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The Teaching of the Puritans about Ordinary Work

This is the third and final instalment of Ian Hart's study of the understanding of ordinary human work in the Reformers. Previous instalments discussed the teaching of Martin Luther (Evangelical Quarterly 67:1, 1995, 35-52) and John Calvin (Evangelical Quarterly 67:2, 1995, 121-135).

The word 'Puritans' refers to the English Protestants of the mid-16th to late 17th centuries who carried forward the emphases of Calvin. They made a determined effort to inculcate true religion into the entire population. The methods mainly used were pulpit preaching, house-to-house catechising (e.g. especially Richard Baxter), and writings, especially pamphlets, sermons, and commentaries. It has been said¹ that the Puritans' only weakness was a tendency to long-windedness when they were dealing with things which were important, and I have had to peruse voluminous material to locate passages where they dealt with the question of work. It has been worth it, for their teaching on work was practical, biblical, and profound. I will pick out five main areas.

I. Calling

The Puritans followed Luther and Calvin in using the word 'calling' to refer to one's job, and they gave it a similar content. (Cranmer's 1539 translation of the Bible into English had used the word 'calling' in 1 Cor. 7:20.²)

Richard Steele, minister of a London congregation, gives a simple explanation of the basic idea:³

¹ J. I. Packer, in his Foreword to L. Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as They Really Were*, Grand Rapids, 1986.

² Pointed out by M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, New York, 1958 (first published 1905), 210.

³ *The Tradesman's Calling, being a Discourse concerning the Nature, Necessity, Choice, etc., of a Calling in general*, 1684, 1, 4, cited by R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, London, 1926, 240.

God doth call every man and woman . . . to serve him in some peculiar employment in this world, both for their own and the common good . . . The Great Governor of the world hath appointed to every man his proper post and province.

Another plain statement from American Puritanism is similar:⁴

Every Christian ordinarily should have a calling. That is to say, there should be some special business . . . wherein the Christian should for the most part spend the most of his time; and this, so that he may glorify God.

The Puritans attributed enormous spiritual importance to this activity in one's calling:⁵ ' . . . the main end of our lives . . . is to serve God in the serving of men in the works of our callings . . . ' The obvious points here are that God requires most people to do an ordinary job; that that job is done primarily with God in view—it serves him and glorifies him; that ordinary work is therefore not in a separate compartment from one's relationship with God, but is in fact a most 'spiritual' activity; that one's work therefore has to be done conscientiously; and that a Christian's work is the most important thing he does in life.

Other emphases followed from this basic perspective. Idleness was constantly condemned. But the Puritans taught that hard work done merely to earn money was no better than idleness. They were not particularly concerned to encourage people to work; they were more concerned to help them to a proper Christian understanding of work as service of God.⁶

. . . a man shall not need to spend much time persuading (most people) to work; but this is hardly beaten into them (= it is hard to beat into them), to observe the due manner of working, or the end why, or the ground whereupon. The motive is penury, the end covetousness, and the manner brutish. They want, and would have to defray the hard world, or to bestow upon their lusts, and to maintain themselves in pride of life; but neither work they because they think it is a sin to be idle, nor because they look for any other fruit of their labour, save the bringing in of the penny. They see not the whole commandment it is, that they should labour, Genesis 3 . . . nay, to speak the truth, when they are in their shops, at markets, in their fields, they are far from setting God before their eyes; much less do they believe that God is with them there, to bless them in their work, as well as when they are occupied in duties merely

⁴ Cotton Mather (1663–1728), *A Christian at his Calling*, cited by Ryken, 27.

⁵ William Perkins, *A Treatise of the Vocations or Callings of Men*, Perkins' Works, Cambridge, 1618, vol. 1, 756; conveniently in *The Work of William Perkins*, I. Breward, ed., Abingdon, England, 1970, 455.

⁶ Richard Rogers, *A Commentary on Judges*, Facsimile of 1615 edition, Edinburgh, 1983, 295.

religious . . . For the Lord will have us serve him religiously, as well in actions civil, not religious, (of their own nature) as holy; and this is the scope of his third Commandment (= the Fourth!), which tieth the service of God to every part of our lives in the common course of living . . . and therefore must be extended to our particular callings, as being the greatest part of our time, wherein our lives are most taken up.

