

## Chapter 1

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# LUTHER OPENS THE DOOR

On the twenty-second of August in the year 1530 Martin Luther wrote a letter to his son Hans in which he instructed the boy to "work hard, pray well, and be good" (Bainton, 303). The former Augustinian monk could also have quoted his spiritual mentor, St. Augustine, who warned that "those who want to be spiritual only and not labor with the body, reveal their indolence." And like St. Augustine, Luther threw his support to work in the handicrafts, agriculture, and manual labor in general (Hyma, 100). But in his condemnation of idleness, Luther drew on a well-established medieval tradition that was wholly Catholic. Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) had urged the faithful to labor diligently in a permanent niche, a point Luther was to later reaffirm. And Antoninus Pierozzi, later St. Antonine of Florence (1389–1459), condemned laziness and urged his parishioners to lead a busy and active life if they wished to serve God and their community. The medieval Schoolmen also attacked idleness; all should work, but should not make their livings by taking interest (Sombart, "Capitalist Spirit," 31–34; D'Entrèves, 171–75).

But despite the rationalist thinking of Aquinas and the medieval scholastics who unknowingly helped provide the intellectual base for expanded business activity after 1450, precapitalist work traditions only supported labor that enabled the worker to live in his accustomed station. As Max Weber noted, medieval man did not live to amass ever-increasing wealth, or to work with growing intensity (Weber, 60). It was this older tradition that Luther embodied and continued. If men had to work in order to serve God, then it was to be on the land or in the craftshops. Work was to maintain oneself in a calling (*Beruf*), a permanent station (*Stand*) through which both God and community could be served

(Althaus, 36–38). In this context, the labor of a peasant or weaver was akin to that of a priest. Trade was permissible, said the wary Luther, but should be limited to the exchange of necessary goods and services. And the seller should ask no more than the minimum amount needed to pay for labor and risk. Above all, idleness was to be avoided, and vagrants should be banished or forced to work. Luther urged that each town should make provision for the “honest poor” (Tawney, 83). This may have led the burghers of Amsterdam to establish the first workhouse in Amsterdam in 1596. It may have also triggered other means of social support to help the unemployed like the general funds that were set up in Nuremberg and Lyons, the *gemeine Kasten* and the *aumône générale* (Garraty, 44–45, 24).

But while Luther remained tied to the medieval conception of good work, that is, the labor of the peasant and the craftsman (Sombart, “Capitalist Spirit,” 34), he did give God’s blessing to toil. Of Christ himself Luther said:

I can just imagine the people of Nazareth at the judgment day. They will come up to the Master and say, “Lord, didn’t you build my house? How did you come to this honor?” (Bainton, 233–34)

Luther thereby gave work the strongest possible support. If Christ labored as a carpenter and Peter toiled as a fisherman, then work could be an ennobling way of life for the peasants and artisans of the sixteenth century. Luther went on to urge the faithful to work hard in his November, 1520 *On the Freedom of the Christian Man*:

Plainly then faith is enough for the Christian man. . . .  
But he is not therefore to be lazy or loose. Good works do not make a man good, but a good man does good works. (Bainton, 230–31)

In this task, Luther had considerable support in his own time. Hugh Latimer (?1484–1555), the English Protestant bishop, also cited Christ’s manual labor as a justification for work. And like other Puritans, Robert Crowley emphasized honesty in work in his 1550 tract *Voice of the Last Trumpet*. . . . *Calling All Estates of Men*

to the Right Path of Their Vocation (Hyma, 106). But while all of these divines praised hard work in one's vocation, they steadfastly opposed the growing commercialism of their times. Richard Baxter was to do the same in the seventeenth century, and it was not until the eighteenth century that business activity won a measure of support among Puritans (Fanfani, 92). Only then was the door to work fully open.

