

## 5. JOHN COTTON, 1584-1652

[One respect in which the Puritans seemed a diabolical contradiction in terms to their enemies, and to many modern viewers remain a riddle, was the way they took to heart—and to an astounding degree translated into daily conduct—an observation of John Cotton's:

“There is another combination of virtues strangely mixed in every lively, holy Christian: and that is, diligence in worldly businesses, and yet deadness to the world. Such a mystery as none can read but they that know it.”

Recently this complex mentality has been scientifically analyzed by the great sociologist, Max Weber, and after him it is called, for shorthand purposes, “the Protestant ethic.” Actually, it is a logical consequence of Puritan theology: man is put into this world, not to spend his life in profitless singing of hymns or in unfruitful monastic contemplation, but to do what the world requires, according to its terms. He must raise children, he must work at his calling. No activity is outside the holy purpose of the overarching covenant. Yet the Christian works not for the gain that may (or may not) result from his labor, but for the glory of God. He remains an ascetic in the world, as much

as any hermit outside it. He displays unprecedented energy in wresting the land from the Indians, trading in the seven seas, speculating in lands: "Yet," says Cotton, "his heart is not set upon these things, he can tell what to do with his estate when he hath got it." In New England the phrase to describe this attitude soon became: loving the world with "weaned affections." It was applied not only to one's love of his property, but also to his love for wife, children, parents and country. It was a razor's edge, and the true Puritan was required to walk it. No wonder that some Puritans fell off to one side, becoming visionary idealists, while some fell to the other side, becoming hypocrites. Ultimately, another group gave up the struggle entirely, and became either John Wise or Benjamin Franklin. Yet out of the original ethic both of these, like thousands of men of business, came; they are inexplicable without an understanding of their origin. This is true, above all, in the case of Franklin: he transported the Puritan ethic of Christian industry into a secular context, but it was always the Puritan ethic.

Regarded by his contemporaries as equally a master of the plain style with Hooker, Cotton's writings may not seem to us to have quite so much vehemence; but he was a master at expounding the paradoxes of Puritan theology, and in this passage gave a classic exposition of the business ethic.]

### CHRISTIAN CALLING

We are now to speak of living by faith in our outward and temporal life. Now, our outward and temporal life is twofold, which we live in the flesh: it is either a civil or a natural life; for both these lives we live, and they are different the one from the other. Civil life is that whereby we live as members of this or that city or town or commonwealth, in this or that particular vocation and calling.

Natural life I call that by which we do live this bodily life. I mean, by which we live a life of sense, by which we eat and drink, and by which we go through all conditions,

from our birth to our grave, by which we live and move and have our being. And now both these a justified person lives by faith.

To begin with the former: A true believing Christian, a justified person, he lives in his vocation by his faith.

Not only my spiritual life but even my civil life in this world, all the life I live, is by the faith of the Son of God: He exempts no life from the agency of His faith; whether he lives as a Christian man, or as a member of this or that church or commonwealth, he doth it all by the faith of the Son of God.

Now, for opening of this point, let me show you what are those several acts of faith which it puts forth about our occasions and vocations, that so we may live in God's sight therein:

First: faith draws the heart of a Christian to live in some warrantable calling. As soon as ever a man begins to look towards God and the ways of His grace, he will not rest till he find out some warrantable calling and employment. An instance you have in the prodigal son, that after he had received and spent his portion in vanity, and when being pinched, he came home to himself, and coming home to his father, the very next thing after confession and repentance of his sin, the very next petition he makes is: "Make me one of thy hired servants." Next after desire of pardon of sin, then "put me into some calling," though it be but of an hired servant, wherein he may bring in God any service. A Christian would no sooner have his sin pardoned than his estate to be settled in some good calling: though not as a mercenary slave, but he would offer it up to God as a free-will offering; he would have his condition and heart settled in God's peace, but his life settled in a good calling, though it be but of a day laborer—"yet make me as one that may do Thee some service." Paul makes it a matter of great thankfulness to God, that He had given him ability and put him in [a] place where he might do Him service (I Tim. 1. 12). And in the Law, they were counted unclean beasts that did not divide the hoof into two (Lev. 11. 3). Therefore the camel, though he chewed the cud, yet because he did not divide the hoof, he was

