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Keeping the Divine Appointment: Advice to Young Christians Entering a Business

JOHN MORRIS, EMMA MORRIS, AND JIM STREET

Young Christians entering business often face a set of difficulties that leaves them wondering if it is possible to be a strong Christian witness in the marketplace. Often they end up choosing one of the four options that more experienced Christians in business follow. They decide either that:

- faith and business do not mix,
- business comes first and they will find opportunities to work in a little Jesus here and there if they are lucky;
- Christian activities are fine if carried out as extra-business activities; or
- the only way to be Christian in the marketplace is to be a guerilla Christian who signals the faith only through scripture screensavers or a well-placed Bible on the corner of the desk.

Although those approaches are understandable, young Christians must understand there are effective ways to be a Christian presence and faithful witness to the risen Christ in the workplace. As people who have worked for many years in high-level positions in large corporate environments and who take seriously our call to be missionaries in the marketplace, we offer seven suggestions to enhance the ministry of young Christians in the corporate setting.

THINK ABOUT YOUR APPROACH TO WORK

Students often enter the workplace with only a general idea of what they would like to do. Some students do not give much thought to their *approach* to work and are happy to find a job anywhere. Many are eager to begin careers and equally concerned to pay off student loans and gain the independence that comes with a degree and good-paying job. While all of that may be necessary in the beginning stages of work, students also should at least begin to think about how they would like to approach work.

The term “approach” refers to the way that a person decides to work. We contend that young people should begin early to think through the question of *how* they would like to work. They should strive to know themselves well enough to determine the approach to work that both suits them as individuals and best serves the purposes of God.

For example, some think the best approach to work is to seek employment in a large corporate setting and begin the process of developing a career path in some field. They may think about the kinds of security a particular setting may offer in terms of employee benefits, the possibility of career advancement, and salary.

Others reject the corporate setting altogether and go into business for themselves—trading the illusion of corporate security and predictability for the risks and opportunities to create their own companies. Still others work as “Me, Inc.” and pursue the freedom to work with several companies as consultants or other kinds of independent contractors.

Each approach supplies a different kind of advantage and limitation in terms of “fit” for the individual. Further, each approach affects a young Christian’s ability to serve God. Working in a corporate setting enables employees to develop deep and important friendships over time. One is able to minister not simply to “co-workers” but to those who have become friends in the workplace. However, working in a corporate setting often limits Christian behavior under corporate policies and practices.

When John worked for a large, internationally known technology firm, he had to be very careful about what he did and how he did it. Because he was part of the management team, he had to be very careful about how he went about showing his faith because he did not want anyone to make a claim that he was discriminating against employees on the basis of religious preference. If he conducted a Bible study, he had to be careful to follow policy, make participation voluntary, and outside of normal business hours. Otherwise, people might argue that they had been mistreated or overlooked in some way only because they did not agree with John’s Christian convictions.

As a consultant to CEOs and other executives, Emma worked with many and was freer to live her faith and witness than John was when he worked as a manager in a corporate setting. Emma’s practice, which is possible because of her approach to work, has been to trust God to open doors to share the faith. She still must be careful about how she goes about witnessing but not in the same ways she would if she were a manager in one company.

In thinking about one’s approach to work, young Christian businesspeople must think through such issues as how much freedom will be accorded in each approach as compared with how deeply one can form lasting and trusting relationships with others. Further, they must think about which approach to work fits them as individuals as well as which approach will accord them more opportunity to serve God.

CAREFULLY SELECT YOUR FIELD OF WORK

Most Christians would say Christians should avoid some fields of work. No one would argue about whether a Christian should be able to manage a house of prostitution or trade in pornography. No Christians would recommend the illegal drug trade as a legitimate business for Christians. Most Christians would say there are boundaries as to the kinds of fields in which Christians can do business.

However, the young Christian, while accepting those boundaries, may rightly ask where one draws those boundary lines. By what criteria are young Christians, or any Christians, to decide when they have crossed a boundary and begun to engage in work that is not suited for Christians?

Some fields of work are more difficult for the Christian. Although there are exceptions in any field, some fields seem to require the use of deception, exaggeration, or questionable ethical practices. For example, while it is not always the case, the field of advertising often requires people to make claims that are exaggerations at best and downright lies at worst. Further, the use of exploitive images of sexuality or images that “over promise and under deliver” on claims may cause difficulty for some Christians who work in those fields. As a marketing executive put it, “Advertisers sell sizzle but people end up with steak.”

