

Professor **David Short** on the Christian view of medicine as a vocation.

More than just a job

The idea that a profession, such as medicine, might be a calling from God has little resonance these days. When not used in the traditional sense as a divine call to a religious life, the word 'vocation' is generally applied, in a dumbed down sense, to a regular occupation or profession for which one is specially suited.

Few, even in the medical profession, think of their appointment as a call to the service of God. Most think in terms of engaging in a challenging and satisfying craft, following a prestigious career, making a good living, and having a secure job. Nevertheless, the Christian understanding is that we are where we are by God's appointment. If we find ourselves in possession of a medical training, it is safe to presume that God intends us to use it for his honour, rather than our own, and for the benefit of society.

The concept of vocation

We belong to God because he not only created us but also redeemed us - and did so at infinite cost; nothing less than the death of his Son. As the Apostle Paul put it to the Corinthian believers: 'You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God in your body.'¹ This belief that we are indebted to God for all that we have, coupled with the recognition that the Christian is a servant of Christ, lies at the heart of the concept of an occupation or profession being a vocation. Cardinal John Henry Newman spoke not merely for those in holy orders but for all thoughtful Christians when he said: 'God has created me to do him some definite service; he has committed some work to me which he has not committed to another. I have my mission...' If this is true, it has profound practical implications. It means that we must be able to justify all that we do on the basis of our primary allegiance to Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. This thought should guide our plans and actions in everyday life. It should inspire our attitude to our work, however humdrum and routine. As Paul put it to the Colossian Christians: 'Don't just do the minimum that will get you by. Do your best. Work from the heart for your real Master, for God, confident that you'll get paid in full when you come into your inheritance. Keep in mind always that the ultimate Master you're serving is Christ.'² This attitude imparts dignity to every task, and reminds us that shoddy work has no place in Christian service.

Working it out in practice


The way we 'work from the heart' should draw attention to our Master, not to ourselves. The essential difference between a Christian life-style and that of a good pagan is unselfish love - a deep concern for the welfare of those with whom we come into contact. In saying this, it has to be acknowledged that some non-Christians are amazingly kind and unselfish: the image of God shines through them. Unbelievers tend to think of Christians as 'good' people, or at least people who claim to be good and set a high standard for their actions. This is a major misunderstanding. We are very ordinary, sinful people who are amazingly fortunate to be the recipients of God's mercy and grace. Conscious of that, we try to please our Benefactor. We need somehow to get that across: the secret of our life is our privileged position, not our intrinsic goodness.

If we are challenged regarding our lifestyle, we should be able to justify it. As the Apostle Peter enjoined his readers, 'always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.'³ He adds: but do this with 'gentleness and respect, keeping a clean conscience'. Ideally, our reaction should be spontaneous. So it is worth thinking out responses to the common, predictable questions. The Christian doctor must be as fully informed and as conscientious and skilful as possible. Once he has applied his medical skill to the problem in hand, then he should be available to meet spiritual need; or, more precisely, to direct the patient to where such need can be met.

Most of us feel totally inadequate for such a life. But it is to this that we are called. It is comforting to recall that this is how God's servants down the ages have felt when they heard his call. Jeremiah's reaction was: 'I do not know how to speak; I am only a child.'⁴ Moses, likewise, when called to lead Israel, said: 'O Lord, I have never been eloquent.'⁵ God's answer in both cases was to the effect: 'I will be with you. I will give you the needed wisdom and strength. I will help you speak.' That is what he says to us. We can say, with the Apostle Paul: 'I have the strength to face all conditions by the power that Christ gives me.'⁶

Double appointment

The Christian doctor thus has a double appointment - sacred and secular. We have an



KEY POINTS

As Christian doctors we both belong to God, and are called to serve him, and our service of others should be motivated, not by consideration or security or satisfaction, but by gratitude for what he has done for us in Christ. Our lifestyles and words will then communicate that we are privileged sinners who are reliant on God's grace for our skills, knowledge and achievements. But whilst we should serve our earthly masters and patients as if serving Christ himself, part of that vocation involves maintaining a healthy balance between activity and rest, work and family – all underpinned by regular prayer and Bible reading.



earthly master and we have a heavenly Master, who is Jesus Christ. We have good models of individuals with double appointments in the Old Testament. Just think of the prime ministers, Joseph and Daniel, and of brave Queen Esther. This sense of a double appointment has never been better expressed than by Sir Thomas More, King Henry VIII's Lord Chancellor, when he declared himself to be 'the King's good servant - but God's first'. As doctors, whatever our secular appointment, we should be the best servants of the NHS and of our patients; and all the better for being God's servant first.

It is important to appreciate that having a dual appointment doesn't mean carrying a double work-load. The Christian is someone who has accepted Jesus' invitation to come to me 'and take my yoke upon you', with the promise: 'I will give you rest'.⁷ The Christian is offered Christ's inner peace, whatever the strength of the storm raging outside. We should determine to avoid the 'clocking on and clocking off' mentality, and all insistence on 'rights'. We should be prepared to do more than we are strictly obliged to do – 'going the second mile' as the Master commended. Having said that, some work-loads are so crazy that the only sensible solution, if relief is not forthcoming, is to cut down on the load and accept a corresponding cut in salary. This may not be possible for those in training positions, but it can be negotiated in many senior appointments, provided there is the necessary determination and patience. Temporary pressures cannot be avoided, but persistent over-work can.

THE CHRISTIAN DOCTOR ... HAS A DOUBLE APPOINTMENT - SACRED AND SECULAR ... AN EARTHLY MASTER AND A HEAVENLY MASTER

The budgeting of time

The budgeting of time, essential for all doctors, is absolutely crucial for the Christian who is determined to glorify God at work. Time must be allocated for recreation, for spouse and family, and for communion with God. All are vital, particularly the last. Professor Drummond of Edinburgh spoke from experience when he said: 'Ten minutes spent in Christ's society every day; aye two minutes, if it be face to face and heart to heart, will make the whole of life different.' It is essential to make a habit of reading a part of the Bible daily, followed by meditation and prayer - ideally at the beginning of the day. To make the best use of time, we must be prepared to say 'No' to demands outside the main objective of our life. We need to challenge ourselves with the question: 'Whose agenda am I following, God's or my own?'

Our infinite resources

In the present difficult circumstances which prevail in the medical profession, particularly with increasing loads and shortage of staff at all levels, the Christian doctor needs to look to God for wisdom and strength and grace in everyday life. And the resources are there. I often lay

hold of the promise in the Epistle of James (1:5): 'If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.' Our resources are adequate for any situation we can ever face because, as believers, God himself lives in us (by his Holy Spirit), with all that that implies. So let us enter upon each day with its unknown demands, putting our hand firmly and confidently into the hand of God. As I go to work, I often repeat the words of Charles Wesley:

'Forth in thy name, O Lord, I go, my daily labour to pursue,

Thee, only Thee, resolved to know, in all I think or speak or do.'

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References

- 1 1 Corinthians 6:20
- 2 Colossians 3:22-24 (*The Message*)
- 3 1 Peter 3:15
- 4 Jeremiah 1:6
- 5 Exodus 4:10
- 6 Philippians 4:13 (TEV)
- 7 Matthew 11:28-29