The Puritans saw clearly that a person's working life (which will probably be the biggest department of his life) must be transformed by his Christian faith into a continual expression of surrender to God; this main transformation would bring with it, as a happy consequence, another transformation: much of the drudgery of work is removed.

It follows that even the rich, who do not need to work to support themselves, should work:⁷

. . . men of wealth and place, as Gideon was, in so mean a tribe, though he was spoiled of the necessary helps of maintaining his life (= he did not need to work) as most of the rest also were, such men, I say, should not refuse labour, as husbandry, or any other honest sort. Gideon had servants, and yet he threshed the corn himself. And it is a thing which we read to have been not only practised of him, but of the old fathers mentioned in the Scriptures, as in all other writers, that what time they had free either from religious or civil affairs, they employed it about cattle and corn. For they would not spend the precious time in eating, drinking, play, or idleness, which they abhorred. . . Such . . . were Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and others, as Gideon here, whose father Joash was in some authority among the people, yet his son contemned not (= did not hold in contempt) the practice of husbandry. . . (It is) not allowed to men of worship (= men born into an upper-class family) to pass their time in such manner, but even they must occupy their talent, till the Lord come, and not pass the time in fleshly ease-taking, play, idleness, and other like profane behaviour. . .

We have seen that for Luther and Calvin the concept of the 'calling', as well as carrying the content I have just described, also included the idea that one is placed in one's job by Providence and that one should therefore not try to change one's job—though Calvin showed a certain amount of flexibility in the latter. The Puritans' teaching was fairly close to that of Luther and Calvin at this point. But I have found in the Puritans something I did not find in either Luther or Calvin: advice about how one was to choose a job. Richard Baxter (1615–1691), pastor in Kidderminster, wrote:⁸

⁷ *Ibid.*, 294.

⁸ Richard Baxter, *The Practical Works of the late Reverend and Pious Mr Richard Baxter*, vol. 1, London, 1707, 358.

It is not enough that you consider what calling and labour is most desirable, but you must also consider what you or your children are fittest for both in mind and body.

Baxter goes on to give the example of becoming a physician; has your son '... a special ingenuity, and sagacity, and natural quickness of apprehension, unless he should make a trade of killing men?' He further counsels: 'Choose no calling . . . without the advice of some judicious faithful persons of that calling.' This contrasts with Luther and Calvin, who seem to have assumed that a person's calling would be outside his control. It is difficult to say whether this shows that the Puritans' doctrine of Providence was less overwhelming than that of Luther and Calvin, or whether one hundred years later the world of work was much more open and there could now be some freedom of choice.

On the particular point of changing one's job the Puritans followed Calvin in being very conservative without absolutely forbidding any change. Robert Crowley wrote in 1550:⁹

First walk in thy vocation
And do not seek thy lot to change;
For through wicked ambition
Many men's fortune hath been strange.

A century later the same message came from John Flavel (c.1625–1691):¹⁰

Be well satisfied in that station and employment in which Providence has placed you, and do not so much as wish yourself in another . . . Providence is wiser than you, and you may be confident it has better suited all things to your eternal good than you could had you been left to your own option.

But it was recognised that there were special circumstances in which it could be right to change jobs:¹¹ 'God nowhere forbids men to change their employment for the better, upon a sufficient cause.'

This extreme caution about changing jobs, which is surprising to us today, no doubt had the same roots as it had for Luther

⁹ In *Voyce of the Last Trumpet*, cited by H. M. Robertson, *Aspects of the Rise of Economic Individualism*, Cambridge, 1933, 7.

¹⁰ *The Mystery of Providence*, Edinburgh, 1985, 80; first published 1678. Richard Greenham also tells a horror story about a man who '... afflicted in mind, began through the temptation of Satan, to dislike his calling, and changed it, afterward he thought this calling and that calling to be unlawful, and so was almost brought to dislike all' and came to a sad end (*Grave Counsels and Godly Observations*, Facsimile edition, Edinburgh 1983, 6.).

