

# The Original Puritan Work Ethic

By valuing all of life in relation to God, Puritans gave sacred significance to every activity.  
Leland Ryken

Suffering from poor health all his life, Richard Baxter preached, he said, "as never sure to preach again, and as a dying man to dying men." Living daily in the shadow of eternity gave the Puritans a deep appreciation for living every moment on this earth to the fullest for God. "Promise not long life to yourselves," Baxter advised, "but live as those that are always uncertain of another day."

For the Puritans, to "redeem the time" (as Baxter put it) meant to order one's daily life in accordance with godly principles and for maximum effectiveness. One of the Puritans' favorite epithets was *well-ordered*. Their opponents nicknamed them the *disciplinarians*. The Puritans aspired to be worldly saints—Christians with earth as their sphere of activity and with heaven as their ultimate hope. Baxter exhorted his readers, "Write upon the doors of thy shop and chamber, ... This is the time on which my endless life dependeth."

This approach to life resulted in three vintage Puritan traits: the ideal of the God-centered life, the doctrine of calling or vocation, and the conviction that all of life is God's.

## The God-centered life

The Puritans' sense of priorities in life was one of their greatest strengths. Putting God first and valuing everything else in relation to God was a recurrent Puritan theme.

Baxter's parting advice to his parishioners at Kidderminster was to "be sure to maintain a constant delight in God." Preaching before the Houses of Parliament, Cornelius Burges admonished everyone present "to lift up his soul to take hold of God, to be glued and united to him, ... to be only his forever."

For the Puritans, the God-centered life meant making the quest for spiritual and moral holiness the great business of life. "In a divine commonwealth," wrote Baxter, "holiness must have the principal honor and encouragement, and a great difference be made between the precious and the vile." Our own culture has conspired to make such holiness seem burdensome, but the Puritans found it an appealing prospect. Ralph Venning, in a book-length treatise on sin, called holiness "the beauty of earth and Heaven, without which we cannot live well on earth, nor shall ever live in Heaven."

Of course, it takes vigilance over one's actions to produce a holy lifestyle. Very tellingly, the Puritans repeatedly used such words as *watching*, *exact walking*, and *mortification* to describe their preferred lifestyle.

In Puritan thinking, the Christian life was a heroic venture, requiring a full quota of energy. "Christianity is not a sedentary profession or employment," wrote Baxter, adding, "Sitting still will lose you heaven, as well as if you run from it." The Puritans were the activists of their day. In a letter to the Speaker of the House of Commons, Oliver Cromwell crossed out the words *wait on* and made his statement read "who *have wrestled with* God for a blessing."

Stressing the God-centered life can lead to an otherworldly withdrawal from everyday earthly life. For the Puritans, it produced the opposite. Richard Sibbes sounded the keynote: "The life of a Christian is wondrously ruled in this world, by the consideration and meditation of the life of another world." The doctrinal matrix that equipped the Puritans to integrate the two worlds was their thoroughly developed ideas on calling or vocation.

## The Puritan doctrine of vocation

The Puritans spoke of two callings—a general calling and a particular calling. The general calling is the same for everyone and consists of a call to conversion and godliness. "The general calling," wrote William Perkins, "is the calling of Christianity, which is common to all that live in the church of God. ... [It] is that whereby a man is called out of the world to be a child of God."

A particular calling consists of the specific tasks and occupations that God places before a person in the course of daily living. It focuses on, but is not limited to, the work that a person does for a livelihood. Several important corollaries follow from this doctrine of vocation.

Since God is the one who calls people to their work, the worker becomes a steward who serves God. Thomas Manton thus commented that "every creature is God's servant, and hath his work to do wherein to glorify God; some in one calling, some in another."

Secondly, the Puritan view that God calls all workers to their tasks in the world dignifies all legitimate kinds of work. Above all, the Puritan doctrine of vocation sanctifies common work. William Tyndale said that if we look externally "there is difference betwixt washing of dishes, and preaching of the word of God; but as touching to please God, none at all." Baxter explained how this could be: "God looketh not ... principally at the external part of the work, but much more to the heart of him that doth it."