How, then, did the new entrepreneurial work values so alien to Luther emerge? To understand this we must remember that Luther was born in 1483, a child of the late medieval world. His world embraced the very early years of modernity, and stood at the end of five centuries of growing business life. Braudel and Hartwell have suggested that there was a general economic awakening in Europe beginning in the eleventh century. From this time, the needs of "everyday life" forced Europeans to gradually reverse their negative attitudes to hard work and risk-taking. Diligence that maximized profit tied an increasing element of the community to the marketplace (Braudel, *Wheels of Commerce*, 555; Hartwell, 24, 26). But the work values of the medieval order—those of the Schoolmen—could not adjust to the world of trade. Nor could they appreciate the growth of urban economies that were linked to the market, and "all the elements created by a new, nonfeudal development." Luther was to a large degree part of this medieval ethos. Because of this he saw urban business and finance as sinful, for it was gain without real work (Lüthy, 105-6). Particularly bothersome to Luther were huge profits made in a short span of time. In this connection, he attacked the banking house of his contemporary, Jakob Fugger, and urged that "we must put the bit in the mouth of the Fuggers and similar companies" (Althaus, 110). For the "medieval" Luther, work had to be tangible. Agriculture, fishing, and manual toil all fit. But the world of finance produced profits devoid of ostensible labor, and the buying and selling of products without the added value of artisanry was sinful. Luther was at home with the ideas of the medieval founder of canon law, Gratian, who wrote in his *Decretum* around 1140:

Whosoever buys a thing, not that he may sell it whole and unchanged, but that it may be a material for

fashioning something, he is no merchant. But the man who buys it in order that he may gain by selling it again unchanged and as he bought it, that man is of the buyers and sellers who are cast forth from God's temple. (Tawney, 37)

But this was no longer the prevailing view of his time, and Luther found himself fighting the tide of economic history even as he tried to establish a Protestant beachhead in Germany.

The changes that engulfed Luther first emerged in Western Europe after the reappearance of urban communities in the eleventh century. With this invigorated city life came blacksmiths, tailors, shoemakers, and butchers who began to sell in open markets. Their modest economic activity was supplemented by fairs in all parts of Europe; those at Troyes and Lyons even dated from Roman times, while the Leipzig and Champagne marts were famous throughout Europe. It was at these fairs that money could be changed and accounts balanced off against each other. In addition, money markets developed in Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands during the thirteenth century. These aided capital accumulation, yielded the bill of exchange, produced the first public-debt bonds, and supported investment in industrial or craft work, shipbuilding, and long-distance voyages (Braudel, *Wheels of Commerce*, 62–67, 82–83; Braudel, *Structures of Life*, 90–91; 472, 113–14). In addition, double-entry bookkeeping may have been used as early as the thirteenth century in Florence, and was employed extensively in Italy after 1450. From here it was introduced into Flanders by Ympym in 1543, and was employed by the famous Jakob Fugger in Augsburg. French and English businessmen also adopted this system during the sixteenth century, so that much of Europe was using a systematic method of recording the results of trade (Robertson, "Max Weber," 81; R. Davis, *Atlantic Economies*, 244).

What would have been even more disturbing to Luther was the emergence of stock markets. One of the earliest was the 1328 Florentine exchange. Genoa could later boast of an active bourse in the Casa di San Giorgio, while Bruges and Antwerp established exchanges in 1409 and 1460, respectively. But because Luther felt that stock exchanges strongly symbolized profit-making without "labor," they caught his particular fury. When Luther was offered

mining shares by the Elector of Saxony so that he would have an income of 300 gulden, Luther rejected the gift summarily: "I want no shares! This is speculative money and I will not make this kind of money multiply." (Braudel, *Wheels of Commerce*, 456).

Luther thus gave his wholehearted support to work, but at the same time was horrified by the entrepreneurial spirit that encouraged labor. His medieval perspective led him to approve of traditional toil in the field or workshop, but compelled him to oppose the new capitalist "spirit" that seemed to undermine all that he cherished. His particular dislike of merchants and bankers stemmed from their desire to be successful in this world, to "climb out of the place where God had put them." Not only did Luther want everyone to be content with their present station, but he argued that difficulty was an integral aspect of Christian life—"suffering, suffering, cross, cross" (Marius, 229–30). Work on the land was his ideal, for this effort would help the faithful avoid the degrading practices of the commercial world. Money could not be accumulated without bodily toil. Yet Italian bankers like the Bardi, Pitti, and Datini earned huge profits in Renaissance Italy, and in Luther's own time, the Amsterdam exchange had over 1,000 brokers. As Braudel pointed out, the exchange had become a permanent fair. Here everything could be bought and sold: currencies, shares, maritime insurance, and commodities. And in Venice banks had been issuing notes that circulated like currency even before Luther's birth (Braudel, *Wheels of Commerce*, 99–100, 473). It was this "capitalist spirit" and not work itself that angered Luther. He saw about him a rapidly changing world with questionable values. It was a universe disrupted by the desire for ever more gain, a world of systematic record keeping, numbers, and fiercely energetic businessmen whose work ethic was "more." He abhorred their rational worldliness, and fought for the stable past that was slipping away.

