

Sacred Versus Secular Work

Os Hillman • Theology of Work

<http://www.intheworkplace.com/apps/articles/default.asp?blogid=1935&view=post&articleid=13265&fldKeywords=&fldAuthor=&fldTopic=136>

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it (Gen. 2:15).

Imagine for a moment that Jesus has just completed his three years of training with the disciples. He has been crucified and is now commissioning the twelve to go into the world and disciple the nations. Now imagine him also making this statement to them.

"Dear brothers, it is now time for you to share what you have learned from me. However, as you share with others be sure that you keep what I taught you separate from your work life. The principles I have shared with you only apply in situations outside your work life. Do not make them fit into this context. The miracles you saw in me can only be done in certain situations outside work life.. Keep this in mind when thinking about praying for the sick or the lost. These truths will not work in the marketplace."

Sound preposterous? It may, but this is the mindset of many in our world today. The spiritual does not mix with the everyday world of the workplace. "What happens on Monday has no relationship to what takes place on Sunday," they say. These are the thoughts expressed so much in our day and time, although they are not expressed in such direct terms. Let's think more about this idea. When Jesus came to earth, how did He come? As a carpenter. A man given to work with his hands and to provide an honest service to his fellow man. He did not come as a priest, although He was both a King and a Priest (Rev. 1:6 KJV). When it came time to recruit those for whom the church would be founded, He chose twelve men from the marketplace -- a fisherman, a tax collector, a doctor, and so on. They all came from the marketplace. Interestingly enough, none of his disciples were priests in the Jewish church, a natural place to recruit from if you were going to start a religious movement. Jesus called them all from the marketplace of life. Was this any accident that Jesus called men and women from the marketplace to play such a vital role in His mission? I think not.

When God created the earth, He demonstrated something right up front to human beings. He believed in work. He was above all else, the Master Creator. He was an artist, designer, strategic planner, organizer, project developer, assessor, zoologist, biologist, chemist, linguist, programmer, materials specialist, engineer, and waste management technician. This work did not end when He created man, but was only the beginning in His continued care for mankind. Whether we call our work "sacred" or "secular," all legitimate work reflects the activity of God. God is honored when we work with the goal of reflecting His life through our life and work. So why and how did society begin to draw a separation between faith and work?

The Great Divide: Elevating the Spiritual at the Expense of the Secular

If you were to conduct a survey on an average city street asking whether people thought religion belonged in the workplace, chances are high that they would say no. Most people today see no relevance between God and work in today's fast-paced

marketplace. Why is this? Why do many Christians even believe this? Well, it goes back to the early years before the protestant reformation.

Os Guinness, in his book, *The Call*, provides us the necessary history of how we got to this segmented view of work and life.

The truth of calling means that for followers of Christ, "everyone, everywhere, and in everything" lives the whole of life as a response to God's call. Yet, this holistic character of calling has often been distorted to become a form of dualism that elevates the spiritual at the expense of the secular. This distortion may be called the "Catholic Distortion" because it rose in the Catholic era and is the majority position in the Catholic tradition. Protestants, however, cannot afford to be smug. For one thing, countless Protestants have succumbed to the Catholic distortion as Wilberforce nearly did. Ponder for example, the fallacy of the contemporary Protestant term "full-time Christian service" - as if those not working for churches or Christian organizations are only part-time in the service of Christ. For another thing, Protestant confusion about calling has led to a "Protestant distortion" that is even worse. This is a form of dualism in a secular direction that not only elevates the secular at the expense of the spiritual, but also cuts it off from the spiritual altogether." (Os Guinness, *The Call*, p. 32., Word Publishing, Nashville, TN, 1998

Therefore, it is understandable why we are where we are today. Over many centuries, we have been trained to believe that the two worlds of spiritual and secular are to be separated. Now it is easier to understand why the separation of church and state is such a debated issue.

"Full time" vs. "Part time"

May the favor of the Lord our God rest upon us; establish the work of our hands for us -- yes, establish the work of our hands (Ps 90:17).