¹¹ Richard Baxter, *Works*, vol. 1, 106 (Christian Directory) (in a discussion of the meaning of 1 Cor. 7:20).

and Calvin: a strong doctrine of Providence; the 1 Corinthians 7 command to remain in one's calling; a desire to spare Christians the restlessness and the lure of ambition and greed linked with job-hopping; and a still quite static, rigidly structured society all around them, in which a 'situation vacant' was rare. It is also hard for us today to imagine what life was like when there were virtually no schools; it is schools which have created the totally new situation whereby most people are equipped for a variety of jobs and there is now such a thing as choice of work. An obvious implication of the doctrine of calling was that ordinary jobs are, in God's sight, of equal value to each other and also of equal value to 'spiritual' jobs; every job is a job done for God and done at his bidding and so men's valuation of different jobs is irrelevant. The Puritans saw this no less clearly than Luther and Calvin had done. William Tyndale (c.1490–1536), who would often be regarded as the founding father of Puritanism, had written that, if we look externally,¹² '... there is difference betwixt washing of dishes and preaching the word of God; but as touching to please God, none at all.' William Perkins (1558–1602), Fellow of Christ's College, Cambridge and pastor of a congregation in Cambridge, wrote similarly:¹³

The action of a shepherd in keeping sheep . . . is as good a work before God as is the action of a judge in giving sentence, or a magistrate in ruling, or a minister in preaching.

Menial jobs were just as worthy as prestigious ones, in fact, more so:¹⁴

If thou be called to the poorest laborious calling, do not carnally murmur at it, because it is wearisome to the flesh, nor imagine that God accepteth (= thinks) the less of thy work and thee. But cheerfully follow it, and make it the matter of thy pleasure and joy, that thou art still in thy Heavenly Master's service, though it be about the lowest things. And that he that knoweth what is best for thee hath chosen this for thy good, and tryeth and valueth thy obedience to him the more, by how much the meaner work thou stoopest to at his command.

¹² *The Parable of the Wicked Mammon*, in Tyndale's *Works*, vol. 1, Cambridge, 1848, 102. This work, a treatise on justification by faith alone, draws heavily on Luther, merely translating him in places.

¹³ *Works*, vol. 1, 758; Breward, ed., 457.

¹⁴ Baxter, *Christian Directory*, *Works*, vol. 1, 358. Bishop Hugh Latimer argued for the dignity of menial jobs from the example of our Lord: 'Our Saviour Christ before he began his preaching, lived of his occupation, he was a carpenter and got his living with great labour. Therefore let no man disdain or think scorn to follow him in a mean living, a mean vocation, or a common calling and occupation. For as he blessed our nature with taking upon him the shape of man, so in his doing he blessed all occupations and arts' (cited by Robertson, 7).

This insistence on the dignity of menial jobs tended towards the same practical implication as has been mentioned previously: remain in your present job. The fact that the menial job is a calling from God encourages contentment in it and discourages ambition and covetousness.

II. The Danger of Overwork

There were obvious dangers in such teaching. John Owen (1616–1683), Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, chaplain to Oliver Cromwell, spent 230 pages explaining ‘The Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually Minded’, and for three of these he warned that it is possible for one’s mind to be filled almost all the time with thinking and planning and worrying about the details of one’s work. He knew this danger was all the greater because the Puritan reader regarded his work as his Christian duty and knew that he must be conscientious in it and committed to it. Owen was well aware of ‘the multitude of these thoughts’, ‘numberless and endless’, which can easily fill the minds of those who are ‘particularly industrious and diligent’.¹⁵

It may be, it will be asked whether it be necessary that men should think as much and as often about things spiritual and heavenly as they do about the lawful affairs of their callings? I say, more, and more often, if we are what we profess ourselves to be . . . as if a man should pretend that his great design is to prepare himself for a voyage unto a far country, where is his patrimony and his inheritance, but all his thoughts and contrivances are about some few trifles, which, if indeed he intend his voyage, he must leave behind him, and of his main design he scarce thinketh at all. We all profess that we are bound for heaven, immortality, and glory; but is it any evidence we really design it, if all our thoughts are consumed about the trifles of this world, which we must leave behind us, and if we have only occasional thoughts of things above?

