

# A New Way to Work: A Paradigm Shift for Marketplace Mission in the 21st Century

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Three days before the 2004 U.S. Presidential election, the *New York Times* published a feature article entitled "Faith at Work."<sup>[1]</sup> The article was written by a self-styled "secularist", Russell Shorto. He found it "weird" that the Riverview Community Bank, in Otsego, Minn., encouraged its employees to pray for their customers even at the drive through window! Chuck Ripka, one of the owners of the Bank is quoted as saying "We use the bank as a front to do full-time ministry," by which he means introducing his employees and clients to Jesus Christ their personal Lord and Saviour. The feature photo shows a painting that hangs in the CEO's office. Jesus is shaking hands with men dressed in business suits. Shorto concludes that "Converting others, after all, is what being an evangelical Christian is all about."

Several long time leaders involved in Christian service work in the marketplace have commented on the article. Pete Hammond, a 25 year veteran with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, stated he was "bothered by the total absence of a theology of work, or creation stewardship" in Chuck Ripka's approach.<sup>[2]</sup> Gregory Pierce, author of *Spirituality at Work*, stated that Catholics are "uncomfortable with overt displays of piety or religiosity" and that they are interested in being faithful in "the work itself."<sup>[3]</sup> Bill Droel of the National Centre for the Laity is concerned that the bank's officers "see God's blessing in their prosperity" and asks the question, "what if a self-proclaimed Christian Bank practices redlining, predatory lending or resists a labour union?"<sup>[4]</sup>

Each leader would claim that their view has biblical foundation. Ripka would point to the great commission in which Jesus commands the disciples to "go into the world and make disciples" (Matthew 28:18-20). Hammond, who is the editor of *The Word in Life Study Bible*, would find warrant for his views from the cultural mandate given to Adam to care for creation<sup>[5]</sup> (Genesis 1:26). Pierce would speak of the intrinsic value of everyday work (Colossians 3:1-2). Droel would challenge us to a biblical view of economic justice (Deuteronomy 24:14-15). Each person believes sincerely that they have a God given mission to the marketplace but each one has a different emphasis. Each person would encourage marketplace Christians to stop checking their faith at the workplace door and take it with them into work. However, each one would place a different emphasis on what that faith looks like at work.

So then, what is marketplace mission really all about? Is it about converting others? Is it about caring for God's creation? Is it about doing work well? Is it about justice for the oppressed? Is it about the Christian faith being introduced into the marketplace through these various approaches? What is marketplace mission and why is it important to grasp a new paradigm that incorporates these approaches but goes farther?

The common assumption in each approach, it seems, is that Christian faith is an "add on" to work. For Ripka, faith is something you introduce to people who do not have faith. Hammond would share the story of creation as a means to shape the

worldview of work. Pierce would add spirituality as a means to enhancing work. Droel would hold up the virtue of justice as a counterweight to the pursuit of unfettered self-interest. So, marketplace mission is about encouraging people to stop checking faith at the door and bring it with them into work in these various forms.

There are several problems with this paradigm for marketplace mission. First, the language of "taking faith to work" tends to divide reality into two separate arenas, "faith" and "work". This is evident in the title of some recent books and conferences on the subject. For example, a recent event I attended was given the title *Upholding Christianity at the Interface of Spirituality and Health*. Many of the topics had to do with tensions arising from the collision of faith commitment and workplace demands. So "ethics" is about how to keep one's conscience "clean" when working in a "dirty" secular environment. Spirituality at work is something we need to cultivate because work consumes so much of our time that unless we discover how to be spiritual at work, we risk never being spiritual at all.

This "interface" is an artificial construction. It poses a false dualism that separates and depreciates work over and against faith. This happens whenever we give faith the job of "improving" or "enlightening" our work efforts. According to this dualism, work has a problem and faith has the solution.

