

Saints in the Marketplace: A Biblical Perspective on the World of Work

by on Wednesday, September 29, 2010

<http://theotherjournal.com/2010/09/29/saints-in-the-marketplace-a-biblical-perspective-on-the-world-of-work/>

Filed under [17: Economics](#), [Theology](#)

God and the Marketplace

Is God interested in the marketplace? Does he care about the public arena, about the world of work, about trade, professions, law, government, education, and industry? Many Christians seem to operate on the everyday assumption that God is not or at least that he is not interested in the marketplace for its own sake, as distinct from an interest in the marketplace as a context for evangelism. God, it would seem, cares about the church and its affairs, about getting people to heaven, but not about how society and its public places are conducted on earth. The result can be a rather dichotomized Christian life in which we invest most of our time that matters (our working lives) in a place and a task that we think does not really matter much to God, while struggling to find opportunities to give some leftover time to the only thing we think does matter to God: evangelism.

Yet the Bible speaks comprehensively about the human marketplace. The Old Testament word was “the gate,” the public square where people met and did their business together. And there is a clear sense that God is intensely interested in this world of human social engagement and activity, this world where we spend most of our time.

The Bible clearly and comprehensively, in both testaments, portrays God as intensely interested in the human marketplace—interested, involved, in charge, and intentional.

He Created It

Work is God’s idea. Genesis 1-2 give us our first picture of the biblical God as a worker—thinking, choosing, planning, executing, evaluating. So when God decided to create humankind in the image and likeness of God, what else could humans be but workers, reflecting in their working lives something of the nature of God? Specifically, God laid upon human beings the task of ruling the earth (Gen. 1) and of serving and keeping it (Gen. 2). This enormous task required not only the complementarity of our male-female gender identities, for mutual help, but also implies some other fundamental economic and ecological dimensions to human life. God has given us a planet with a vast diversity of resources scattered all over its surface. There is, therefore, a natural necessity for trade and exchange between groups living in different places, to meet common needs. That task in turn necessitates economic relationships, and so there is a need for fairness and justice throughout the social and economic realm. There needs to be justice both in the sharing of the raw resources with which we work and in the distribution of the products of our work. The biblical witness is that this great human endeavour is part

of God's intention for human life on earth. Work matters because it was God's intention for our part in his creation.

Work, then, is not the result of "the curse." All work is now affected in myriad detrimental ways by our fallenness, but work itself is of the essence of our human nature. We were created to be workers, like God, the Worker. The so-called "cultural mandate" (Gen. 1:26-30), then is a valid concept—all that we are and do in the public sphere of work, whether at the level of individual jobs, the family, the community, or even as part of a culture or civilization, is connected to our createdness and is therefore of interest to our Creator. The marketplace is of course polluted and distorted by our sinfulness. But then that is true of all spheres of human existence. It is not a reason to excuse ourselves from the public arena, any more than the fact that sickness and death are ultimately the results of sin is a reason for Christians not to enter hospitals or funeral parlours.

He Audits It

We are all familiar with the function of auditors. Auditors provide independent, impartial, and objective scrutiny of a company's activities and claims. Auditors have access to all documents and evidence. To them all books are opened, all decisions known, and from them no secrets are hidden. That, at least, is the theory.

According to the Bible, God is the independent judge of all that goes on in the marketplace; he is the auditor. The Old Testament speaks repeatedly of Yahweh as the God who sees and knows and evaluates. This is true in the most universal sense and of every individual.

From heaven the LORD looks down
and sees all mankind;
from his dwelling place he watches
all who live on earth—
he who forms the hearts of all,
who considers everything they do. (Ps. 33:13-15)

But it is specifically true of the public square. Israel was reminded repeatedly that God calls for justice "in the gate," which is, in contemporary terms, the marketplace.

For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins. You oppress the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts. Therefore the prudent man keeps quiet in such times, for the times are evil. Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the LORD God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is. Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts. Perhaps the LORD God Almighty will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph. (Amos 5:12-15)

Furthermore, God hears the kind of talk that occurs both in the hidden places of the greedy heart and in the confidence of a business deal.

Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land, saying, "When will the New Moon be over that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?"—skimping the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales, buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat. The LORD has sworn by the Pride of Jacob: "I will never forget anything they have done. (Amos 8:4-7)

And for those who think that God is confined to his temple and sees only what goes on in religious observance comes the shock that he has been watching what goes on the rest of the week in public.

Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, "We are safe"—safe to do all these detestable things? Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the LORD (Jer. 7:9-11)

God is the auditor, the independent inspector of all that happens in the public arena. What he therefore demands, as auditors should, is complete integrity and transparency. This is the standard that is expected of human judges in their exercise of public office. The case of Samuel is revealing, as he defends his public record and calls God as witness—as his divine auditor.

Samuel said to all Israel, "I have listened to everything you said to me and have set a king over you. Now you have a king as your leader. As for me, I am old and gray, and my sons are here with you. I have been your leader from my youth until this day. Here I stand. Testify against me in the presence of the LORD and his anointed. Whose ox have I taken? Whose donkey have I taken? Whom have I cheated? Whom have I oppressed? From whose hand have I accepted a bribe to make me shut my eyes? If I have done any of these, I will make it right."

"You have not cheated or oppressed us," they replied. "You have not taken anything from anyone's hand."

Samuel said to them, "The LORD is witness against you, and also his anointed is witness this day, that you have not found anything in my hand."

"He is witness," they said. (1 Sam. 12:1-5)

He Governs It

We often speak of "market forces" and of the whole realm of business and politics as if they were all independent as a law unto themselves. "The Market" (often with a capital M), is objectified and given a kind of divine autonomous power. At any rate, at a personal level, we feel we are at the mercy of forces beyond our individual control, forces determined by millions of other people's choices.

The Bible has a more subtle view. Yes, human public life is made up of human choices, choices for which human beings are responsible. So in that sense, all that happens in the marketplace is a matter of human action, choice, and moral responsibility. Yet at the same time, the Bible puts it all under God's sovereign government. By stressing both human responsibility and God's sovereignty, the Bible avoids sliding into fatalism or determinism. It affirms both sides of the paradox: we are morally responsible for our choices and actions and their public consequences, yet God retains sovereign control over final outcomes and destinies.

Many Bible stories illustrate this. The story of Joseph oscillates between the sphere of the family and the public arena at the highest level of state power, in relation to political, judicial, agricultural, economic, and foreign affairs. All the actors in this story are responsible for their own motives, words, and deeds, whether good or evil. But

the perspective of the author of Genesis, through the words of Joseph, is crystal clear (even though it enshrines a tantalizing mystery):

But Joseph said to them, “Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.” (Gen. 50:19-20)

The stories of Esther and Daniel affirm the same perspective. In all three cases, believers in the living God are at work in a public arena that is “pagan” in the sense of being outside the covenant community. The human political authority in all three cases bears no intentional allegiance to Yahweh the God of Israel. Yet in all three cases, it is the will of Yahweh that governs the outcomes of their lives and decisions. Moving from narrative to prophetic texts, it is significant that when prophets turn their attention to the great empires of their day, they affirm Yahweh’s government as much over them as over his covenant people, Israel. Furthermore, all their public works are included in Yahweh’s gaze, the marketplace as much as the military.

Isaiah 19:1-15 puts the whole of Egypt under God’s judgment, including its religion, irrigation, agriculture, fisheries, textile industry, politicians, and universities. Ezekiel 26-28 is a sustained lament for the great trading city of Tyre, while 29-32 pours similar doom on the great imperial culture of Egypt. In both cases, the public marketplace of economic and political power is in focus.

Daniel 4 portrays the arrogance of Nebuchadnezzar gloating over his city: “Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?” (Dan. 4:30). But God again involves himself in such matters, pronouncing through Daniel that the building project was completed on the backs of the poor and oppressed, and that Nebuchadnezzar must repent, “Therefore, O king, be pleased to accept my advice: renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue” (Dan. 4:27). Then, having refused to humble himself, Nebuchadnezzar was humiliated into a more sober frame of mind. And the lesson he learned is the one I am pressing here: God governs the public square, along with all else. Or in Daniel’s more graphic words, “Heaven rules [. . .] the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes” (Dan. 4:26, 32).