There are three points to be noted here: (a) Owen saw the danger of working so long and hard that prayer and worship get squeezed out. Though he does not base his warning on any biblical texts, there are warnings about this danger in Mt. 6:24–34 and possibly also in Lk. 17:28–30; 21.34. (b) Owen made it clear that, even though work is service of God, it is not enough; prayer and worship are essential too. Work for the Puritan was worship, but worship in the normal sense of the word was also necessary. (c) There is a tension. One’s job is lawful and something to which God has called a Christian. Yet this

¹⁵ *Works*, vol. vii, Edinburgh, 1965, 302–303 (first published 1681).

job may have one dealing with things which are 'the trifles of this world', and which, as Owen writes further on, should not 'be the principal thing in your thoughts and consciences', nor should one ever have 'disquietude of mind' concerning them.¹⁶ One's job is both important and unimportant. The same point was insisted upon by John Flavell:¹⁷

And yet do not be so intent upon your particular callings as to make them interfere with your general calling. Beware you do not lose your God in the crowd and hurry of earthly business . . . It was an excellent saying of Seneca: I do not give, but lend myself to business.

These quotations demonstrate the falsity of the oft-repeated allegation that the Puritans made work a kind of religion;¹⁸ the 'particular calling' (i.e. one's work) was always subordinated to one's 'general calling' (the calling to be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ).

III. Work as Serving One's Fellowmen

While the 'calling' concept stressed that work was service of God, the Puritans also emphasised that work was to be regarded as service of others. William Perkins, held by some to be 'the greatest Puritan theologian of all',¹⁹ wrote:²⁰

The end of a man's calling is not to gather riches for himself, for his family, for the poor; but to serve God in serving of man, and in seeking the good of all men; and to this end men must apply their lives and labours.

This point was pressed home very specifically:²¹

The callings most useful to the public good are the magistrates, the pastors and teachers of the church, schoolmasters, physicians, lawyers, etc., husbandmen (plowmen, grasiars, and shepherds); and next to them are mariners, clothiers, booksellers, taylors, and such other that are employed about things most necessary to mankind; and some callings are employed about matters of so little use (as tobacco-sellers, lace-

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ *The Mystery of Providence*, 79.

¹⁸ E.g. Tawney, 245, on Richard Steele's theology: 'trade itself is a kind of religion.' Tawney's claim is denied by J. A. T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism*, New York, 1962; he argues that Steele simply 'insists on the sanctification of the calling' (420).

¹⁹ So Gordon S. Wakefield, *Puritan Devotion: Its Place in the Development of Christian Piety*, London, 1957, 3.

²⁰ William Perkins, *Cases of Conscience*, Perkins' Works, vol. II, 126; cf. also n. 4 on that page.

²¹ Richard Baxter, *Christian Ethics*, Works, vol. I, 357.

sellers, feather-makers, periwig-makers, and many more such) that he that may choose better should be loth to take up with one of these, though possibly it in itself may be lawful. It is a great satisfaction to an honest mind, to spend his life in doing the greatest good he can; and a prison and a constant calamity to be tied to spend one's life in doing little good at all to others, though he should grow rich by it himself.

Work as a solemn social obligation was a major Puritan emphasis, and it was powerfully pressed home from a hundred pulpits.

IV. Money

Obviously conscientious work was likely to produce a degree of prosperity; and also, anyone involved in trading or shop-keeping faced daily decisions about how much profit was proper, so some guidance about money was essential.

Richard Baxter wrote:²²

If God show you a way in which you may lawfully get more than in another way (without wrong to your soul or to any other), if you refuse this, and choose the less gainful way, you cross one of the ends of your Calling, and you refuse to be God's steward.

The Puritans did not feel guilty about making or having money; they regarded the right use of money as part of their stewardship. William Perkins, expounding Mt. 6:19-20 (on not laying up treasure on earth), listed some things Jesus did not forbid:²³

Diligent labour in a main vocation, whereby a person provides things needful for himself, and those that depend on him . . . The fruition and possession of goods and riches: for they are the good blessing of God being well used . . . The gathering and laying up of treasure is not simply (= absolutely) forbidden, for the word of God alloweth herefor in some respect. 2 Corinthians 12:14.

