

How does being a Christian affect the way in which we relate to our employers, our colleagues and the users of our library services? Can we identify a Biblical model for management? Should the Church be playing a greater role in supporting Christians in the workplace?

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## ***A CHRISTIAN APPROACH TO MANAGEMENT AND WORK***



### **The Christian at Work**

John Stott has written: *“Every honourable work should be seen by Christians as some kind of co-operation with God, in which we share with Him in the transformation of the world which He has made and committed to our care”* (Stott, 1991, p. 148).

Mark Greene points out that Christians in work spend more time in work than in any other place and the workplace is the one place where Christians cannot avoid contact with non-Christians (Greene, 1997, pp. 15, 16).

William Temple, one of our greatest Archbishops of Canterbury, said that we should regard work as worship – breath, brains and brawn all for God (Deeks, 1972, p. 12). We work to serve others, to improve life for the community as a whole.

God does not change when we walk into work. The Holy Spirit doesn't suddenly realise he's in an office or factory and say *“I'm off now. See you later at the prayer meeting.”* (Greene, 1997, p. 24).

Here are some Bible references on the importance of work:

- A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without Him, who can eat or find enjoyment? (Ecclesiastes 2: 24 – 25).
- Jesus said to them [the Jews who were persecuting him for healing on the Sabbath], “*My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.*” (John 5: 17).
- You yourselves know that these hands of mine [Paul’s] have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: “*It is more blessed to give than to receive.*” (Acts 20: 34 – 35).
- He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his hands, that he may have something to share with those in need (Ephesians 4: 28).
- For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you. On the contrary, we worked day and night, labouring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: “*If a man will not work, he shall not eat.*” (2 Thessalonians 3: 7 – 10).

### **The Christian Manager**

Greene has referred to some of the desirable qualities of a Christian boss, based partly on a survey of his colleagues (Greene, 1997, pp. 175 – 188). They include courtesy, service, justice, the ability to communicate with his or her colleagues (especially about changes that are being made) and to listen to them, and the ability to bring out the best in his or her staff. The Christian boss has vision and direction, integrity, competence, enthusiasm. He or she respects colleagues, is concerned for them as people, and knows their names, worries and needs.

Maurice Line, who may or may not be a Christian, has given some amusing but perceptive hints on how managers should **not** treat their staff – for example, ignore them, forget their names, patronise them, reject their suggestions or claim the credit for them, give conflicting orders or behave in some other inconsistent manner, avoid praise or saying ‘Please’ or ‘Thank you’ (Line, 1992).

As well as positive approaches like communication and knowing people’s names, the Christian manager should demonstrate holiness in other ways such as avoiding ‘fiddling’ expenses and sexual harassment.

‘Management by Wandering Around’ (MBWA) is a good technique for the Christian manager. Higginson points out that the manager should always be accessible (Higginson, 1993, pp. 128 – 130). There are several examples in the Gospels of Jesus wanting to be alone, but we also read sometimes of him abandoning his plan to be alone because of the needs of desperate people: for example, the feeding of the five thousand (Mark 6: 31 – 44) and the Greek woman whose daughter was possessed by an evil spirit (Mark 7: 24 – 30). Jesus was always accessible.

### **The Christian Employee**

Alas, not all managers are Christian and not all Christian managers behave like Christians. How does the Christian employee handle an unreasonable manager?

First, as Greene points out (Greene, 1997, pp. 132 – 134), it must be remembered that the manager’s authority is from God (Romans 13: 1) and that God is our real boss (Colossians 3: 23 – 24). God is in control of our careers, promotions, success and failure (Psalm 75:7). Hard though it may sometimes be to believe it, God loves our boss. We should, therefore, give him or her our loyalty. David accepted that Saul’s authority was from God, even though he abused this authority (1 Samuel 23, 24 and 26). Similarly, as Greene points out (Greene, 1997, p. 115), the manager’s authority comes from God though not necessarily his or her decisions. We should avoid criticising the boss publicly or encouraging complaints and we must *‘get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger’* (Ephesians 4: 31) as well as all resentments and negative feelings.

The conviction that God is the boss can be liberating. Faced with an irritating or unreasonable line manager, we can ask ourselves “*How is the real boss treating me?*”

We should try not to panic, but to concentrate on the things we can do something about (Matthew 6: 34). Obviously, we should spend as much time as possible with God. Higginson states that some people find it difficult to find time to pray (Higginson, 1993, p. 246) but he also writes, in the same book, that it is always possible to spend time with God – for example, in the bedroom or when walking to catch the train (Higginson, 1993, pp. 64 – 65). The Bishop of Liverpool, James Jones, has said in an interview that he frequently prays when ‘*on the move*’: when passing a school or a home, for example, or when seeing people in the street. It should be possible to offer up quiet prayers when at work and no Christian should underestimate the power of prayer.

