

“They were not Brought up in Idleness”: Matthew Henry, the Old Testament, and Work

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The doctrine of vocation is an essential part of a Christian’s understanding of how to live before God. Gene Veith—who has written extensively on the doctrine of vocation—observes that there is a great need to recover this “liberating, life-enhancing doctrine” in the present day.¹ The doctrine of vocation “has become all but forgotten” in the church and in the seminaries.² To answer this need, Veith develops a doctrine of vocation, basing his work on Luther. However, Veith acknowledges that other theologians have also contributed to an understanding of vocation, “from the Puritans to Os Guinness’s recent book *The Call*.”³

As Veith points his readers to Luther and the Reformers, this article outlines the teachings of Matthew Henry—a prominent preacher and Bible commentator of the late 1600s and early 1700s—on work as found in his Old Testament (OT) commentaries. Henry was greatly influenced by the Reformers and the Puritans through the training he received early in life from his father Philip Henry.⁴ Nearly three hundred years after first appearing, Matthew Henry’s commentaries are still in print today and still influence his readers. With his keen insight and profound wisdom, Henry has much to offer in developing a biblical understanding of work.

While Henry does not formulate a systematic doctrine of work, his

teachings on the matter are easily ascertained from his comments on passages of the OT. His observations are found in narratives in which work or some form of labor is a prominent feature—for example, Jacob working for Laban in Genesis 29 and 30; the rebuilding of Jerusalem in Nehemiah 3—and in the writings of Solomon in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Furthermore, while Luther and Veith contend that “vocation” encompasses all aspects of a person’s life—work, marriage, citizenship, church, etc.—the focus of this article is solely on Henry’s teaching regarding a person’s employment.⁵

This article argues that Henry teaches that God calls all people to work and to improve upon their employment in order that their labor may benefit themselves and others. Henry’s comments on work, gathered from various portions of his OT commentaries, can be organized under six themes, which will be elaborated on in this article:

1. God calls all people to work.
2. Honest work is not to be despised.
3. God provides everything needed for work.
4. Study is necessary to improve work.
5. Work benefits all people.
6. Work is difficult.

As each theme is expanded on, Henry’s contribution to a biblical understanding of work will be clear.

1. GOD CALLS ALL PEOPLE TO WORK

Henry understood that the OT clearly teaches that all people are called by God to work. No matter one’s station in life—rich or poor, follower of Christ or not—every person must have something to do while on this earth. According to Henry, God providentially places all people in their particular place of employment, whether a person remains in one job or changes employment. In whatever situation, Henry exhorts his readers to be faithful in that situation God places them.

ALL PEOPLE MUST WORK

According to Henry, the OT indicates that all people must find some form

of employment. Reflecting on Genesis 2:8-15, Henry remarks that even the first man was called to work. God placed Adam in the Garden of Eden to keep it; “He put him there, not like Leviathan into the waters, to play therein, but to dress the garden and to keep it.”⁶ “Paradise itself was not a place of exemption from work,” notes Henry.⁷ He goes on to add,

We were none of us sent into the world to be idle. He that made us these souls and bodies has given us something to work with; and he that gave us this earth for our habitation has made us something to work on . . . ; he that gave us being has given us business, to serve him and our generation, and to work out our salvation: if we do not mind our business, we are unworthy of our being and maintenance.⁸

In Solomon’s command in Proverbs 27:23—“Be thou diligent to know the state of thy flocks, *and* look well to thy herds”—Henry observes that that command implies that “we ought to have some business to do in this world and not to live in idleness.”⁹

Henry gleans from the narratives of the OT that all people—rich or poor, gifted or non-gifted, believer or non-believer—are called to work. No one is exempt. Commenting on Genesis 2:8-15, Henry notes that if anything such as a good family lineage, or a large domain, or sinlessness, or “a genius for pure contemplation,” could “have given a man a writ of ease” then Adam would have been exempt from work, for before he sinned he had it all.¹⁰ However, God placed Adam in the garden to tend it; Adam was called to work. Henry notes that even Cain and Abel, who “were heirs apparent to the world, their birth noble and their possessions large, yet they were not brought up in idleness.”¹¹ Henry comments on Noah planting a vineyard after exiting the ark, “Though Noah was a great man and a good man, an old man and a rich man, a man greatly favoured by heaven and honoured on earth, yet he would not live an idle life.”¹²

In his comments on Deuteronomy 28:8—“The Lord shall command the blessing upon thee in thy storehouses, and in all that thou settest thine hand unto”—Henry continues to emphasize that all people are called to work. The context of Deuteronomy 28:8 is the blessings promised to Israel in her obedience to God. Henry argues that the clause “in all that thou settest thine hand unto” implies that even when the Israelites were rich they were not to be idle, “but must find some good employment or

other to set their hand to, and God would own their industry.”¹³ Even ministry does not exempt a person from work. Henry calls attention to the sons of the prophets in 2 Kings 6:1-7, who entreated Elisha that they might work to improve their house. Henry writes, “As the sons of the prophets must not be so taken up with contemplation as to render themselves unfit for action, so much less must they so indulge themselves in their ease as to be averse to labour ... Let no man think an honest employment either a burden or disparagement.”¹⁴

God's Providence in Work

Henry contends that God ordains the job or the station in life for each person. He indicates this when he comments on Adam's work in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2:8-15: “There is a true pleasure in the business which God calls us to, and employs us in.”¹⁵ Henry maintains that God's providence is over the call of the minister and the public servant, as he demonstrates in his comments on the Queen of Sheba's visit to Solomon (1 Kgs 10:1-13): “Those whom God has called to any public employment, particularly in the magistracy and ministry.”¹⁶ Yet, Henry also extends God's providence to all honorable work. In his remarks on Joseph's slavery in Potiphar's house (Gen 39:1-6) Henry writes, “Providence is to be acknowledged in the disposal even of poor servants and in their settlements.”¹⁷ Reflecting on Joseph acquiring the land of Goshen for his family to settle and tend sheep (Gen 46:28-34), Henry notes that Joseph could have obtained for his brothers any employment in Egypt; yet, they remained shepherds. Henry exhorts his readers, “Whatever employment or condition God, in his providence, has allotted for us, let us accommodate ourselves in it, and satisfy ourselves with it.”¹⁸ In his observation on Ecclesiastes 5:18-20, Henry encourages his readers to delight “in the calling wherein God has put us.”¹⁹ God, contends Henry, is sovereign over all peoples' employment.

