

Salt and Light - Living as Christians in Our World of Work

How far should we go as Christians in the work place?

Those of us who live at the blunt end of Western society, where God, the church and spirituality have been progressively isolated (or quarantined as “private”) from the daily reality know that it can feel surreal to be both modern, educated and rational and surrounded by skilled people and yet continue to believe in an invisible creator and be personally committed to His Son who lived two millennia before our time.

We are torn between different sets of values, competing allegiances, seemingly mutually exclusive, at odds in their purpose and design; we straddle a widening gulf of belief versus unbelief. Nevertheless, if we are serious about our faith, who and what we are because of our relationship with God and trust in Christ integrates us on a personal level, anchors us in our secular world and impinges on every aspect of life.

This is the context in which the call of Christ to each of us to be salt, seasoning and preserving society, and light, dispelling darkness and showing the way, is no less real than it was to the comparatively simple (yet equally challenging, in its own ways) society of His first followers. We are uniquely placed, mandated to touch our world. We often feel we are not up to the task, afraid of being called obscurantists, hypocrites, or worse. But the call remains, so we had better look more closely at the implications, and the possibilities. Let's face it, all too often the only Christian your neighbours and work colleagues know personally is you.

I recently returned to my head office after a particularly demanding role that literally touched the lives and personal circumstances of thousands of men and women over a twelve month period. I led a team that confronted enormous cynicism and scrutiny. From the first day I felt inadequate in and of myself, but I strongly believed that He who opens doors that no one can close and shuts doors that no one can open had set before me an open door, an opportunity to serve, to grow, to draw closer to him and to exercise a level of influence I only barely grasped at the outset. For reasons of confidentiality, and out of respect for my employers I cannot go into greater detail, but the role forced me onto my knees, to dig deeper wells (Psalm 87:7), draw on the prayer support of Christian friends of character and integrity and reminded me that, in the darkest places we can season our world and shine in a way that brings glory to God. It worked.

My role was not a Christian one, but I was a Christian occupying it. Make sense? I had clear ethical and legal boundaries around my power and authority, and I was not about to abuse the office, but being affected by such constraints made me no less a Christian, with a Christian approach to life. It brought me into contact with people who asked me about my worldview, and my values.

A Bishop of an Australian state, who became a close friend, subsequently wrote to me saying that, "It has been a privilege to share something of the journey of life with you. You have brought the authentic compassion of Jesus to a situation that cried out for it".

What was the strategy? How did it all fit together? Where did my resilience come from? Consider the following.

First, I acknowledged that the role was never about me. The ideas I brought to the job, the humanity I was able to extend to many lives, the solutions to intractable problems, the challenges of working with difficult partners, were not just about what worked for me; I believed that I was in the role because God put me there, that his were broad shoulders on which I (in turn) could lay the heaviest part of the burden (Psalm 55:22), and that the peace of God that passes understanding (Philippians 4:7, cf Isaiah 26:3) could give me an inner sense of calm when the going got really tough and I was tempted to give up. I vividly recall one morning, when I was on my way to the airport for a dawn flight, mulling over some recent developments, when I felt the Holy Spirit cut in and say, "I put you in this position". My perspective changed in an instant and I felt the weight of the moment fall away completely. Every Christian needs to know how to tap into the "rest" that God has promised those who love Him. ("So then, banish anxiety from your heart", Ecclesiastes 11:10.)

Second, I came to realize long ago that there is no room for pride, arrogance or hubris when we are living out God's purpose for our lives. It is not "all about us". If we are Christians, we are bound to acknowledge the presence, power and faithfulness of God in all we do. He has said, "I will not share my glory with another" (Isaiah 42:8). Our motivation is therefore re-directed, to please Him, to seek to honour Him in the way we live and relate to others (John 8:29). This way we do not have to stress about our reputation or limitations, flee from difficulty, be grasping in relation to opportunities or play the blame game when circumstances become difficult or things go wrong (as they do, from time to time). Instead of yielding to defensive thinking, we are driven to seek His wisdom and answers. He can help us establish a positive tenor and bring blessing to the workplace (Psalm 84:5-7).

