

Making a Difference in the Marketplace

How can Christians make a difference in their diverse marketplaces?

Apart from everything we have said so far, our attitudes and responses in three key areas will influence the kind of people we become and whether we are truly likely to be effective as God's people in our marketplaces. These are: the way we *define and evaluate vocation and work*, the way we *understand and apply power relationships*; and how we *esteem people*. We need practical, Biblical insights, free from the language of religious exegesis, so that we know how to be victorious Christians and reflect the light and life of Christ.

1. A Right Approach to Vocation

Jesus said, "As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work". (John 9:4)

I met Julie (not her real name) at a diplomatic function in Singapore. She told me she had an "important job", representing her country. Holding her drink with a studied poise she confided that she couldn't elaborate about what she did, because it was "classified" (probably connected with the intelligence community). She enjoyed meeting "important people" and passing back "important information" to her home government. She sounded truly important. Suddenly, she burst into tears and complained bitterly, "I hate my job". Pressures in her hitherto important position had just contributed to the breakdown of her second marriage, life was boring and repetitive; all she wanted to do was go home and get everything together (which she did within a few weeks). Suddenly it sounded as though her status didn't amount to a proverbial "hill of beans" in the context of what mattered in the long term. Had she missed the point?

In the marketplace in which I operate, people often bury themselves in their jobs the way Julie did. They become compulsive workers, almost legendary "workaholics". The best hours of their days become traps and they have almost no life outside of being busy. (Check out Ecclesiastes 2:17-23; 3:22). Like her, they work to be frenetic and mask their problems. There is nothing wrong with being busy; it is when busyness becomes an end in and of itself that the problems start. Like the colleague who once kept a straight face when he told me he was "too busy to start getting happy".

What is "work" anyway? I once heard someone define it as a "product of the displacement of the body and the component of the force in the direction of the displacement". Uh? No wonder Julie found work boring. How about, "work equals force times distance"? None the wiser?

"What do you do for living? Ah, the "identity" question. Society values people on the basis of what they do, how much they earn and where they live. So much hangs on our responses to these questions.

In the Dominican Republic I once visited what was left of an auction house for slaves. Before the abolition of slavery, men and women kidnapped from Africa would stand naked on the stage, to be evaluated according to their age, physical strength, beauty, even the condition of their teeth. “How much is this man worth? Will he work hard? In India I have seen the caste system at work; in any caste system the work people do defines their relative worth in a clear social pecking order from which there is no escape.

Too many people derive their sense of worth from work, but ignore (or can't discern) the underlying purpose of life. If you look to work for meaning you will eventually find it is meaningless. There has to be more.

“Vocation”, on the other hand, is a way of life. It is more than exerting effort for wages or salary, for profit or fees, or for payment in kind. Sometimes it feels like a “calling”. Christians sometimes call it “ministry”. Referring to what we do as a calling is one way of attributing worth.

However, vocation alone doesn't define you. You can strive all your life to serve others, use your skills, “climb the ladder” (the term “greasy pole” is apposite), only to realise you are at the wrong wall (or pole) and you have wasted your time and effort. Some jobs are interesting and intellectually challenging. Others are boring, dehumanizing, tedious and alienating. Rank and prestige don't define you (even surgeons and Nobel Prize winners get bored). Believing it does so is a crippling philosophy that sets you up for disappointment.

God's valuation is what really defines you. Your dignity and worth as a person do not come from your title, the type of work you do, or how much you earn. You are a man, a woman, designed in the image of God, made for a purpose. God says, “I love you”. He wants to fill your life with meaning. That statement can come across as a cliché, but it is true. Once you were nobody; now you are a child of God; everything is new (1 Peter 2:9, 10).

Why do we work? According to American psychologist Abraham Maslow (1908-1970), the basic needs we face are to breathe, have access to water, eat, dispose of bodily wastes and regulate body temperature. But life is about more than organic minimalism. We have deeper needs that distinguish us from animals, plants and minerals. We make money for a living, to meet our expenses, fund education, travel, marriage and home life, a reasonable level of financial and physical security and comforts we believe are essential. But there's more. There is always the “why?”.

The driving force for Jesus Christ was to do the will of God. Whatever you do professionally, your life can count because you are important to your Heavenly Father. He made you with the capacity to be creative, to solve problems and to use your knowledge, skills and abilities for good. The key is to monitor your lifestyle, so that over-scheduling, materialism and busyness don't limit your fruitfulness. It is easy to become so busy that you are left with no time for God, family, personal growth, or energy to serve those in need.

Former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill once said that, “We shape our buildings; thereafter our buildings shape us”. But that’s not true. We are not the unwitting captives of our work environment. We can be instrumental in changing the world around us.

The ability to work, to earn enough to pay for life, without becoming materialistic, can be a gift from God. I have heard people identify work as a curse, a consequence of the fall of Adam and Eve, however if you read the Biblical account carefully you will discover they were given physical jobs before the Fall (Genesis 2:15). God created us with wiring that finds part of its fulfillment in realizing our individual callings; as we do so in submission to Him we discover His “wisdom, knowledge and happiness” on the job (Ecclesiastes 2:24, 25; 5:18-20). The solution is not to avoid work (“If a man doesn’t work, neither should eat”, 2 Thessalonians 3:10), but to ask the Holy Spirit for understanding about how what you do makes sense in the long run and find God’s blessing in it.