Secondly, as a consequence of this dualistic thinking, work becomes a secondary consideration for the important activity of introducing faith into the work context. Rick Warren, in his bestselling book *The Purpose Driven Life* falls into this trap when he states,

"Your mission has eternal significance. It will impact the eternal destiny of other people, so it's more important than any job, achievement or goal you will reach during your life on earth. The consequences of your mission will last forever, the consequences of your job will not. Nothing else you do will ever matter as much as helping people establish an eternal relationship with God."<sup>[6]</sup>

According to Rick Warren, the bottom line is the salvation of souls. Nothing could be more important, thus, everything else is less important. Caring for creation is less important. Work is less important. Unjust work structures are less important. Everything is less important than presenting the gospel and inviting individuals to be saved. It is this "savings souls first" approach to marketplace mission that may underlie the thinking of a marketplace Christian who posted this comment at the Scruples.net web portal"

"The real reason Christians are left here on the earth is to evangelize non-Christians, disciple growing Christians, and to plant churches. Everything else is just a tool by which we do these things. For instance, I may work as a Marketing Coordinator, but my basic interest is to make friends with my co-workers, do things with them outside of work, share Jesus Christ with them, read the Bible with them, etc., and see God's church grow and spread. If I am only working to make a lot of money or to improve world conditions (which will likely only grow worse despite all our efforts), I do not have the vision Jesus Christ had for the people he left here."<sup>[7]</sup>

When work becomes a "tool" for salvation ministry, it sets up a false dichotomy that cripples marketplace mission. Thus, a missionary tentmaker who I met in Yemen is

crippled by this dichotomy when he complains that his business, while providing him the visa to be in the country, interferes with his church planting efforts. It cripples the workplace witness of a CEO who in his excitement to bring "revival" to the marketplace neglects the mundane responsibility to generate a profit for his shareholders. Each marketplace Christian perceives they are living a divided life and that perception cripples their effort to work well and to be a tangible example of the faith they so desperately want to share with others.

The third problem with the "taking faith to work" paradigm is that it is based on an abstraction. Faith is abstracted from the real world of work and given a domain of authority over which it can rule. We use various terms for this domain such as values, virtues, ethics, spirituality, etc. However, this abstraction does not achieve its purpose because in our postmodern culture, faith simply becomes one more choice at the overflowing smorgasbord of thoughts and ideas of the way the world is. Rather than ruling over our choices, faith actually becomes domesticated to the reigning powers that rule over work and is made to serve their purposes. This is evident when we promote "taking faith to work" because it will provide a better work environment or more honest business practice or "happier" workers and all this is justified because it will be "good for the bottom line."

For these reasons then, a "taking faith to work" paradigm defeats itself. By placing work in a secondary position it devalues the work. By elevating faith in some areas (e.g. ethics) while ignoring others (e.g. bottom line) it lacks integrity. By ignoring the idolatrous faith already operating in the workplace, it becomes co-opted to serve the agenda of that idolatrous faith.

Thus, rather than work being a front for "full time ministry" what can end up happening is faith becomes a front for "full time profiteering." So sincere Christians take their faith to work to do good and end up doing well instead. This concern forms the basis of the critique of the faith at work movement by Michael Budde and Robert Brimlow in their book *Christianity Incorporated: How Big Business is Buying the Church*.<sup>[8]</sup>

This was also the conclusion of Alan Wolfe, director of the Boisi Centre for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College who is quoted in the Shorto's article as stating, "the message becomes swamped by the might of the broader culture." Wolfe thinks faith will inevitably be "contaminated" as it engages popular culture. Wolfe used the Coors Beer company as an example of an "evangelical" company that has lost its way because it uses sexually explicit advertising to sell its beer.

The root of our divided loyalties and dualistic thinking is found in the view that work is a neutral arena in which we can introduce faith. The reality is that all work is embodied faith. Every action proceeds from a form of faith. This faith is based upon a future hope shaped by a worldview-commitment, metaphysical assumption or social condition.<sup>[9]</sup>

To discover the faith that work embodies one has only to ask the question, what is driving the way we work? In the movie, *Wall Street*, the young broker's fear of being poor is driving his desire for wealth. It is his hope that he can catch "an express" to a better life. He has faith in his mentor's teaching that "greed is good."<sup>[10]</sup> It is this idolatrous faith in market forces that permits him to sacrifice his integrity so as to capitalize on insider information.

