

# Can a Pastor Help a Businessman Succeed?

“What does God think of the workplace?” asked the businessman. His pastor responded with the words, “not much.”

The pastor expressed a view shared by many professing Christians, namely, that God doesn’t really care about the workplace; He only cares about souls. In this view the workplace is simply a vehicle for making money, as ethically as possible, of course. And at best it is a place to evangelize. Hence, there is no other redeeming value to the workplace. But is this really true?

Genesis 1 records the creation of the universe including the creation of man. It also records why God made man—to rule His creation (see vs. 26–28). Man is to rule by multiplying and subduing. Multiplying is about growing and increasing. Subduing is about mastering.

This mandate to rule by multiplying and subduing is sometimes referred to as the “creation mandate” or the “cultural mandate.” It is the most foundational directive that man has from the Creator and is intended to be the driving directive of every human. However, something happened—sin entered the scene.

Our ancestors, Adam and Eve, were given the Garden of Eden—a wonderful context in which to fulfill the creation mandate. They chose to rebel against God, however, introducing sin into their lives. And because of God’s law of reproduction—everything reproduces after its own kind—the descendants of Adam and Eve are inflected by sin as well.

The entrance of sin into the human race in Genesis 3 did not nullify the creation mandate; but sin impedes our ability to fulfill the creation mandate because the ground is cursed (Genesis 3:17). Since everything is ultimately tied to the ground, this makes our work of ruling more difficult.

Christ came to save us from judgment for our sin (1 Timothy 1:15) and to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8). This reality is generally understood by the Christian community. What is not as well understood is the relationship of salvation to the creation mandate. The common view is that salvation is about insuring that we go to heaven instead of hell and has little implication for our earthly life. May I suggest that this understanding is incomplete.

If the creation mandate to rule physical reality is still the primary mandate for man, and sin, which is part of spiritual reality, impairs our ability to fulfill the mandate, then sin is the problem. Christ came to deal with the sin issue and free us from sin so that we can fulfill the creation mandate.

The view that the gospel is largely irrelevant to physical reality is a dualistic gospel. Those who view the gospel as the means to enable man to fulfill his destiny in both the physical and spiritual realms embrace a holistic gospel.

For most of us one of the primary venues for fulfilling the creation mandate in physical reality is the workplace. This means that the workplace is a divinely ordained vehicle to allow us to do what God created each of us to do. Hence the workplace has value beyond simply providing a venue to make money and to evangelize. The workplace is a venue for kingdom activity. It is a place to work out our salvation (Philippians 2:12) and to reflect Christ in everything that we do (Colossians 3:17, 23). It is a place where the holistic gospel of Jesus Christ should be transforming us so that we can work with excellence (Colossians 3:17, 23).

At the end of the creation account, God declared that what He created was very good (Genesis 1:31). With this statement He placed great value on both the physical universe and the creation mandate. If therefore, God values the workplace, so should we. And if God creates everyone for a specific purpose (Ephesians 2:10) and the workplace is a valid venue for individual purpose to be expressed, then we must value individual callings to the workplace.

So how should pastors and other church leaders help Christians find and fulfill their divinely ordained life work in the workplace? Consider the following true story.

Times were difficult for young Al during the depression of the 1930s. After working numerous odd jobs, he was blessed to find work in a meat processing plant. One day while cleaning a meat grinder, he caught his left hand in the equipment and nearly severed it. The cut went from his thumb to the little finger. The fingers were dangling, attached only by a small amount skin.

Al was rushed to the hospital. The doctors had little hope that his hand could be repaired. Before going under anesthesia, Al heard the doctors discussing amputating the hand. They noted that it would be an easy procedure since the only thing left to cut was a little skin. Al requested that they do their best to reattach the hand. He assured them that they would have divine help as his fellow church members were praying for him.

When Al awoke after the surgery, his doctor told him that he had done all that he could. According to Al's wishes, the hand was reattached, but his finger joints were frozen and the doctors were unable to clean out all the hamburger meat, which they expected to cause infection. And if infection set in, most likely the hand would have to be amputated.

Surprisingly to all, except Al and his intercessor friends, his hand healed, including the finger joints. The only permanent damage was to one finger. The joint was essentially frozen, but in a slightly bent position that made the hand look natural.

After his recovery Al returned to his job at the meatpacking plant where he continued to work. With the onset of World War II, many young men enlisted in the military. This left a need for bus drivers in San Diego—Al's adopted hometown. This new opportunity was attractive, so Al became a bus driver.

Al enjoyed his work as a bus driver. The work was stable and benefits were good. Over time he gained seniority, which enabled him to select his routes and schedule. So life was good for Al and his family.

Then in 1947, Al received a call from his father, Hoyt, who was a pastor in Idaho. During World War II, Hoyt had responded to a request from the US government. The ill-prepared and poorly equipped US military appealed to the civilian population to turn over knives to the military. Not only did Hoyt respond to the request, Hoyt also set up a knife production shop in the basement of his church and produced knives throughout the duration of the war.

Hoyt was well prepared to manufacture knives. Growing up in rural Kansas, he quit school after the fourth grade and became a blacksmith apprentice. In those days the blacksmiths sharpened cutting blades of all types—hoes, sickles, plows, saws, shovels, knives, and so forth. Hoyt noticed that many of the customers brought the saw implements in for sharpening on a regular basis. He began to muse about the possibility of finding a way to get cutting blades to hold their edges longer. After some experimentation he developed a tempering method that worked. This was a significant discovery and one that Hoyt would eventually feel compelled to pass on to his son.

