

Sermon Given by

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At the 6pm Service on 27<sup>th</sup> June 2010

### “Witness in the workplace”

Last week we were thinking about the way our work – any work that falls within God’s standards - can glorify God if it is done for him. But I want to finish this short series by considering one specific way in which we may glorify God in the workplace.

Not simply in doing a good job, but in seeking deliberately to glorify God ***in what we say and do, to point other people to Christ and winning them for him – so that they in turn glorify him.*** Our witness in the workplace can be and should be one of our chief ways of glorifying God.

I’m aware that this is not rocket science and it isn’t a new idea. Back in 1945 the Church of England produced a report with a great title. It was called ‘Towards the conversion of England.’

There was only one sentence in bold type in the section on evangelism: **we are convinced that England will never be converted until the laity use the opportunities daily afforded by their various professions, crafts and occupations.**

So it wasn’t the full-time, professional clergy who held the key to the conversion of England. It was the laity – the people in the pews; or rather the people who **had** been in the pews but who then scattered from Monday to Friday, shining the light of Christ into a million different dark corners in their workplaces.

Of course it makes sense: the key to evangelism is relationships. And the place where people have most relationships is in the workplace. You don’t have to knock on doors, put on special events or invite people to meetings. You don’t have to build bridges, because the bridges are being built day in, day out as you work alongside each other. Most people at work will probably know 20-30 times more people who aren’t Christians than they would in their neighbourhood – with the added advantage that they will spend much more time with them.

We have two readings today – from 1 Peter 2:9-12 and Colossians 4:2-6. They each mention two aspects to our witness, which should be inseparable – our life and our lip – how we live and what we say...

#### **1. The witness of our life (1 Peter 2:12)**

***<sup>12</sup>Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.***

We considered this last week when we looked at Paul’s instructions to slaves to work with all their heart and to do so whether their efforts are being seen or not. Here Peter adds his comment about the evangelistic impact of a godly life.

As I said, there is definitely a focus on what we say here as well. Peter says that we are to declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light. There is something to declare. Of course, given all that he has done for us – in making us his people, giving us mercy when we had not received mercy. The fact that Jesus Christ has died so that we can be forgiven our sins and that he sends his Spirit into our lives so we can have a fresh start – that demands that we declare his praises out of sheer gratitude.

And also that we **live** differently. Often it is a matter not of how we do our work, but of how we treat our colleagues. Do we display relational qualities which run against the average office dynamics? Not joining in with the character assassination when backs are turned... Not losing your temper with people when the deadline is looming or the proposal gets rejected. Being patient with a colleague who is inconsiderate or annoying. Not covering up our own mistakes and at the same time being understanding when others mess up. Dropping a note to a colleague who is having a hard time, getting a sandwich for someone who has no time for a break.

Susu and I watched The Apprentice, a programme where Sir Alan Sugar, the successful business man, sets business tasks to two teams of budding entrepreneurs and then whittles down the number of applicants to see who will eventually be his apprentice.

It's great TV but you watch the way people try to promote themselves and defend themselves and the mix of greed and dishonesty: that is not a bad portrayal of the workplace, even if it is an extreme form... and there is great scope for Christians to be different. How important that we witness to God's character with our own character – the witness of our lives.

But we cannot leave our witness at that level. If we say nothing then our lives may be a puzzle that makes people wonder: 'what is it about x that is different?'. But it will be a puzzle which they cannot solve. So alongside the witness of our lives there must be the witness of our lips.

## **2. The witness of our lips... (Colossians 4:2-6)**

Let's focus particularly on verses 5 and 6.

***<sup>5</sup>Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.***

***<sup>6</sup>Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.***

Verse 5 there refers once again to the actions of the Christian – our life; but verse 6 is unambiguously about the conversation – our lips.

In our everyday conversation we are to be gracious and in particular to answer the questions of the outsiders wisely. And that is a command addressed to every Christian – not to evangelists and preachers alone.

I was talking to Rico Tice the other day about our weekend away in 2011, for which he is the speaker – and he made a very telling observation that as our culture shifts from being Christian to post-Christian to anti-Christian, so our message will be more and more unwelcome and it will be harder and harder for us to verbalise our message – it will antagonise people if we open our mouths for Christ.

Rico commented that one result is that Christians find it very easy to rationalise away their responsibility to speak out. 'Oh', we say, 'we must earn the right to speak.' As if by living perfectly we will in the end eliminate any offence when we do speak.

Well we do need to live godly lives, of course. But we must speak up too. And we need to settle it in our minds that when we speak it will always be a 'ministry of disagreement' – that was Rico's striking phrase.

Of course it is, if we are calling on people to change the way they are thinking and living. We are disagreeing with them and they will disagree with us.

But there is still an obligation here on all Christians to speak up for Christ.