In this sense, Luther was enveloped by the paradox of "progress." He wanted everyone to work, but it had to be labor of a specific character. Bankers and merchants did not toil, but used their efforts to exploit. He failed to see that the new businessmen created the very work he applauded because he was so at war with their goals. Luther also failed to distinguish between the work values of the entrepreneurs and the new laboring class they were beginning to create. To the new businessmen, no amount of

time and energy was too great for the profitable task at hand. But for the new laborers and apprentices, fresh from the farm, the practice of taking some fifty to sixty religious holidays annually in addition to fifty-two Sundays seemed perfectly normal. Luther also failed to appreciate that farmers turned industrial workers riled against the systematic industrial labor that required punctuality, routine, and precision. In addition, Luther overlooked the short time-horizons of the new proletariat. They engaged in the precarious practice of living day to day in the new market economy where the only certainty was uncertainty. For the new workers, "the opportunity of earning more was less attractive than that of working less" (Weber, 60). They failed to see, like Luther, that their increasing dependence on distant markets in textiles and other products required a time and work discipline not expected of them as they worked in land and craft. And yet Luther approved of their traditional bent because he neither understood nor approved of the massive economic changes that were welling up around him. He did not see the new capitalist work effort as opportunity for work, growth, and a better standard of living, but attacked its emphasis on profit, interest, and rationalized production. The function of work was to support one's family and community, but above all, to serve God. Not to do so was clearly a defect in character, a fault that could lead to the sin of beggary or vagrancy (Bainton, 237–38).

This, then, was the paradox of "progress" that dogged Luther. And it should not be surprising. How could a former Augustinian monk see the connection between the money markets of Amsterdam and Antwerp and the creation of needed work that he fervently supported? Luther seemed more at home with the fourteenth-century Schoolman Henry of Langenstein, who argued that

He who has enough to satisfy his wants and nevertheless ceaselessly labors to acquire riches, either in order to obtain a higher social position, or that subsequently he have enough to live without labor. . . .—all such are incited by a damnable avarice, sensuality, or pride. (Tawney, 38)

Unlimited worldly striving and the spirit of enterprise was hateful to the Protestant reformer. He particularly detested the calculating nature and rationality of the bourgeois ethos (Sombart, *Moderne Kapitalismus*, 1:327–29). And despite the fact that the new entrepreneurial world created the work that Luther cherished, it simultaneously brought forth a greed and rationality he could not abide. Ernst Troeltsch succinctly describes what troubled Luther when he noted that “this [capitalist] spirit displays an untiring activity, a boundlessness of grasp. . . . [I]t makes work and gain an end in themselves, and makes men the slaves of work for work’s sake” (Troeltsch, *Protestantism and Progress*, 133–34).

In short, the new man of business would never accept the “satisfaction of fixed needs,” the static ideal of the medieval village economy (Sombart, *Moderne Kapitalismus*, 1:13–15). He set aside the ideal of St. Antonine (1389–1459), who had warned merchants and financiers that “riches exist for man, not man for riches.” And despite the great authority of the sixteenth-century clergy on the socioeconomic thinking of the time, the new entrepreneurs persisted (Tawney, 35, 229). It was not likely that Luther contributed to the new “capitalist spirit,” although his strong advocacy of work was an unintentional boost for the profit motive. In *The Sermon on Good Works* written in May 1520, Luther extended the idea of a divine calling to all work he considered worthy (Bainton, 233). Good work disciplines man, helps him to control his desires, and offers the reward of patience. Labor in itself is a beneficial act, and offers the worker independence and the ability to help those in need. But above all, work was a key aspect of God’s creation. Even in paradise, Luther noted, God gave Adam “work to do, that is [to] plant the garden, cultivate, and look after it” (Althaus, 101–2). But Luther was quick to warn those on earth that “no one is so heavily burdened with work that he cannot speak with God in his heart at the same time.” By this reasoning, Luther’s advocacy of work in a calling never diminished the central purpose of existence: work was God’s offering to man through which he could express his love for his fellow human beings (Boehmer, 314). Luther opened the door to work, but never in an earthly or economic sense. We can appreciate this through Luther’s sermon on John 21 at Kemberg on 27 December 1519

