

## Christian Values in the Marketplace

“Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ.” (Philippians 1:27 NIV)

Historians tell us that, at the height of official persecution of early Christians, the Emperor Nero would command his soldiers to smear convicted Christians with oil and use them as lighted torches along the pathways during garden parties. Others were torn apart in the arena for public amusement, executed with arrows in public places, or crucified for all to see. It only took one glance at the “entertainment” to see who had been identified as a follower of Jesus.

What do Christians in the Western marketplace look like today? What are their identifying features? Could it be they have developed a habit of hiding themselves? Or acting as double agents? Super-Christians in some contexts; mild-mannered neighbours in others; most people who know them are unaware of their true identity. “Psst, are you a Christian? I am too.” It takes skill to hide.

### *Look who's hiding*

Three generations of children have been enthralled by *Coles Funny Picture Books*, first published by the English businessman EW Cole in Melbourne in the late 1880s. The series was also known as “The Family Amuser and Instructor to Delight the Children and Make Home Happier”. The authors re-wrote nursery rhymes to make them funnier and included pictures, stories, puzzles, jokes and verses from other children’s books (verbatim or altered to give humorous angles not intended in the originals). Children and their parents still spent time pouring over puzzle-pictures, trying to find hidden images. Here are some scenes.

- *Becky is visiting the farm, but she can't find her dog. Can you? There he is, upside down and blended in with the branches of the tree above her.*
- *The captain is trying to steer his sailing ship, but the bosun is missing. Can you find him? There he is, hat and pipe, aloft in the rigging, smiling down at the perplexed crew.*
- *The hunters and their dogs are searching for the fox. Where can he be? After looking long and hard and turning the book upside down, he is found, disguised in the equipment. The children squeal with delight. Even the sly fox can't hide forever.*

A modern equivalent would be “Where’s Wally?” Wally is an ordinary fellow with a distinctive outfit (blue trousers and striped red and white top and cap), who turns up in the busiest scenes imaginable, at the zoo, in a flotilla of colourful boats, in a playground, or at a railway station. The challenge is to find Wally. It’s hard, but he’s there, smiling at the difficulties we face detecting him in the crowd. Is he hiding from us, or just having a bit of fun. Once we identify him, we wonder why he remained hidden for so long.

Is this the challenge people in your marketplace have when it comes to identifying Christians? Would the real Christian please stand up? Are followers of Christ so embedded in the scenery that no one notices they are there? In an effort not to be overtly religious in politically correct workplaces, we may lose the initiative and our credibility. The danger inherent in lying low for too long is that the values by which we live end up being informed by the world, and not the other way around. Like sponges in dishwater, we easily pick up society's ways. If we don't identify and articulate Christian values, we will likely osmotically adopt the values of others.

### *Identifying our values*

Everyone tries to live according to the values they consider to be important (or to project the facade that they do so). What counts is not what they say, but what they do. Our actions and priorities as Christians stem from our values. These, in turn, reflect the strength and durability of our relationship with God and our conscious decision to follow Jesus. Values are not what we say about ourselves, but the reason we live the way we do.

To be effective as Christians in the marketplace it is important that we discern how to live in a manner that exalts Jesus, upholds His standards and brings glory to Him while not alienating the unsaved (Philippians 1:10,11).

We also need to understand the underlying culture of our particular marketplace, the nature of power, the magnetism of money and the nuances of non-Christian "anti-values" in the environment in which we live and work, if we are to overcome the dynamics of a world under the influence of Satan (1 John 5:19) and effectively model the Christian alternative.

So, what *are* the values we consider important, as we embrace the marketplace?

### *Spirituality*

The Western lifestyle is preeminently materialistic. Being materialistic means living as though physical matter is the only true or valid reality. It emphasizes physical well-being and worldly possessions, as though they constituted the highest values in life. The materialist has a high regard for worldly concerns. Secular humanism, which rejects God and substitutes man as "god", is fundamentally materialistic.

Having said that, some of the people I work with are interested in spiritual things. They are open to holistic medicine healing, higher energy powers, gurus, divine masters, yoga, chakras, auras, metaphysics, spiritual enlightenment and a raft of other para-religious interests. Everyone is spiritual. The difference is that most of these endeavours are about the individual concerned, their subjectivity, moods and need to escape and to find satisfaction and good feelings.

If those who inhabit your world are able to see that your faith works because it is grounded on the God who really is there, regardless of how you feel, you will have opportunities to reach them with the Gospel. At least you will get a hearing.