counted unclean. And God by the beasts did signify to us sundry sorts of men, who were clean, who not, as you may see in Peter's vision in Acts 10. It shows you then that it is only a clean person that walks with a divided hoof, that sets one foot in his general and the other in his particular calling. He strikes with both: he serves both God and man, else he is an unclean beast. If he have no calling but a general, or if no calling but a particular, he is an unclean creature. But now, as soon as ever faith purifies the heart, it makes us clean creatures (Acts 15. 9); and our callings do interfere one upon another, but both go an end evenly together. He drives both these plows at once: "As God hath called every man, so let him walk" (I Cor. 7. 19, 20). This the clean work of faith, he would have some employment to fill the head and hand with.

Now more particularly, faith doth warily observe the warrantableness of its calling.

Three things doth faith find in a particular calling:

1. It hath a care that it be a warrantable calling, wherein we may not only aim at our own, but at the public good. That is a warrantable calling: "Seek not every man his own things, but every man the good of his brother" (I Cor. 10. 24); (Phil. 2. 4) "Seek one another's welfare"; "Faith works all by love" (Gal. 5. 6). And therefore it will not think it hath a comfortable calling unless it will not only serve his own turn, but the turn of other men. Bees will not suffer drones among them; but if they lay up any thing, it shall be for them that cannot work: he would see that his calling should tend to public good.

2. Another thing to make a calling warrantable, is, when God gives a man gifts for it, that he is acquainted with the mystery of it and hath gifts of body and mind suitable to it: (Prov. 16. 20) "He that understands a matter shall find good." "He that understands his business wisely, God leads him on to that calling" (I Cor. 7. 17). To show you that when God hath called me to a place, He hath given me some gifts fit for that place, especially if the place be suitable and fitted to me and my best gifts. For God would not have a man to receive five talents and

gain but two; He would have his best gifts improved to the best advantage.

3. That which makes a calling warrantable is, when it is attained unto by warrantable and direct means, when a man enterprises not a calling but in the use of such means as he may see God's providence leading him to it. So Amos manifests his calling against the high priest: (Amos 7. 14, 15) "The Lord took me, and said unto me, Go, feed my people." So he had a warrant for it; God's hand led him to it in God's ordinance, and therein he comforted himself, whereas another man that hath taken up such a calling without warrant from God, he deals ingenuously (Zech. 13. 5) and leaves it—to show you that a man ought to attend upon his own warrantable calling. Now faith that hath respect unto the word of God for all its ways, he would see his calling aiming at the public good; he would see gifts for it and an open door for his entrance into it; he would not come unto it by deceit and undermining of others, but he would see the providence and ordinance of God leading him unto it, the counsel of friends, and encouragement of neighbors—this is the first work of faith.

Secondly: another work of faith, about a man's vocation and calling, when faith hath made choice of a warrantable calling, then he depends upon God for the quickening and sharpening of his gifts in that calling, and yet depends not upon his gifts for the going through his calling but upon God that gave him those gifts; yea, he depends on God for the use of them in his calling. Faith saith not, give me such a calling and turn me loose to it; but faith looks up to heaven for skill and ability. Though strong and able, yet it looks at all its abilities but as a dead work, as like braided wares in a shop, as such as will be lost and rust unless God refresh and renew breath in them. And then if God do breathe in his gifts, he depends not upon them for the acting his work but upon God's blessing in the use of his gifts. Though he have never so much skill and strength, he looks at it as a dead work unless God breathe in him; and he looks not at his gifts as breathed only on by God, as able to do the work, unless also he be followed by God's blessing. "Blessed be the Lord my strength, that