“Work” is more than perfunctory attendance at a place of paid or unpaid employment. You don’t necessarily need more meetings, activities or overtime to be important.

The bible commands:

“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.” (Colossians 3:23-24)

The Christian has a different starting point. Work is about honouring God with what you have and who you are. It isn’t an “add-on” to your Christian commitment, but an expression of who you are, serving God. That shows your true priorities. Your work can be a gift to God (whether or not you do “religious” things at work), based on making the right choices. You can be like many people, for whom the workplace is characterized by control, coercion and competition, or you can be a servant of Christ, even if you are the boss or a sole operator. Wherever you are, what ever you do, give it your best shot (Ecclesiastes 9:10).

As you bring up children, work in a factory, office or school, you can be like a breath of fresh air in other peoples’ lives, with Biblical perspectives about the environment, justice, fulfillment, priorities, wealth, prosperity, altruism, servanthood and sacrifice. Christians have access to power to be different in the workplace. We don’t need to be consumed by non-Christian values.

The Bible teaches that our ultimate vocation (to which everything else is subordinate) is knowing God’s will and living for Christ.

“As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.” (Ephesians 6:1)

“... offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” (Romans 12:1, 2)

Paul described the Christian life as being “Christ’s Ambassadors”. Over the years I have had a lot to do with the diplomatic world. In the New Testament, when Paul made this statement, Consuls were important go-betweens between empires and between subject people and those who ruled them. It is more or less the same today. The Bible says that “our citizenship is in heaven” (Philippians 3:20). Just as diplomats represent their countries, we represent God’s Kingdom.

Like Jesus, we have small windows of time to use our vocations to touch people with God’s presence and the message of His love.

2. A Right Approach to Power

Jesus said, “By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me.” (John 5:30)

A leading Christian minister in Sydney once told me of his disappointment that the Australian Prime Minister had backslidden from his Christian faith because of power politics. “I have known him for years. He should have stuck to teaching at Sunday School. He may be one our longest serving Prime Ministers, but he has left God.” Power (and the quest for power, usually over others) can replace God in our lives. It can be like a magnet, irresistibly drawing people to itself.

Power can create hunger and drive people to achieve noble or ignoble things. Robert Green claims that, “The ultimate power is to get people to do as you wish. When you can do this without having to force people or hurt them, when they willingly grant you what you desire, then your power is untouchable. The best way to achieve this position is to create a relationship of dependence. Crush your enemies as they would crush you. Ultimately the only peace and security you can hope for from your enemies is their disappearance. If you are not ruthless with your enemies you will never be secure.” How cynical!

There are physical and spiritual dimensions of power. For the Christian, the only power that counts is the power of God (1 Corinthians 2:5). Without that resource we can easily be sucked into the vortex of the world’s or Satan’s ways of doing things and lose our way, along with the capacity to influence others.

God’s power was constantly in evidence in the ministry of Jesus, to enable Him to do good to those under the influence of Satan (Acts 10:38). We need the power of the Holy Spirit, not for our own sake (cf Acts 8:14-24), but to network with integrity and live effectively for Christ.

Do you feel powerless at times? That's OK. God's power is best demonstrated through your weakness (1 Corinthians 1:18-25, 2 Corinthians 4:7; 12:9, 10). Jesus said we can have everything in the world for which people aspire and end up losing our souls (Matthew 16:26).

It is essential that we understand the real nature of the world around us. The notion that, "There is a bit of good in everyone" is faulty theology. Read Romans 3:10-18 and the daily newspaper you will see why. Dealing with power relationships at all levels requires wisdom and discernment because what is really at stake is usually not apparent to those who are involved.

We need to learn how to recognise and cope with stressful and unhealthy relationships, difficult bosses, treacherous colleagues or competitors, ambitious and unfaithful friends, toxic workplaces, pressures and stresses, to reject corruption, manage difficult decisions, make honest judgments, forgive those who injure us, rise above fear about the future, pursue ethical pathways, work hard, be effective, manage our time sensibly, keep our heads and deliver results of excellence. That's all a tough order. The end result is up to God. We live for His glory.

Christians can make a difference where they are. At one end of the human power spectrum, that can include political leaders (Parliamentary Christian groups exist at the highest levels), business leaders, lobbyists and opinion-makers. If you have opportunities to influence men and woman in authority, sooner or later you will run into major ethical debates. At times you will experience conflicts between obedience to human institutions (legal barriers will be thrown up; restrictions inherent in political correctness will appear, along with opposition to Christian influence in the political realm) and knowing what you believe to be right, by God's standards. Some Christians have dual-track callings. If that is you, seek all the training you need to do both competently.