Christians believe that the physical reality will eventually disappear and that we are called to live for, and in relationship with, God. Saul of Tarsus, in the Bible, started out life well-positioned in terms of family and culture; he had a top class education; was connected socially; had plenty of resources and access to power and authority. One day he met Jesus and it dawned on him that his values were vacuous. After turning to Christ he concluded that:

*“Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ”  
(Philippians 3:7, 8).*

The spiritual man or woman doesn't look ethereal on the outside, but lives as though his or her relationship with God is more real than the surrounding physical reality, which will one day pass away. They are spiritual because Jesus lives in them. Let's not be seduced by materialism, as the only thing that counts, as we walk in fellowship with Christ in our marketplace.

### *Integrity*

Our English word “integrity” comes from the Latin “integritas”, which meant soundness, wholeness or completeness”. Integrity speaks of moral strength, ethics, honesty, trustworthiness, incorruptibility and scrupulousness. In the case of the Christian, it also means consistency with Scriptural standards. In the Bible, one of the underlying themes of the life of Daniel and his friends mentioned throughout the book bearing his name is remaining true to God in the face of pressures to conform coming from the most powerful ruler of his day and his senior bureaucrats. They were all men of integrity. Integrity as a Christian means acknowledging God's rule and refusing to take away the honour that is His alone (Acts 3, 4). It means holding to our relationship with God, even when things go wrong, as in the case of Job, who served God but seemed dogged by misfortune (Job 13:15). If you lose your integrity you lose everything. As Christians we are given strength to live like Jesus, not merely copy the behavioural standards of those around us. Christians stand out because they are immovable, have backbone and demonstrate soundness.

### *Morality*

Morality is all about living by the Christian “Code of Conduct”, in our private lives (when we think nobody is watching) and when faced with the prevailing moral relativism (the notion that anything is permissible, providing we feel good about it). It is the opposite of immorality. Situation ethics allows anything as long as the situation demands it. Morality is absolute.

It can be hard for a Christian to remain true to his or her moral standards in the marketplace, with its “in your face” sexual temptations, opportunities for cheating, emphases on ambition, money, achievement of power through domination and diminution of others. If you endeavour to live as a Christian in the workplace your morality will be tested on many levels. You will find it is easier to go along with the crowd, ceding a little here and there until you don't realise you have crossed the line. It is written of Lot (Abraham's nephew), in the Old Testament, that he looked long and hard at the sinful city of Sodom. In his heart he felt right with God (Peter calls him “righteous”, 2 Peter 5:7), but through carelessness he moved closer and closer to Sodom, small compromises here and there, until he crossed the line and moved into the city. When the terrible day of judgment came and the city was destroyed, he was forced to flee with his family and barely escaped with his life. (Read the full account in Genesis Chapter 19). Paul reminds us that bad company corrupts good character (1 Corinthians 15:33). We need power, not to escape the marketplace, but to remain faithful to Christ and His ways in the midst of it.

### *Accountability*

Being accountable means being answerable to others for your decisions, the way you use power, spend money and report on your activities. It means accepting obligations and consequences with trustworthiness. The opposite of accountability is lack of accountability, a dangerous situation in which dishonesty, illegality and corruption are normal and thrive like vines in a tropical jungle. Christians in the marketplace are usually accountable to a Boss, Board or shareholders; regulatory and taxation authorities and to their peers and families. They are also accountable to their Heavenly Master. We will answer to God for the way we live (Romans 14:12). That fact alone should provide a fillip for godly living.

### *Transparency*

Being transparent means that people can see through you. They can follow what is going on in your life, your decisions, your personal relationships, the way you prioritize your expenditure of time and money, how you evaluate issues and what motivates you. In societies where the concept of “cover up” is commonly applied to corruption and dishonesty across government and business, decisions and values easily become blurred. God sees right through us, more accurately than an x-ray. He knows the thoughts and intents of our hearts (Hebrews 4:12). Having a transparent character means you don't mind critical people looking into your life, because they will see goodness and the fruit of the spirit residing there. Gossips will go away empty-handed if we have allowed the light of our God-given and enlivened conscience to act like a “candle” in our lives, showing up things that would otherwise remain hidden (Proverbs 20:27) and repented of them. Jesus called on the critics of His day to see if they could find any sin in his life (John 8:46). The challenge for us is to be able to do the same, without coming across as proud and censorious, unwisely choosing our counsellors, using our own standards to pry into the lives of others and unnecessarily closing doors to the Gospel by our attitudes.

