

# Separation of Church and Work

Pastor James White tackles the questions of personal success and significance in his book, *Serious Times*, published by Intervarsity Press. In an interview with Pastor White, he was asked what should be the chief priority of the church. He answered that the chief purpose is evangelism. The rationale he used was that we have eternity to worship God, fellowship with each other, and grow in Christ. We only have here and now, however, to populate heaven.<sup>1</sup>

On one level, Pastor White's proposition is compelling. I know of no credible protestant theologian who advocates that there are opportunities after physical death to move from hell to heaven. If this is indeed the case, Pastor White seems to have an interesting point. But, is his perspective aligned with Scripture?

An examination of the New Testament reveals a sense that discipleship undergirded the evangelism that took place. Consider Paul's comment: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."<sup>2</sup> This doesn't sound like the comment of a new convert. Rather, Paul seems to be articulating the process of dying to his own interests and agendas, which most Christians would associate with discipleship. If evangelism is the primary focus of Christians, why do we need to undergo this death to self?

Consider also Pastor White's thesis as it relates to the marketplace. Suppose, for example, that you need surgery and your surgeon is a Christian who subscribes to Pastor White's thesis that evangelism is his chief priority. The surgeon faithfully attends church and spends hours evangelizing; hence, he has little time to stay current on the medical trends. He works only as much as necessary to keep his medical license and maintain his practice. After visiting this doctor, he recommends surgery.

Think about what could happen during surgery: The doctor enters the operating room. You are anesthetized and the nurses and other personnel are gathered around you. Since your surgeon's priority is evangelism, his focus is not on you. He is looking for opportunities to share the gospel with those in the room. Perhaps he would ask probing questions or share his testimony or pass out tracts (assuming they are sterile). In any case, your medical needs are clearly not his priority and focus.

Now suppose that your Christian surgeon believed that his primary purpose was to work as if God was his boss, which is what the apostle Paul stated: “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men.”<sup>3</sup> Taking this directive seriously, your surgeon is very conscientious of staying abreast of the latest medical research and collaborating with colleagues to glean from their experience. When your surgeon enters the operating room, it is all business. His conduct and interaction is professional as he focuses on doing an outstanding job of surgery, and he keeps his team focused to that end.

Some might argue that this is a ludicrous example. Who would want to submit to surgery with a doctor whose primary agenda is something other than the patient? Clearly, the answer is no one, which illustrates my point. The reality is that anyone seeking medical help wants a doctor whose priority and commitment is to excellence in medicine and who is attentive to his patients.

This simple illustration demonstrates the profound truth that the chief purpose of each Christian is to do what God created him or her to do and to do it with excellence, which is the antithesis of Pastor White’s position. There can be no question that all Christians, by virtue of their identification with Christ, bear witness to Him. The issue is: What is the best way to provide a God-honoring witness?

One of the results of working with excellence is an inspiring witness for Christ. This is a better and more biblical basis for evangelism. Which of the two doctors in the above illustration has the best witness? Obviously, the good worker does. God has put something in man that attracts us to excellence. When we see excellence, we admire it and want to emulate it. Our ability to work with excellence works like a magnet. Furthermore, through excellence we gain the opportunity to not only evangelize, but to disciple, which is indeed the Great Commission.<sup>4</sup> Evangelism is only the first step in discipleship. And being a disciple and making disciples should be the real objective of every Christian.

Sadly though, few Christians seem to understand this reality. Most are trapped in dualism. Dualism is the bifurcation of spiritual and material reality, which minimizes the value of material reality and exalts spiritual reality. Such a perspective minimizes the value of work and therefore minimizes the calling of anyone in the workplace.

Dualism has been around for centuries in many forms. The common factor in all paradigms of dualism is the minimization of material reality. Such a perspective suggests that

work outside of church or ministry has little value. A common view is that the purpose of work is to make money to give to the church and other ministries for the purpose of advancing the kingdom of God. Implicit in this thinking is the presupposition that work has no eternal value and therefore no value to God. Therefore anyone who thinks he or she is called to the marketplace is probably self-deceived, because the only callings that God values are to the church or other ministries. Such conclusions are the logical end of dualistic thinking.

This begs the questions: What does the Bible have to say about work? Does work matter to God? To answer these questions, consider why God made man. Genesis 1:26–28 states:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” (NIV)

What a great revelation as to why God made man!

Note that God, a spirit being,<sup>5</sup> created man, a material being, had put enough of Himself in man so that man could rule God’s physical creation. And note that man was given the responsibility to rule over all the earth. Man rules by multiplying (growing) and subduing (mastering). There are two ways to multiply or grow; namely, in quality (depth) and quantity (numbers). Mastery of the universe implies research and development of all aspects of creation: animate and inanimate, tangible and intangible, physical and spiritual. In the process of growing and mastering the physical universe, man is to reflect or glorify God.

Glorifying God is about living and working in accordance with God’s philosophy or worldview, which is expressed in principles and values that are consistent with the character and nature of God. Man’s rulership is therefore about reflecting the character and nature of God by bringing order to God’s physical creation just as God brought order out of chaos in creating the universe.

So what does the Bible have to say about work? It says that God created man to work at ruling His physical creation. Does work matter to God? If God cared enough to create the physical universe and specifically created man to rule it, does it not follow that God values man’s work?