We believe it would be difficult for a Christian to be a venture capitalist who that buys up companies at below-value prices and drives them mercilessly in the name of “return on investment.” That game requires a kind of ruthlessness, a lot of blood-letting and a heart for “stealing companies.” Although that is not true for all venture capitalists, it is true for many.

In choosing a field, young Christians must think about the field of play and the rules for that particular field. If Christians work in questionable fields, they will either have to change or change the ways they do business. However, choosing to do business in a different way from the commonly accepted way of doing business can disqualify one from the game.

Although young Christians may find a calling in almost any field of business, most would be wise to select fields that are not predisposed by nature to questionable, unethical, illegal, or immoral practices.

EXPLORE AND FULLY UNDERSTAND A COMPANY'S CULTURE

The culture of a company is made up of its daily practices and expectations as guided by often less-than-visible assumptions. The actual culture may be in line with the company's public claims about itself but is often something other than those claims. Young Christian job seekers may enter a first job wearing rose colored glasses and believe that because they are working for a highly visible, well-known and even profitable company they are entering a supportive cultural setting. Some highly successful and visible companies are highly successful in spite of being supportive. The actual culture of the corporation may be only numbers-driven and indifferent to the well-being of employees.

Further, young Christians entering business must also realize that the actual culture of a company may not resemble the values statements the company posts in its lobby or on its literature. Perhaps it is a bit of an overstatement but the words of a seasoned executive in a manufacturing concern contain a kernel of truth. "While a company may claim that it holds to certain values," he said, "More often than not the values do not matter in the crunch. In the crunch, business becomes exclusively about the numbers."

A company may claim in its public material that it values the families of the employees but expect the employees to work 14 hour days. A company may claim in a public way that they do not do business with just anyone but pressure its sales force to "hit the numbers" at whatever cost. Even companies that hold themselves out to the larger society as driven by "Christian values" fall under the same market pressures as every other company and may hedge on their public claims to increase the bottom line.

Young Christians should ask whether there is a "fit" between themselves and the culture of a company. To do that, a Christian has to know what he or she is about. They have to know which of their values can be compromised and which cannot be compromised. They must know themselves well enough to know what they are comfortable with both as a person and as a Christian.

A company's culture can be a Christian's enemy or friend. One can only come to see it for what it is by knowing the real culture. Christians must work within the policies, practices, and expectations of the company. However, the real policies, practices, and expectations are not always obvious at first. Christians must listen for the hidden messages and watch for the hidden signs. Young Christians should never hesitate to talk to employees, visit the lunchroom, look at the practices, and check out the real hours before accepting employment.

Young Christians entering business must also ask whether the culture of the company fits with what God has called them to be and do. They must ask whether the company opens a career path, provides more skills, creates more opportunities and life experiences that will help them better serve God. A Christian's main concern is to serve the purposes of God and not simply to get to the next rung on the corporate ladder. Young Christians should think through their definition of success and explore how success in business matches up to God's definition of success.

REMEMBER CHARACTER IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN SKILL-SET

Although talent and skill is critical to success in the workplace, character is more important. Who a person is far outweighs what a person can do. Young Christians in the marketplace can save themselves trouble by being careful to select a job that respects their convictions and draws upon their talents and strengths. Skills can be acquired through training and practice. Character is not acquired in a training class. Character is a matter of who people are and how they conceive of themselves in terms of the larger purpose that claims their lives.

Christians must be before they do. They must stand on their principles, never waver, and let it be known their convictions are non-negotiable. When Emma was CEO of one particular company, one of the chief investors came to her with a "work around" that she was not willing to take. Because she had already taken a stand, she was well-known as a Christian who lived according to certain standards and would never do

anything immoral, illegal or unethical. Because of her reputation, she was able to tell the investor outright that she knew who God called her to be and that—although she was there to build a company—she was also there for much larger reasons. The investor dropped the request.

There is an important caveat in this matter of standing for principle. Some young Christians may believe that if they display Christian character and hold to Christian standards they will not fail in their work. However, God does not make those kinds of guarantees. Being faithful to God may cost a job and may even cost a company.

Even Christian executives who put God first know their companies could fail because of poor business practices or a downturn in the economy. Being faithful to God is no guarantee of success in the marketplace. Although all Christians in business want to be successful in the terms of the marketplace, their chief end as Christians is to be faithful to God and be comfortable with not knowing what lies ahead.

