FAITHFUL PRESENCE AT WORK

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God's calls all of humanity to return to His presence and be completely present to Him. As we respond to that call, He sends us into the world to imitate Him by being present and available to others in the same way. As such, God's faithful presence to each of us becomes our model for an incarnational public faith.

Philippians 2:3-8 gives insight into how the incarnation of God in Christ becomes a model for a faithful presence (or incarnational public faith) that is to be worked out in every sphere of our lives:

> Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found

in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!

Just as Jesus was the embodiment of God, the church is the embodiment of Christ. The church, Christ's body, becomes a tangible and visible expression of God's kingdom. When the world looks at the church it should see a reflection of Jesus Christ.

The implications of faithful presence in vocation are enormous. By enacting the love and wisdom of Christ through work, the church is able to bear witness to the gospel in every sphere of society, while affirming the value of work and the image-bearing nature of the worker.

Incarnational faith in vocation also encompasses the mandate to "do it all for the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:3). This pushes the Christian to the highest standard of excellence in work and sustains her through vocational difficulties. Christian vocation can be summarized as: work done for the glory of God and oriented toward human flourishing.

A posture of faithful presence in the

workplace offers healing for the brokenness of every vocational sphere—business and industry, as well as art, academia, and the professions. As believers model the incarnate Christ, corrupted structures are challenged with creative solutions and counterculture alternatives (e.g., the servant leadership of Jesus challenges the misuse of power in modern society). And by connecting corporate responsibility to all stakeholders, not just stockholders, industries and institutions tether profit to the common good.

As James Hunter explains in *To Change the World,* "If, indeed, there is a hope or an imaginable prospect for human flourishing in the contemporary world, it begins when the Word of *shalom* becomes flesh in us and is enacted through us toward those with whom we live, in the tasks we are given, and in the spheres of influence in which we operate."[8]

Faithful Presence in the Workplace

Public faith refers to the posture an individual or church takes toward the wider world. This posture has observable convictions, expressed through attitudes and behaviors that are experienced by those outside the community of faith.

The church's public posture is, in part, determined by how it views its mission and purpose in the world. This affects how the church engages society. Likewise, one's public faith in the workplace will reflect one's view of the mission and purpose of vocation. When the object of work is human flourishing, the worker will be concerned with both the effect of his work on the common good and the proclamation of the gospel.

The Character of Public Faith

When one's public faith is expressed through a posture of faithful presence, it becomes a reflection of God's presence to His people.

God's faithful presence to His people. God's faithful presence is best described as *covenantal commitment.*[9] God bound himself to His people in promise marked by divine initiative and sacrificial love.

God's presence is active. It persistently pursues, initiating before we are ready to return to Him and persistent until we do return to Him: "God demonstrates his love that while we were still sinners Christ died" (Rom.5:8).

God's presence is life-giving. The objective of the Christian is life in Him--new life, abundant life, eternal life: "and the life was in his son" (John 1:4; 1 John 5:12). Within the posture of faithful presence, this translates into a commitment to human flourishing.

Our faithful presence in the world. God's faithful presence translates into public faith in several ways. Like God's presence, our presence in the world is *grounded in promise and commitment.* This is countercultural in a time when the idea of commitment has been greatly diminished. God's presence pursues people throughout their entire lives. His commitment is unwavering and eternal. Translating this idea into public faith will require rethinking the modern transient lifestyle.

Also, like God to His people, the Christian is called to be *sacrificial, inclusive,* and *empathetic* in the world. This requires availability to both those who are welcoming and those who are hostile to the faith. This presence is much deeper than a mere physical presence; it identifies with the hurts and needs, as well as the hopes and dreams of those to whom we are present.

The Christian is to pursue an *active* public posture that takes *initiative.* She should pursue the redemptive purposes of God within her field of work and in the lives of co-workers (this includes but is not limited to evangelism). This kind of presence is life-giving.

The Enactment of Public Faith

Because God's presence is active, any true expression of public faith must move beyond attitudes to behavior. Public faith in the workplace is enacted in these three areas:[10]

In relationships. To be faithfully present in and through work relationships involves much more than getting along with co-workers. Work relationships extend to all stakeholders in the corporate or institutional setting. These would include co-workers and employers, as well as customers, suppliers, beneficiaries, and the community at large. The level of commitment we express to various individuals will differ, but generally, the priority will be for the people God has put right in front of us. This will include, but is not limited to, a commitment to the spiritual journey of those with whom we work.

In tasks. If we are truly committed to the success of our employers and customers, we will need to embrace a commitment to excellence in our work. This extends beyond job performance to the continuing development of skill and acquisition of knowledge.