On the other hand the Puritan writings abound in warnings against greed and any sharp practice: one must not 'accumulate two or three callings merely to increase his riches', nor seek more than 'a reasonable proportion of gain' nor 'lie on the catch (= look-out) to make his markets of others' straits', and in decisions as to a just price

²² *Christian Directory, Works*, vol. I, 357.

²³ *An Exposition of Christ's Sermon on the Mount, Works*, vol. III, 163. William Perkins continued that there are three categories in worldly goods: necessary, abundant, or superfluous; the first two of these are permissible: 'The second sort of worldly goods is abundance, whereby I mean that plenty and store, which serves not only for necessity, but for holy comeliness and delight.'

and an appropriate standard of living 'an upright conscience must be the clerk of the market.'²⁴

Baxter again:²⁵

Take heed lest, under the pretence of diligence in your calling, you be drawn to earthly-mindedness, and excessive cares or covetous designs for rising in the world.

Thomas Watson (1557–1584), one of the most popular preachers in London during the Puritan era, has a very helpful section on the dangers of greed and sharp practice in one's work in his exposition of the 'Deliver us from evil' petition of the Lord's Prayer:²⁶

Take heed of the sins which attend your particular callings. A calling you must have. Adam in paradise tilled the ground. God never sealed warrants to idleness. But every calling has its snare; as some sin in living out of a calling, so others sin in a calling. Remember how deadly an evil sin is. Avoid those sins which you are exposed to in your trade. Take heed of all fraud and collusion in your dealings. 'Whatever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.' Matt. vii. 12.

Take heed of a sinful tongue in selling. The Scripture says of one that goes to heaven, 'He speaketh the truth in his heart.' Psa. xv. 2. It is the custom of many to say the commodity stands them more (= is worth more), and yet they take less. This is hardly creditable. Beware of a deceitful balance. 'The balances of deceit are in his hand.' Hos. xii. 7. Men by making their weights lighter, make their accounts heavier. Beware of sophisticating, mingling, and debasing commodities. 'We sell the refuse of the wheat.' Amos viii. 6. They pick out the best grains of the wheat, and sell the worst at the same price as they did the best. To mix a coarse commodity with the fine, and sell it all for fine, is no better than deceit. Isa. i.22.

Beware of stretching your consciences too far, or taking more for a commodity than it is worth. 'If thou sell ought unto thy neighbour, ye shall not oppress one another.' Lev. xxv. 14. There is a lawful gain allowed, yet one may not so advantage himself as to injure another. Let the tradesman's motto be, 'A conscience void of offence toward God and toward men.' Acts xxiv. 10. He has a hard bargain that purchases the world with the loss of his soul.

In this emphasis the Puritans were echoing not only the OT but also the NT (e.g. Lk. 3:11–14; Jas. 5:4) and Luther.

Also relevant here is a further quotation from Baxter (which incidentally also confirms that many Puritans believed you should

²⁴ Richard Steele, *The Tradesman's Calling*, cited by Tawney, 244.

²⁵ *Christian Directory, Works*, vol. 1.

²⁶ *The Lord's Prayer*, Edinburgh, 1982, 318; first published as part of *A Body of Practical Divinity*, 1692.

actively choose your job, and that it was not purely and simply a matter of Providence):²⁷

Choose that employment or calling in which you may be most serviceable to God. Choose not that in which you may be most rich or honorable in the world; but that in which you may do most good and best escape sinning.

Samuel Hieron said the same thing more warmly:²⁸

Oh, let not mine eyes be dazzled, nor my heart bewitched with the glory and sweetness of these earthly treasures . . . Draw my heart to the love of that durable riches, and to that fruit of heavenly wisdom which is better than gold, and the revenues whereof do surpass the silver, that my chief care may be to have a soul enriched and furnished with thy grace.