When Al received the call from his father in 1947, he was content as a bus driver; hence, initially he resisted his father's idea of starting a business. But Hoyt would not be denied. He persisted in convincing his son that starting a knife business together would be wise.

Al struggled to see the logic of his dad's argument. His fifty-eight-year-old dad would resign as pastor of his church in Idaho and move to San Diego. Al would quit a stable good-paying job to help start a business that he knew nothing about. Neither Hoyt nor Al was wealthy. How did this make sense? Nevertheless, after a great deal of persuasion from Hoyt, Al finally capitulated.

Hoyt moved from Mountain Home, Idaho, to San Diego and built a 10-foot by 12-foot lean-to on the side of Al's one-car garage to serve as the first manufacturing plant for the nascent company.

Al knew very little about the process that Hoyt had developed some forty years before that enabled the edges on cutting implements to last longer. So he began to apprentice under his father.

Initially Hoyt would go out in the morning looking for business. They sharpened all kinds of blades and cutting instruments—lawn mower blades, saws, knives, and so forth. In the afternoon Al and Hoyt would perform the work sold that morning. As with most startup businesses, the going was tough. Everything was done by hand, which meant that they were limited in their production capacity. It also meant that they had to charge more than other sharpening companies, so they had to work hard to sell their superior value proposition.

Though money was tight, both Al and Hoyt had a strong work ethic and were not quitters. Furthermore, Hoyt, wanted to teach his son the special process he had developed as a young lad. For some reason this was more important than Hoyt's service as a pastor. Perhaps Hoyt sensed that his life would soon be over and felt compelled to pass on his tempering method to his son. Or perhaps Hoyt sensed that God had something else for Al. Whatever the case, Hoyt was not going to be denied—he and his son were going to succeed in business together.

Al apprenticed under his father for a year before his father unexpectedly died of stomach cancer. Now left to run the business alone, Al struggled just to keep the business going. He worked arduously for thirteen years, but could not seem to get any significant traction. In fact, by 1960 the company was on the verge of bankruptcy. Despite Al's arduous efforts, the mom and pop operation that provided basic blade sharpening services using Hoyt's special technique was unable to grow.

Al's pastor, Pastor Robert Wilson, saw that Al was killing himself and met with Al to express his concerns. The pastor must have seen something in Al that impressed him. Perhaps he saw the Holy Spirit waiting to be released in Al's life through the business. Or perhaps he saw Al's skill and the reputation enjoyed by the company. In any case, Pastor Wilson saw enough to know that Al was called to be in the knife business.

Pastor Wilson started exploring options for Al. He talked to others including fellow church members about Al's situation. Through these conversations, the pastor began to discern a business plan. Sharing his thoughts with Al led to the development of a new business plan. This plan included a strategy for financing that based on private equity. And one of the investors was Pastor Wilson.

The first step of this new plan was to incorporate the business, which was accomplished in April 1961. The business formed a board, acquired capital, leased a new facility, and developed a product line.

For the first time the company moved from providing services to providing products. Al designed a line of six basic sport knives. The knives were made using Hoyt's secret blade process, which produced a superior long-lasting cutting edge.

At a time when competitors offered sport knives for two dollars each, Al's line of knives averaged twenty dollars each. Clearly, Al's customers would have to value the superiority of his product.

To kick off his product line and sell retailers on the value of his products, Al and his wife traveled across the country visiting sporting goods stores. The trip took several months and proved to be very successful in establishing Al's philosophy of sales and marketing based on personal relationships. Al and his wife visited 250 sporting goods stores and received orders from 40 percent of them. The response from sporting goods retailers to Al's new product line was so good that it launched the Buck Knife Company.

The first board of directors was composed of the new investors largely assembled by Pastor Wilson. Serving as a commissioning agent, Pastor Wilson acted on his faith in the call of God on Al's life. He served Al not only as a business advisor, but also as an investor.

Part of the deal in funding the company was that Al would develop a product line and move into a suitable manufacturing facility. To attract new financial support, Al had to abandon the mom and pop approach and morph into a professional business model.

Al Buck enjoyed great favor building the Buck Knife Company. He was well regarded by all. Upon his death in 1991, the family reflected back on the accident in the meatpacking plant. In a moment of sober reality, the family realized that had Al lost his hand, he would not have been able to learn the knife business from his father. They also recognized that Hoyt's development of the process to make cutting edges last longer was a critical piece of the puzzle. Without both the divine healing of Al's hand and Hoyt's knife-edge discovery, Buck Knives would never have come into being.

Furthermore, if Pastor Wilson had not valued the creation mandate and had not seen the call of God on Al to build a knife business, he would have not helped Al. Pastor Wilson stepped into Al's life as a commissioning agent at a critical time to help Al discern and fulfill his life purpose.

To serve as a commissioning agent, Pastor Wilson invested time, talent, and treasure in Al. Plus he recruited others to help. May I suggest that this is an example of true pastoring—helping people find and fulfill their life purpose.

Pastor Wilson illustrated the value in investing in disciples—people committed to faithfully discovering and fulfilling their divinely ordained life purpose. Investing in disciples who are fulfilling their life purpose is an excellent investment strategy. It is a strategy in alignment with God's plan. And we know that in the end God wins; hence, there can be no better way to invest. After all, in the end, only true disciples of Jesus Christ will prosper.

May God give us the grace to lead the church as Pastor Wilson did and make investing in disciples our investment strategy. This is the essence of the holistic gospel of Jesus Christ that transforms everything in both the spiritual and physical realms. Remember that in God's universe everything reproduces after its own kind. It takes transformed people to transform other people. It takes disciples to make disciples. This is the way that the gospel will grow.

May God grant us the grace to be about making disciples and fulfilling the Creation Mandate.

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