ENGAGE IN WORK SUPPORTIVE OF SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

The practices of the faith shape us for witness and service in the world. By regularly participating in the life of the church and personal spiritual practices, Christians are prepared to enter into difficult fields of service because they are enabled to trust that their lives are sustained by the power and presence of God. Young Christians who are entering the business world must expect challenges, anticipate adversity, and prepare for battle. The free market is a highly competitive world often driven by ambition, avarice, and extreme self-interest. Although much good is accomplished in and through the marketplace, it can also be a place that grinds people to a pulp.

Young Christians must learn to pick their battles and to be as “wise as serpents and harmless as doves.” They must learn which causes are worth dying for. Being a Christian in the marketplace requires that one to stay in the word because it contains so much practical wisdom for how to be a presence in the workplace. Young Christians would do well to continually look for supportive resources, guidance, and mentoring from Christians who are experienced in living as a Christian in the workplace.

Young Christians who are thrilled to be earning their first real paychecks must think critically about lifestyle choices. For example, young Christians should strive to avoid lifestyle choices that end up imprisoning them. First paychecks bring first debts. Debt is a prison that can prevent one from following Christ wherever he may lead. Young Christians must protect their freedom to go where Christ wants them to go.

SEE YOUR WORK AS PART OF YOUR WITNESS

The quality of one’s work is directly related to the quality of one’s witness in the workplace. Employers pay for the employee’s time, talent, skill, and performance. Young Christians in the marketplace should always strive to be a “notch above and step ahead” in their work. By so doing they can leverage their work performance to open doors for sharing their faith. By doing good work, they earn the right to be heard.

An executive in a large manufacturing concern told the following story.

“I had a manager who worked for me who was widely known as ‘the religious guy.’ He knew how to ‘talk the talk.’ I have no doubt that he was a good Christian man. However, he did not understand that he could make a more lasting impression as a Christian by doing exceptional work than by simply displaying his Bible on his desk. I remember once that we had a real crisis on the shop floor. The workers in the plant were scrambling to solve a problem, one that was costing the company by the second. I walked out onto the shop floor and asked the workers where the manager was. They replied, rather sarcastically, ‘Oh, he is up in his office reading his Bible.’ I can assure you that his ‘witness’ was null and void among those workers because his work as a manager was of such poor quality.”

The doors of opportunity to serve God swing open more widely because of a Christian’s walk and work.

BE FAITHFUL AND KEEP THE “DIVINE APPOINTMENT”

Christians see themselves as serving larger purposes in the workplace than simply increasing revenues, cutting costs, and increasing market share. Young Christians must guard against the temptation to enter the business world only on the terms of the business world. Likewise, they must avoid conceiving of their convictions as usurping the rules, demands, and expectations of business as business.

Christians must see that being hired as an employee or as a consultant is an invitation into the business for business reasons. Those who offer the jobs think they are hiring people for their skills, talents, and abilities to accomplish work that feeds the bottom line. However, young Christians should look at the call into business, the actual hiring for a job, as a divine appointment. God appoints. God opens doors into companies for God’s reasons and Christians go in to serve God’s purpose in that place.

Any businessperson would relish the opportunity to talk with and learn from people like Jack Welch and Bill Gates. Christians have to remember that they have the chance to sit down everyday with the One who created everything, including Jack Welch and Bill Gates. Our call is to learn from the Source and always be faithful and act on behalf of God.

Young Christians entering business should not only be faithful to God but also to the person God created each of them to be. In the corporate world, one is often pressured to be somebody, do something, and climb up one more rung. However, that is not the calling. Each Christian is created in certain ways and called to bring their true selves to bear in every situation.

Young Christians must be sensitive not only to the doors that open to them in terms of the kinds of businesses they enter but also to the numerous ministry opportunities that cross their paths in a single day. To work in the business world is to work closely with people who are lost, in pain, and searching. Young Christians must prepare themselves to see people around them not simply through the eyes of productivity but also through the eyes of God.

All of us, whether young or not so young, must “seek first the Kingdom of God.” Although it is not taught in most business schools, our task as Christians is to take God to the marketplace and adjust the marketplace to God rather than adjusting God to the marketplace. Christians young and old can do that by listening for God’s voice and by keeping the divine appointment.

EMMA MORRIS

Ms. Morris is a technology entrepreneur and business consultant to CEOs.

JOHN MORRIS

Mr. Morris, after spending 17 years in sales and sales management at Hewlett-Packard, is pursuing his Ph.D. in New Testament and Greek at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. Both he and Emma are engaged in active workplace ministry.

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