

# Called To Be A Pharmacist:

## Recovering the Christian Doctrine of Vocation



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*“It is not right...to acquiesce in the notion that a man’s life is divided into the time he spends on his work and the time he spends in serving God.”*

— Dorothy Sayers

This issue of Christianity & Pharmacy explores the integration of faith and profession. To ‘integrate’ something means to unite it with something else, or “to blend into a functioning or unified whole.”<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, the question before us is, “How can Christian pharmacists effectively blend their faith and their work into a functioning and unified whole?” This question has long troubled and perplexed many Christians, especially those working in ‘secular’ jobs. But perhaps we are asking the wrong question, for the question implies an underlying assumption that faith and work are dichotomous and, ipso facto, need to be integrated. That paradigm should be shattered. Faith and work are already in-

tegrated in God’s eyes. Instead, our attitudes and understandings about work need to be integrated with the teachings of Scripture. Only then will we understand that in our jobs—either as pharmacists or any other legitimate professions—we “are serving the Lord Christ.”<sup>2</sup>

### **“By the Sweat of Your Brow” Attitudes Toward Work**

When it comes to attitudes toward work, Christians in general are similar to their non-Christian counterparts. In a survey of young evangelical Christians enrolled in Christian colleges and seminaries, one researcher concluded, “What has been seen thus far merely confirms what is already well known about the place and value of work for Evangelicalism—that work has lost any spiritual and eternal significance and that it is important only insofar as it fosters certain qualities of the personality.”<sup>3</sup> We see this every day in society. For example, some have a mercenary perspective toward work, seeing a job as merely a means to earn the wages that make their lifestyle possible. This attitude is so common that it is often displayed as a bumper sticker: “I owe, I owe, so off to work I go!” Similarly, work is often viewed as a necessary evil. “I’d rather be fishing,” we say. There are others of us who live by the slogan, “Thank God it’s Friday.” Work is something we must endure during the week so we can finally enjoy the weekend, only to feel a growing sense of dread as Monday morning approaches.

Many Christians have the notion that work came as a consequence of man’s rebellion in the Garden of

Eden. The Lord told Adam, “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, mankind was expelled from the abundance of the Garden “to work the ground from which he was taken.”<sup>5</sup> If we look back to the previous chapter of Genesis, we see that work was instituted for man by God before the Fall. Immediately after Adam was created it is stated, “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it.”<sup>6</sup> After the Fall, the ground was cursed and would bring forth “thorns and thistles,”<sup>7</sup> indicating that mankind’s labor would thereafter be accompanied by difficulties. The punishment was not work, but the toil, tension, frustration, hardship, worry, and disappointment that accompanies labor in a fallen world. Since God had ordained work for mankind prior to his rebellion in the Garden, we may conclude that work itself is not a curse.

The Christian’s attitude toward work should be different. Non-Christians view work through a lens that usually focuses on the toil and trouble of work. Christians ought to see work in the light of Scripture, through the lens of the Holy Spirit. According to theologian Paul Althaus, “Scripture does this in Psalm 128:1-2 when it blesses the man who works industriously. He is blessed because in the midst of all the toil and bitterness of work, the believer may know that his work obeys God and therefore stands under God’s approval. God accepts it as a sacrifice of worship and praise and uses it to bless us. God has sweetened the sourness of work with the

honey of His good pleasure and the promise of His blessing. Because the Christian views work in this way, it is precious to him. He can easily bear the burden and do it with joy and courage. Thus work is indeed under a curse, but it also stands under God's blessing."<sup>8</sup>