He Redeems It

A common Christian assumption is that all that happens here on earth is nothing more than temporary and transient. Life here is nothing more than the vestibule for eternity, so it doesn’t really matter very much. To this negative comparison between heaven and earth is added the idea, drawn from a mistaken interpretation of 2 Peter 2, that we are headed toward total obliteration of the earth and indeed of all physical creation. With such a prospect, what eternal value can we possibly attach to the work we do in the world’s marketplace here and now?¹

But the Bible presents a very different prospect. God plans to redeem all that he has made because he “loves all he has made” (Ps. 145), including all that we have made with what God first made—that is, our use of creation within the great cultural mandate. Of course, all that we have made is tainted and twisted by our sinful, fallen human nature. And all that flows from that source will have to be purged and purified

by God. But that is exactly the picture we have in both the Old and New Testaments. It is a vision of redemption, not of obliteration.

Isaiah 65:17-25 is a glorious portrayal of the new creation—a new heavens and a new earth. It looks forward to human life in which we are no longer subject to weariness and decay; in which there will be fulfilment in family and work; in which the curses of frustration and injustice will be gone forever; in which there will be close and joyful fellowship with God; and in which there will be environmental harmony and safety. The whole of human life—private, family, and public—will be redeemed and restored to God-glorifying productiveness.

The New Testament carries this vision forward in the light of the redemption achieved by Christ through the cross and especially in the light of the resurrection. Paul comprehensively and repeatedly includes “all things,” not only in what God created through Christ, but also in what he plans to redeem through Christ.

For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Col. 1:16-20)

Because of that plan of redemption, the whole of creation can look forward to the future.

The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. (Rom. 8:19-21)

Even the text often used to speak of the destruction of the cosmos (when in fact, in my view, it is actually portraying redemptive purging) immediately goes on to the expectation of a justice-filled new creation: “In keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness” (2 Pet. 3:13).

And the final vision of the whole Bible is not of us escaping from the world to some ethereal paradise, but rather of God coming down to live with us once again in a purged and restored creation, in which all the fruit of human civilization will be brought into the city of God.

The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life. (Rev. 21:24-27)

The “splendor,” “glory,” and “honor” of kings and nations is the combined product of generations of human beings whose lives and efforts will have generated the vast store of human cultures and civilizations. In other words, what will be brought into the great city of God in the new creation will be the vast accumulated output of human work through the ages. All this will be purged, redeemed, and laid at the feet of

Christ, for the enhancement of the life of eternity in the new creation. Does that not transform our perspective on a Monday morning?

All human history, then, which takes place in the marketplace of human public interaction, will be redeemed and fulfilled in the new creation, not just abandoned or destroyed. All human work, then, in that marketplace, has its own value and eternal significance, not just because of our understanding of creation and the mandate it laid upon us, but also because of the new creation and the eschatological hope it sets before us. With such a hope, we can heartily follow Paul's exhortation, knowing that "the work of the Lord" does not mean just "religious" work but any work done for as unto the Lord, which includes even the manual labor of slaves: "Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Cor. 15:58).

Saints and the Marketplace

If that, then, is God's view of the public life and work of the marketplace, what ought to be the attitude, role, and mission of God's people in that sphere? Certainly not one of disengagement.

We Are Called to Engagement

This is not to deny that there may be particular callings that require individuals or communities to pursue a distinctive devotional, pastoral, or missionary calling, but even they are not on some other planet. Evangelists, missionaries, and pastors also participate in the global marketplace simply by being human in God's earth. Even monastic communities farmed land, tended the sick, and brewed beer. Even the Amish utilize the human invention of the wheel.

The Old Testament, as we have seen, contains notable examples of believers—for instance, Joseph and Daniel—engaged in the public arena and in the service of "pagan" powers. But the New Testament also urges Christians to be good citizens and good workers, and thereby, to be good witnesses. Work is still a creational good. It is good to work, and it is good to do good by working.