It is good to look for contentment and the positive side of work wherever possible (1 Timothy 6: 6). Higginson lists several things which make for contentment and happy work such as pleasant conditions, making use of one’s talents, having control over one’s work, exercising responsibility, stimulation, achievement, team work, helping others and showing and receiving appreciation (Higginson, 1997, p. 16).

Most employees have the opportunity to organise their own work and to apply some degree of self-management. This includes time planning, prioritisation and self-assessment, asking such questions as:

- Are my relations with library users satisfactory?
- Do I know my stock well enough?
- Have I done my best to keep up to date with modern trends?
- Do I participate enough in professional activities or, alternatively, do I participate too much in professional activities to the detriment of the job for which I am paid?
- Am I a good communicator?
- Do I work well with colleagues, including colleagues in other departments/agencies who can contribute towards a successful library?
- Can I talk to my boss?
- What am I like at dealing with change, in a crisis or when working under pressure?

- Can I accept justified criticism?
- What role can I play in furthering the effectiveness of the library?
- What other work can I or should I be doing that is not directly related to the work of my unit?
- How does my contribution fit in with that which is being made by others?
- Do I have a strategy for my job?
- When did I last review my effectiveness?
- Am I making the best use of my time?

It goes without saying that the Christian should demonstrate Biblical standards when doing his or her work, for example:

- serving the boss wholeheartedly, as if serving the Lord (Ephesians 6: 7, Colossians 3: 23)
- working well not only to win the boss's favour and when his or her eye is on you but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord (Colossians 3: 22)
- being pleasant and instructive to colleagues: watching our tongue (Proverbs 16: 23 – 24, 25: 11; Colossians 4: 6; James 1: 26, 3: 2 – 12; 1 Peter 3: 9 – 12)
- helping others (Galatians 6: 2)
- seizing opportunities when they arise (Colossians 4: 5)
- loving our enemies (perhaps the boss) (Matthew 5: 43 – 48; Romans 13: 8 – 14)
- doing to others what we would have them do to us (Matthew 7: 12)
- evaluating our actions (Galatians 6: 4)
- showing humility (Titus 3: 2)
- being honest in everything we do, remembering that 'stealing' includes stealing other people's ideas or the credit due to them (Exodus 20: 15; Deuteronomy 23: 24 – 25; Luke 16: 10 – 12; Ephesians 4: 28; Titus 2: 10)
- avoiding laziness (Proverbs 6: 6 – 11).

Higginson has a great deal to say about the way in which the Holy Spirit can help us at work (Higginson, 1993). He has a crucial role in communication (John 16: 13) and at the first Pentecost he had a tremendous influence on the disciples: he removed fear, allowed them to speak in other languages and to other groups (Gentiles) by removing cultural barriers (Acts 2: 1 – 12, 15: 7 – 9). The Holy Spirit is still alive, well and active, and we do not have to

leave him behind in church on Monday morning. One of his many gifts is the gift of perseverance.

Returning to the theme of self-management, Greene suggests a number of questions which we should ask ourselves (Greene, 1997, pp. 134 – 136):

- Am I selfishly ambitious? (James 3: 16)
- Do I consider my boss's needs (Philippians 2: 3 – 4)
- Am I trying to steal the credit? (Luke 14: 7 – 11)
- Am I proud? (Proverbs 8: 13)
- Am I really submitting to my boss's authority or simply doing what I am told? (Titus 2: 9)
- Do I genuinely forgive my boss when he or she does something wrong? (Matthew 18: 21 – 22; Ephesians 4: 32.)
- Do I love my boss and actively seek opportunities to express that love? (1 John 3: 18)
- Do I fail to see opportunities in apparently adverse circumstances? (James 1: 2 – 3)
- Do I communicate my problems with my boss to him or her – and do I do it lovingly? (Matthew 18: 15)

### **The Christian's Relationship with Colleagues**

Greene gives some examples of the desirable relationship of a Christian employee with his or her boss (Greene, 1997, p. 128). It should be creative and dynamic. Christians should love their boss as they love themselves. They should support him or her and try to deal constructively with things that bother them. They should recognise their responsibility to submit to authority even though they may have to challenge some decisions. They should seek ways to develop good working relationships. They should believe that God is in control of their careers and that he will use the workplace and the boss to accomplish his purpose in their lives.

Compromise may be looked upon with suspicion by Christians, but it is not always wrong. Higginson suggests that it may be an attempt to do justice to different moral claims, both or all of which may be valid (Higginson, 1993, p. 219). He states that the best compromises are those which take the 'promise' part of the word seriously. They are creative and hold out hope for something better in the future (Higginson, 1993, p. 222). Jesus told his

disciples that he was sending them out like sheep among wolves and that they must be shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves (Matthew 10: 16). Of course, there should never be any question of compromise when this would conflict with Christian faith or principles – for example, condoning dishonesty or unfair accusations against a colleague.