As is evident in the quotes above, Henry encourages his readers to be content in the place God has put them; however, he does maintain that God may place a person into a new occupation. At times, God may call a person to suspend one's current employment to temporarily serve in a new line of work, only to return to his former employment at a later period. Note Henry's comments on Noah in Genesis 9:18-23.

Henry observes that after leaving the ark, Noah “returned to his old employment, from which he had been diverted” by the building of the ark and the resettling of his family.²⁰ In light of Noah’s situation Henry writes, “Though God by his providence may take us off from our callings for a time, yet when the occasion is over we ought with humility and industry to apply ourselves to them again, and, in the calling wherein we are called, faithfully to *abide with God*.”²¹ At other times, God may call a person to a particular work, but temporarily place him in a different occupation to prepare him for his calling. For instance, Henry observes in Exodus 3:1-6 that Moses was “confined to obscurity” as a shepherd before God directed him to lead Israel out of Egypt. Henry writes, “Let those that think themselves buried alive be content to shine like lamps in their sepulchres, and wait till God’s time come for setting them on a candlestick.”²² No matter the situation, Henry exhorts his readers to recognize God’s providence and to faithfully work.

While Henry acknowledges God’s providence in a person’s employment, he also contends that a person has the responsibility to seek and choose his profession. In Genesis 4:1-2, Henry notes that Abel chose to be a shepherd, an “employment which most befriended contemplation and devotion.”²³ Henry goes on to add that there are things to consider when choosing a vocation: “That calling or condition of life is best for us, and to be chosen by us, which is best for our souls, that which least exposes us to sin and gives us most opportunity of serving and enjoying God.”²⁴ Henry also highlights the responsibility of man in his exposition of Deuteronomy 28:1-14. In this passage Moses promises Israel that God will bless their obedience. Henry focuses on verse 8—“the Lord shall command the blessing upon thee in thy storehouses, and in all that thou settest thine hand unto.” Henry remarks that Deuteronomy 28:8 indicates that Israel must not be idle, even though they were rich and blessed, and “must find some good employment or other to set their hand to, and God would own their industry.”²⁵ Israel still had a responsibility to seek work.

Not only is man to seek work, but Henry insists that man also has a responsibility to raise his children to work. Commenting on Cain’s and Abel’s professions in Genesis 4:1-2, Henry remarks that parents have a duty to “bring up their children to business.”²⁶ Henry then goes on to quote a certain Mr. Dod, “Give them a Bible and a calling (said good

Mr. Dod), and God be with them.’”²⁷ In his exposition of Genesis 37:1-4, Henry comments on Joseph who, although was favored by his father Jacob, still worked as a shepherd. Jacob, argues Henry, did not raise his son to be idle. Henry writes,

Though he [Joseph] was his father’s darling, yet he was not brought up in idleness or delicacy. Those do not truly love their children that do not inure them to business, and labour, and mortification. The fondling of children is with good reason commonly called the spoiling of them. Those that are trained up to do nothing are likely to be good for nothing.²⁸

Although God is provident over a person’s work, Henry places a great responsibility upon parents to raise their children to work.

According to Henry, therefore, God calls all people to work, no matter one’s station in life. Henry encourages his readers to be content in their work as God has providentially placed them in the very labor they have chosen to set their hand to. However, God may temporarily suspend a person’s work in order to accomplish another task, or He may temporarily keep a person from his calling in order to prepare him. Furthermore, because God ordains work and providentially calls people to their work, all honorable work is of God and must not be despised.

2. Honest Work is Not to be Despised

Throughout his comments on the narratives of the OT, Henry impresses upon his readers the attitude towards work many faithful Israelites exhibited. Taking these examples into account, Henry emphasizes that no manner of honest labor—shepherd, tradesman, husbandman, craftsman, etc.—should be despised by any person. Henry exempts no one; Henry addresses noblemen, ministers, kings, men and women alike. No person is above any kind of honest labor.

The Individual and Work

In his commentary on Genesis 29:9-14, Henry focuses on the phrase “she kept her father’s sheep” in verse 9, noting that Rachel likely had servants under her and yet she worked to care for her father’s sheep. Henry writes, “Honest useful labour is that which nobody needs be

ashamed of.”²⁹ Although Rachel was likely in an elevated position, she did not despise her work. Even young David, after slaying Goliath, does not shy away from declaring that he is a shepherd when King Saul inquires of his work (1 Sam 17:31-39). “He is not ashamed to own that he kept his father’s sheep, which his brother had just now upbraided him with,” observes Henry. Henry goes on to note, “So far is he from concealing it that from his employment as a shepherd he fetches the experience that now animated him.”³⁰ Far from being a source of shame for David, his experience as a shepherd served him well in his fight against Goliath. According to Henry, no one is to be ashamed of his or her work, even when standing before a king.

Henry even exhorts his readers to not despise the honest labor of others. Concerning God’s appointment of Bezaleel to lead the work on the Tabernacle (Exod 31:1-11), Henry maintains that the family of Bezaleel was greatly honored even though he was employed “as a mechanic, or handicraft tradesman, for the service of the tabernacle.”³¹ Bezaleel’s work on the tabernacle offered no less honor to his family and himself than the work of the Levites. Furthermore, Henry highlights Joseph’s attitude towards his brothers, who were shepherds, when Joseph gains from Pharaoh the land of Goshen (Gen 46:28-34). Even though the Egyptians despised shepherds, Joseph “would have them to continue shepherds, and not to be ashamed to own that as their occupation before Pharaoh.”³² Henry continues, “An honest calling is no disparagement, nor ought we to account it so either in ourselves or in our relations, but rather reckon it a shame to be idle, or to have nothing to do.”³³ Family members are not to be ashamed of or despise the honest labors of fellow family members. Honor comes to a person and to a family when a person faithfully performs his duty in work, not in the type of work.

