

Christian Workers as Social Architects



HARRY MARKOWITZ HAD AN IDEA.

In 1952, Harry Markowitz sat in a Chicago library, pondering the stock market. For over a decade the investment world had struggled to regain a vaulted place in the economic community. The crash of 1929 shattered the confidence of the public, as stock prices plunged 80% in three years. The incredible upward swing of stock values in the '20s led many investors to borrow heavily to get into the market, and as stock values dropped, their ability to pay their loans disappeared. Banks were also heavily invested in the market, and as the public realized this, they rushed to remove their funds. Banks failed, confidence declined, and a wave of other factors added themselves to the onslaught of the Great Depression.

For years after that, the market fought both myth and fact to restore itself, but still the public worked its way back gingerly. As he read a book on 1950s investment strategy, Harry Markowitz decided investors should be diversifying their portfolios—spreading their stock holdings over several companies and industries rather than “putting all their eggs in one basket.” He wrote an article, “Portfolio Selection,” and in 1990 won the Nobel Prize in economics.

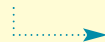
Likely, many of Markowitz's peers are saying to themselves, “Why didn't I think of that?”

It is often the simple that becomes most profound. It is often the little that leads to the big.

Our culture seduces us into a search for the big act, the big dividend and the big idea. Not content to trudge forward tenaciously and diligently, we spend our lives in a frenzied search for a magic pill that will bring us prosperity, popularity, potency and power. Even in our service to God, if we can't find ways to make a big splash, then we grow weary of making any splash.

Isn't it amazing that the righteous whom Jesus commends in this passage of Matthew 25 are surprised by His words of praise? It reminds us that many faithful followers of Christ, who never serve in foreign mission fields, who never conquer disease, who never lead a congregation, who never manage greatness on the world's terms, will find their hours in the cubicle, their moments on their knees, their lunchtimes listening to troubled friends—to be the very things Christ points to when He speaks of their treasures laid up in heaven.

Only a few are called to step into visible or dramatic roles in a culture. Only a few are called to visible or dramatic roles in the Kingdom of God. But every one of us is called to faithfulness—and *that*, in the end, is the ultimate standard by which we should measure ourselves and by which we will be measured.



Scripture Passages

James 2

Introduction

More than any other lesson in this set of thirty, this one addresses those of us whom God places in positions of influence. While every worker, by the way they live out their faith on the job, can affect the culture of the place where they work, not every worker gets to design systems or programs that actually create or reshape a culture.

As a worker in a lower tier of the workforce, you might be tempted to skip this study. Please don't, for three reasons. First, we're called to pray for those God places in authority, and that includes our bosses. Understanding how God wants Christian business leaders to function helps us pray for them appropriately. It also can open our eyes to ways to help them accomplish the tasks God lays at a leader's feet. Second, there are likely many ways for us to help Christian business leaders meet the needs of their workforce, thereby turning our jobs and offices into places where we can serve God while tending His creation. Third, you never know when you may have an opportunity regardless of your position to influence your bosses. (See the note on Esther below.)

Any discussion of the civic responsibility of a Christian business leader must start with a comment on stewardship. While most of us think of stewardship in terms of tithes and offerings, the principle of stewardship applies to every facet of our lives. Scripture teaches us we "are bought with a price" (I Corinthians 6:20). This transaction is not an employment agreement—we aren't hired to do a job for God; we are now *owned* by God. While the concept of slavery—one human being owning another—is reprehensible, the concept of being slaves to God is entirely Biblical. In fact, the Bible tells us that when we are slaves to our Lord, we are most truly free.

Despite their prominent positions, leaders in business who are followers of Christ are also slaves to Christ. They have been assigned the task of caring for a particular corner of His creation. The authority any of us have, the power and influence at our disposal, even the assets under our control, are tools to be used to accomplish His purpose even as we honor our earthly employers with competency and integrity.

In Depth

Consider Queen Esther for a moment. Picked by the king for her beauty, she faced a difficult decision: Should she stand up to the king for her people, or should she take the safe route, remaining silent while fulfilling her regular royal duties? Read her uncle's words in Esther 4:13-14. What do those verses teach business leaders about our responsibility to God in the workplace?

Read James 2 in one sitting; make notes below of any principles you think are useful to Christian business leaders.

Several principles emerge in this passage:

1. James 2:1-4. Favoritism is never appropriate. Describe ways that you show favoritism in your own job. Why do you show favoritism? What should you change?

See also Deuteronomy 1:17 and Leviticus 19:15. In the first passage, Moses instructs his judges to be sure not to show partiality in making judicial decisions, and in the second he warns against showing partiality to the poor in a judicatory setting. Judge fairly, God says.

Think about the employment policies and procedures in your firm. Do any of them

show favoritism? (Note: Favoritism is different from economic value. It is not inconsistent with Scripture, for example, to pay a master carpenter a higher wage than a laborer. It is, however, inconsistent with Scripture to pay a Vietnamese-American master carpenter less than an Irish-American master carpenter, or to pay a woman less than a man when both are doing the same work.)

2. James 2:5-7. Another principle emerging from James 2 that is useful to a workplace leader is the realization that God gives spiritual advantage to the poor. React to that statement.

What value does this suggest employees in the lowest levels of our firm bring to our organizations? Are there roles they might play in balancing the ethical component of our structures?

3. James 2:8-13. James also refers to the “royal law,” meaning the second half of the Great Commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. Read I Corinthians 13:1-3, and comment on why love becomes a guiding principle in developing systems for workplace cultures.
4. James 2:14-17. In what ways do businesses have a social duty to their workers? What impact should this passage have on a Christian business leader who is setting wage and personal policies for his/her firm?
5. James 2:18-26. Legalistic Christians often abuse this passage, making it say something it doesn't. James is writing to Christians, not prospective Christians, in this epistle, and therefore he is not suggesting that works plays any role in salvation. “Works” as that term

is used is meant to apply to the fruit of our lives. What James *is* saying is that faith without these works or fruit is a faith that is useless to God's purposes. In other words, a business leader who refuses to let his faith affect his business practices is not living out the reality of his faith and essentially is makes his career useless to God. At the extreme, James is saying that the lack of fruit may be a practical evidence that a person is not even a Christian and has not surrendered his or her life to Christ at all. Again, however, take care to distinguish between failures to fully live out the gospel in our lives and a complete refusal to accept Christ's lordship.

Until we understand why we're in authority—that it's part of God's plan in caring for His creation and His people—we can never use that authority appropriately. Once we grasp the concept that even leaders are slaves to Christ, the authority He grants us in our work worlds becomes another place we serve Him.

In our next study we examine how that can happen in the "real world."

Common Sense and Eternal Principles

- Christians are "bought with a price." Once the purchase price has been paid, everything we have is surrendered to the purposes of God.
- Stewardship involves more than money and talents. It also involves authority, influence and power.
- Whatever authority, power or influence we have comes from God and is expected to be used for His purposes. This includes workplace influence.
- Christian leaders are prohibited in Scripture from developing policies and procedures which favor one worker over another, or one class of workers over another. This is different than the concept of economic value by position or skilled contribution.
- Christian leaders have a duty to care for the physical, emotional, spiritual, and fiscal well-being of those God gives them authority over.
- God gives spiritual advantage to the poor, and their perspective on God is a useful tool in assessing the ethical and moral climate of our workplaces.
- Christians in business who fail to see their workplace roles as spiritual service make their work and careers useless to God.