A willingness to bring creative and innovative solutions to problems in the workplace is a characteristic of faithful presence. This might involve anything from better accounting procedures to fair and equal hiring practices. It will certainly mean developing a greater sensitivity to systems or products that destroy *shalom* and a willingness to challenge the status quo with new *shalom*-producing alternatives.

Faithful presence is marked by a commitment to the success and profitability of the employing company or institution. If the overall purpose of the company is good and contributes to the common good, then work done well promotes that good. If success is a gift of common grace, rather than the evil it is often thought to be, then our commitment to the companies we work for is a conduit of God's grace. Of course, all of our tasks are to be done with high moral standards.

In Spheres of Influence. As we develop our vocational paths, our spheres of influence are likely to expand. We exercise greater leadership and have a wider platform from which to affect the institutions in which we work. Faithful presence at work requires that this increase in relational power be in humble submission to God. Through our spheres of influence, we gain the ability to apply our efforts to long-term solutions and to impact positively those with whom we work.

Vocation: *A Path & A Resource*

Our vocational path is part of the storyline of our lives. Rather than our specific occupation at a specific time, it is the accumulation of experience, knowledge, education, and employment that forms a path for our vocation. It is through our work, not in spite of it, that we are to accomplish the tasks and purposes that God gives us. Our accomplishments become a means of accomplishing God's *shalom* in the world.

Vocation is a resource that can be developed and managed for the *common good*. As you add experience, education and accomplishments, you may gain influence in your field or profession providing new opportunities for greater contributions to human flourishing. But there are important considerations when determining to pursue a path of greater influence through work.

The Ramifications of Accomplishment. Work takes on a much richer meaning when understood in light of its original purpose, even in its fallen context. When combined with the idea that each of us has been called to live in God's presence and do our work to God's glory, motivation for our work is often elevated.

A biblical view of work can result in a joyful striving that pushes us to achieve far more than we would otherwise. When further education, training, innovation, and effort result not just in the promotion of self-interest

but also in the promotion of the common good, our work takes on a new dynamic. When we add knowledge, skill, and new accomplishments to our résumé, we often gain greater influence, opportunity, and expanded leadership. This kind of success is paradoxical in that it generates status within one's field that can create opportunities for doing good, while at the same time become a temptation to adopt an unhealthy form of elitism.

The tension between the opportunity and pitfalls of status are captured in the book of Philippians. On one hand, both Paul, and more importantly Jesus, modeled an attitude of indifference toward status. Jesus did not consider, "equality with God a thing to be grasped but humbled himself" (Phil. 2:6-8) and Paul counted His vast accomplishments as "rubbish" (Phil. 3:7-8). And this seems right to the Christian who knows he is called to look out for the interests of others, considering them as more important (Phil. 2:3-4).

Neither Jesus nor Paul allowed status to define himself or others, but neither were they ignorant of it. In the biblical narrative, status, which is the accumulation of social accomplishments, is employed for the purposes of redemption. Paul is a great example (see his accomplishments in Phil. 3:5-6). He was a Jew of the highest lineage, a Roman citizen, highly educated, and a Pharisee among other things. These accomplishments gave Paul knowledge, reputation, and position that were used to promote *shalom* and build the church.

All people are called to lead in some capacity, and leadership often leads to greater influence and personal benefit; the greater the accomplishment, the greater the social influence. The only way to completely shun status is to refuse God's command to lead. The issue is not whether status is good or bad but how one can prevent status from growing into elitism. Then what should govern a Christian's use of social power and influence gained through professional achievements?

The only antidote for elitism is servant leadership. Again, we are called to be present in the world as Jesus was present to us. He becomes our model for leadership. Mark 10:42-45 sums up Jesus' attitude on leadership:

And Jesus called to him and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

This was not an abstract idea for Jesus; He modeled this in real ways, especially in His death on the cross. Consider also how He washed His disciples feet and how He fed and taught the crowds. The incarnation, as recorded in the first chapter of John, reveals how Jesus came to live a life of power in submission: "He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him" (John 1:1-18).

Leadership, as modeled by Jesus, is always others-oriented and sacrificial. Therefore, leadership for the Christian is sacrificial and moves toward *shalom*. This is the very opposite of elitism and the answer to the misuse of power and influence. This style of leadership provides a countercultural alternative to the misuse of power so prevalent in the world.