Kings, Ministers, and Nobles and Work

Henry also addresses those in a position of leadership or authority—nobles, ministers, kings—exhorting them to value all honest work. When Elijah calls Elisha, Henry emphasizes that Elijah found Elisha “not in the schools of the prophets, but *in the field*, not reading, nor praying, nor sacrificing, but *ploughing*.”³⁴ Henry surmises that Elisha was a wealthy man, basing his conjecture on the feast mentioned in verse 21. Henry

writes of Elisha, “Though a great man (as appears by his feast, v. 21), master of the ground, and oxen, and servants, yet he did not think it any disparagement to him to follow his business himself, and not only to inspect his servants, but himself to lay his hand to the plough. Idleness is no man’s honour, nor is husbandry any man’s disgrace.”³⁵ In 2 Chronicles 26:1-15, Henry calls attention to King Uzziah and his love of husbandry (v. 10). Henry stresses that Uzziah did not hold himself above inspecting “his affairs in the country, which was no disparagement to him, but an advantage, as it encouraged industry among his subjects.”³⁶ Henry goes on to add, “It is an honour to the husbandman’s calling that one of the most illustrious princes of the house of David followed it and loved it.”³⁷

Furthermore, Henry exhorts ministers to follow the example of Eliashib the high priest in Nehemiah 3:1, who, along with his fellow priests, rebuilt the sheep gate. Henry writes,

Ministers should be foremost in every good work; for their office obliges them to teach and quicken by their example, as well as by their doctrine. If there be labour in it, who so fit as they to work? . . . The dignity of the high priest was very great, and obliged him to signalize himself in this service.³⁸

Henry finds another positive example of ministers and work in 2 Kings 6:1-7. In this passage the sons of the prophets entreat Elisha, requesting permission to improve their housing. Henry writes,

They were industrious men, and willing to take pains. They desired not to live, like idle drones (idle *monks*, I might have said), upon the labours of others, but only desired leave of their president to work for themselves. As the sons of the prophets must not be so taken up with contemplation as to render themselves unfit for action, so much less must they so indulge themselves in their ease as to be averse to labour . . . Let no man think an honest employment either a burden or a disparagement.³⁹

Against these positive examples of ministers and kings at work Henry sets the negative example of the noblemen of the Tekoites in Nehemiah 3:5. This verse reads, “And next unto them the Tekoites repaired; but their nobles put not their necks to the work of their Lord.” Henry writes,

Here is a just reproach fastened upon the nobles of Tekoa, that they *put not their necks to the work of their Lord* (v. 5), that is, they would not come under the yoke of an obligation to this service; as if the dignity and liberty of their peerage were their discharge from serving God and doing good, which are indeed the highest honour and the truest freedom. Let not nobles think any thing below them by which they may advance the interests of their country; for what else is their nobility good for but that it puts them in a higher and larger sphere of usefulness than that which inferior persons move?⁴⁰

Henry clearly holds those in a privileged or leadership position to a high standard. Their position does not exclude them from work, and neither should those in higher positions spurn any kind of work. Rather, leaders or those in privileged positions should set the example by doing all kinds of honest labor; furthermore, their work benefits those under their care.

Henry and Husbandry

Henry’s insistence on the dignity of all honest labor is made most clear in his numerous statements on husbandry.⁴¹ Henry often praises the husbandman and his occupation, urging his readers to not despise this calling. Henry holds husbandry in higher favor compared to other occupations and stresses its importance. Henry’s insistence on the honor of husbandry is likely due to the fact that he thought that husbandry was despised in his day. Notice his comments on Genesis 4:1-2. In this passage Henry observes that Cain’s and Abel’s work was that of husbandmen. Husbandry, contends Henry, is “a needful calling, for *the king himself is served of the field*, ... It is now looked upon as a mean calling.”⁴² Henry cites Jeremiah 53:16, “*the poor of the land serve for vine-dressers and husbandmen*,” attributing the sentiment to Henry’s peers.⁴³ Although Henry’s contemporaries may have despised husbandry, Henry’s comments give the impression that it is the preferred occupation.

Henry demonstrates the honor of husbandry through the lives of several illustrious men of the OT. In Genesis 2:8-15 Henry notes that husbandry was the ideal occupation for the sinless Adam. “It was a calling fit for a state of innocency,” Henry remarks, “making provision for life, not for lust, and giving man an opportunity of admiring the Creator and acknowledging his providence: while his hands were about his trees, his heart might be with his God.”⁴⁴ Henry also holds up Noah as an example,

observing that Noah—after he left the ark—tended the vine and did not “think the husbandman’s calling below him.”⁴⁵ Even King Uzziah loved and did not despise husbandry (2 Chr 26:1-15). Henry writes of Uzziah,

It is an honour to the husbandman’s calling that one of the most illustrious princes of the house of David followed it and loved it. He was not one of those that delight in war, nor did he addict himself to sport and pleasure, but delighted in the innocent and quiet employments of the husbandman.⁴⁶

Lastly, Henry commends Elisha, for though he was a great man, he did not shun husbandry (1 Kgs 19:19-21). Henry reflects on Elisha the husbandman, “Idleness is no man’s honour, nor is husbandry any man’s disgrace.”⁴⁷ That these great men of the OT saw fit to be husbandmen supports Henry’s statements that honest work of all kinds should not be despised.