teacheth my hands to war, and my fingers to fight" (Psal. 144. 1). He had been trained up to skill that way, yet he rests only in God's teaching of him (Psal. 18. 32, 33, 34). "It is the Lord that girds me with strength; he puts strength into his hands, so that a bow of steel is broken with my arms." And therefore it was that when he went against Goliath, though he had before found good success in his combats with the lion and the bear, yet he saith not, I have made my part good enough with them, and so shall I do with this man. No, but this is the voice of faith: "The Lord my God that delivered me out of their hands, He will deliver me out of the hand of this Philistine; He that gave me strength and skill at that time, He is the same, His hand is not shortened. And then what is this Philistine more than one of them" (I Sam. 17. 37)? And so when he comes in Goliath's presence and looks in his face, he tells him he comes to him in the name of the Lord of Hosts; and he comes not only in the Lord's name, but he looks up to Him for skill and strength to help; and therefore saith (verse 40): "The Lord will close thee in my hands, so that by his own strength shall no flesh prevail." "It is in vain," saith faith, "to rise early, and go to bed late, but it is God that gives His beloved rest" (Psal. 127. 1, 2, 3; Prov. 3. 5, 6). The strongest Christian is never more foiled than when he goes forth in strength of gifts received and his own dexterity.

Thirdly: we live by faith in our vocations, in that faith, in serving God, serves men, and in serving men, serves God. The Apostle sweetly describes it in the calling of servants (Eph. 6. 5-8): "Not with eye service as men-pleasers, but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart with good will, as unto the Lord, and not unto men, not so much man or only man, but chiefly the Lord," so that this is the work of every Christian man in his calling. Even then when he serves man, he serves the Lord; he doth the work set before him, and he doth it sincerely and faithfully so as he may give account for it; and he doth it heavenly and spiritually: "He uses the world as if he used it not" (I Cor. 7. 31). This is not the thing his heart is set upon; he looks for greater matters

than these things can reach him, he doth not so much look at the world as at heaven. And therefore—that which follows upon this—he doth it all comfortably, though he meet with little encouragements from man, though the more faithful service he doth, the less he is accepted; whereas an unbelieving heart would be discontented that he can find no acceptance, but all he doth is taken in the worst part. But now if faith be working and stirring, he will say: "I pass very little to be judged by you, or by man's judgment" (I Cor. 4. 3). I pass little what you say or what you do; God knows what I have done, and so his spirit is satisfied; (I Thess. 2. 7) "We were tender over you, as a nurse over her child." We wrought not for wages nor for the praise of you; if so, we had not been the servants of Christ. A man therefore that serves Christ in serving of men, he doth his work sincerely as in God's presence, and as one that hath an heavenly business in hand, and therefore comfortably as knowing God approves of his way and work.

Fourthly: another act of faith about a man's vocation is this: It encourageth a man in his calling to the most homeliest and difficultest and most dangerous things his calling can lead and expose himself to. If faith apprehend this or that to be the way of my calling, it encourages me to it, though it be never so homely and difficult and dangerous. Take you a carnal, proud heart, and if his calling lead him to some homely business, he can by no means embrace it; such homely employments a carnal heart knows not how to submit unto. But now faith having put us into a calling, if it require some homely employment, it encourageth us to it. He considers, "It is my calling," and therefore he goes about it freely; and though never so homely, he doth it as a work of his calling: (Luke 15. 19) "Make me one of thy hired servants." A man of his rank and breeding was not wonted to hired servile work, but the same faith that made him desirous to be in a calling made him stoop to any work his calling led him to; there is no work too hard or too homely for him, for faith is conscious that it hath done the most base drudgery for Satan. No lust of pride or what else so insolent but our base hearts could be content to serve the Devil and nature in it; and therefore what

drudgery can be too homely for me to do for God? (Phil. 2. 5, 7) "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, he made himself of no reputation." He stood not upon it that he was born of God and equal to the Most High; but he made himself a servant, and of no reputation, and so to serve God and save men; and when his Father called him to it, he stooped to a very low employment, rose up from supper and girded himself with a towel and washed his disciples' feet (John 13). They thought it was a service too homely for him to do, but he tells them that even they ought thus to serve one another. So faith is ready to embrace any homely service his calling leads him to, which a carnal heart would blush to be seen in; a faithful heart is never squeamish in this case, for repentance will make a man revenge himself upon himself in respect of the many homely services he hath done for Satan; and so faith encourageth us to the most difficult and homely businesses. (Ezra 10. 4) "It is a great thing thou art now about, yet arise and be doing, for the matter belongs to thee." Yea, and though sometimes the work be more dangerous, yet if a man be called to it, faith dares not shrink. It was an hard point that Herod was put upon: either now he must be profane or discover his hypocrisy. Now therefore, John dischargeth his conscience; and though it was dangerous for him to be so plain, yet faith encourageth him to it. If it appear to be his calling, faith doth not pick and choose as carnal reason will do.

