are fearfully attempting to earn salvation through work, or a wealth gospel, in which material success becomes a sign of faith. In either case, the Protestant Work Ethic misses the grace that is present in the lives of those who have experienced salvation through faith, not by works.

Opportunities for presenting a Christian work ethic

Although the Protestant Work Ethic clearly distorts the biblical view of work, its acceptance in the secular community does present an opportunity to articulate a Christian understanding of work. First, the Protestant Work Ethic emphasizes the importance of a world view in the development of work attitudes and behaviors. There is an implicit understanding that one's heart

commitment drives one's actions. This is rare in business. In a discipline that often embraces a scientific objectivity devoid of religion, the work ethic is one area in which even secular theorists understand the importance of a comprehensive world view.

Second, research relating to the Protestant Work Ethic suggests that even a secularized version of a biblical work ethic is not as prevalent as it once was. Until recently, Christians could assume that non-Christians were familiar with a Christian worldview. That assumption is losing its validity. The current research relating to the Protestant Work Ethic supports the notion that we are moving into a post-Christian age. In many aspects of modern life, the passing of Christianity is met with indifference or even enthusiasm. But in the case of the Protestant Work Ethic, even secular society seems to mourn its passing. Therefore, the acceptance of a work ethic, however misguided, presents an opening for Christians to present an authentic biblical work ethic.

Is the Protestant Work Ethic consistent with a biblically-based work ethic? It is not consistent as understood by the secular

business community. The Bible places a high value on work as service to God and others, a value that is not reflected in the Protestant Work Ethic. The Protestant Work Ethic can be a useful concept for Christians to employ, but its use demands discernment on the part of those who wish to remain faithful to a biblical understanding of work.

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