It seems that some people in the churches Paul planted had come to the view that ordinary work was no longer of any value, and so they became lazy, spiritualizing their idleness with fervid expectations of Christ's return. Paul shared their convictions about Christ's return, but not their work-shy opting out of normal human responsibilities.

Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody. [. . .] warn those who are idle (1 Thess. 4:11-12; 5:14).

Paul had no hesitation in appealing to his own example in this regard, as one who had supported himself from his own labor in the marketplace.

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it.

On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: “If a man will not work, he shall not eat.”

We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat. And as for you, brothers, never tire of doing what is right. (2 Thess. 3:6-13)

Paul’s frequent exhortations to “do good” should not be construed merely as being nice. The term also carried a common social connotation of public service and benefaction.² Christians should be among those who bring the greatest public good to the marketplace and who thereby commend the biblical gospel. And we should do so fully aware of the task of creation that we share with our fellow human beings. We serve our Creator in serving all his creatures. There is a pressing need in the church today to recover a more biblical understanding of service, or its more religious sounding equivalent, ministry. Sadly, we still suffer from the legacy of pietism and a dichotomized worldview in which ministry is confined to full-time paid work within the church as pastor, evangelist, or missionary. But ministry, or servanthood, is what we are all called to in all of life. There are any number of ministries available to us, including in so-called secular callings.

In Romans 13, for example, Paul speaks of governing authorities as “God’s servants.” He uses both the words that are otherwise also used for ministers in the church—*diakonos* (twice in verse 4) and *leitourgos* (in verse 6). Political and judicial service can both be service of God. In Acts 6, the same word is used both of the service of the word, to which the apostles were called, and the serving of tables, for which the Seven were appointed (*diakonein*, *diakonia*). One was a teaching ministry, the other, a social ministry. Both were ministries; one was a priority for apostles, the other, a priority for those selected to do it. The text does not give us permission to say that one form of ministry was intrinsically more important than the other, only that the apostles knew what was their priority. And in the letters of Paul, one does not get the impression that new converts suddenly left the occupations they had in the secular world. On the contrary, Paul seems to envisage most of them still there, working and earning, paying their taxes, and doing good in the community. One imagines the Philippian jailor back at his post, Lydia carrying on with her textile business, and Erastus somehow combining his job as director of public works with helping Paul.

We Are Called to Distinctiveness

So we are to be engaged in the global marketplace, but we are called to do so as saints. We are called to be holy, which means different or distinctive.

The calling to distinctiveness is an essential part of the faith of Old Testament Israel. You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the LORD your

God. Keep my decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them. I am the LORD (Lev. 18:3-5)

This essential distinctiveness is what holiness actually meant for Israel. It was grounded in the holiness (i.e., the distinctive otherness) of Yahweh, and it was to be worked out ethically in everyday, ordinary, social life. Leviticus 19, begins with the demand that Israel should be holy as the LORD their God is holy and then articulates a whole range of contexts in which that holy difference is to be seen, contexts that include personal, familial, social, judicial, agricultural, and commercial realms.

Moral distinctiveness. The distinctiveness of God's people in the Bible is not merely religious (i.e., that we happen to worship a different god from most other people), but also ethical (i.e., that we are called to live by different standards).

The twin sayings of Jesus about being "salt and light" in the world (Matt. 5:13-16) are still crucial insights into what it means to follow Jesus in the marketplace. At least four implications can be discerned.³

1. If disciples are to be salt and light, then the world must be corrupt and dark. Jesus's metaphors depend on this contrast. When speaking of salt, he compares the world to meat or fish that, left to itself, will quickly become putrid. The primary use of salt in his day was to preserve meat or fish by soaking it in brine or by rubbing salt thoroughly into it. And when speaking of light, Jesus compares the world to a dark room in a house after the sun goes down. Lamps have to be lit to avoid damage and danger. So, the world in which we live—the world of the global marketplace—is a corrupt and dark place. That is our starting point, and not terribly surprising in view of all the rest of the Bible's story so far.
2. Disciples have the power to make a difference. Salt and light are active; they are applied to relevant situations (meat and rooms) in order to change something, to stop putrefaction and to dispel the darkness. Similarly, God intends disciples to make a difference in the contexts in which they live and work. Things ought to be less rotten and less dark in any situation where Christians are present, which includes the global marketplace.
3. Both salt and light are penetrative. That is, they have to be released into the environment where they are to make a difference. Salt has to be rubbed vigorously into the meat in order to stave off decay. Light has to be put on a stand where it can confront the darkness. Similarly, disciples must be closely involved in society in order to make any difference to it. We are meant to penetrate, not merely to preach.
4. Jesus applies his metaphor explicitly to practical living, not merely religious devotion or evangelistic witness. The light that is to shine before men is "your good deeds" (v. 16). So just as in the Old Testament (where light also has a distinctly ethical dimension, see Isa. 58), the way disciples are to function as salt and light in society is through ethical distinctiveness.