Higginson points out that Christians have to live in the real world. Unless they choose to form their own exclusively Christian company, they are likely to find that most of their colleagues do not share the same degree of altruism or idealism (Higginson, 1993, p. 94). There are several examples in the Bible, however, of how the Christian should behave in the world - for example, as salt and light (Matthew 5: 13 – 16) and avoiding complaining or arguing (Philippians 2: 14). The Christian can accomplish much by example: colleagues may notice that the Christian is always honest and courteous and does not swear (Greene, 1997, p. 51). We are Christ's advertisement in the workplace (1 Thessalonians 4: 11 – 12). We are ambassadors for Christ (2 Corinthians 5: 20).

The Bishops of Liverpool and Warrington have both said that, when they ask people what has brought them to Confirmation, a frequent reply is the encouragement and example of other Christians. Some time after my retirement, a committed Baptist became team leader of the Information Management Group in Liverpool John Moores University's Business School. A colleague told me that this person's management style truly reflected his Christian faith.

Deeks states that, as Christians, we should be the pacemakers, making the pace in the punctuality stakes but not making the pace as *'the first blokes to knock off work'* (Deeks, 1972, p. 18): making the pace in good conscientious work but helping the chap who finds the going hard (Deeks, 1972, p. 20).

We should be up with the front runners in saying "thank you" to the floor sweeper as well as the foreman, always ready to say "sorry" when we are wrong, courteous to all, being ready to guide others – even, for example, in little things like showing them where the toilets are and when to take tea breaks.

Christians should always provide support for their colleagues, whether Christian or non-Christian. This support may take the

form of mentoring (providing advice and encouragement to less experienced colleagues), coaching and counselling – giving of our time, talents and care. The Bible contains several examples of our need to take responsibility for others – for example, Abraham pleading for Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18: 22 – 33; Moses pleading for the Israelites in Numbers 14: 11 – 20; Nehemiah pleading for the Israelites in Nehemiah 1: 5 – 11; and Jesus asking for forgiveness for those who were crucifying him in Luke 23: 34.

Christians should be reconcilers when disputes arise (2 Corinthians 5: 16 – 21, Ephesians 2: 11-22). Greene asks '*If morale is low in your workplace, but your joy remains, if people have become niggly about management and critical of one another and you remain objective about management and generous to colleagues, won't people recognise Christ in you?*' (Greene, 1997, p. 145).

Christians should always be courteous when responding to questions from colleagues, however silly these may appear to be (Proverbs 15: 1, Colossians 4: 6).

Although Christians should behave in a Christ-like manner to **all** their colleagues, whether managers or peers and whether Christian or non-Christian, it is obviously helpful if they can find people who share their faith and perhaps form a Christian fellowship. This may be easier in academic libraries, where there are full-time or part-time chaplains available, than in public or special libraries, though my experience is that all too few Christians attend meetings organised by the chaplains. Greene points to the possibility of Bible study groups being organised in the workplace (Greene, 1997, p. 19).

### **A Biblical Model for Managers and Management**

Greene writes '*The biblical model for both the employer and employee is a servant model – one who deploys his gifts and resources for the benefit of another person*' (Greene, 1997, p. 126).

There should be consistency and integrity by managers and managed:

- The man of integrity walks securely, but he who takes crooked paths will be found out (Proverbs 10: 9).
- And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6: 8).

### **The Church and Work**

As well as meeting with fellow Christians at work, writes Higginson, Christians should enlist the support of their church when faced with problems at work (Higginson, 1997, p. 38). This is more easily said than done, as it is not always easy to persuade ministers what they should include in their prayers. It is possible, however, to pray for work situations during 'open prayer' sessions at house groups and prayer meetings.

Higginson suggests the possibility of an occasional 'Festival of Work' at church, similar to a Harvest Festival (Higginson, 1993, p. 252). This could provide opportunities for sharing testimonies about work activities, sharing and praying about problems at work, and praying more widely for the work situation in one's town/city, country, continent and the world.

### **Witnessing to the wider community**

Christians who have experienced problems at work can benefit themselves and others by sharing these problems not only among their own church families but also with the wider community. They can write articles for professional journals such as ***Librarians' Christian Fellowship Newsletter*** and ***Update***. Experiences may be helpful to others, not just librarians, and such journals as ***Faith in Business*** and ***Third Way*** might be willing to consider articles. Local church magazines are another possibility. Such articles should not be confined to negative situations and how to overcome them but should also be concerned with positive issues such as the formation of Christian fellowships, Bible study groups and prayer groups at work.

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## **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**



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