Fifthly: another act of faith by which a Christian man lives in his vocation is that faith casts all the failings and burthens of his calling upon the Lord; that is the proper work of faith; it rolls and casts all upon Him.

Now there are three sorts of burthens that befall a man in his calling:

1. Care about the success of it; and for this faith casts its care upon God: (I Pet. 5. 7; Prov. 16. 3) "Commit thy works unto the Lord, and thy thoughts shall be established"; (Psal. 55. 22, 24) "Cast thy burthen upon the Lord, and He will deliver thee." Faith will commend that wholly to God.

2. A second burthen is fear of danger that my befall us

therein from the hand of man: (Luke 13. 31, 32) Some bids Christ go out of the country for Herod will kill him; what saith Christ to that? "Go tell that fox I must work today and tomorrow." He casts that upon God and his calling; God hath set me a time, and while that time lasts, my calling will bear me out, and when that time is out, then I shall be perfect.

3. Another burthen is the burthen of injuries which befalls a man in his calling. I have not hastened that evil day, Lord thou knowest; he had not wronged himself nor others in his calling, and therefore all the injuries that befall him in his calling, he desires the Lord to take it into His hands.

Sixthly: faith hath another act about a man's vocation, and that is, it takes all successes that befall him in his calling with moderation; he equally bears good and evil successes as God shall dispense them to him. Faith frames the heart to moderation; be they good or evil, it rests satisfied in God's gracious dispensation: "I have learned in what estate soever I am, therewith to be content" (Phil. 4. 11, 12). This he had learned to do: if God prosper him, he had learned not to be puffed up; and if he should be exposed to want, he could do it without murmuring. It is the same act of unbelief that makes a man murmur in crosses which puffs him up in prosperity. Now faith is like a poise: it keeps the heart in an equal frame; whether matters fall out well or ill, faith takes them much what alike; faith moderates the frame of a man's spirit on both sides.

- Seventhly: the last work which faith puts forth about a man's calling is this: faith with boldness resigns up his calling into the hands of God or man; whenever God calls a man to lay down his calling when his work is finished, herein the sons of God far exceed the sons of men. Another man when his calling comes to be removed from him, he is much ashamed and much afraid; but if a Christian man be to forgo his calling, he lays it down with comfort and boldness in the sight of God and man.

First, in the sight of God: (II Tim. 4. 7) "I have fought the fight, I have kept the faith and finished my course, and therefore, henceforth is laid up for me a crown of right-

eousness, which God according to His righteous word and promise will give him as a reward for his sincere and faithful walking." He looks up to God and resigns up his calling into His hand; he tells Timothy the day of his departure is at hand; and now, this is matter of strong consolation to him, faith believing, that God put him into his calling and hath been helpful to him hitherto. And now grown nigh to the period of his calling, here was his comfort, that he had not thrown himself out of his work; but God calls him to leave it, and so he leaves it, in the same hand from whom he received it. A man that in his calling hath sought himself and never looked farther than himself, he never comes to lay down his calling, but he thinks it is to his utter undoing. A swine that never did good office to his owner till he comes to lie on the hurdle, he then cries out; but a sheep, who hath many times before yielded profit, though you take him and cut his throat, yet he is as a lamb dumb before the shearer. So a carnal man that never served any man but himself, call him to distress in it and he murmurs and cries out at it; but take you a Christian man that is wonted to serve God in serving of men, when he hath been faithful and useful in his calling, he never lays it down but with some measure of freedom and boldness of spirit. As it was with the three princes in the furnace, they would live and die in God's service, and therefore God marvelously assisted them in their worst hours; the soul knows whom it hath lived upon. This is the life of faith in the upshot of a man's calling: he lays it down in confidence of God's acceptance; and for man, he hath this boldness in his dealings with men—he boldly challenges all the sons of men of any injury done to them, and he freely offers them restitution and recompense if any such there should be. It was the comfort of Samuel when he was grown old and the people were earnest for a king (I Sam. 12. 3), he saith unto them, "Behold, here am I before you this day, bear witness against me this day, whose ox or ass have I taken?" He makes an open challenge to them all; and they answered, "Thou hast done us no wrong." This is the comfort of a Christian: when he comes to lay down his calling, he cannot only with comfort look God in the face but all the sons