Throughout the church, a view of those in full-time Christian work versus those who work "secular" jobs has created a definite class distinction. There seems to be little evidence of this distinction in the Bible. Yet, we often hear testimonies from those who left "regular" jobs to go into the mission field, or some other "full-time" Christian work.

My good friend, Rich Marshall, has been a pastor for more than thirty years. He came into this understanding of the walls that existed between sacred and secular. He came to recognize the calling that men and women had to the workplace, so he began ordaining men and women in his congregation for their call to the workplace. Rich came to realize that so often his fellow ministers had been guilty of training those in the marketplace to do the *church's* ministry instead of *their* ministry. And these are not necessarily the same, nor do they require the same skills. In his book, *God@Work*, Rich writes the following regarding two words (clergy and laity) that have brought confusion to the true call of men and women to the marketplace.

Two little words, words that misrepresent God and His plan, have been used by the enemy to bring about the development of a caste system within the Body of Christ -- those who are called to "professional ministry" or "full-time ministry": the "clergy"; and those who are not: the "laity." It is my conviction that all of us in the Body of Christ are called to "full-time ministry." When we allow this caste system to disturb our thinking, we create a problem for many who experience the strong call of God on their lives. We need both a terminology and a mindset that works to eliminate the "second-class citizen" concept in the Kingdom of God.

John Beckett is a business leader who has written an excellent book for business leaders: *Loving Monday*. In it he tells of his own journey into understanding the call of

God. He writes, "For years, I thought my involvement in business was a second class endeavor -- necessary to put bread on the table, but somehow less noble than the more sacred pursuits, like being a minister or a missionary. The clear impression was that to truly serve God, one must leave business and go into 'full-time Christian service.' I have met countless other businesspeople who feel the same way." (Rich Marshall, *God@Work*, p.5, Destiny Image Publishers, Shippensburg, PA , 2000

The often-held view by pastors toward business people was brought home to me one day when I received a letter from a pastor in response to an internet devotional that I write for men and women in the workplace. This devotional is being distributed throughout the world and I have a surprisingly large number of pastors subscribed to it. One day I received a very simple note from a pastor that said, "How can a businessman have such wisdom?" This comment spoke volumes to me. Basically, he was implying that clergy were the only ones in tune with the spiritual matters of life, and businessmen and women are focused on the "secular" life. However, God has never said this. He is now helping many of us begin to understand our true calling as disciples of the Lord Jesus, but with different roles to fulfill in the body of Christ. And no role is less Holy than another.

When I received Christ in 1974, I was a golf professional. God gradually led me away from golf and into business. In 1980, I considered moving into "full-time" Christian work by attending a short-term Bible school to determine if I wanted to be a pastor. I served briefly as an assistant pastor only to have the position removed. God took me out of that because it was never His intention for me to be a pastor.

It was more implied guilt than a genuine call of God that led me to consider "vocational ministry." I believed I might not have been giving my all to God if I wasn't full time in the work of the Lord. I have learned since then that work truly is worship to God: work and worship actually come from the same root Hebrew word, *avodah*. If you are in a secular job that doesn't violate scripture, your vocation is just as important to God as is a full-time missionary in India. God calls each of us to our vocation. It is in that vocation where He desires to use us for His kingdom.

In their book, *Your Work Matters To God*, authors Doug Sherman and William Hendricks state the following regarding holy versus unholy vocations.

The architect who designs buildings to the glory of God, who works with integrity, diligence, fairness, and excellence, who treats his wife with the love Christ has for the Church, who raises his children in Godly wisdom and instruction, who urges non-Christian coworkers and associates to heed the gospel message -- in short, who acts as a responsible manager in the various arenas God has entrusted him -- this man will receive eternal praise from God. That is what really matters in eternity. In short, God's interest is not simply that we do holy activities but that we become holy people. Not pious. Not sanctimonious. Not otherworldly. But pure, healthy, Christlike.