Furthermore, Henry asserts that husbandry is a necessity; people spurn husbandry to their own detriment. Reflecting on Proverbs 14:4—“Where no oxen *are*, the crib *is* clean: but much increase *is* by the strength of the ox”—Henry writes, “The neglect of husbandry is the way to poverty.”⁴⁸ Henry goes on to explain, “*Where no oxen are*, to till the ground and tread out the corn, *the crib is empty, is clean*; there is no straw for the cattle, and consequently no bread for the service of man.”⁴⁹ Henry, focusing on the clean crib, chastises those who are unwilling to engage in the dirty work of husbandry:

The crib indeed is clean from dung, which pleases the neat and nice, that cannot endure husbandry because there is so much dirty work in it, and therefore will sell their oxen to keep the crib clean; but then not only the labour, but even the dung of the ox is wanted. This shows the folly of those who addict themselves to the pleasures of the country, but do not mind the business of it, who (as we say) keep more horses than kine, more dogs than swine; their families must needs suffer by it.⁵⁰

According to Henry’s exposition on Proverbs 24:30-34, the earth would be a wilderness without husbandry. In this passage Solomon observes “the field of the slothful” and offers words on idleness. Henry comments on verse 31—which describes the field overgrown with thorns and the stone wall broken down:

See what a blessing to the world the husbandman’s calling is, and what a wilderness this earth, even Canaan itself, would be without it. The king himself is served of the field, but he would be ill served if God did not teach the husbandman discretion and diligence to clear the ground, plant it, sow it, and fence it.⁵¹

Such a needed occupation should not be despised.

In two instances Henry contends that husbandry is actually a more attractive occupation compared to others. First, commenting on Abel’s choice to be a shepherd in Genesis 4:1-2, Henry notes that “Abel chose that employment which most befriended contemplation and devotion, for to these a pastoral life has been looked upon as being peculiarly favourable. Moses and David kept sheep, and in their solitudes conversed with God.”⁵² Second, reflecting on Genesis 49:13-21, Henry maintains that husbandry is the most restful occupation. The context of Genesis 49:13-21 is Jacob’s prophecy concerning Issachar. Verse 14 states that Issachar is a donkey “couching down between two burdens.” According to Henry, the two burdens are cultivating the land and tribute.⁵³ Verse 15 states that Issachar saw that “rest *was* good, and the land that *it was* pleasant.” Henry writes, “The labour of the husbandman is really rest, in comparison with that of soldiers and seamen, whose hurries and perils are such that those who tarry at home in the most constant service have no reason to envy them.”⁵⁴

While many people spurn husbandry, Henry argues that the OT honors husbandry. Husbandry is not a source of shame, but of honor to the individual and to his family. Furthermore, people spurn husbandry to their own detriment, missing out on the necessities and benefits provided by and through this occupation. Henry’s comments regarding husbandry supports his main point that all honorable work should not be despised.⁵⁵ Compare his comment in 1 Kings 10:14-29 regarding the tradesman, “This puts an honour upon the trading part of a nation, and sets a tradesman not so much below a gentleman as some place him, . . . In all labour there is profit.”⁵⁶ All people are called to work, and God providentially places people in their occupations; therefore, no one should spurn honest labor.

3. God Provides Everything Needed for Work

The blessing of God on seemingly menial tasks is further evidenced

by God's provision of all that is necessary to carry out that task. Henry encourages his readers that God will equip them whether their job is a secular job or service in the ministry of God.

Henry maintains that the time Joseph spent serving in Potiphar's house was used by God to prepare him for the time he served under Pharaoh. Henry writes, "He was sold to an officer of Pharaoh, with whom he might get acquainted with public persons and public business, and so be fitted for the preferment for which he was designed."⁵⁷ Furthermore, Henry observes, "What God intends men for he will be sure, some way or other, to qualify them for."⁵⁸ Likewise with Moses, Henry remarks that Moses' time as a shepherd was a time that God prepared him to lead Israel (Exod 3:1-6).⁵⁹ Two things Henry notes that Moses learned during his time of shepherding were "meekness and contentment to a high degree, for which he is more celebrated in sacred writ for all his other learning."⁶⁰

Henry asserts that God provides all wisdom and skill for use in secular work. In Exodus 31:1-11 God tells Moses that He has filled Bezaleel "with the spirit of God, in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship" for his work on the tabernacle (v. 3). God also filled Aholiab and "all that are wise hearted" with wisdom (v. 6). With reference to these verses, Henry remarks,

Skill in common arts and employments is the gift of God; from him are derived both the faculty and the improvement of the faculty. It is he that puts even this *wisdom into the inward parts*, ... He teaches the husbandman discretion ..., and the tradesman too; and he must have the praise of it.⁶¹

Bezaleel and Aholiab are reintroduced again in Exodus 35:30-35, and Moses declares to Israel that God had filled them with His Spirit. Henry writes, "Those whom God called by name to this service he *filled with the Spirit of God*, to qualify them for it, ... Skill in secular employments is God's gift, and comes from above."⁶² Henry then cites James 1:17, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights."

Moreover, as illustrated with Moses in Exodus 3:1-6 above, God also equips those called to ministry. In Jeremiah 1:4-10, when God calls Jeremiah, Henry notes two things. First, Henry comments on verse 5, in

which God comforts Jeremiah stating that He had called Jeremiah while he was in the womb. Henry observes that “what God has designed men for he will call them to.”⁶³ Second, Henry notes that the prophets and ministers “are by special counsel designed for their work, and what they are designed for they are fitted for.”⁶⁴ God does not leave His servants to do His work without equipping them.

The minister, the shepherd, the farmer, the mechanic can rest assured that God has and will equip them with those things necessary to complete their work. God providentially places people in their employment and he also provides the means for that work.