Of course, when countercultural alternatives are discussed, it is important to remember the strong pull that social norms and values have on us. It isn't easy to stand apart from social practices, especially ones that are likely to be of great personal benefit. To take up a posture of faithful presence in the workplace and to truly model our presence after God's presence to us, we must engage in character-shaping activities such as public and personal worship, the spiritual disciplines, and transparent accountability.

How to Choose & Develop a Vocational Path

The biblical idea of being sent into the world is essential in determining one's vocational path. Though some people will have a strong sense that God is calling them to a specific kind of work, many (who are also sent), may never have that same sense.

With the assurance that work is good and that each of us have been sent into the world to work, there are many factors that can help us choose a vocation. Whether God speaks dramatically or leads in quiet ways, each of the following is important to the process of choosing and developing your vocational path:

Pray for God's leading in specific situations and for general direction. And listen for His answer. He may give you an inner sense that one direction is better than another. This sense may come through your own wise assessment of the situation.

Seek wise counsel from those who know you and whose judgment you trust.

Consider the gifts, talents, interests, resources, and opportunities you possess. Finding work that fits you will be most satisfying in the long run. God has created you so don't be afraid to consider your own composition.

In light of who you are and what you have been given, consider what it is you want to accomplish with your life. Your desires and your story should inform your decision. Of course, in all this submit your plans and desires to the Lord.

The Twin Criteria

In today's society, work can be a means of success or acclaim. More often, it is a means to the lifestyle we hope money can buy. But if work was meant to be a *shalom*-building activity, then we have more to consider than just our personal success or fulfillment.

When choosing a career, consider the twin criteria of *fit* and *benefit*. Whenever possible, choose work that *fits* personally and also work that *benefits* the wider world. We want to contribute to the common good while doing what we were designed to do.

Work that fits us personally. We will be most satisfied in our employment when we do work that we enjoy and do well. Some work is more suited to our gifting and interests than other work. Personal satisfaction in work is ideal but not always possible. Ultimately, satisfaction is more dependent on the personal discipline of doing "all for the glory of God" and trusting Him than on having the perfect work environment. It is important to note that although it is not a God-given right to have an ideal work situation, there is nothing wrong with looking for work that really fits.

Work that benefits the wider world. Godliness and good works are inseparably linked for the believer who is instructed to work for the common good. Though choosing a career according to our gifts and abilities is important, self-fulfillment is not the ultimate objective of work; human flourishing is.

When choosing work, consider whether the end objective of the company or institution will promote human flourishing or detract from it. Will it build human community or destroy it? Will it contribute to humanizing experiences of beauty, goodness, and truth or block them? Use *shalom* as a straight edge for choosing your work, even if the work is not as professionally or personally fulfilling.

Formation

Just as work is worship and a means of making God honoring contributions in the world, it is also the primary venue of formation. In *Work*

Matters, Tom Nelson says, "When we think about work, our tendency is to reflect on how we, as free moral agents, shape our work, yet we must not overlook how the work we do profoundly forms us as individuals within a community."[11] Our work and our workplace shape who we are and what we are becoming. Therefore, one of the desired outcomes of work is formation leading to personal, professional, and spiritual maturity.

Calling is the defining principle of spiritual formation in the work place. Emulating God's faithful presence is impossible in the power of the flesh. The guiding tenet of sacrificial love requires vigilance and humility, which encompasses our thoughts, actions, and relational behavior. If we are to consistently exhibit the fruit of the Spirit, we must gain mastery of ourselves through the practice of spiritual disciplines and a supportive and praying community.

Every day, we need to imitate Christ in how we resolve conflict and how we advocate for those in lesser positions of power. We do this through our efforts to control our tongues, manage our ego impulses, and limit the emotional footprint we leave behind. Sacrificial love calls each of us to do all these things on behalf of people we may not even like.

Work can shape us either positively or negatively. Through our work we develop a vocabulary and attitudes that can transcend work and start to define our experience in the broader world. Ideas are often communicated in the workplace as unquestioned assumptions. And corporate culture can subtly shape our perspectives in ways that may be either good or morally questionable and difficult to resist. It requires wisdom to discern and navigate this company culture.

Our work also shapes the competencies we develop and the opportunities we encounter. Much of the influence that one wields is developed in the workplace. This is crucial to consider when setting forth on a vocational path.

Conclusion

As we connect faith and work through a posture of faithful presence, we can put flesh on theological ideas. No transmission of information alone, no matter how complete, can help people understand God in this very real and practical way. By responding to the great and wonderful call to return to God's presence, each of us is sent into the everyday world of work to incarnate the love of Christ and the message of redemption.

8. James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 252.
9. James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World*, 261.
10. James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World*, 243-248.
11. Tom Nelson, *Work Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 102.