Some people would say that work is not spiritual activity; in fact, that work is simply the result of sin and it was never God's intent that man should work. After all, man originally lived in a garden—a paradise. How could work ever be part of God's plan and purpose? The only way for this argument to make sense is to believe that Genesis 1:26–28 has in some way been superseded. If the mandate of Genesis 1 has been superseded, then God no longer cares about the rulership of His physical creation. Such a position seems unlikely, particularly when one looks for some basis for this proposition in Scripture.

There is much instruction given on how God wishes for us to manage His physical creation. For example, consider the glowing description of a woman who fears the Lord in the book of Proverbs.<sup>6</sup> This woman was a serious businesswoman engaged in commerce as well as adroitly managing her home. Her excellent work brought her praise in the community and provided a support for her husband who was a community leader. This sounds as if ruling God's physical universe is a valued activity.

Or consider the teaching in Luke: “So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?”<sup>7</sup> This text suggests that the privilege of stewarding true riches, which I assume is spiritual or eternal wealth, is predicated on how well we steward physical wealth. This doesn't reconcile with the thesis that the physical work no longer counts with God.

I contend that the Genesis mandate to rule God's physical creation has not been superseded and is in full effect. Man's primary purpose is to glorify or reflect God by ruling His physical creation.

Such an understanding of the purpose of man on earth seems at odds with Pastor White's view that man's chief objective should be evangelism. In reality, the views can be reconciled. Consider the following argument.

The first step in reconciliation is to realize that the entrance of sin into the human race recorded in Genesis 3 does not invalidate the purpose for which God made man. All that the entrance of sin did was to make man's job a little more difficult, because we are no longer living in a garden with all its benefits. The work of our hands is now more laborious, but we are still on planet Earth to rule God's creation according to His principles and values.

The next step is to gain a better understanding of the Great Commission. The Great Commission is not about evangelism as is widely believed—it is about discipleship. Evangelism

is only the first step in discipleship. To become a disciple of Jesus Christ, one must be born again<sup>8</sup> and submit to a life of learning and growing in Christ. The goal of this growth is maturity in Christ,<sup>9</sup> which, though never achieved in this life, must still be the objective. As one matures in Christ, one has increased ability to rule God's creation.

This means that as a disciple grows in Christ, he or she better understands his or her individual purpose and destiny. Furthermore, he or she better understands and applies God's values and principles, which are the essential tools for glorifying God in the work He created us to do. When people live this way, it can be said of them, as of King David: "For when David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep."<sup>10</sup> Surely there is no greater priority in life than to fulfill one's purpose as David did.

The view that man is here to rule the physical creation is the driving agenda and priority of God. This means that man is to glory God by applying God's principles and values to all jurisdictions—personal, family, church, work (business), and government. In other words, Christians should be integrating the reality of their faith and therefore reflecting (glorifying) God in every jurisdiction, including work. This is the chief aim of man.

And as man performs this well, man will be a powerful witness for Christ. Those who work with excellence, knowing that their work is valuable and significant to God, are exemplary and become models of excellence for others. Such men and women become change agents ruling God's creation with great wisdom and integrity, and drawing others to Christ by virtue of their excellent lives.

If God values work as articulated above, then man must be about discovering the principles that facilitate growing and mastering the universe. With regard to work, these are the principles that business researchers spend countless hours studying with the goal of understanding what makes great organizations. The beautiful part of this situation is that Christians have the handbook of organizational excellence—the Bible.

In the process of revealing the character and nature of God, the Bible reveals many great and marvelous principles that will facilitate building world-class organizations. For example, the Bible gives us the Golden Rule,<sup>11</sup> which is used with great success by many companies as a guiding principle. The companies that employ this simple principle greatly bless their customers, employees, and vendors. But there is more.

Organizations that discover and understand God's principles that facilitate organizational excellence have an opportunity to be truly world-class. Why is this true? The reason is that God blesses alignment with Himself.<sup>12</sup> The key to divine blessing is building God's way. Organizations can and should build according to His principles and values. After all, God created the universe and therefore has the right to define the rules for how the universe works, including how business works.

This means that there is no dualism in God. He values both spiritual and physical reality. Hence, he values man's work to rule His creation. It therefore behooves man to be about God's business of ruling God's creation in God's way. This is the chief priority of man. Let us be like the surgeon in the above illustration who was both serious and committed to God and to the work that God called him to do. There is no better way to evangelize than by being excellent in our work, and we can only be excellent by doing what God called each of us to do according to God's ways.

My book, *Beyond Babel*, presents a biblical model for building world-class organizations based on a biblical worldview (philosophy), values, and principles. This is a wonderful primer for anyone or any organization seeking to glorify God.

May you be richly blessed as you engage in glorifying God in everything you do, including your work.

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1. Marvin Olasky, "Time Saver," *World*, 29 January 2005, 32.
  2. Galatians 2:20 (NIV).
  3. Colossians 3:23 (NIV).
  4. Matthew 28:18-20.
  5. John 4:24.
  6. Proverbs 31:10ff.
  7. Luke 16:11 (NIV).
  8. John 3.
  9. Ephesians 4:13.
  10. Acts 13:36 (NIV).
  11. Luke 10:27.
  12. Deuteronomy 4:40.