Jesus taught that we should carefully evaluate who our opinion makers and masters are. He said that no person can effectively serve two masters (Matthew 6:24). If our Master is Christ, even if He is not our paying employer, He can help us to live His way. We can pray for God's wisdom, innovation, favour and strength on the job, so that we can do our best and be productive as we represent Him. We need the capacity to distinguish between a Christian culture and market philosophies at variance with what we believe. We need to be led by the Spirit (Romans 8:14).

Men and women of Godly vision, commitment, character and courage are making differences in leadership roles all over the world. God's presence is at work in the lives of those personally committed to Christ, contrasting with superstitions, fears and insecurities that would otherwise pervade those same marketplaces.

People need to see that our faith is built on an enduring relationship with God, not faith in faith, functional knowledge or relational connectness. The irony is that real power in God comes from being surrendered to Him.

3. A Right Approach to People

Jesus said, "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave - just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:26-28)

"*Loving God and Loving People.*" It seemed like a good logo. After half a day of soul searching, plotting, strategizing and writing endless versions of Vision and Mission statements, the Church Board agreed that these five simple words encapsulated everything they stood for in the community. If they went through the usual motions on Sundays, but failed to connect with people, they would miss the mark in terms of being Jesus to their world. If they loved God and loved people they were fulfilling life's highest objectives: That's always easier said than done, but the most important part of a worthwhile journey is starting.

Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matthew 22:37-40) There is no higher mark of a Christian and their church than the extent to which the logo translates into fact.

Jesus loved people. He didn't sit in judgment, waiting for them to stumble. He wanted men and women to change and He gave them the power to do so. He didn't insist they become like Him before they became His disciples; what he asked them to do was count the cost. His ministry wasn't about counting scalps of converts, but leading people into long-term discipleship. That takes good people skills, starting with love, acceptance, patience and empathy.

Most of us function in marketplaces where people assign economic value and personal worth to one another. "What can you do for me?" If we want to follow in Jesus footsteps, we have to start by loving people, on a one-to-one basis. That means loving non-Christians, even when they act in non-Christian ways. (After all, where would we be without Jesus in our lives?)

It is easy to become holier-than-thou and alienate people. I discovered this when I started in my second job. I was full of zeal and determined to be the best Christian witness I could. I bought supplies of tracts and foot-slogged the hills around the Weather Bureau where I worked, pinning up weather maps, finding people to talk to about Jesus and filling letterboxes with Christian literature.

When I took over from a colleague named "Bevan" I discovered pornographic magazines in my work area. Some of my colleagues used to come and read it during the lunch hour. In a burst of righteous indignation I declared war on porn and trashed the lot. I told my colleagues they shouldn't be reading such material. When they discovered I had acted this way because of my Christian convictions they became angry and drew graffiti in Christian books I had ensconced in the drawer. Score 1:all.

I had not calculated the extent of their anger with my “purge”. I was branded a zealot, an avenging crusader. I learned the hard way that doing “God’s work” according to our definition doesn’t reach peoples’ hearts. It never occurred to me to consider how Jesus would have responded. I found people were suddenly closed to me and it took months for them to open up again.

As a corollary, when I first visited Saudi Arabia years later, and saw “Mutaween” (religious police) beating people with sticks for arriving late at mosques for prayer I was reminded of the need to temper our “crusades” with love.

Much of what is available in the Christian sphere (churches, books, CDs, websites) is geared to Christians who are comfortable in traditional church settings. While these resources are invaluable tools, Christian living in the world requires more complex people-skills sets than isolation. Life is not just about obtaining a wage, retirement, home and status, with church on Sunday, but acknowledging eternal values and seeing God’s perspective. Jobs, business life, goals, education, family life and purpose are all part of a bigger package.

Living as a Christian in non-Christian marketplaces has enabled me to share the Gospel with military leaders in Arab dictatorships; teach the Bible to wealthy business people in Europe and Latin America; and preach in “closed” countries. (It is God who opens doors.) We have to be dependant on Him, not on our abilities or past successes. You are ideally located to influence people the rest of us have never met. As they open up, identify God-given opportunities to do so.

We also live in a religiously pluralistic marketplace, where Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and others dress religiously and have prayer rooms. Christians alongside them are the only active models of Christian faith most of them will ever experience. They may not know how to navigate nuances of theology, but they speak volumes with their lives, disappointments, victories, frustrations, limits, break-throughs; explaining in simple words why they are Christians and why faith in God works for them.

There is no “one-size-fits-all” model for Christian relationships in the modern marketplace. Every work environment is unique. We need God to help us see how He values people we work with. We also need to understand how non-Christians think (read 1 Corinthians 1:18-31). Our message is not based on man’s wisdom, but the power of God. Such a perspective may appear fatuous and foolish to some people, but it is the wisdom of God and it transforms lives (Romans 1:16). This is our roadmap, our way forward.

From Holy Water to the Water Cooler

Marketplace ministry involves reaching beyond the church vestry to the water cooler, the laboratory and the child care centre, where “the rubber hits the road”. Friends who will never come to your church (why should they?) are waiting to see that happen. Get hold of God’s priorities. Better still, let Him get hold of you. Find your marketplace and touch people with Jesus’ power and life.