

Stewards of Two Economies



FOR NEARLY TEN YEARS MARTI HAS BEEN managing editor of a regional magazine with an affluent niche market. The job offered her precisely the kinds of opportunities to express her creative side she wanted, and it paid well too.

The owner of the magazine only wanted the revenue and cared little for the daily tasks, so Marti had immense freedom to try new ideas. The steadily increasing subscriptions and the rapidly increasing list of advertisers made it clear her new ideas were working.

One of those ideas hit her while she was vacationing in another part of the country when she met some people who'd moved there from the area where her magazine was located. As she listened to them talk wistfully about their old stomping grounds, she realized there were probably many others just like them. So she mounted a national ad campaign inviting subscribers in other areas of the country to "come home every month" in the pages of her publication.

Riding the wave of nostalgia and angst that characterizes middle-aged America, the campaign worked beyond her wildest dreams. Soon her magazine had tripled its readership, and national advertisers were knocking on her door.

Unfortunately, that success also attracted the attention of publishing chains.

One of the offers was just too sweet for her owner to refuse. Just like that, Marti was an employee in a big firm instead of the captain of her own tiny ship.

At first, the changes were merely unsettling as she adjusted to a new reporting structure. Because she was successful, most of the changes were administrative and not creative. The new owners were reluctant to change a formula that worked, so Marti still felt in control.

Eventually, however, the pressure for efficiency from the parent company began to rear its ugly head in her discussions with her regional manager. She fought losing battles against expanding the number of pages per month because all new pages were given over to ads without copy. Soon Marti felt the publication was taking on the look of an advertising booklet with a few regional stories thrown between the ads.

Even more troubling for Marti, though, were the business practices of the new owner. Subscribers who once had been able to decide on a year-to-year basis about renewals suddenly discovered the new company was automatically renewing them and charging their credit cards for the renewals. When one of her longtime subscribers complained to Marti, she agreed to look into the issue, surprised even she didn't know about the change. What Marti discovered was the company outsourced its renewal processing. In the last round of renewals, that subcontracted firm added a clause to the fine print of the boilerplate she had used for years, giving the company permission to renew until "notified in writing not to do so."

Customers who typically paid by check found

continued...

themselves receiving threatening notices from the renewal company saying they would be “turned over to a collection agency” unless they paid their renewal charges. It was one of a number of practices troubling Marti.

Advertisers who had been with the magazine for years were growing disgruntled too. Their extremely visible ads of years past were now buried in a sea of ads that made standing out difficult without spending large amounts of money for new and creative ads. When Marti raised the issue with corporate officials, they assured her they had other advertisers in the wings to “replace the whiners.”

Then the economy began to falter and advertising took a nosedive across the board. Marti’s bosses began accepting advertising from firms whose businesses

weren’t consistent with Marti’s editorial sensibilities, and some that simply violated her own personal faith. Casinos in particular were eager to be featured in her magazine, despite a long-running campaign by the publication highlighting the darker effects of the gambling industry on the region. The controversies that made Marti uncomfortable came to a head when her boss gave her two ultimatums: (1) Take the casino ads and stop the gambling stories; and (2) Start a section of personal ads for people looking for partners.

It was time for Marti to face facts. Her perfect job was no longer perfect. But, were there any perfect places left anymore? Was it time to leave?

Scripture Passages

Daniel 1
 Genesis 39
 Genesis 41:41-57
 Jeremiah 29

In Depth

Christians are required to live life aware of two realities: (1) the tangible world where they live and work, which God created; and (2) the spiritual world with its eternal perspective, which God also created. We are not permitted to retreat permanently from one to meditate on the other; nor are we allowed to compromise the principles of the eternal in order to prosper in the tangible.

In the face of cultural norms that challenge our spiritual principles, we must find ways to adhere to those principles. And, while doing so, we must also serve diligently, competently, and admirably in the workplace and the society at large.

List some examples of circumstances when a Christian’s religious beliefs might clash with the wishes of an employer.

List times in your own working life when your personal faith clashed with the demands of your job.

Christians often feel trapped, thinking they have few options when facing these conflicts. Why?

Read Daniel 1:1-7. What options were available to Daniel and the other young Jewish men in Babylon?

Describe a time in your own working life when your personal faith clashed with the demands of your job.

In Daniel 1:8-14, Daniel decides to take a stand. Describe your impressions of Daniel after reading this passage?

What traits are evident about Daniel from this set of verses?

Do any of these traits describe you at work? Why or why not?

Now examine the rest of Daniel 1 closely. What lessons about creativity might we learn from Daniel and his friends from this passage?

But what if the experiment hadn't worked? What do you think Daniel would have/should have done then?

How does that inform your own workplace choices when faithfulness to God's instructions collides with the authority over you?

Discuss this statement: Trials never give us permission to do less than our best in being faithful to the standards God has set.

Now let's look briefly at the life of Joseph to reinforce that idea. Read Genesis 39. Describe some of the reasons why we might have been sympathetic to Joseph if he just gave up.

What would you be thinking and feeling after getting thrown in jail for something you didn't do? Remembering this was strike two (being sold by his brothers is the first strike), how would that affect your feelings toward God when the second strike comes?

How do you react to difficult (especially unfair) circumstances?

What is Joseph's response?

What might we learn from that?

Now look at Genesis 41:41-57. How does Joseph's place in Egypt help to fulfill God's promise to Abraham many years before (to protect Abraham's descendants and to provide for them)?

What does this say to you about the plans of God?

What should it teach us about circumstances and our spiritual values?

Finally, read Jeremiah 29. What does God have to say about what His children should do while they're in a culture not necessarily friendly to their faith? What lessons might we take from this passage to apply to our own roles in our workplaces?

How are you doing in your two worlds? Are you managing your career with a keen eye on what God wants from you? If not, what changes do you think you need to make?

Where might you go for help with these changes?

What about your work/faith journey? Describe some of the ways you measure competence in your stewardship of these two parts of the same role.

Common Sense and Eternal Principles

- God expects faithfulness even in the face of trials.
- God also expects us to put forth our best effort even when the authority over us is not someone we would choose if we were free to do so.
- God often uses difficult circumstances to move us where He intends to use us most effectively.
- We must serve our employers with the same integrity and competency as we serve God.
- Christians don't have a promise their jobs will be easy, but they do have the promise God will always be with them in those jobs.
- Trials never give us permission to do less than our best in being faithful to the standards God has set.