4. Study is Necessary to Improve Work

Henry contends that while God calls people to work and provides for all that is necessary for work, a person still has a responsibility to improve his understanding and skill in his profession. Henry notes in Genesis 3:17-19 that the need for improvement is especially necessary due to the curse placed on the ground after the fall. Henry reflects, “That uneasiness and weariness with labour are our just punishment, which we must patiently submit to, and not complain of, since they are less than our iniquity deserves.”⁶⁵ Although we do labor under the curse of sin, Henry exhorts his readers, “Let not us, by inordinate care and labour, make our punishment heavier than God has made it; but rather study to lighten our burden, and wipe off our sweat, by eyeing Providence in all and expecting rest shortly.”⁶⁶ Henry’s comment raises the question: What does he refer to when he commends his readers to study to lighten the burdens of work? Does Henry mean to study God’s word in order to have a biblical perspective? Or, does Henry also include the exhortation to study one’s profession in order to improve his labor? It would seem that both options are viable, as Henry makes several remarks about studying and growing in understanding in work.⁶⁷

Henry clearly exhorts his readers to study their respective professions. Proverbs 27:23 reads, “Be thou diligent to know the state of thy flocks, *and* look well to thy herds.” Henry reflects on this verse:

A command given us to be diligent in our callings. It is directed to husbandmen and shepherds, and those that deal in cattle, but it is to be extended to all other lawful

callings; whatever our business is, within doors or without, we must apply our minds to it. . . . We ought rightly and fully to understand our business, and know what we have to do, and not meddle with that which we do not understand.⁶⁸

Henry offers Jacob as an example. In Genesis 30:37-43, Moses chronicles Jacob taking rods from various trees in order to breed strong, spotted cattle. Due to his actions, Jacob grew in wealth. Henry reflects on Jacob's actions, "It becomes a man to be master of his trade, whatever it is, and to be not only industrious, but ingenious in it, and to be versed in all its lawful arts and mysteries."⁶⁹ Henry also notes the ingenuity of Joseph's brothers in Genesis 47:1-12. In verse 6 Pharaoh commands Joseph with regard to his brothers that if he "knowest any men of activity among them, then make them rulers" over his cattle. Concerning the "men of activity" Henry writes, "He [Pharaoh] offered them [Joseph's brothers] preferment as shepherds over his cattle, provided they were men of activity; for it is the man who is diligent in his business that shall stand before kings. And, whatever our profession or employment is, we should aim to be excellent in it, and to prove ourselves ingenious and industrious."⁷⁰

Henry also highlights worthy examples among non-Israelites. In Genesis 36:20-30 Moses lists the sons of Seir the Horite, among whom was Anah. Henry notes that this Anah was mentioned in v. 24 where it is told that he found mules in the desert and fed them. Anah is later called a duke in v. 29. Henry praises Anah, saying, "This Anah was not only industrious in his business, but ingenious too, and successful."⁷¹ Henry also offers the Queen of Sheba as an example when she visits Solomon in 1 Kings 10:1-13. Henry writes,

She came to *hear his wisdom*, and thereby to improve her own (Matt. xii. 42), that she might be the better able to govern her own kingdom by his maxims of policy. Those whom God has called to any public employment, particularly in the magistracy and ministry, should, by all means possible, be still improving themselves in that knowledge which will more and more qualify them for it, and enable them to discharge their trust well.⁷²

Notice that Henry's comments covers all workers in a wide range of positions. Henry exhibits no favoritism; just as all people are called to work, and to honor all lawful work, they are all to improve upon their work.

5. Work Benefits all People

Henry maintains that people should not only work to benefit themselves or their family only; an individual’s work is a benefit to his neighbors. Moreover, Henry widens the scope of the merits of work to include the labor of nations. Work should be a blessing and a boon to all.

In his comments on Genesis 4:1-2, Henry comments on Cain’s and Abel’s choices of work: Cain a farmer, Abel a shepherd. Henry notes, “Their employments were different, that they might trade and exchange with one another, as there was occasion. The members of the body politic have need one of another.”⁷³ Henry also points his readers to Jacob, who worked for his uncle and was faithful with his uncle’s property (Gen 29:15-30). Henry writes, “Wherever we are, it is good to be employing ourselves in some useful business, which will turn to a good account to ourselves or others.”⁷⁴ Jacob’s labor was a benefit to Laban, which Laban readily recognized. In Exodus 36:1 Moses recounts Bezaleel, Aholiab, “and every wise hearted man” beginning the work on the tabernacle. Henry comments on these talented men, “Note, [t]he talents we are entrusted with must not be laid up, but laid out; not hid in a napkin, but traded with. What have we all our gifts for, but to do good with them?”⁷⁵

Consider also Henry’s comments on Proverbs 10:16a, which reads, “The labour of the righteous *tendeth* to life.” Henry observes that the righteous man “would enable himself to do good to others; he labours *that he may have to give* (Eph. iv. 28); all his business turns to some good account or other.”⁷⁶ Against the positive example in Proverbs 10:16a, Henry comments on a negative example in Ecclesiastes 4:7-12. In this passage Solomon observes the vanity of the man who labors only for himself. Henry writes of “this covetous muckworm,” “He has not consideration enough to show himself the folly of this. He never puts the question to himself, *For whom do I labour* thus? Do I labour, as I should, for the glory of God, and that I may have to give to those that need?”⁷⁷ The fool does not recognize that his labor is to benefit others in addition to himself.

In 1 Kings 9:15-28 Henry observes the benefit of one nation’s work upon another. Verses 25 and 26 recount Solomon building a navy and Hiram sending his shipmen to Solomon. Henry conjectures that Solomon had worked with Hiram before, “or put a venture into his ships,” and made

a profit off of the partnership.⁷⁸ With this money, Henry argues, Solomon built his navy. Henry then reflects on this passage, “The success of others in any employment should quicken our industry; for *in all labour there is profit.*”⁷⁹ Henry also praises Solomon’s trade with Egypt in 1 Kings 10:14-29: “This puts an honour upon the trading part of a nation, . . . In all labour there is profit.”⁸⁰

Work is certainly meant to benefit the individual and his or her family. Henry expands the merit of labor to include the labor of nations. All are mutually benefitted by the labor of others. “In all labour there is profit.”⁸¹

6. The Difficulty of Work

While Henry recognizes the merits of work and God’s providence and provision in work, he does recognize the difficulty of labor. Henry teaches that after the fall of man work was cursed. As people labor in a cursed world, Henry encourages his readers to work with an eye to God, and to be faithful and content in one’s occupation.