Compare this with the story of the rich young ruler (Luke 18:18-30). Jesus anticipates the man's question about eternal life when he states, "No one is good but God alone." His challenge to the young man was that the future he hoped for was for God to provide. God gives it to him who is willing to follow Jesus wholeheartedly. The man failed this test when he would not relinquish his possessions which were for him idols of an alternative "good" that would provide security for his future.<sup>[11]</sup>

The point was that unless Jesus is Lord of all of your life, he cannot be Lord at all in your life. Jesus must represent all that is good in your life and that good must relativize and displace any other good that drives your life. Thus, there can be no division in one's life between that which is faith, where Jesus is Lord, and that which is work, where an idolatrous faith in another future, another good, is shaping your work.

Rather than Christian faith being an "add on" to work, Christian faith ought to completely animate the way we work. We need a faith that is robust enough to engage, subdue and displace the faith that drives the dominant work culture. It needs to be a faith that relativizes, subverts and overwhelms the benefits of that idolatrous culture with an alternative future that provides significance and meaning beyond what we think that culture can provide. It needs to be a faith that is anchored in the real world of work but that transcends it, shaping work to serve a different future.

Winston Churchill once said, "We shape our buildings: thereafter they shape us." The same could be said of work. We shape work according to the paradigm that gives it meaning, thereafter it shapes us to achieve that agenda. If it is wealth creation, we work for money. If it is career achievement, we work to succeed. If it is "souls", our work becomes a stage for evangelism. If it is to wisely order God's creation, work is the means by which we care for creation. If it is to bring all things under the saving influence of Jesus Christ, work becomes a foretaste of the new creation.

The redeeming aspect of the Christian faith on display in Chuck's Ripka's "piety" is just such robustness. His faith relativizes the "bottom line" faith that drives banking. His belief is that if he is obedient to God at work, God will vindicate his faithfulness by taking care of the bank's profitability. This does not mean that God will simply reward Ripka's piety. Nor does it mean Ripka can spend all his time praying for sick customers to be healed and ignore the business of banking. It means that Ripka is willing to risk marching to a different drumbeat because he thinks God will back him in "pastoring" his bank. It's that kind of faith that risks it all to do it differently that must also animate the work of caring for creation and the work that seeks justice, concerns that are not necessarily profitable from the point of view of the dominant work culture.

Another example of Christian faith at work that marches to a different drumbeat comes from Don Flow of Flow Automotive in North Carolina. In a recent issue of *Ethics*, he speaks about how they sell cars. He has broken the selling process down into its component pieces and converted each of these pieces so that they serve a purpose that empowers people and establishes trust as the foundation of customer relationships.

"The traditional model in the automobile business is really laissez-faire capitalism, and at the centre point is a transaction where both parties

try to maximize their own position. Thus the auto dealer sees the customer as an element of the profit-maximization model. What we try to do is to change that model and ask, "How are we serving the customer?" This is a completely different starting point. So our sales processes are totally different from most others in the car business."<sup>[12]</sup>

When questioned about profitability, he states,

"We have been very profitable. We have enormous loyalty with our customers. We've also been able to manage our costs much better than other folks because we don't have the overhead associated with all of the negotiation processes and we've greatly streamlined our operations. We found what profit structure people would be willing to pay for us for that approach, and though it was slightly less than the average profit you could make the traditional way, we have made up for it with our cost savings. You have to break the whole system apart and reassemble it to make it work."<sup>[13]</sup>

So it is my premise that marketplace mission is about displacing the idolatrous faith that animates the dominant work culture with a Christian faith that serves a different Lord. This new faith is not just something we take with us to work. It is something that animates a whole new way of working. It is a faith that provides a "completely different starting point" for work. It is a faith that empowers a new way to work.

In this new paradigm there is no interface. All work is informed by faith and all our work becomes the concrete evidence that this faith is true. Rather than work being in tension with faith, work becomes an embodiment of faith.

This is not simply about the conversion of individuals at work; this is about the conversion of the work itself, giving it the power to shape people to be like Jesus Christ and empowering them to be for the world what Jesus was for his world!

For example, rather than hanging a painting of Jesus greeting business people in our reception area so that people can see Jesus at work, we need a converted receptionist who receives people like Jesus would receive them. Rather than simply stamping our business cards with the fish symbol or the cross, we need converted businesses that service customers like Jesus would service them. Rather than hosting a lunch hour prayer meeting for whosoever is "spiritually" inclined, we need converted professionals and staff who know how to pray for their clients and personnel whenever the opportunity or crisis presents itself. All work, everything we do, think or say must be converted and marching to a different drumbeat.