The Puritan doctrine of vocation (inherited, we should note, from Luther and later Continental Reformers) integrated life in the world with the spiritual life. The spiritual life was no longer limited to some "sacred" space, nor was it reserved for monks and nuns who had retired from the world. Instead, it is "in your shops" (said Richard Steele in his classic treatise *The Tradesman's Calling*) "where you may most confidently expect the presence and blessing of God."

This view of work as vocation offers more than simply the possibility of serving God in one's daily work. It offers the possibility of serving God through or by means of that work. To work is to serve God. Baxter's exhortation was for workers to "serve the Lord in serving their masters."

There is a moral dimension to work as well. When the Puritans spoke of the rewards of work, they almost automatically paired serving God with serving humanity. "The main end of our lives," wrote Perkins, "is to serve God in the serving of men in the works of our callings."

If daily work is as central to the spiritual life as the Puritan doctrine of vocation asserts, it is no wonder that the Puritans threw themselves with such zest into their work. We need, of course, to draw a distinction between the original Puritan work ethic and the secularized perversion that followed. The original Puritan work ethic was this: "Be laborious and diligent in your callings ... ; and if you cheerfully serve [God] in the labour of your hands, with a heavenly and obedient mind, it will be as acceptable to him as if you had spent all that time in more spiritual exercises" (Baxter).

### **All of life is God's**

An additional genius of the Puritans was the skill with which they managed to view all of life as God's. The Puritans lived simultaneously in two worlds. For them, both worlds were equally real, and life was not divided into sacred and secular.

According to Thomas Gouge, Christians should "so spiritualize our hearts and affections that we may have heavenly hearts in earthly employments." "If God be God over us," wrote Peter Bulkeley, "he must be over us in every thing."

It is no wonder, then, that the Puritans saw God in the commonplace. Richard Baxter asked his readers, "Canst not thou think on the several places thou hast lived in and remember that they have each had their several mercies?" John Bunyan asked in the preface to *Grace Abounding*, "Have you forgot ... the milkhouse, the stable, the barn, and the like, where God did visit your soul?"

In such a framework, there are no "trivial" events, and all of life is potentially a teachable moment. One Sunday morning when the young Robert Blair had stayed home from church he looked out of the window to see "the sun brightly shining, and a cow with a full udder." Blair remembered that the sun was made to give light and the cow to give milk, which made him realize how little he understood the purpose of his own life. Shortly thereafter, he was converted while listening to a sermon.

There was no place where the Puritans did not find God. They were always open to what Baxter called "a drop of glory" that God might allow to fall upon their souls.

C. S. Lewis wrote enthusiastically of "the beautiful, cheerful integration of [William] Tyndale's world. He utterly denies the medieval distinction between religion and secular life." Such integration is one of the most attractive features of the Puritans. Their goal was an ordered and disciplined daily life that integrated personal piety, corporate life, everyday work, and the worship of God.

Leland Ryken is Clyde S. Kilby Professor of English at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois.

### **Dos and Don'ts in the Workplace**

*From Richard Baxter's A Christian Directory*

- 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 honourable in the world.
- Be diligent in your callings, and spend no time in idleness, and perform your labours with holy minds, to the glory of God, and in obedience to his commands.
- Idleness is a robbing God, who is the Lord of us and all our faculties.
- Take pleasure in your work, and then you will not be slothful in it.
- This interest of God in your lowest, and hardest, and servile labour, doth make it honourable and should make it sweet.
- The question is, How they use that which they labour so hard for, and save so sparingly. If they use it for God, and charitable uses, there is no man taketh a righter course.
- Remember that riches do make it much harder for a man to be saved.
- 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 then choose the less gainful way, you cross one of the ends of your calling, and you refuse to be God's steward.
- You must not desire nor seek to get another's goods or labour for less than it is worth.
- You have far more cause to be afraid of prosperity, than of adversity; of riches, than of poverty.
- The devil suiteth his temptations to men's daily work and business.

Copyright © 2006 by the author or Christianity Today/Christian History & Biography magazine.  
[Click here](#) for reprint information on Christian History & Biography.