### **Tearing Down the Imaginary Walls Separating Faith and Work**

There is another mindset among contemporary Christians that certain jobs, such as farming, construction, banking, and pharmacy, are not service to God. An exception to this idea is perhaps those rare moments when individuals are able to witness the Gospel (e.g., share faith with a colleague, hold a Bible study for coworkers, and conduct other "religious activities" at the workplace). This view is particularly prevalent among evangelical Christians, who have the idea that a Christian who is not employed in full-time vocational ministry cannot be a Christian in the fullest sense. This false dichotomy between faith and work comes, not from Scripture, but from an erroneous mindset described by Paul Helm as 'split-mindedness.' According to Helm, "Christians have become accustomed to think of themselves as having a 'spiritual life' which is sharply distinct from the every-day life in the family, and from work and leisure. A 'spiritual life' is a life of prayer and watchfulness, of Bible-reading and church-going. As a result of this distortion, instead of the Christian life being thought of as an integrated whole, it is artificially broken up into compartments which have little or nothing to do with one another. The 'vertical' dimension of a person's life with God seems unrelated and unrelatable to the 'horizontal' dimension of his life on planet Earth. It is as if Christian responsibility ceases at the church porch, as if the Christian

gospel has nothing to do with the pavement outside and the roads and motorways beyond."<sup>9</sup> The artificial division of the Christian life into two compartments, religious and non-religious, carries over to a falsely dichotomous view of faith and work as well. These imaginary walls separating Christian faith and work should be torn down. As Dorothy Sayers noted, "It is not right...to acquiesce in the notion that a man's life is divided into the time he spends on his work and the time he spends in serving God."<sup>10</sup> For the Christian, all of life is to be lived in spiritual service to God. We need to restore the historic yet forgotten Christian doctrine of vocation or calling, embraced by leaders in the Reformation.

### **Recovering the Christian Doctrine of Vocation**

It wasn't until the Protestant Reformation that the doctrine of vocation surfaced and began to be fully developed by the Reformers, especially Martin Luther and John Calvin. Prior to the Reformation, only those engaged in full-time church work (e.g., priests, monks, nuns) were seen by the medieval church as having a vocation or calling. Ordinary or secular occupations, such as a milkmaid, a farmer, a shoe maker, a soldier, or even a king, were seen as worldly and of much lesser value to God. In order to serve God fully and live a truly spiritual life, one had to be separated from ordinary society and live a monastic, celibate life. This life had to be devoted each day to prayer, contemplation, worship, and other religious duties.

This concept of vocation changed under the influence of Martin Luther. Luther grew increasingly restless as a result of his growing conviction that the church had drifted away from the truths of God's Word.

One of the many fruits to come out of Luther's and other's efforts in the Reformation was the doctrine of vocation. As Gene Veith observes, "In scrutinizing the existing ecclesiastical system in light of the Gospel and the Scriptures, the Reformers insisted that priests and nuns and monastics did not have a special claim to God's favor, but that laypeople too could live the Christian life to its fullest."<sup>11</sup> Reformers believed that every legitimate occupation had eternal significance and was equally valued by God. Thus, the term for vocation acquired a new meaning in the Reformation. Luther saw vocation as the work one accepts as God's decree or command. As author Georgia Harkness has observed, "God decrees that man fulfill his calling, not in a monastery, but in the world. The concept is intertwined with one of Luther's most fundamental contributions, the setting aside of the distinction between the cloister and secular life as spheres of religious activity. All men, he said, are equally obligated to do God's work, and every legitimate calling is of equal value in the eyes of God. Man must labor at his [vocation], not away from the world, but in it."<sup>12</sup> The elevation of secular vocations to the same status as ecclesiastical vocations led Luther to write, "Therefore I advise no one to enter any religious order or the priesthood, indeed, I advise everyone against it - unless he is forearmed with this knowledge and understands that the works of monks and priests, however holy and arduous they may be, do not differ one whit in the sight of God from the works of the rustic laborer in the field or the woman going about her household tasks, but that all works are measured before God by faith alone."<sup>13</sup>