### *Service*

Service is a value that involves acts or words performed for another. Service may or may not attract payment (or gratitude; thanks is not a Biblical motive for genuine service). Jesus' life was dedicated to serving others. He was motivated by God's love. Every Christian is called to serve God and love those around him or her, including in the marketplace. In the face of abuse of authority, power and privilege, it is not always popular to speak about service. (Don't be a sucker.) In business the concept of "client service" is widespread, but the promulgation of service standards neither guarantees that it will be delivered nor that it will be given in the right spirit. The way to peoples' hearts in the marketplace is service that is motivated by the love of Christ and is not tied to rewards.

### *Humility*

"Let this mind be in you, which was also in Jesus Christ" (Philippians 2:5). Humility is lack of false pride and exaggerated opinions of ourselves. In my work world (international relations) ego is a strong driving force. That is because "self" (Latin "ego") is all that counts in the lives of people without God. I have heard it said of some successful people that, "He's a self-made man and he worships his Creator" (himself). As Christians, we should have realistic estimations of the value of our work. The Bible says that God resists proud people (James 4:6). Humility is expected of Christians ((Romans 12:3; 15:17, 18; 1 Corinthians 3:5-7; 2 Corinthians 3:5). True humility means that we don't act out of selfish ambition or conceit, but that we consider others better than ourselves. It means looking out for the interests of others, not just thinking about ourselves all the time. This is a tough call, but it is the standard of Christ (Philippians 2:3, 4).

### *How do we manage?*

The values and qualities listed above are not necessarily popular or on the shopping lists of those who inhabit the marketplace. They sound old-fashioned, value-laden and constrictive. However, if I had a million dollars to invest I would rather have someone who subscribed to such values than someone who regarded them as trite and moveable feasts. These values go to the heart of a person's credibility (who we are).

Nature tends toward degradation. It is easier to compromise than to stick to our beliefs and values in the face of opposition. Only strength of character and the inner help of God's Spirit will keep you us going.

Here's how I believe we can manage.

First, by maintaining a strong relationship with God, holding onto a sense of divine purpose and presence, having Godly goals and being led by the Holy Spirit. We walk by faith and confidence in Him (2 Corinthians 5:7). Trust in God is a supreme value.

Second, by seeking and being granted wisdom from God. James tells that there is an earthly wisdom and a heavenly wisdom (James 3:15-17). The two are incompatible. We need to tell them apart, with the Holy Spirit's help. If we lack wisdom, all we need to do is ask for it, with the right attitude (James 1:5). I have claimed that promise literally hundreds of times and been granted special insight, astuteness and wisdom to deal with the most intractable situations. Does this mean I'm always wise? No, I often blunder (ask my family and friends), but I know that, as a Christian, I can humbly seek God's forgiveness and start over.

Third by approaching work and relationships with the right heart. The Bible encourages us to make this strategy foundational.

*“Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” (Philippians 4:8 NIV)*

You will be tried and tested in the areas of your morals and financial integrity. You are not immune from temptation. Satan will make every effort to discredit your life and witness (who wants to listen to a hypocrite, after all?), to lead you to stumble. When values pass the test they emerge stronger. The International Standards Organization subjects companies and ideas seeking international quality accreditation to the most rigorous testing. When our values have been through the test they will be shown to be strong and resilient.

We also need clear focus. Paul said that he, “press(ed) on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of (him)” (Philippians 3:12-14). He spoke about what was “ahead”, the “goal”, the “prize”. If we aim at nothing, are sure to hit it. If we have focus we will not be constantly fretting about our circumstances or direction (Philippians 4:11-12). We will trust that, what God has started in us, He will be able to carry through to the end (Philippians 1:4). If we believe that our lives are in God's hands and that we can trust him with the future, we will be able to demonstrate confidence and direction that are usually lacking in peoples' lives.

When I was last in London I toured the Natural History Museum with my family. Our visit coincided with a display called “The Earth from the Air”, a collection of over a hundred large-scale photographs of landscapes and people taken by photographer Yann Arthus-Bertrand. We bought the book and never got tired of looking at our planet through his. When the collection visited Singapore we visited it several times. What makes the display unique is the sense of technical focus in the shots and the artist's focus on the big picture. As Christians we must never lose sight of the big picture. With God's help we can keep that focus clear and see what is going on from his perspective. Christians have that advantage.

Finally, our values are not only statements of purpose or intent. They are a person. Our constitution isn't a list of qualities, like selection criteria for a job. It is Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God. As Christians, we have decided to “put on Christ” and not make provision for the world's ways. (Romans 13:14). Our lives are “hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:3). That's what quintessentially makes us different.