Work is Difficult

The difficulty of work is clearly expressed in the book of Ecclesiastes. In Ecclesiastes 1:14 Solomon writes, “I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit.” Henry comments, “The works themselves which we see done are *vanity and vexation* to those that are employed in them. There is so much care in the contrivance of our worldly business, so much toil in the prosecution of it, and so much trouble in the disappointments we meet with in it, that we may well say, It is *vexation of spirit.*”⁸² In Ecclesiastes 1:3, Solomon asks, “What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?” Henry observes, “The business of the world is described. It is labour; the word signifies both care and toil. It is work that wearies men. There is constant fatigue in worldly business.”⁸³

Solomon’s language is particularly strong in Ecclesiastes 2:18: “Yea, I hated all my labour which I had taken under the sun: because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me.” Henry aptly explains what Solomon means by hating labor. He writes,

This expresses not a gracious hatred of these things, which is our duty, to love them less than God and religion (Luke xiv. 26), nor a sinful hatred of them, which is our folly, to be weary of the place God has assigned us and the work of it, but a natural hatred of them, arising from a surfeit upon them and a sense of disappointment in them.⁸⁴

Solomon simply expresses the frustration felt by all who labor under the curse. Furthermore, Henry’s comments on Solomon’s sayings evidences that, although he has a high view of work, work is difficult.

Work is Cursed by the Fall

Although work is hard, in Genesis 2:8-15 Henry indicates that work was never itself a curse; work was part of God’s original design. “Paradise itself was not a place of exemption from work,” writes Henry.⁸⁵ Adam’s call to tend the Garden of Eden, according to Henry, “was a calling fit for a state of innocency” for it provided his needs and allowed for communion with God.⁸⁶ Henry goes on to observe that “Adam’s work was so far from being an allay that it was an addition to the pleasures of paradise; he could not have been happy if he had been idle.”⁸⁷ In Genesis 3:17-19 Henry writes, “His [Adam’s] business, before he sinned, was a constant pleasure to him. [T]he garden was then dressed without any uneasy labour, and kept without any uneasy care.”⁸⁸ Work was never a curse, but work was cursed.

After the fall Adam’s work became difficult. Henry continues his comments on Genesis 3:17-19: “But now his labour shall be a weariness and shall waste his body; his care shall be a torment and shall afflict his mind. The curse upon the ground which made it barren, and produced thorns and thistles, made his employment about it much more difficult and toilsome.”⁸⁹ Henry brings out the effect of the curse on work in his comments on Leviticus 25:1-7. In this passage God commands the sabbatical year; the land was to lie fallow in the seventh year. This command, argues Henry, reminds Israel “of the easy life man lived in paradise, ... Labour and toil came in with sin.”⁹⁰ The difficulty mankind faces in work is due to the curse placed by God on the ground; however, God still calls all people to work.

Work With an Eye to God

In light of the difficulty of work in a fallen world, Henry offers much

in the way of exhortation to his readers to help ease the burden. Henry exhorts his readers to perform their work to the glory of God, and to keep in mind the believer's heavenly rest. Moreover, Henry reminds his readers that their work is to benefit others in addition to themselves.

In Genesis 2:8-15, Henry stresses that even Adam, who at that time had not sinned, was called to work. "Secular employments," writes Henry, "will very well consist with a state of innocency and a life of communion with God."⁹¹ He goes on to note if believers perform their work "with an eye to God, they are as truly serving him in it as when they are upon their knees."⁹² Henry reiterates this point in his comments on Ecclesiastes 2:26: "For *God* giveth to a man that *is* good in his sight wisdom, and knowledge, and joy." Henry explains that this verse intimates that the believer is to faithfully use the profits from his or her work. How a person uses their profits is more important than how to increase profit. "This," writes Henry, "is intimated in v. 26, where *those* only are said to have the comfort of this life who are good in *God's* sight, and again, good before God, ... We must set God always before us, and give diligence in every thing to approve ourselves to him."⁹³ In Ecclesiastes 4:7-12 Henry admonishes the "covetous muckworm" who only works for himself: "Do I labour, as I should, for the glory of God?"⁹⁴ As man receives his work from God, he should work unto God.

Henry also offers other counsel to aid the believer in bearing the difficulties of work. First, Henry reflects on Joseph's success in Potiphar's house (Gen 39:1-6), noting that "it is God's presence with us that makes all we do prosperous."⁹⁵ Henry continues, "Those that would prosper must therefore make God their friend; and those that do prosper must therefore give God the praise."⁹⁶ Second, Henry exhorts his readers to keep in mind the believer's heavenly rest. Expounding on Jacob's prophecy for Issachar (Gen 49:13-21), Henry writes, "Let us, with an eye of faith, see the heavenly rest to be good, and that land of promise to be pleasant; and this will make our present services easy, and encourage us to bow our shoulder to them."⁹⁷ Third, Henry exhorts his readers to work in heavenly things. While earthly work is important and needed, we must also work for that which is higher. Commenting on Ecclesiastes 5:9-17, Henry writes,

“If we labour in religion, the grace and comfort we get by that labour we may carry away in our hearts, and shall be the better for it to eternity; that is meat that endures. But if we labour only for the world, to fill our hands with that, we cannot take that away with us; we are born with our hands griping, but die with them extended, letting go what we held fast. So that, upon the whole matter, he may well ask, *What profit has he that has laboured for the wind?* Note, Those that labour for the world labour for the wind, for that which has more sound than substance, which is uncertain, and always shifting its point, unsatisfying, and often hurtful, which we cannot hold fast, and which, if we take up with it as our portion, will not more feed us than the wind, Hos. xii. 1. Men will see that they have *laboured for the wind* when at death they find the profit of their labour is all gone, gone like the wind, they know not whither.⁹⁸

According to Henry, work will be difficult, but an eye to God will ease the burden.

