

Christian Identity & Work

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I am a priest, and also part of the Global Tax Policy leadership at one of the Big 4 accounting firms here in DC. Fairly often I get questions about the compatibility of the two jobs, but none more pointed than one several years ago by a noted tax justice campaigner while I was still in London:

[It's]a challenge for Will as he's also the Rev Will Morris, a curate at the radical parish of St Martin's in the Fields, Trafalgar Square, London. And I still can't see - despite the fact that I know Will and have discussed this with him often - how these positions can be reconciled. It's beyond my understanding of the Christian faith and its message of good news for the poor that someone with that faith could do the job he does.

That frames the issue pretty clearly: can I be a “proper” Christian if I’m also in the workplace? It probably wouldn’t be a problem if I had a “good” job: for example, nursing or teaching. But what about the law (other than public defenders or *pro bono*), or for that matter banking, or being an oil company executive? Am I struggling – with no chance of success – to squeeze myself through the eye of a needle?

If I turn to the church for answers on this I don’t always get much help. Often the Sunday- and building-based institution seems unwilling to engage with the rest of the week unless it takes place within the parish. And it seems very uncomfortable with the subject of money or for-profit business. Much paid work is a grey zone for the church: not wholly bad, but, neither, apparently, wholly good.

But my Christian identity is being forged in this grey zone. I have now been ordained for ten years and I have become convinced that my identity, my “calling”, is to be present in this place with others, and to openly struggle with its ambiguities as they do. Many people live in this zone at work: where moral lines aren’t always clear; where pressure is sometimes applied to cut corners; and, where the social utility of what their business does isn’t always immediately clear. And the church should be there to help them with those choices, with those pressures.

Living in this grey zone is often not a comfortable place – not least because it can give rise to some very tough questions (see above) – but nor should it be. I have accepted a call (and affirmation) to be a priest – a public Christian. But I have also chosen to stay in a well-paying job where I promote my clients’ (and firm’s) interests in the tax field. I’m neither a saint nor a martyr, so I need to make sure that having found myself in this situation that I’m not just kidding myself that the two can be held in a creative tension. So the question I keep coming back to is this: am I the rich young ruler (in Luke 18) who can’t quite make the break; or am I more like Zacchaeus (in Luke 19) who, while remaining in his secular role, nevertheless, finds salvation?

I'm not objective enough to answer that (and, anyway, the answer probably varies weekly), but I can tell you a few things I try to do:

First, I try not to compartmentalise. I can't cleanse Monday-Saturday by being good on Sunday. My life has to work together as one whole. So this means being honest about how I act at work, and also about the firm for which I work. On the latter, I ask three questions: how does it treat its employees; how does it contribute to the local community around it; and, finally, what does it contribute to the world? That's fairly straightforward (and I think my firm, generally, meets the criteria well).

Second, the question about myself at work. I think I have to ask more than "am I honest?" and "am I decent to my fellow workers?" The question has to go to the nature of my own job – advancing my clients' tax interests. I believe that the tax law is not always clear, and that properly-run companies that create good jobs and economic growth should not be prevented from doing that by an ill-designed tax system. But those arguments can also be overdone. Companies can get unfair, or overly rich benefits. And I have a clear incentive to convince myself that I'm doing the right thing. So I need some type of more objective framework.

In relation to that, I have found very helpful a idea from Richard Rohr, an American Franciscan, about a calling to "live on the edge of the inside". I am definitely on the inside, not an angry prophet hurling rocks from outside. I appreciate the positive things my firm does. But "living on the edge" also required me to be a loyal critic, questioning when necessary. I don't win every argument with my colleagues, and I don't always feel entirely comfortable with every argument I have to make. But there are two things about that which speak to living in the grey zone. One, my colleagues' arguments are never bad – just not perhaps my first choice. And, two, I also feel that it's better if I remain inside, even if I lose an argument, so that I can be positively involved in the next discussion. Perhaps, I'll make the difference (be it ever so small) the next time.

Finally, I try to confront the hard questions by talking to those who disagree with me. Sometimes, often, in fact, this has to be in private to build trust, and to allow people to move away from entrenched positions without being seen to back down. But there can be real moments of grace when people on opposing sides realise that they both want the same thing (to improve people's lives) even if they disagree on how to achieve that.

One final thought on my Christian identity and work. I never preach or evangelise at work – but everyone knows I'm a priest. I have a photo from my ordination service on my desk, and a bible, and a cross. Nothing big and flashy – but not hidden either. When one Maundy Thursday because of morning and evening services I turned up at work in a fairly obvious clerical shirt, albeit without the white collar, there were a lot of gentle smiles from my non-churchgoing colleagues. As Woody Allen said, in a slightly different context, 80% of success is just showing up. My Christian identity at work, in large part, is about just showing up, and sharing in the struggles and the ambiguities, while being visibly, if unobtrusively, a Christian.