The Old Testament echoes should remind us immediately of Daniel.

Daniel, we are told, had a "spirit of excellence" (Dan. 6:3, literally). This is then expanded to include the testimony that he was "trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent" (6:4). In other words, he was a man of integrity in his public as well as his private life. This surely has to be the key distinctive mark of a saint in the marketplace: truth, honesty, and trustworthiness.

David, a man after God's heart, knew what was closest to God's heart: "I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity." (1 Chron. 29:17).

God himself, reminding himself of why he had chosen Abraham, states this as the purpose of election and the agenda for mission to the nations:

For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him (Gen. 18:19)

And Paul, speaking even to slaves whom one might have thought could be spared any duty of honesty toward their masters, urges them in exactly the same way.

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men. (Col. 3:22-23)

Moral integrity means that there is no dichotomy between our private and public personas, between the sacred and the secular in our lives, between what we say and what we do, between what we claim to believe and what we actually practice. This is a major challenge to all believers who live and work in the non-Christian world, and it raises endless ethical dilemmas and often wrenching difficulties of conscience. But it is a struggle that cannot be avoided, if we are to function with any effectiveness at all as salt and light in society.

If a piece of meat goes rotten, it's no use blaming the meat. That's what happens when the bacteria do their natural work. Instead, the question to ask is, where was the salt? If a house gets dark at night, it's no use blaming the house. That's what happens when the sun goes down. The question to ask is, where is the light? Likewise, if society becomes more corrupt and dark, it's no use blaming society. That's what fallen human nature does when left unchecked and unchallenged. The question to ask is, where are the Christians? Where are the saints who actually live as saints—as God's different people—in the marketplace?

Worldview distinctiveness. But why are Christians supposed to be ethically distinctive in the marketplace? The answer is that we operate from a different worldview, a worldview based on the biblical revelation of the biblical God.

We live by the biblical story, which sets the whole of human life, work, ambitions, and achievement (all of them valid and intended) within the context of God's creation, redemption, and future plans. We actually live as if God creates, audits, governs, and redeems the marketplace, as if these points from section 1 are life-determining realities,—not just empty philosophical concepts. We refuse to idolize the marketplace itself, because we recognize the ultimate, highest reality—God himself.

The Bible is filled with passages that respond to our temptation to turn work and achievement into an idol. Paul twice equates covetousness with idolatry: break the tenth commandment and you also break the first. As early as Deuteronomy, we hear the yuppy capitalist boast articulated in one verse and pricked in the next.

You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today. (Deut. 8:17-18)

So we must affirm that work has its value and its integral place in what it means to be human, but we also must affirm the Sabbath, the climax of God's creative work by which all our work is intended to find its rest and fulfillment in the enjoyment of God. Work is neither the primary fact about life nor the totality of life; God is.

Within this worldview, God is not an escape from our work, nor a crutch to help us endure it. Rather, God is actively involved in all our work in the marketplace, functioning in all the ways outlined above.

Daniel is our inspiration once more. We are told that as an exile in Babylon he prayed thrice daily with his windows open toward Jerusalem (Dan. 6:10). I believe this was not mere nostalgia. It was not that he was longing to waft away on the wind and go home to Jerusalem. It was rather that he was orientating his life in Babylon by his awareness of the God of Jerusalem. The key to Daniel's worldview lay not in the city that Nebuchadnezzar built but in the city Nebuchadnezzar thought he had destroyed. Daniel would not be co-opted by the gods or masters (or work colleagues) of Babylon, but while serving them in the best way possible, he would actually serve the living God of the covenant people. Those windows were open, not to let the prayers of Daniel out, but to let the God of Israel in—into the Babylonian marketplace where Daniel lived the whole of his working life.