Faithfulness and Contentment in Work

Henry urges his readers to be faithful and content in their employment while they work with an eye to God. Whether one is placed in a humble occupation or one is in charge of another’s affairs, faithfulness and contentment is expected of all. Moreover, Henry contends that the OT implies that workers are to be wise in the amount of labor they perform that they might rejoice in their labor.

Henry reminds his readers in Genesis 3:17-19 that difficulties in work “are our just punishment” as fallen sinners, “which we must patiently submit to, and not complain of, since they are less than our iniquity deserves.”⁹⁹ Commenting on the same passage Henry exhorts his readers to study to ease the burden of the curse; however, his charge to submit to “our just punishment” seems to indicate that not all difficulties will be alleviated. For example, Henry comments on Proverbs 6:6-11,

We must take pains, and labour in our business, yea, though we labour under inconveniences. Even *in summer*, when the weather is hot, the ant is busy in *gathering food* and laying it up, and does not indulge her ease, nor take her pleasure, as the grasshopper, that sings and sports in the summer and then perishes in the winter.¹⁰⁰

One will face difficulty simply by the weather conditions, notes Henry.

Henry also observes Jacob's endurance in hardships while he tended Laban's flocks in Genesis 31:36-42: "He stuck to his business, all weathers; and bore both heat and cold with invincible patience."¹⁰¹ Henry then applies the lesson of Jacob to business men and ministers: "Men of business, that intend to make something of it, must resolve to endure hardness. Jacob is here an example to ministers; they also are shepherds, of whom it is required that they be true to their trust and willing to take pains."¹⁰² Despite difficulties and hardships, Henry urges his readers to be faithful in their work.

Henry's view of God's providence in calling people to work has been discussed above. While Henry does contend that God can call a person from one occupation to another, the thrust of his remarks seem to indicate that God primarily calls a person to one occupation. In the following quotes, Henry urges his readers to be content in their calling and not to be given over to longing after other opportunities. Reflecting on Genesis 9:18-23 and Noah's return to the vineyard after the flood, Henry writes, "In the calling we are called, faithfully ... *abide with God*."¹⁰³ In Genesis 46:28-34 Joseph attains the land of Goshen for his brothers to live and shepherd. Henry observes, "It is generally best for people to abide in the callings that they have been bred to, and used to, ... Whatever employment or condition God, in his providence, has allotted for us, let us accommodate ourselves to it, and satisfy ourselves with it, and *not mind high things*."¹⁰⁴ Henry ends the comment from Genesis 46:28-34 with a quote from Romans 12:16, which reads, "*Be of the same mind toward one another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits.*" Henry seems to intimate that one should not think too highly of himself, thinking himself above or overqualified for his current employment.¹⁰⁵ Henry points to Moses as an example in Exodus 3:1-6. Moses labored as a shepherd as God prepared him to lead Israel. Henry writes, "In the calling to which we are called we should abide, and not be given to change."¹⁰⁶

Henry clearly indicates that faithfulness and contentment should be exhibited no matter one's work situation. In Genesis 31:36-42 Henry highlights Jacob's faithfulness and contentment even though the flocks he tended were not his own. "Servants should take no less care of what they are entrusted with for their masters than if they were entitled to it as

their own,” Henry writes.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, Jacob “was very honest, and took none of that for his own eating which was not allowed him. He contented himself with mean fare, and coveted not to feast upon the rams of the flock.”¹⁰⁸ Henry also offers young David as an example, who declared to King Saul that he was a shepherd (1 Sam 17:31-39). Henry observes, “Whatever our profession or calling is, be it ever so mean, we should labour to excel in it, and do the business of it in the best manner.”¹⁰⁹ Notice Henry’s comment on Proverbs 27:18: “Though the calling be laborious and despicable, yet those who keep to it will find there is something to be got by it.”¹¹⁰ Faithfulness and contentment should be exhibited no matter the work situation.

Henry also instructs his readers that a part of being faithful and content is being mindful of not overworking. In Ecclesiastes 2:17-26 Henry writes, “We must neither over-toil ourselves, so as, in pursuit of more, to rob ourselves of the comfort of what we have, nor must we over-hoard for hereafter, nor lose our own enjoyment of what we have to lay it up for those that shall come after us, but serve ourselves out of it first.”¹¹¹ Notice also his comments in Ecclesiastes 5:18-20:

We must not do the business of our calling as a drudgery, and make ourselves slaves to it, but we must *rejoice in our labour*, not grasp at more business than we can go through without perplexity and disquiet, but take a pleasure in the calling wherein God has put us, and go on in the business of it with cheerfulness.¹¹²

Work will be difficult, but Henry exhorts his readers that no matter the occupation to keep their eyes to God, to be faithful and content, and to not overwork. With this biblical perspective it “will make our present services easy, and encourage us to bow our shoulder to them.”¹¹³

CONCLUSION

Although he does not set out his teaching systematically, Matthew Henry presents a well-developed doctrine of work in his OT commentaries. Henry teaches that all people are called by God to work and that all people are to improve upon their work so that they may be a benefit to themselves and to others. Furthermore, Henry teaches that since God providentially places people in their work, no honest labor is to be

despised. He encourages his readers to ease the burden of the curse on work by laboring with an eye to God.

Believers today would do well to consider what Henry has to offer towards a biblical understanding of work. Henry's insistence on the dignity of all honorable labor helps correct a tendency among those in ministry or the workforce to favor certain jobs while despising others. While American laborers enjoy a freedom of mobility in employment, Henry's comments on contentment and God's providence in work certainly places a check on the temptation to search for that elusive "better opportunity." Veith is correct to observe the church's need to recover the doctrine of work. Rediscovering Matthew Henry and his teaching of work is a step towards recovery.

