

Business Ambassadors

OURLIVES AND WHAT WE DO with them are important to God.

A close relationship with the Lord will bring about a compelling and necessary result. We will find it possible to bring every aspect of our lives, including our work, into alignment with God's truth and design. This in turn will transform us into people who are not only more effective as human beings and as workers but more pleasing to God.

God himself, through his Word and his Spirit, provides the context within which we must operate. When we are bounded by the guidelines he establishes and the wisdom he imparts, our work will delight him and further his kingdom here on earth.

Let's peer into the future and look at God's larger agenda for a moment. Earlier I noted a vision given to the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk. In that vision he foresaw a coming day when the glory of the Lord would fill the entire earth.

“Earth,” as the prophet used this word, was intended to include everyone and everything on the planet. “Glory” signifies honor, substance, renown and visible splendor—the opposite of instability, temporariness and emptiness—and actually signifies the very presence of God himself. Imagine. That kind of glory filling the entire earth. What a vision!

Right Here—Right Now

Now here is the key question. Does it not seem likely that God intends our work and occupations to be included as he immerses everything in his glory? Is this an aspect of the compelling vision the prophet saw? If this is indeed God’s direction, what are the implications for us day to day? If so, is it not consistent that we would be engaging that process here and now—not waiting for the “sweet by-and-by,” but doing all we can currently to align our work with God’s glory?

For myself, I cannot but answer in the affirmative. From this perspective, I find each day is important and filled with opportunity. Not just to “survive the rat race,” but to actually have a part, however small, in consciously knitting what I do into God’s larger purposes.

In America, we are very privileged to have the freedom to integrate our faith and our work. This isn’t so everywhere across the earth, and, really, we must not take it for granted in our own nation. This lesson was driven home to me a few years ago.

Contending with the EEOC

You may recall from earlier comments that a while back I found

myself in the midst of a battle with the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission. It was this involvement that eventually resulted in the news piece with ABC.

The EEOC had issued some ill-conceived guidelines that would likely have imposed severe restrictions on the exercise of religious liberty in the U.S. workplace. I tell the story because the commission's approach would have directly impeded the process of aligning our work with God's design.

Dudley Rochelle, an attorney in Atlanta, was perusing a recently published *Federal Register* and saw the proposed guidelines amending the Civil Rights Act of 1964. As she read them in detail she saw some ominous implications. She quickly wrote a brief, which I received just days before the end of November 1993, the close of the sixty-day period for public comment. I wrote to the EEOC with my concerns and encouraged several of my friends in business to do the same.

But it became clear that this proposal would sail through Congress to become law, and that the letters of objection, less than ten, would have no effect. I found I was being stirred by a righteous anger that a handful of bureaucrats could possibly shut down workplace Bible studies, prayer before business meetings, the singing of carols at a Christmas dinner, the display of a poster for a church-related event, or even the wearing of jewelry with a religious symbol. Other attorneys with whom I spoke confirmed this possibility.

Preventive Measures

I was further encouraged to get involved as I read in Isaiah 28

that the Lord would give strength to “those who hold back the battle at the gate.” This spoke to me of taking preventive measures now, before it was too late. I concluded that if these guidelines became law, it could take a decade to restore workplace religious liberty. By then, the damage would have been done. We learned, in fact, that a major airline had already issued instructions restricting bulletin board notices in their operations centers: any reference to religious content was forbidden.

Humanly speaking, there seemed to be no way to prevent the EEOC guidelines from becoming law. But God provided a way.

I learned that while the public could no longer comment, members of Congress could. I met with Mark Siljander, a former member of the U.S. House of Representatives, who immediately saw the dangers and jumped into the fray. He was inspired! Within weeks, and with the help of the January 1994 snowstorm that paralyzed Washington and slowed the reconvening of Congress, we were able to mount an effort to get this issue on the radar screen of several supportive members of the House and Senate.

Various prayer ministries became involved, encouraging their members to mount a nationwide crescendo of prayer that the proposed guidelines would not go through. Then Christian Broadcasting Network News got involved. Pat Robertson, never one to duck something threatening religious liberty, sent a camera crew to our company. I was interviewed for a TV story which showed activities that might have to be abandoned, including a group of our employees who had gathered for a voluntary Bible study.