of men. There is never a Christian that lives by faith in his calling but he is able to challenge all the world for any wrong done to them; we have wronged and defrauded no man (Acts 20. 26; II Cor. 12). We have done most there, where we are least accepted; that is the happiness of a Christian: those who have been the most weary of him have had the least cause.

Use 1. From hence you see a just reproof of the infidelity found in them that live without a calling: they either want faith or the exercise of faith. If thou beest a man that lives without a calling, though thou hast two thousands to spend, yet if thou hast no calling tending to public good, thou art an unclean beast. If men walk without a cloven hoof, they are unclean; and hast thou a calling and art never so diligent in it, it is but dead work if thou want faith. It likewise reproveth such Christians as consider not what gifts they have for this and that calling; he pleads for himself, his wife and children, further than himself he respects no calling; and this is want of faith in a Christian's calling. Or if men rest in the strength of their own gifts for the performing of their callings and will serve God in some things and themselves and theirs in other some, or if we can tell how to be eye-servants, it is but a dead work for want of faith. Or if thou lose thyself, and thy heart is carnal and not heavenly-minded, thou mayest have faith; but that is but a dead work. And if thou cast not all thy care and burthen upon God, thou wilt be very dead when ill successes fall out. But had we faith, it would support us in our worst successes; and if better successes come, if faith be wanting, our vain heart will be lifted up; and if Christians be confounded before God and men when they are to resign up their callings, it is a sign that either they have no faith, or it puts not forth life and courage into them; and if it so fall out, know that the root of it springs from an unbelieving heart.

Use 2. It is an use of instruction to every Christian soul that desires to walk by faith in his calling: if thou wouldst live a lively life and have thy soul and body to prosper in thy calling, labor then to get into a good calling and therein live to the good of others. Take up no calling but that thou

hast understanding in, and never take it unless thou mayest have it by lawful and just means. And when thou hast it, serve God in thy calling, and do it with cheerfulness and faithfulness and an heavenly mind. And in difficulties and dangers, cast thy cares and fears upon God, and see if he will not bear them for thee; and frame thy heart to this heavenly moderation in all successes to sanctify God's name. And if the hour and power of darkness come, that thou beest to resign up thy calling, let it be enough that conscience may witness to thee that thou hast not sought thyself nor this world, but hast wrought the Lord's works. Thou mayest then have comfort in it, both before God and men.

Use 3. It is a word of consolation to every such soul as hath been acquainted with this life of faith in his calling: be thy calling never so mean and homely and never so hardly accepted, yet, if thou hast lived by faith in thy calling, it was a lively work in the sight of God; and so it will be rewarded when thy change shall come. Many a Christian is apt to be discouraged and dismayed if crosses befall him in his calling. But be not afraid; let this cheer up thy spirit—that whatever thy calling was, yet thou camest into it honestly and hast lived in it faithfully; your course was lively and spiritual, and therefore you may with courage look up for recompense from Christ.

THE  
AMERICAN  
PURITANS

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THEIR  
Prose and Poetry

*Edited by Perry Miller*

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DOUBLEDAY ANCHOR BOOKS  
Doubleday & Company, Inc.  
Garden City, New York, 1956

*Cover and Typography by Edward Gorey*

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 56-7536

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Printed in the United States of America  
First Edition