

THE WORK ETHIC OF THE GOSPELS AND ACTS

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This work is a sequel to a similar study the author did on the work ethic concept in the Pauline writings.¹ The reason for including Acts² in this study is because of the close relationship the book has to the Gospel of Luke, since both were written by the same author. ³

In the article on the Pauline work ethic, discussion was given to the twentieth century sociological shift away from that work ethic which held some prominence earlier in the twentieth century. In this article, we wish to review this problem and relate to it a study of the attitude toward work in the Gospels and in the Acts of the Apostles.

That the shift away from the biblical Protestant work ethic is continuing is seen through recent studies by Daniel Yankelovich. This author and researcher in a new work has adequately commented on Calvinism and its interpretation of the Bible on this point of the Protestant work ethic. He says:⁴

When Calvinism conjoined hard work, profit making and ethical rightness, the Protestant ethic began to take shape as a determining force in Western history. Rational profit making involved hard work and self-denial in the present for the sake of later gratification. Self-denial thus received the dual blessing of ethical rightness and practical payoff, an unbeatable combination.

Yankelovich agrees that in the last decades there has been a shift away from this Protestant work ethic. As reasons for this, he cites what he calls the "psychology of affluence." Aspects of this psychology include: (1) the "we expect more-of-everything outlook"; (2) the assumption that acquiring more of everything is a matter of personal entitlement rather than a mere hope or desire; (3) a taking for granted that the economy will function more or less automatically; the economy is Big Mother, indestructible and bountiful; (4) an attitude that turns the self-denial ethic on its head: "instead of a concern with moral obligations to others pursued at the cost of personal desire, we have the concept of duty to self, pursued at the cost of moral obligations to others. Personal desire achieves the status of an ethical norm."⁵

What is it in the teaching of Jesus and the early disciples as set forth in the Gospels and the Acts from which the society as a whole has turned away?

GREEK WORDS FOR WORK IN THE GOSPELS AND THE ACTS

The Greek word ἔργον ("deed," "action"), the common word for work in the Gospels and Acts (used some 47 times) as in Matt 5:16; Mark 13:34; Luke 11:48; John 3:19; and Acts 5:38 is found also in several derivative