The message was clear: “Such activities as these may not be

possible in the future!” This hit the national airwaves in repeated showings. Interviews on radio talk shows ensued, then special coverage by Dr. James Dobson on his “Focus on the Family” broadcast. Now the ball was really rolling.

An Outpouring of Support

Major network TV news programs picked it up, and the *Wall Street Journal* wrote a hard-hitting article for which I was interviewed. Congressional offices were besieged with mail and phone calls. People wrote over 100,000 letters of protest to the EEOC, more than ten times the number they had received on any previous issue. Practically no one wrote in support!

An amusing incident occurred during this process, reminding me of the Lord’s sense of humor. A coalition was invited to meet with EEOC attorneys to discuss the guidelines. We were strange bedfellows, with representatives ranging from the conservative National Association of Evangelicals to the liberal American Civil Liberties Union. The meeting was cordial but combative. As I was leaving the EEOC headquarters in Washington, I noticed a beautiful poster in an office cubicle with a verse from the Bible on it. I couldn’t resist drawing one of the EEOC attorneys aside to point out to her that under their proposal it might have to be taken down. Her knowing nod confirmed that the point had been made.

Freedom Preserved

A resolution was introduced into the U.S. Senate to cut off funding to the EEOC for the promulgation of their guidelines,

and in a rare display of unity, the Senate voted 100 to 0 for passage! Soon after, the House of Representatives followed with an overwhelming, though not unanimous, vote. Faced with this wall of resistance, in the fall of 1994 the EEOC withdrew the guidelines.

It was a tremendous victory—an affirmation to me that the same God who created the far-flung heavens also cares about our having the uncontested freedom to voice matters of faith in the workplace.

It was also a wake-up call to us in business that our liberties must not be assumed. The EEOC challenge brought us within a razor’s edge of a government mandate that could have cost us these liberties forever. This battle confirmed to me that we in business need to be bold in the exercise of the freedoms we have, to declare and act on our beliefs.

It is an aspect of the commission Jesus gave his followers to be “salt” and “light.”

Salt and Light

On one of my visits to Israel, I was able to stand where it is believed Jesus stood when he spoke about salt and light in the Sermon on the Mount—overlooking the beautiful hills surrounding the azure waters of the Sea of Galilee. It is a breathtaking setting. As he addressed the crowd, Jesus was no doubt mindful that in those hills beyond the sea were tens of thousands of people, tucked away in small villages, who also needed to hear his message. He implored those who were listening to take the message out to the world around them.

“You are the salt of the earth,” Jesus said. “Salt” to them conveyed the idea of both a preservative and an agent to create thirst. They also realized that in the process of doing its job, salt could be an irritant. “Be salty,” Jesus nonetheless admonished.

He went on: “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”

In effect, Jesus was saying it is not enough to have a “private faith.” If it is real, it needs to shine forth, challenging the darkness.

Ambassadors

The apostle Paul used a different metaphor, but one which conveyed a similar purpose, as he addressed the church in Corinth, encouraging them to reach out and make an impact upon the society around them. Corinth was a seaport, strategically located as a hub of commerce and trade for the Roman Empire, a city bustling with activity—with merchants and managers, ships’ crews and captains, dockworkers and traders, soldiers and noblemen—and, on occasion, even emperors and kings.

Let me paraphrase what Paul said to his followers: “Be Christ’s ambassadors to these people. He wants to reconcile every aspect of the world to himself, including these who are busily engaged in their trades, their responsibilities in business and in governance. He wants to bring them and their work into alignment with his ultimate purposes. He wants to reveal to them his love, his compassion, his care. He has a destiny for them beyond what

they can see. This is reality; the rest is illusory. And he wants your help! Be ambassadors!”

Loving Monday

This call extends to each of us who has decided to embrace the message of the gospel. We are salt. We are light. We are his ambassadors. In business. Where we are. To everyone with whom he brings us in contact. In the work, the vocation, to which he has called us. Using whatever platforms he provides.

For indeed, there is that day coming—a day when God’s glory will envelop every atom, every plant and human cell, every family and home—and, yes, every place of work.

Let us hold this vision before us, and do all we can to hasten its fulfillment.

There is wonderful hope beyond the weekend. It involves that very special assignment to which God has called us: our work. And it begins next Monday.