Everyone should remain in the natural calling to which divine Providence has appointed him. This calling of his is the place in which he can and should serve God and his neighbor. Anyone who neglects the duties of his calling will not be helped at all by fasting . . . and such other "good works" as there may be. (Boehmer, 302)

For Luther the calling was a way to serve God "by humbly and cheerfully acquiescing in that lot in life to which God had assigned him." This was a step away from the Catholic view of the calling that posited a path apart from this world. But for Luther, the greatest good was to live the secular life religiously by serving God in a vocation. Calvin later built upon Luther's conceptualization: what counted was what the individual could do "through his calling" (*per vocationem*). This provided the sixteenth-century businessmen and their successors with an intellectual opening to anoint work and the profitability that could flow from it (Fullerton, 10). When Calvin amended Luther's injunction to remain in the position to which one was called, this new mobility of employment was a further support for the new market economy. Calvin was quick to warn that this should not be done for material gain, only for the glory of God. This more flexible view of the calling opened the door to gainful employment for a later generation of Calvinists (McNeill, 221; Bouwsma, 199).

The concept of the calling also migrated to England. As on the continent, it gave the work of ordinary folk a "positive moral value," and won wide acclaim among English Protestants. The calling recognized the individuality of each worker, but tied him to God: all were defined by the spiritual and worldly parameters imposed by the Almighty (Crowley, 53–54). The Puritan leader Robert Crowley was very influential in spreading the idea of the calling. He urged the faithful to "fyrste walke in thy vocation and do not seke thy lotte to chaunge; for through wycked ambition, many mens fortune hath ben straynge." For Crowley, as Luther, the calling was a lifelong commitment. But it was not to be used to gain riches or to seek societal elevation (Robertson, "Max Weber," 70).

Hugh Latimer, a contemporary of Luther, agreed with his fellow Protestant leaders in the approval of all vocations. In the



sixth sermon he preached before King Edward VI (1547–53), Latimer stated

Therefore let no man disdain or think scorn to follow him [Christ] 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. (Robertson, "Max Weber," 70)

Some four decades later the great teacher of theology at Cambridge University, William Perkins (1558–1602), argued that the secular aspects of vocation were meaningless outside a more General Calling that committed the individual to a Christian life. And like Calvin and Luther before him, every calling had to contribute to the betterment of society (Crowley, 54). Still later the Presbyterian minister Richard Baxter (1615–91) passionately argued that "if you have a necessity of labouring in your callings, you have no necessity of loving the world or caring inordinately, or of being discontented with your estate" (Robertson, "Max Weber," 72).

Luther's emphasis on the calling was written about and sermonized on by many later British and American religious leaders. In terms of work values, it remained the keystone of Christian thinking about work until well into the eighteenth century. Even as late as 1693 J. Jeffrey urged that every person who was diligent in his calling was "a benefactor to mankind" (Cunningham, 38-39). But beyond all of this we must look at Martin Luther's contribution to work in its broadest perspective. Luther opened the door to traditional labor, but was not willing to bless workers who left their assigned place in the world. Upward mobility or an improved status were not in Luther's frame of reference. And in this matter he worried about the power and effect of the growing business establishment. He viewed the power and wealth of the great commercial centers like Antwerp with concern, and had only disdain for wealth created by investment rather than physical labor. If, as Adriano Tilgher noted in 1930, "Luther placed a crown on the sweaty forehead of labor," he did so in a most conditional sense (Tilgher, 50). It would be left to Calvin and his successors to further shape society's attitudes

toward work. But as with Luther, these ministers were in a race with the work values of the growing market economy. It was a race they were destined to lose.