This whole idea of secular versus religious is a Greek idea. These Greek ideas, clothed in biblical language, have for the most part, been passed down unchallenged to succeeding generations of Christians. As a result, most of us today bring assumptions to the biblical text, assumptions based on a worldview articulated by Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, and other Greek thinkers. Likewise, if you have been around much Christian teaching, you've undoubtedly been influenced by at least

some Greek ideas. Nothing overtly or purely pagan. But I suggest that Christianity in our culture has absorbed from its tradition a number of subtle beliefs that trace back to Greek philosophy. Now I am not 'down' on philosophy. Nor am I 'down' on the Greek philosophers, for they have provided us with many insights into philosophical questions. Nevertheless, reading the Bible through their eyes -- through Greek glasses -- can severely distort the truth of God's Word. We will think that the Bible says things it does not say, and overlook important things it does say. The result will be a distorted view of life. And a distorted view of work. Wearing Greek glasses, one would tend to ignore or disparage everyday work. This is how work looks when viewed through these lenses. (Doug Sherman and William Hendricks, *Your Work Matters To God*, Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1987, p. 60.)

Sherman makes an excellent assessment here of how many Western societies have been affected by the philosophies and culture of the Greek influence. We in the United States may speak English, but we think "Greek." Our focus on competition, segmentation of life from the secular to sacred, rationalism and reasoning all move us to a goal of a more intellectual position in our faith instead of a simple trusting faith. The root of this is the Greek/Hellenistic civilization. It has been so much a part of our thinking and way of viewing life that we have lost our ability to understand God and relate to him as the early church did.

As the church grew and extended its borders outside Jerusalem believers became influenced by a wide array of philosophies. The purity and power of the message were affected by the dominant culture, which became the Greek culture. The time following the two major Jewish revolts of AD 70 and AD 135 saw a Greek, man-centered view of the world reshape the church. Early Greek scholars like Plato introduced dualism, which says that life is divided into two compartments: the spiritual or eternal, and the temporal realm of the physical. Plato's dualism entered the church through many of the church fathers that were Greek philosophers who had converted to Christianity. They attempted to reconcile Greek thought with Christianity.

To Bring Glory to God

God takes us through the process of life and allows us to develop specific skills and talents for His purposes. The marketplace is where many of us have the greatest opportunity to display these gifts. When young David went up against Goliath, he was only a small shepherd boy. King Saul offered David his armor to protect him from the big Philistine, but David knew the weight of the armor would be a hindrance to him. Instead, David used the skills he had developed as a shepherd to protect his sheep. A slingshot and stones were his weapons. When the time came for David to exercise his faith in God to slay the giant, he used the talents God had trained him to use. The shepherd fields were David's training grounds. There he learned to fight lions and protect his sheep. Now he would protect God's sheep. God gives us the same talents to achieve the things He wants us to achieve. However, not all of us will be heroes. Some of us have been called to use our talents to serve others to benefit the kingdom of God. David's faith was the reason God gave him victory. David declared that he came in the name of the living God and that the whole world would know the God of Israel because of the defeat of Goliath by a small shepherd boy. This is why God gave him victory over Goliath: so the world may know the living God. The workplace is a training ground for most of us. It is the place where we deal with the everyday challenges of life, but it is also here where God wants to reveal His glory "so that the world might know that He is God." Someone once said that you will

have many "jobs" before you come into the "primary" calling God has for your life. I have seen this principle at work. God uses the early training, like David, to prepare us for future battles and future experiences that God will use for his purposes in our lives.

That is how God wants to use you and me, so we may proclaim Him wherever we are. He also wants us to use the talents and abilities he has allowed us to be trained with for His greater glory in this world. For many of us, these talents were given to provide valuable services to our employers for the glory of God. We can find comfort in the knowledge that there is no higher calling than to be where God calls us. Regardless of whether it is in "full-time" Christian mission work, or working at the local hardware store.