Very strikingly in verses 2-4 Paul has been speaking about his own witness as an apostle; he urges the Colossians to pray for him in his proclamation of the gospel.

But there is a play on words between verses 3 and 6, that is between Paul's proclamation and our conversation. Paul uses the same word, **logos**, for both – even though it is translated 'message' in verse 3 and 'conversation' in verse 6.

He is making deliberate comparison between the apostolic word of the gospel and the congregational word of everyday conversation. And just as he says that **he** must proclaim the word he lays an obligation on the Colossians: **he must proclaim; they must 'answer outsiders'**.

I hope we can take real encouragement from that. Because it means that even if I do not have formal opportunities to tell someone the gospel from start to finish – as Paul the apostle did, nonetheless I can still say a word of real value to the outsider. Simply by answering their questions, whatever they may be, wisely. That may not be an opportunity on a plate to take them through a Gospel outline in full – but it is still of huge missionary significance. I am sure he rated his role as an apostle very highly – but still the word of the average Christian is significant.

Did you also notice that he doesn't spell out what they are to say or the content of their replies? That will depend of course on the comment or question to which we are responding. What Paul focuses on is the manner of the answer, not the content. They are to be full of grace, seasoned with salt.

Presumably those phrases belong together – we are to season our word with grace. Again, what a relief: because an answer which may not be very clever but is gracious can achieve much more in God's hands than a clever but cocky answer. So there is hope for me, if instead of trying to win the argument all the time, I try to win the person...

**It is this kind of responsive evangelism that I think we can usefully employ in the workplace and I want to conclude by suggesting three possible areas.**

- ... We can do so by bringing a biblical witness to bear on personal issues...

There was a very interesting article recently in the Briefing, exploring what you might say next on a Monday morning in the coffee queue when you ask a colleague how the weekend went and he replies: 'My girl-friend walked out – she's been sleeping with my best mate'.

Instead of just turning beetroot-coloured and feeling very uncomfortable they ran an edited version of the conversation, where the Christian replied: 'I'm really sorry to hear that. I'm impressed you even made it to work at all today – how about lunch.' And then when the colleague says, Thanks, but don't worry, I'll be fine, the Christian says: Fine? How can you possibly say that! If I were you, I'd be devastated... and pretty angry.'

Now they haven't shared anything much more than a slice of the gospel – but you are demonstrating a gospel-shaped compassion and if lunch happens there is more explicit stuff that can be said about people being made for relationship, the need for forgiveness and so on...

Often in the business of life we only have a moment to make a comment. And we rarely have much time to think: Maybe we see a work colleague looks worried. So we ask: What's the matter, Tom?' 'Oh' he says, 'we just learned yesterday that our son is taking crack cocaine – and we're really worried sick'. There's the question – with no warning at all. What am I going to say? 'Of course you're worried: I generally try to pray about my family worries: would you like me to pray for you?'

It could be any number of other personal issues that people are facing: anxiety, debt, illness, bereavement, family trouble.

If we are able to give people some biblical wisdom on one such issue, that may demonstrate to them that the Bible has something to say in other areas, and, who knows, it may open up into a Gospel opportunity at some point

- **We can witness by bringing a biblical witness to bear on general issues...**

John Chapman the evangelist had a training programme he engaged in every day with a friend.

They decided to read the editorial in a daily newspaper and to ask this question: 'If someone begins talking about this subject what can I say which is Christian and relevant?' They phoned each other up every day and compared notes.

Sometimes one or both would come up with something useful; at other times they were unable to think of anything to say at all. But the value of the exercise lay in the constant thinking in Christian categories about the world around them.

Why not try the exercise yourself: what are your friends at work actually talking about? Tiger Wood's adultery? The ash cloud? Benefit cuts?

Can you say anything distinctively Christian on that topic? If you can, then why not when the conversation comes up again as others make **their** point, you make **yours** and see where it leads. I'm not saying that you announce it with a fanfare – just make your point and see if it leads to the gospel. If it doesn't, don't worry about it: God is Sovereign... Try again on the same topic or a different one some other time.

- **Finally, we can witness by bringing a biblical witness to bear on business issues...**

Because inevitably there will be many issues we encounter about the way a business is run: integrity, honesty, when suppliers are paid, racism and sexism; on how our firm impacts the local community or the environment. Some businesses are of course very well run and to high operating standards; many are not. But instead of allowing evil to flourish Christians need to have the courage to speak up – even if they are ignored or opposed as a result.

For no doubt many companies' lapses are sometimes deliberate and not just unfortunate. But we may not always know the impact of that sort of courage in the workplace in causing others to think about the Christian faith...

Let me give the last word to the Apostle Peter again – because he is confident that there will be unbelievers glorifying god on the last day because of our gospel witness. If you are a Christian in an office, in a school, in a lab, then they may be people from your workplace.

***<sup>12</sup>Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.***

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Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)