The Puritan preachers constantly dampened the desire for wealth by warning that it brings the Christian into a danger-zone. One might cite John Robinson:²⁹ 'Both poverty and riches have their temptations . . . And of the two states . . . the temptations of riches are the more dangerous.' Or Richard Baxter:³⁰ 'Remember that riches do make it harder to be saved.' Or Richard Sibbes (1577–1635), Master of St. Catherine's College, Cambridge and pastor of a London congregation:³¹ 'It is a rare thing to see men that have the greatest visible advantages . . . to be very zealous for God.' Or Richard Greenham:³² 'It is harder to believe in the abundance of worldly means, than it is in the want of them.'

The Puritan preachers often spelt out reasons for being contented with poverty:³³

Poverty works for good to God's children. It starves their lusts. It increases their graces. 'Poor in the world, rich in faith' (James 2. 5). Poverty tends to prayer. When God has clipped his children's wings by poverty, they fly swiftest to the throne of grace.

But the Puritans were also very realistic about poverty:³⁴

Poverty also hath its temptations . . . For even the poor may be undone by the love of that wealth and plenty which they never get; and they may perish for over-loving the world, that never yet prospered in the world.

²⁷ *Christian Directory, Works*, vol. 1, 106.

²⁸ *A Prayer Fit for One Whom God Hath Enriched with Outward Things*, cited Ryken, 69.

²⁹ John Robinson, *Observations of Knowledge and Virtue*, cited Ryken, 62.

³⁰ *Christian Directory*.

³¹ *The Saint's Cordials, Works of Richard Sibbes*, Edinburgh, 1973, vol. 5, 176ff.

³² *Grave Counsels and Godly Observations*.

³³ Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes*, Edinburgh, 1971 (first published 1660), 251.

³⁴ Richard Baxter, *Christian Directory*.

Another important emphasis concerning money was stewardship; and detailed and specific instruction was given about this:³⁵

They which have riches are to consider, that God is not only the sovereign Lord, but the Lord of their riches, and that they themselves are but the stewards of God, to employ and dispense them, according to his will. Yea, further, that they are to give an account unto him, both for the having and using of those riches, which they have and use . . . We must so use and possess the goods we have, that the use and possession of them may tend to God's glory, and the salvation of our souls . . . Our riches must be employed to necessary uses. These are, first, the maintenance of our own good estate and condition. Secondly, the good of others, specially those that are of our family or kindred . . . Thirdly, the relief of the poor . . . Fourthly, the maintenance of the Church of God, and true religion . . . Fifth, the maintenance of the Commonwealth.

I have discussed this point in some detail and included a considerable number of quotations for a reason: R. H. Tawney has accused the Puritans, especially the later ones, of abandoning the words in 1 Timothy 6:10: The love of money is the root of all evil; and of replacing the historic Christian ethic of sufficiency and contentment with another ideal: limitless increase in wealth.³⁶ He argued that they followed Calvin's doctrine of the calling but did not follow his careful safeguards. The evidence above does not support Tawney's verdict; the truth is that the Puritans were relatively other-worldly and their emphasis was on contentment with what you are and with what you have.³⁷ I believe that such differences as there are between the teachings of Calvin and the Puritans on the one hand and Luther and the Schoolmen on the other are due to changing economic circumstances. In the real world which the Schoolmen and Luther encountered, hard and honest work rarely yielded more money than merely sufficient to meet one's own immediate needs, and the Schoolmen and Luther believed that Christians should settle for that; if one did not settle for that, one would become restless, discontented, and be tempted to dishonest ways. However, in the real world which the Puritans (and to some extent already Calvin) encountered, the newly-forming economic structures made possible the making of more substantial sums, with the same hard work and scrupulous honesty, and the Puritan preachers had to grapple with this new state of affairs, and say what kind of behaviour was right

³⁵ William Perkins, *The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience, Works*, vol. II, 126-129.

³⁶ Tawney, 248.