Third, as a Christian I knew that I was not alone. In the position I have described, I was away from my family for many months, I lived by myself, but I was never alone, not once (life is too short to do it all alone). I never felt isolated. In the darkest nights, in the most difficult meetings, facing the most complex (often bleak) issues, in a valley of deep shadows (Psalm 23:4), I always knew God was with me, guiding me (even in tough times, cf Isaiah 58:11, Psalm 143:10), giving me strength (Psalm 86:16, Colossians 1:29b), ideas, vision, clear focus, context, solutions, speaking simple directions and ideas into my heart, wisdom to know what to do. That makes an enormous difference. For the Christian, resilience comes (first and foremost) from the depth and vitality of our relationship with God, who renews us and gives us the strength and reassurance we need each day (Jeremiah 31:25).

Fourth, I made sure I maintained my daily devotions, using my One Year Bible and prayer. Many times the reading for the day spoke to my circumstances in a way that seemed uncanny. I often marked the margins when this occurred; re-reading the relevant passages even now I can recall many of the circumstances and thank God that He set His wisdom in place long ago. If you don't have a daily Bible reading plan, get one and stick to it.

Fifth, from my first week in the role I sought out a local church and got involved to the extent that I could. Those who knew me well understood that I would always be at church on Sunday. In the company of the people of God I established relationships with friends who cared, who upheld me in prayer (what a privilege to know that each day their minds turned to my situation and I was able to know they were one with me in seeking God's blessing and direction), and who had issues of their own that I could pray for. Never get out of the habit of regular fellowship with other Christian believers, no matter how busy or complex your life becomes. If the world observes that, "A burden shared is a burden halved", how much more so when the dimension of the support of men and women of God is taken into account.

Sixth, in walking with the Lord through this time I discovered a new level of the love and compassion of Jesus Christ for the thousands of people for whom I was responsible. I saw them, not merely as a functionary might, as clients within a system, but as men and women made in the image of God, people whom He loved and for whom Christ died; even the most complex or difficult person was owed what I could extend to them by way of God's grace in my life. This gave me a strong sense of humanity that impacted just about everything I did. Even if I did not tell them I was a Christian (although some did ask, giving me unscripted opportunities to share the fact) what motivated me was my Christian world view and God's love. I never once compromised my formal role with my personal Christian commitment, but I can honestly say that a non-Christian in the position would not have been motivated to act the same way. In circumstances such as these, the maxim that "Christ's love compels us" (1 Corinthians 5:14) is a powerful driver.

Seventh, I experienced God's faithfulness and favour (Psalm 84:11). He opened doors, gave me confidence and specific wisdom that I was able to apply in practical terms. The job did not stop being demanding, but I knew He was able to take it all one step further. That gave me courage to try new approaches and press through to positive outcomes where others had given up. It informed the way I related to my team and empathised with those travelling the same road as me; I was able to grow as a leader (cf Psalm 78:70-72) and provide a model and leadership worth following.

Eighth, if the grace of God teaches us (Titus 2:11, 12), being in this role taught me a lot about myself, the nature of power, working as a Christian at a high functional level, our capacity to pursue justice (Psalm 106:3, 2 Chronicles 19:6, 7), the motivations and styles of others, what examples not to follow, and how to see the hand of God in the most complex (or banal) circumstances.

All work has a spiritual dimension (cf Colossians 3:23, 24); how much better if we have a clear understanding about how what we do fits into God's purpose for our lives.

My wise wife has a stratagem she brings into circumstances such as I have described above, "You can do anything you want if you don't care who gets the credit". That is so true. At the conclusion of my assignment I was awarded a Citation from the head of my organisation, which was appreciated, but I know the honour is not mine. I thank God for everything I have done that has worked. If people see my good works, I want them to give Him the glory (Matthew 5:16).

Christians think differently from non-Christians about work and the challenges we all face. I would not expect my non-Christian friends to understand (or agree with) the worldview that informed and motivated my approach to the role described above, but I know it worked, and that it was worth every day invested.

Christians ought to embrace difficult work roles, because such open doors are God's opportunities to do good and make a lasting impact on the lives of others. Comfort zones, and many who like living in them, become boring; and life is too short for us to feel bored.

So, here's my challenge to you: get involved. Make your life count. Allow the presence of Jesus Christ in your life to be experienced by those in your work world, whether or not you open your mouth (2 Corinthians 2:14). He will show you what to do, give you the wisdom, favour and ideas you need, if you are open. He will give you the necessary resilience. Renew your focus on doing what pleases and honours Him. Then you will truly season your world and bring the light of Christ into peoples' lives.

Jesus said, "Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honour the one who serves me." (John 12:26)

Compared with what tends to occupy most of our time, that will have eternal value.