

THE FALSE DOCTRINE OF “SECULAR” WORK

David Shankle, Ph.D.

Blue Mountain College, Blue Mountain, MS.

A.W. Tozer once wrote, “One of the greatest hindrances to internal peace which the Christian encounters is the common habit of dividing our lives into two areas, the sacred and the secular.”¹ There is a war waging within each Christian between the light of Christ and the darkness of the world. John 1:5 describes the tension by explaining how the darkness could not, and would not, comprehend the light of Christ.² Secularization is the complete removal of anything spiritual and replacing it with a worldly or temporal view.³ Even secular research concludes that as nations mature over time, they replace their once religious foundations with a secularist view.⁴ One such area that was once considered sacred in America is work.

The Protestant Work Ethic (PWE) in which this nation was founded has slowly eroded. Weber’s original research found that the great prosperity in Europe could be attributed the Christian belief that all work was sacred.⁵ McClelland used Weber’s work to show how the PWE led to high levels of employee motivation.⁶ As culture secularized, so did the concept of the PWE. The work that was once sacred in American culture is becoming another casualty of rampant secularization. A God-given calling to work is being replaced with a relentless pursuit

¹ Taken from: Tozer, A. (2006). *The pursuit of God*. Camp Hill, PA: WingSpread Publishers. (Original work published 1948).

² John 1:5 (NKJV) – “And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.”

³ Definition taken from Merriam-Webster online dictionary. Retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/secular>

⁴ Eastwood and Prevalakis confirmed in their research in 2010, that nations which started out with religious principles tended to secularize as they matured. Their research was entitled *Nationalism, religion, and secularization: An opportune moment for research*.

⁵ Taken from: Weber, M. (1958). *The protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*. (Talcott Parsons, Trans.) New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons. (Original work published in 1904).

⁶ Taken from: McClelland, D. (1961). *The achieving society*. New York, NY: The Free Press. In 1961, the prevailing thought in American academia was that the PWE did lead to national prosperity, so McClelland’s work just assumed that most readers accepted that the PWE lead to national prosperity and employee motivation.

of temporal desires. Morley stated it like this: “Many of us are Christians in spirit, but secular in our practice. We have become a generation of cultural Christians.”⁷ Americans are trading what was once sacred for what is secular. Cultural Christianity can be equated with the lukewarm church of Laodicea in Revelation 3:15-16 (NKJV): “I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth.” It is clear that God despises the lukewarm church, and cultural Christianity puts on this same lukewarm attitude. Hopefully this article will shed some light on the false doctrine of secular work, and point Christians back to the Biblical basis for work.

Work Before the Fall of Man

The first step to understanding the Biblical view of work is to understand that man was created in the image of God.⁸ Connection with the Creator means that man is endowed with mental and spiritual traits that link him to God. Inklings of God are imprinted on man’s heart, soul, and mind. C.S. Lewis claimed that this can be seen through the conscience and natural laws that are found innately within every person.⁹ Everyone has some sense of right and wrong, and that innate prompting comes from the perfect and sinless God. The conscious is one of many inklings of the Creator found in created man.

Another trait of God that can be witnessed in humankind is ability to create. The Creator inspired creativity into the very fabric of mankind. An inkling of God’s creative nature can

⁷ Taken from: Morley, P. (1997) *The man in the mirror*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. Quote taken from page 42.

⁸ See Genesis 1:26-27

⁹ Taken from: Lewis, C.S. (2001). *Mere Christianity and the screwtape letters*. San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins. (Original work published 1952).

easily be witnessed through the creations, innovations, and inventions of man. Mankind has the ability to be creative and to create new ideas, concepts, products, etc... Creativity is inherent, and this trait of God triggers man to produce. Creative concepts many times transform work and labor. Secular studies suggest that man is naturally geared to be creative, and that creativity manifests itself through innovation in the workplace.¹⁰ Creativity can, and is, expressed through work, and that creativity is an inkling of the Creator. Genesis 2:19-20 (NKJV) depicts how God brought creatures before Adam, so that he could name them:

Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to Adam to see what he would call them. And whatever Adam called each living creature, that was its name. So Adam gave names to all cattle, to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper comparable to him.

God relied on Adam's creativity to name every living creature that roamed on the ground and flew in the air. It is conceivable that this work that God commissioned Adam to do likely consisted of over 2,500 species of animal and bird life.¹¹ God tapped into Adam's creativity, and it manifested itself into a monumental task for Adam. The work was God-ordained and God-honoring, and it depended on Adam's creativity.