³⁷ For detailed support of this view and a trenchant critique of Tawney see K. Samuelsson in R. W. Green ed., *Protestantism, Capitalism, and Social Science: the Weber Thesis Controversy*, Lexington, 1973, 108-133.

and what was wrong. In my judgment their stand was very balanced: it would have been unnecessarily restrictive, and without biblical warrant, to insist that in these new circumstances Christians must remain at subsistence level. I think the Puritan preachers were right to permit the making of larger profits, especially since they surrounded this new permission with so many limits and warnings: one's work must serve others, one's profit must not hurt anyone else's welfare, the need to be on one's guard against greed, strict honesty, careful stewardship of what one earned, and not letting work fill one's life to the exclusion of one's other duties. I find their balance admirable.

V. Work and 'Proof'

The other controversial claim about the conduct of the Puritans which has been made by Weber, Troeltsch, and Tawney³⁸ was that their earnest commitment to work was at least partly the result of believing that such commitment would serve as proof that they were 'of the elect'; hard work gave them assurance of salvation, and relieved the anxiety about their state of grace caused by the doctrine of predestination. Weber did not claim that Puritan preachers actually taught that hard work by a person would be evidence that he was regenerate; Weber claimed that the Calvinist and Puritan theological emphases unintentionally created a psychological compulsion in believers to work zealously, in order to try to find evidence that God was present in their lives inspiring them to work zealously. In a way which Calvin had not intended or foreseen, his unique cluster of emphases: on predestination, on one's renewed lifestyle providing 'proof' of one's regeneracy, and on one's job as one's calling, resulted (especially in the Puritans' less careful, less balanced formulations) in the creation of a psychological compulsion to work. (In similar vein Louis Bouyer has claimed that the Puritans found

³⁸ 'It was through the consciousness that his conduct, at least in its fundamental character and constant ideal, rested on a power within himself working for the glory of God; that it was not only willed of God but rather done by God, that he attained the highest good towards which his religion strove, the certainty of salvation' (Weber, 114-115). 'Good works are not a way of attaining salvation, but they are indispensable as a proof that salvation has been attained' (Tawney, 109).

that salvation by faith was a too uncertain concept and³⁹ '... works soon regained their supremacy ... as a more tangible criterion by which to judge a man's spiritual condition.'

The second part of Weber's theory (that this uniquely rigorous, consistent, methodical, self-controlled, rational work of the Puritans was the catalyst for the spectacular economic growth which transformed our world) has given rise to an enormous literature from economists, sociologists, and historians, and the debate continues today.⁴⁰ But only the first part of Weber's theory is relevant to our present purpose. Accordingly I would like to consider whether the Puritans' formulation of their teachings about predestination, proof, and work could possibly have created such a psychological compulsion as Weber alleged.

The Westminster Confession of Faith (1649), a famous expression of Puritan thinking, in its chapter 'Of Assurance of Grace and Salvation,' (ch. XVIII) states the main grounds of the Christian's assurance as the promises of God and the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit; in a subsequent paragraph 'conscience of duty' is mentioned as one of several secondary sources from which the Holy Spirit can revive assurance for a believer who for some exceptional reason has lost it. Diligent work could conceivably be considered to be an example of 'conscience of duty'.

In their discussion 'Of Good Works' (ch. XVI) the Westminster Divines wrote as follows:

These good works (i.e. such as God hath commanded in his holy Word), done in obedience to God's commandments, are the fruits and evidence of a true and lively faith; and by them believers manifest their thankfulness, strengthen their assurance, edify their brethren, adorn the profession of the gospel, stop the mouths of the adversaries, and glorify God, whose workmanship they are, created in Christ Jesus thereunto; that having their fruit unto holiness, they may have the end, eternal life.

³⁹ L. Bouyer, *A History of Christian Spirituality*, vol. 3, ET 1968, Tunbridge Wells, 155-156. The full quotation reads: '... the Puritan insistence on salvation by faith was soon to absorb them in minute self-examination, bearing (at least in principle) not on external works but on inner feelings. But in fact works soon regained their supremacy ... for in the uncertainty that all self-analysis inevitably creates ... works re-emerged as a more tangible criterion by which to judge a man's inner condition.' (The personal sympathies of this Protestant-turned-Catholic are rather clearly in evidence!)