The 'Jesus scholar', Ben Meyer, puts it well, in his book *Christus Faber*,

"the scope of the Christian task is far greater than that of theology. It is to sustain, pervade, and transform the perennial human task [work] of building, rebuilding, sustaining the human order, creating the conditions in which Jack and Jill can marry, enjoy a modicum of economic and social security, raise children and send them to decent schools, worship God without interference, share according to their resources and preferences in the life and direction the communities they live in, and, in short, have a chance to live and die in human dignity."<sup>[14]</sup>

This, then, is what marketplace mission is all about. It is to proclaim a faith that transforms work and through that transformed work to transform people and through those transformed people to transform society. The goal is that human beings ought to have the opportunity to live with hope in a future secure in God's goodness and die with dignity knowing that their labour will not be in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58).

In doing this, our work becomes a tangible demonstration of the reality of our faith and the power of the gospel, proving it, so that we can recommend it with integrity. Work well done, that cares for creation, acts justly and serves God's purpose in the marketplace, is a powerful witness to the faith it embodies and provides a hearing for the gospel challenge.

This is why the *New York Times* featured Chuck Ripka's approach to faith at work. It is a tangible demonstration that Chuck serves a different God than the god of this world. To the writer it may seem "weird," just as the gospel seemed foolishness to the Greeks and presented a stumbling block to the Jews. But to those who are experiencing it, it is the power of God (1 Corinthians 1:18). No wonder Ripka's faith is bearing fruit in salvations and healing!

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[1] Russell Shorto, "Faith at Work," *New York Times*, 31 October 2004, Late Edition - Final, Section 6, Page 40, Column 1.

[2] Pete Hammond. "Faith at Work is more than Witnessing - InterVarsity.org." [http://www.intervarsity.org/news/news.php?item\\_id=1411](http://www.intervarsity.org/news/news.php?item_id=1411) (Accessed on: 12 January 2005).

[3] Gregory F. A. Pierce. "Posted Letter to Editor of the New York Times, posted at ACTA Publications Website" [http://www.actapublications.com/spiritwork/spirituality\\_of\\_work\\_4.html](http://www.actapublications.com/spiritwork/spirituality_of_work_4.html) (Accessed on: 12 January 2005).

[4] William Droel, *Initiatives, In support of Christians in the world. Number 143.* (Chicago: National Centre for the Laity, December, 2004), 2.

[5] *Word in Life Study Bible.* electronic ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), c1996.

[6] Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth am I here for?* (Grand Rapids; Zondervan, 2002), 284.

[7] Posted at the Scruples *Faith At Work Forum* on Saturday, June 19, 2004 - 03:07 pm <http://www.scruples.net/cgi-bin/discus/show.cgi?tpc=8&post=807#POST807> Accessed July 11, 2004.

[8] Michael Budde & Robert Brimlow, *Christianity Incorporated, How big business is buying the church.* (Grand Rapids; Brazos Press, Baker Book House, 2002.), 27ff. "A deeply important analysis of the relationship between the ideological power of capitalism and the radical claims of discipleship central to Christian faith. Budde and Brimlow explicate the aggressive totalism of consumer capitalism in its capacity to preempt Christian faith and reduce it to a chaplaincy function for the defining ideology of our society." – Walter Brueggemann's comment on the dust jacket.

[9] Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision, Shaping a Christian Worldview,* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1984), 171-2.

[10] Oliver Stone, *Wall Street (screenplay)* (Twentieth Century Fox, 1987) spoken by Michael Douglas. The complete quote is ""Greed is good! Greed is right! Greed works! Greed will save the U.S.A." as quoted in John Bartlett Justin Kaplan, Ed., *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations, Seventeenth Ed* (Palm Reader Version), (Boston: Little, Brown and Company Inc., 2002)

[11] N. T. Wright. *Jesus and the Victory of God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 301-2.

[12] Albert M. Erisman, "Ethics at Flow Automotive" *Ethix*, Issue 34, March/April 2004. 7. (Visit <http://www.ethix.org> to view the article online.)

[13] Ibid, p. 8.

[14] Ben F. Meyer, *Christus Faber: the Master Builder and the House of God*, (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1992.), 210.

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