Man was given several tasks by God in Genesis 1:26-28 (NKJV):

¹⁰ Diliello, Houghton, and Dawley published an article in 2011, entitled Narrowing the creativity gap: The moderating effects of perceived support for creativity in the *Journal of Psychology*. Their study concluded that people are inherently creative in the workplace.

¹¹ Kulikovsky authored an article in 2005, where he considered all of the possible species that Adam had to name. The article was entitled, *How could Adam have named all the animals in a single day?* This article can be found in *Creation magazine*.

Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

Man was to have dominion over every living thing, to be fruitful and multiply, and to subdue the earth. These were specific tasks given to man by God. Each task was God-ordained for His glory. Genesis 2:15 (NKJV) states, “Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it.” Matthew Henry’s commentary on Genesis 2:15 says, “There is true pleasure in the business God calls us to. Adam could not have been happy if he had been idle.”¹² Working for God led to fulfillment and happiness for Adam. Work was a special calling from God for His created man, and it was good. Pre-fall man enjoyed work as an expression of faith and fellowship with God. This poses an interesting question: Is work still sacred after the fall?

Work After the Fall of Man

God’s perfect creation came to a screeching halt in Genesis 3, but the call to work did not change with the fall of man.¹³ These verses in Genesis 3 explain that the ground was cursed, but

¹² Matthew Henry’s complete commentary on the Bible can be found at

<http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-concise/genesis/2.html?p=2>

¹³ Genesis 3:17-19 (NKJV) describes Adam’s punishment that he brought on himself and all mankind: “Then to Adam He said, ‘Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, ‘You shall not eat of it’: ‘Cursed is the

Adam was still to continue to “toil” and “sweat.” The call to work did not end with the fall of man; it just became more difficult. Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown made the following comment on Genesis 3:17-19: “Adam was made to gain his livelihood by tilling the ground; but what before his fall he did with ease and pleasure, was not to be accomplished after it without painful and persevering exertion.”¹⁴

Work in and of itself should still be a sacred calling after the fall. John Calvin argued that all work should be considered a sacred calling and believers should view all work as God’s work.¹⁵ The Apostle Paul shatters the false doctrine of secular work in Colossians 3:17 (NKJV), “And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.” Colossians 3:23 (NKJV) puts emphasis on the sacred nature of work: “And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men.” In God’s eyes all work is holy. Work is an expression of man’s faith in the Creator. The fall of man did not change the sacred nature of work; it just changed man’s view work. When Adam and Eve fell, the impact of the fall was felt throughout all of creation. The Biblical view of work was distorted when sin entered mankind. A manmade view of work took precedence over God’s view of work.

Combatting Secular Thinking with Biblical Views

ground for your sake; In toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you. And you shall eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; For dust you are, And to dust you shall return.”

¹⁴ Jamison, Fausset and Brown’s commentary can be retrieved from <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/jamieson/jfb.i.html>

¹⁵ Taken from Calvin’s *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* published in 1552.

Christians face an uphill battle as they attempt to reclaim the sacred nature of work. Secularization in America has allowed organizations such as the Southern Poverty and Law Center to categorize Christian groups like the Family Research Council and the American Family Association as hate groups.¹⁶ The Southern Poverty and Law Center categorizes these organizations as hate groups because they, “promote traditional moral values,” and, “defame gays and lesbians.” Being biblically correct is not politically correct in many instances in America. In some sense Christians face a daunting task when restoring the sacred nature of work, because it is already mostly secularized. It might not be feasible to think that non-believers will accept biblical truths if they reject the Bible. The first step to reinstating the sacred nature of work is for Christians to take personal responsibility for their calling.

When Isaiah was called (Isaiah 6:8, NKJV), God asked, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?” The prophet’s response was immediate – “Then I said, here am I! Send me.” Two things should be noted about this verse. First, Christ was with God at Isaiah’s calling as seen by the pronoun “Us.” This is important because Christians cannot live apart from the lordship of Jesus Christ. There is no way for a Christian to divide their lives between sacred and secular. A divided life is not Biblically supported. Acts 17:28a (NKJV) states: “For in Him we live and move and have our being.” Second, Christians must stand up and take personal responsibility for their calling much like Isaiah embraced his personal calling. Christians, who have embraced the lie that what they do for a living has nothing to do with their personal relationship with Jesus Christ, are largely responsible for the secularization of work. If Christians live divided lives, then why would an unbeliever view work as sacred?