⁴⁰ A convenient introduction to the debate can be found in the two collections of essays edited by R. W. Green: *Protestantism and Capitalism: the Weber Thesis and its Critics*, Boston, 1959; *Protestantism, Capitalism, and Social Science: the Weber Thesis Controversy*, Lexington, 1973; perhaps the best criticism of Weber and Tawney is that of H. M. Robertson, *Aspects of the Rise of Economic Individualism*, Cambridge, 1933; qualified support for Weber comes from, for example, R. H. Preston, *Religion and the Persistence of Capitalism*, London, 1979.

Here once more the believer's personal holiness and ongoing sanctification are stated to contribute to his assurance; as in ch. XVIII, work is not mentioned, but could be considered to be a possible example of this holiness.

Thomas Goodwin, in the course of an 80-page discussion of assurance, sets out the main grounds of assurance as one's faith, fellowship with Christ, and 'an immediate testimony of the Holy Ghost.' He then adds that the believer also⁴¹ '... finds a new spring of gracious dispositions in him, still bubbling naturally up, and cleansing, and working out corruptions.' This is very similar to the position taken in the Westminster Confession.

We might also consider a section of Arthur Dent's 'The Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven.' Published in 1601, it lists the following 'eight infallible notes and tokens of a regenerate mind', 'eight signes of salvation':⁴²

A love to the children of God
 A delight in his word
 Often and fervent prayer
 Zeale of God's glorie
 Deniall of our selves
 Patient bearing of the cross, with profit and comfort
 Faithfulnesse in our calling
 Honest, just, and compassionate dealing in all our actions and amongst men.

This passage, isolated from its context and thrown into prominence, could function as Weber claimed: inviting people by the quality of their conduct to reassure themselves about their salvation. But is it fair to isolate a passage in that way? If verses such as 1 Jn. 3:10, 14; 4:7 were taken in isolation they would have the same effect. A passage such as that by Arthur Dent above should be supplemented by careful formulations such as those in the Confession or Goodwin, or this simple reassurance from Baxter:⁴³ 'Are you willing to have Christ to pardon, sanctify, guide, and save you, or not? If you are, then you are a true believer . . .'

It is true that Puritan preachers on occasion linked not doing any

⁴¹ *The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, vol. VIII, Edinburgh, 1985, 366.

⁴² Cited by Bouyer, 155.

⁴³ Cited by Wakefield, *Puritan Devotion*, 126. In this book and also in his essay in *The Study of Spirituality*, C. Jones, G. Wainwright, and E. Yarnold S.J. (eds.), London, 1986, Wakefield gives a much more positive evaluation of Puritan spirituality than Bouyer does.

work to losing one's salvation.⁴⁴ 'A man may as well go to hell for not working in his calling, as for not believing.' But this does not make diligent work a ground of assurance.

Weber's theory of a psychological compulsion to rigorous work being accidentally created by Puritan preaching cannot be either proved or disproved. Who can tell, except God himself, whether many Puritans, in the depths of their hearts, drew some assurance of their salvation from their energetic application to their everyday work? But my own (tentative) opinion is that the Puritan preaching and teaching, as exemplified above, was actually quite well safeguarded against this distortion which Weber claims to have occurred. In Puritan writings, as in Calvin's, one's 'works' were only a very secondary ground of assurance, and the primary grounds of assurance were much more thoroughly taught than has been the case in most other Christian traditions. Puritan theology not only does not forge a link between hard work and assurance of salvation; it actually seems to leave little need, or even room, for such a link.

VI. Summary

The tremendous Puritan stress on work as loving obedience to a personal God and loving service to one's fellowmen, their massive argumentation, warm, profound reflection and detailed practical application add up to the most comprehensive exposition of the Christian view of work ever presented.

Abstract

The article shows how the Puritans carried forward and developed the thinking of John Calvin in his positive assessment of daily work as an integral part of the Christian life. They saw work as the expression of obedience to God and service to their fellows, and their detailed exposition of the topic is unsurpassed in its comprehensiveness.

⁴⁴ Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, London, 1965, 98 (also first published as part of *A Body of Practical Divinity*, 1692). Watson quotes William Perkins in support: 'Let a man be endowed with excellent gifts, and hear the word with reverence, and receive the sacrament, yet if he practise not the duties of this calling, all is but hypocrisy' (*ibid.*).