Another leader who helped refine the biblical doctrine of vocation was John Calvin. Like Luther, Calvin believed

that Scripture taught that persons in every legitimate profession were to glorify God through their toils as they fulfill their daily responsibilities. Calvin wrote, “We know that we were created for the express purpose of being employed in labor of various kinds, and that no sacrifice is more pleasing to God than when every man applies diligently to his own calling.”<sup>14</sup> But where Luther had asserted the possibility that one can serve God within one’s calling, Calvin took the bolder step of claiming that one can serve God by one’s calling.<sup>15</sup> Professor Leland Ryken outlined the leading ideas of Calvin’s doctrine of vocation as follows: (1) God is sovereign in the events of a person’s life. Part of this sovereignty is that the tasks that come to people in their lives are “appointed duties” (named “callings”) that have been “assigned...by the Lord.” The doctrine of calling or vocation was a specific application of God’s providence to the personal life of every Christian. (2) Because God is a person’s “guide in all these things,” our daily undertakings are not simply self-contained tasks but are part of a religious service to God, with the result that if “you obey your calling” it will “be reckoned very precious in God’s sight.” (3) No vocation is more sacred than another; in Calvin’s words, “it is all one in the sight of God what a person’s manner [i.e., “vocation”] is in this world, inasmuch as this diversity does not hinder agreement in piety.”<sup>16</sup>

According to Calvin, when we view work from the perspective of Scripture, and recognize, acknowledge, and acquiesce to the station and callings wherein God has placed us, “it will be no slight relief from cares, labors, troubles, and other burdens for a man to know that God is his guide in all these things. The magistrate will discharge his functions more willingly; the head of the household will confine himself to his duty; each man will bear and swallow the discomforts, vexations, weariness, and anxieties in his way of life, when he has been persuaded that the burden was laid upon him by God. From this will arise also a singular consolation: that no task will be so sordid and base, provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God’s sight.”<sup>17</sup>

### **Application to Pharmacy**

The application of the doctrine of vocation to pharmacy has far-reaching potential to transform the Christian pharmacist’s view of daily work and life. In the biblical worldview, there are no insignificant or secular areas of life. We are commanded to glorify God in all things, including our daily routine of eating and drinking! 1 Corinthians 10:31 says it this way, “*So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.*” (NIV)

Being commanded to do all to the glory of God, including mundane and seemingly insignificant activities as eating and drinking, how much more does this apply to our jobs. As Christian pharmacists, we must remove the imaginary walls separating our work life from our faith, and live every aspect of our lives *coram Deo*, Latin for ‘in the presence of God’. According to theologian R.C. Sproul, “The Christian who compartmentalizes his or her life into two sections of the religious and the non-religious has failed to grasp the big idea. The big idea is that all of life is religious or none of life is religious. To divide life between the religious and the non-religious is itself a sacrilege. This means that if a person fulfills his or her vocation as a steelmaker, attorney, or homemaker *coram Deo*, then that person is acting every bit as religiously as a soul-winning evangelist who fulfills his vocation. It means that David was as religious when he obeyed God’s call to be a shepherd as he was when he was appointed with the special grace of kingship. It means that Jesus was every bit as religious when He worked in his father’s carpenter shop as He was in the Garden of Gethsemane.”<sup>18</sup> This is a biblical principle clearly enjoined in Scripture:

Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.<sup>19</sup>

Applying this verse to our context today, we can easily substitute employees for slaves, and employers for masters. The applicable principle is the same: we are to do our daily work ‘heartily, as unto the Lord,’ for it is He whom we ultimately serve, and He who will ultimately reward our labors as we carry them out for His glory. True Christianity encompasses all of life.

Christian pharmacists must avoid the lie that our work in this world is a secular affair that does not concern God. If we go about our daily tasks offering ourselves and our work as a sacrifice to God, then it is accepted by God as a holy and pure sacrifice pleasing in His sight. And as Paul Helm reminds us, “To see one’s whole life as a divine ‘calling’ is both the key to Christian sanctification and the cement which holds together the various aspects of our lives, preventing them from splitting up into different, and disjointed, sealed compartments.”<sup>20</sup> It is time to shatter the paradigm that faith and work need to be integrated, because in God’s eyes they are integrated.

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