Our Primary Call

We should step back for a moment and remind ourselves again that each of us is called to a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ, first and foremost. From this position all else comes. The fruit of our relationship with Christ moves us to the level of our calling in work. That work -- whether serving on the mission field or delivering mail -- is a holy calling of God. The reason God holds a high view of work is that He created each person in His image for an express purpose in this world to reflect His glory in ALL aspects of life. *And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him* (Col 3:17). He knows the number of the very hairs of our head, and He knows what we are wired to do in life (see Ps 139). By segmenting this part of our life, we cut off the expression of His life to the world. However, He would by no means let us do that. He knows there are many who will never hear the gospel because they will never enter a church building . You or I may be the only representative of God they will ever encounter.

Have you ever considered the diversity of gifts and talents God gave humankind? It is amazing to consider. I sometimes think about someone who is working in a particular profession that does not appeal to me, yet God created that person to use his or her gifts for that express purpose. At the same time, He desires that we see that work as worship to Him and a place where His presence and power can be manifested as a testimony to the world. God is always about creating a testimony of His love and power for the world to see. The Bible is a continual testimony about reconciling the world unto Himself. Later we will see how God has demonstrated His life through individuals in some dramatic ways in the workplace.

The Value of Secular Work

The *Word in Life Study Bible* provides some good insights into this question of secular versus sacred work.

God values our work even when the product has no eternal value. Christians often measure the significance of a job by its perceived value from the eternal perspective. Will the work last; will it "really count" for eternity? The implication is that God approves of work for eternity, but places little value on work for the here and now. By this measure, the work of ministers and missionaries has eternal value because it deals with people's spiritual, eternal needs. By contrast, the work of a salesman, teller, or typist has only limited value, because it meets only earthly needs. In other words, this kind of work doesn't really "count" in God's eyes. But this way of thinking overlooks several important truths.

(1) God himself has created a world that is time-bound and temporary (2 Peter.3:10,11). Yet he values his work, declaring it to be "very good," by its very nature (Gen 1:31;Acts 14:17).

(2) God promises rewards to people in everyday jobs, based on their attitude and conduct (Eph 6:8; Col 3:23-4:1).

(3) God cares about the everyday needs of people as well as their spiritual needs. He cares whether people have food, clothing, and shelter.

(4) God cares about people who will enter eternity. To the extent that a job serves the needs of people, God values it, because he values people. (*Word in Life Study Bible* notes, p.1869, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 1993.)

Skillful Work

Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will serve before kings; he will not serve before obscure men (Prov. 22:29).

The Lord has called each of us to be excellent in what we do. Those whom God used in the Kingdom as marketplace ministers were skilled and exemplified excellence in their field. Not only were these men skilled, they were filled with God's Spirit. Then the Lord said to Moses, "See, I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts -- to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship" (Exodus 31:1-5).

Consider Hiram, the master craftsman of bronze to whom Solomon entrusted much of the temple designs. He was a true master craftsman (see 1 Kings 7:14). Consider Joseph, whose skill as an administrator was known throughout Egypt and the world. Consider Daniel, who served his king with great skill and integrity. The list could go on -- David, Nehemiah, Aquilla and Priscilla. Most of these were in the "secular" world of work providing a service that was needed for mankind. May we strive for excellence in all that we do for the Master of the universe. 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 emphasis mine).

Reflection

1. What has been your personal experience of the concept of "sacred" versus "secular"?
2. Have you ever considered your job a ministry? Explain.
3. Based on the information in this chapter, explain why God views secular work as important.

Copyright 2000 by Os Hillman. Used by permission of the author From *Faith & Work: Do They Mix?* (Aslan, 2000)

Os Hillman is president of Marketplace Leaders (www.marketplaceleaders.org), an organization that helps men and women discover their God-ordained calling to their vocations, and he is the director of the International Coalition of Workplace ministries (icwm.net) which brings leaders in the faith and work movement together once a year at an annual summit. Os has authored several books including TGIF: Today God Is First; Making Godly Decisions; TGIF Small Group Bible Study; and Faith and Work: Do They Mix? Click on the bookstore link to the right of this page for more resources by Os Hillman.