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1. Gene Edward Veith Jr., *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 16.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Ibid, 23.
 4. Allan Harman, *Matthew Henry: His Life and Influence* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2012), 150.
 5. In his first plenary address at the Southeast Regional meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Veith noted that Calvin's and the Puritans' teachings on vocation primarily focused on economic labor. Gene Veith, "Human Work and God's Work in Vocation" (lecture presented at the annual Southeast Regional meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY, March 17, 2017). While Henry was greatly influenced by the Reformers and the Puritans, the author of this article did not seek to verify Veith's claim with regard to Henry.
 6. Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible, 6 Vols* (McLean, VA: MacDonald Publishing, 1985), 1:16.
 7. Ibid.
 8. Ibid., 1:16-17.
 9. Ibid., 3:951. All quotations from Scripture are from the KJV. Henry bases his commentaries on the KJV and often weaves quotations from the KJV into his sentences.
 10. Ibid., 1:16.
 11. Ibid., 1:36.
 12. Ibid., 1:72.
 13. Ibid., 1:838.
 14. Ibid., 2:739.
 15. Ibid., 1:17.
 16. Ibid., 2:628.
 17. Ibid., 1:221.
 18. Ibid., 1:250.
 19. Ibid., 3:1011.
 20. Ibid., 1:72.
 21. Ibid., 1:73. Italics are original and are a quote from 1 Cor 7:24.
 22. Ibid., 1:280.
 23. Ibid., 1:37.
 24. Ibid.

25. Ibid., 1:838.
26. Ibid., 1:36.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 1:212.
29. Ibid., 1:175.
30. Ibid., 2:375.
31. Ibid., 1:404.
32. Ibid., 1:250.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., 2:685. Italics are original. The second italicized phrase is a quote from 1 King 20:19.
35. Ibid., 2:685.
36. Ibid., 2:987.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid., 2:1076.
39. Ibid., 2:739.
40. Ibid., 2:1076-77.
41. *The New Oxford American Dictionary* defines ‘husbandry’ as “the care, cultivation, and breeding of crops and animals.” *The New Oxford American Dictionary*, s.v. “Husbandry.” In his comments on Gen 4:1-2, Henry notes that both the employment of Abel (shepherd) and of Cain (farmer) “belonged to the husbandman’s calling” (*Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 1:36).
42. *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 1:36. The italics are original and are a quote from Eccl 5:9.
43. Ibid., 1:36. The italics are original.
44. Ibid., 1:17.
45. Ibid., 1:72-73.
46. Ibid., 2:987.
47. Ibid., 2:685.
48. Ibid., 3:867.
49. Ibid., 3:867. Italics are original and are quotes from Prov 14:4.
50. Ibid. Italics are original and are quotes from Prov 14:4.
51. Ibid., 3:934. Italics original and are a quote from Eccl 5:9.
52. Ibid., 1:37.
53. Ibid., 1:262.
54. Ibid.
55. See his comments on Prov 27:23-27 (*Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 3:951).
56. Ibid., 2:630.
57. Ibid., 1:220.
58. Ibid., 1:220-21.
59. Ibid., 1:280.
60. Ibid.
61. Ibid., 1:404. Italics are original and a quote of Job 38:36.
62. Ibid., 1:433-34.
63. Ibid., 4:400.
64. Ibid.
65. Ibid., 1:32.
66. Ibid.
67. Henry’s quotes about working with a biblical perspective will be discussed below.
68. *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 3:951.
69. Ibid., 1:183.
70. Ibid., 1:251.
71. Ibid., 1:211.
72. Ibid., 2:628.
73. Ibid., 1:36.
74. Ibid., 1:176.
75. Ibid., 1:434.
76. Ibid., 3:846.
77. Ibid., 3:1003. Italics are original and are a quote of Eccl 4:8

78. Ibid., 2:627.
- 79 Ibid. Italic are original; the italicized words are a quote from Prov 14:23.
80. Ibid., 2:630.
81. Ibid.
- 82 Ibid., 3:986. Italics are original and are a quote from Eccl 1:14.
- 83 Ibid., 3:982. Italics are original and are a quote from Eccl 1:3.
- 84 Ibid., 3:992.
- 85 Ibid., 1:16.
- 86 Ibid., 1:17.
- 87 Ibid.
- 88 Ibid., 1:32.
- 89 Ibid.
- 90 Ibid., 1:545-46.
- 91 Ibid., 1:17.
- 92 Ibid.
- 93 Ibid., 3:994. Italics are original. The first italicized phrase may be a paraphrase of Deut 12:28. The second italicized phrase is a quote from Eccl 1:26.
- 94 Ibid., 3:1003.
- 95 Ibid., 1:221.
- 96 Ibid., 1:221.
- 97 Ibid., 1:262.
- 98 Ibid., 3:1011. Italics are original and, unless otherwise noted, is a quotation from Eccl 5:16.
- 99 Ibid., 1:32.
- 100 Ibid., 3:822. Italics are original. The first italicized phrase is likely a paraphrase of Prov 10:5. The second italicized phrase is a paraphrase of Prov 6:8.
- 101 Ibid., 1:189.
- 102 Ibid.
- 103 Ibid., 1:73. Italics are original and are a quote from 1 Cor 7:24.
- 104 Ibid., 1:250. The italics are original and are a quote from Romans 12:16.
- 105 Consider Henry's comments on Rom 12:16. He writes, "*Mind not high things. We must not be ambitious of honour and preferment [advancement; recognition], nor look upon worldly pomp and dignity with any inordinate value or desire, but rather with a holy contempt ... *Condescend to men of low estate—... First, It may be meant of mean things, to which we must condescend. If our condition in the world be poor and low, our enjoyments coarse and scanty, our employments despicable and contemptible, yet we must bring our minds to it, and acquiesce in it ... Be reconciled to the place which God in his providence hath put us in, whatever it be*" (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6:463. Italics original and are generally a quote from Rom 12:16.).*
- 106 *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 1:280.
- 107 Ibid., 1:189.
- 108 Ibid., 1:189.
- 109 Ibid., 2:375.
- 110 Ibid., 3:949.
- 111 Ibid., 3:994.
- 112 Ibid., 3:1011. Italics are original and is a paraphrase of Eccl 5:19.
- 113 Ibid., 1:262.