¹⁶ Taken from the Southern Poverty and Law Center’s Website: <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/hate-map>

Once Christians walk worthy of the calling they receive,¹⁷ others will notice a difference in the way they (Christians) work. One of the reasons that a secular view of work is culturally accepted might be attributed to those who confess Christ with their lips but act at work the same way as non-Christians. The key to changing the secularist's view of work is to work differently. Chick-fil-A grossed \$4.1 billion dollars in 2011, a 13% increase over its 2010 profits.¹⁸ Due to the Christian heritage of the founder and top management, no stores are open on Sunday. Chick-fil-A works differently than secular organizations and people have no choice but to acknowledge the overall success of the company. Chick-fil-A is closed on a major retail sales day in which their competitors stay open, but the company is still successful financially. Their work is sacred work, and secular companies take note of their success. In the same way Christians should work differently and let the product of their labor speak to a culture that is increasingly secularized. Work to the Christian is an expression of faith and gratitude to the Creator. A sacred view of work should look vastly different than the secular view of work. Let the work speak for itself.

I John 2:15-17 (NKJV) describes what a secular view of work looks like.¹⁹ Secular work is loveless, lustful, proud, and temporary. Contrast secular work with the eternal perspective that Christians are called to have. II Corinthians 4:17-18 (NKJV) says:

¹⁷ see Ephesians 4:1

¹⁸ Taken from Chick-fil-A's website: from http://www.chick-fil-a.com/Pressroom/Fact-Sheets#?release=2012_fun_facts

¹⁹ I John 2:15-17 (NKJV) – “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.”

For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

Sacred work looks beyond current sufferings toward actions that are glorifying to a loving God. The ultimate gaze of sacred work is on the eternal life that awaits Christians in Heaven. Enjoying certain temporal aspirations are not inherently bad as long as an eternal perspective is maintained. An eternal perspective should look vastly different at work, and it should lead others with a secular view to investigate what makes a Christians work differently.

Contemporary Implications

Work for the Christian is to be a sacred action that is to draw the created closer to the Creator. The myth that work life is to be separated from the spiritual life is pervasive in American culture, but the myth should not be accepted as reality. Christians need to go back to the Edenic definition of work and see that work was a blessing given by God. Biblical principles integrated into everyday life help believers to see that, “there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!’”²⁰ Colossians 1:16-17 (NKJV) offers a glimpse into the Lordship of Christ: “For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist.” A Biblical view of work will make Christians act differently than their secular counterparts. The obligation is ultimately on

²⁰ Quote from Abraham Kuyper taken from *Sphere Sovereignty*.

each individual believer to take responsibility for their calling and offer their lives as living sacrifices as an acceptable act of service.²¹

There are those who understand their holy calling through work. Dennis Bakke is the former CEO of AES Corp. AES Corp. is a publically traded global company with over 27,000 employees and boasts revenues in excess of \$17 billion dollars annually.²² AES is not a company founded upon Biblical principles, but their former CEO intentionally chose not to live a divided life. His job as CEO was also his sacred calling. Bakke said this:

Adam's and Eve's jobs, and those of all humans who followed them, were to act as stewards—that is, keepers of the Earth and all that was created there. God appears pleased by all human work, not preferring one type over another. All kinds of production and management activities appear to honor and please the Creator, particularly if they please the person who does them.²³

Bakke saw his job as a CEO of a major corporation as his calling. He shattered the false doctrine of secular work. Christians should take back the sacred nature of work, but changing the culture begins by changing current perspectives.

Consider John 1:5 (NKJV) once again: “And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.” The darkness of secularization in our culture might be vast, but darkness is immediately vanquished by the light. I John 4:4 (NKJV) says, “You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.” Christians should recapture the workplace and

²¹ see Romans 12:1

²² Taken from the AES website: http://www.aes.com/aes/index?page=about_us

²³ Quote taken from page 272 of Dennis Bakke's book, *Joy at work: A revolutionary approach to fun on the job*.

glorify the Creator through their sacred calling by letting their light shine brightly at work. Matthew 5:16 (NKJV) says, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in Heaven.” Biblically speaking, work is a sacred calling and Christians are to combat the false doctrine of secular work so that others might glorify God.