The Church and the Marketplace

So far I have been speaking of saints as individuals in the marketplace. But the church, as a corporate entity, has its own role there too.

The Prophetic Task

We are called to the role of the prophet, not just the role of chaplain. The marketplace often asks for chaplaincy, for someone to pronounce God's approval over the works of the marketplace. And today, there are all kinds of Christian equivalents to the old pagan priests and augurs who would check the auspices and perform rituals to keep the gods happy. Public life can then gleam with the veneer of socially acceptable religious approval. It can be very thin veneer, however. The prophet Amos had a thing or two to say about social wrongs that were going on beneath the facade of religious rites.

The people of God are called to maintain a critical distance and to speak on behalf of the independent Divine Auditor. This does not mean we adopt a posture of superiority, for we know our own sinfulness. Instead, it means we must offer a voice of evaluation, of critique or approval, according the standards we learn from God's revelation. We are to renounce evil and hold fast to what is good, and that calls for minds and hearts attuned to recognize the difference. The church collectively can still perform this prophetic function, though it will also always suffer for doing so—sometimes from the co-opted chaplains of the marketplace themselves.

The Pastoral Task

It is also the function of the church to support those who live their lives daily as saints in the marketplace. Paul tells us that God has given to his church pastors and teachers “to equip the saints for works of service” (Eph. 4:12). I believe that “works of service” here does not just mean Christian activity (i.e., church-based ministry or evangelism), but all and any form of service within society as a whole, including the church.

This turns upside down one of the most common misconceptions that still permeates the church and cripples its effectiveness. Believe it or not, God did not invent the church to support the clergy. Rather, God gave pastors and teachers to the church in order to equip the saints. People don’t go to church on Sundays to support their pastor in his ministry; the pastor goes to church on Sunday to support his people in their ministry, which is outside the walls of the church, in the world, being salt and light in the marketplace.

The challenge to pastors and those who train them, therefore, is to help ordinary working Christians to understand the world they live and work in rather than merely dangling before them the prospect of a better world when they die. The challenge is to provide biblical teaching and a biblical worldview that sustains Christian ethical witness. The challenge is to help working Christians wrestle with the ethical issues they face in the workplace, encouraging faithfulness, integrity, courage, and perseverance. And in order to exercise such supportive ministry, pastors and teachers in the church themselves need to know the problems and temptations their people face. They need to keep up to date with the realities of the marketplace and not live in an isolated spiritual bubble.

I remember with sadness the time I spoke to a conference of graduate Christians in India, all of them professional lay people. In the context of teaching about Old Testament ethics, we were discussing the multiple complex problems of ethics and conscience that face Indian Christians daily, from bribery and corruption to exploitation and violence. I asked if they were able to talk such things over with their pastors. There was hollow laughter. “Our pastors never talk, or think, or preach about such things,” they said. “Some of them are involved in that kind of thing themselves anyway.”

Conclusion

I have to say that, on this particular topic, I feel that I speak as a coward, for my working life is not spent in the secular marketplace. I spent a few years as a school teacher before moving into professional involvement with pastoral service and theological education for the rest of my life. But I have great admiration and great concern for all Christians who engage every day in the workplaces of the world. You are the Daniels of our time—or at least, you can and should be. You are the salt and light of the world. What would the world be like if all the millions of Christians who earn their living in the marketplace were to take seriously what Jesus meant by being salt and light? Your work matters because it matters to God. It has its own intrinsic value and worth—in the human community and therefore to God, our creator and redeemer. What you do has some place in God’s plans for this creation and the new creation. And if you do it conscientiously as a disciple of Jesus, willing to witness to

him, and if necessary, to suffer for him, then he will enable your life to bear fruit in shaping the contours of new creation and in multiplying the citizens of the new creation from among your friends and colleagues.