



Reflecting Christ in the workplace

key points

Healthcare professionals are not exempt from stress, burnout and post-traumatic stress disorder. Jesus too suffered fatigue and at times felt overwhelmed, but he received grace and strength to persevere. He knows how we feel when we are tempted to give in, give up or get out. Paul's letter to the Ephesians embodies much of Jesus' teaching about dealing with life's stressors. He reminds us of our calling, our competencies and the character God has in mind for us.

I've just about had enough. I'm getting out!' How many times have we heard this? How often have we thought it? In Britain, we so often hear of stress, burnout and post-traumatic stress disorder. Healthcare professionals are not the only ones to witness one tragedy too many or simply to suffer from being overstretched. Yet if we lived in a war zone or a part of the world affected by natural or unnatural disasters, we might then consider our British trials to be relatively modest. In his incarnation Jesus, too, suffered fatigue.¹ At times, he felt quite overwhelmed by the horror that lay ahead of him, but received grace and strength to go through with it.² He knew the fullest force of temptation because he never yielded, and therefore he now knows exactly how we feel when we are tempted to give in, give up or get out.³

When Paul was persuaded to leave Ephesus, he knew that arrest and possible death lay ahead but still he longed to complete his appointed task.⁴ Much of what he says in his letter to the young Ephesian church is still relevant and encouraging to those working under pressure today. He reminds us of our calling, our competencies and the character God has in mind for us.

Our calling - Ephesians 1:3-14

Even though he was writing from prison, Paul quickly turns to praise. He lists the many blessings given to those who, through Jesus Christ, have been adopted into his family, *chosen* by God⁵ with the thrice-mentioned intention that they should live to his praise and glory.⁶ This repetition should make us ask if that is how we come across - not only when wearing our shining going-to-church faces, but also in the workplace. The church is the body of Christ, not just a building. So, whether we are in our consulting rooms, operating suites or committee meetings, *there* is the church. God is bringing *all things* under the headship of Christ so this must include *everything* that happens in our places of work.⁷

Therefore, our ultimate authority is not our own autonomy, primary care trust, health authority, or even the Minister of Health, but Christ himself. Assurance that all new edicts, difficult patients and ethical dilemmas are to be dealt with 'to the praise of his glory' should help us to look trustfully to God for the wisdom and understanding 'lavished' on us for times like these, rather than letting ourselves get anxious, frustrated and exhausted.⁸ Paul's own great

enthusiasm would have been fuelled by knowing that the Greek *en theo* means 'possessed by a god'. If our calling is to be possessed by the God of gods, then we too should work with enthusiasm.

Our competencies - Ephesians 4:7-13

We are reminded that we have been *called* by God, so we are not just doing a job but fulfilling our vocation.⁹ We are all told to be humble, gentle, patient and loving;¹⁰ but we also need to find our particular God-given competence and use it in the workplace as much as elsewhere. Yet since the Fall, the work of 'subduing the earth' has been hard and burdensome.¹¹ Many around us still complain bitterly that, rather than subduing their workload, it is subduing them! It is in Christ that we can receive God's redemption and abundant supply of grace, raising us up to enjoy his gifts.¹² Christians should not join the chorus of moaners but instead act as encouragers and burden-sharers.

Just as God elected people in the early church to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, so we should find distinctive, perhaps parallel, gifts in each other for use as much in our professional callings as within a formal church setting. Paul defined the marks of an apostle as signs, wonders and miracles;¹³ however, he claimed those who had believed through his ministry as the seal of his apostleship.¹⁴ Many Christian doctors experience this same seal, even when not widely known as wonder-workers. Some of our patients have been prompted to put their faith in Christ simply because we have, even unconsciously, acted as channels of his love to them. Our employers might veto open evangelism in the workplace, but in Britain the official line is that spiritual support may be offered when not offensive to the recipient. More people are likely to complain about hasty, uncaring attitudes than about Christian concern for their deepest needs.

By applying biblical principles and being open to the Holy Spirit, some are enabled to 'prophesy' the results of a particular course of action, both in consultations and on committees. Through a divine nudge, an unconscious foretelling, our words might be used to avert an approaching disaster, perhaps within someone's relationship. It can be easier for practitioners of front line - rather than back room - medicine to see themselves as pastors, whereas others know that their special competence is in administration or simply the ability to help others.¹⁵ We should beware of the assumption of some church fellowships that doctors will automatically take a leading role, and thereby arrest growth in ability for others. It could be that our God-given gifts are primarily intended for use in the mission field of our daily workplace, inaccessible to others of God's people whose intended tasks lie elsewhere.

Not all have all gifts, but each is given for the common good.¹⁶ In Ephesians four, Paul explains how our 'works of service' all become complementary as each part does its work within the body

of Christ.¹⁷ This does not exclude different roles emerging at different times of life, or being recognised and encouraged by others when an obvious gift lies dormant. Our prayer should be that whatever gifts we have been given - indeed, our whole lives - will be used 'to the praise of his glory'.¹⁸

Our character - Ephesians 5:1-21

'Be imitators of God.'¹⁹ What an ambition! This only becomes a possibility as we allow God's Spirit to fill our lives, especially producing his first fruit of love.²⁰ As the Spirit of Jesus gradually works the necessary transformation, the intended image of God emerges. The alternative is to be moulded by the image of the world about us, whose ugly manifestations stem from something else having taken God's place.²¹

Since Paul forewarns us about this in detail, we should take careful note. We must be on our guard against unsavoury gossip, coarse jokes, foolish - and possibly complaining - talk, as well as sexual immorality. Temptations attack when punishing rotas keep us away from Christian friends or family, but being unemployed can leave us equally vulnerable. We are instead to 'find out what pleases the Lord', namely goodness, righteousness and truth, and to let Christ's light shine on any shady areas.²²

Much of our medical practice deals with people (including some of our colleagues, either in person or within their families) damaged by the lifestyles Paul denounced. Whilst shunning the sins we should sensitively make the most of every opportunity to introduce offenders to our source of light.²³ This will need the Spirit's wisdom, gleaned from prayerfully studying the word of God, often in fellowship with others.²⁴

As we turn our minds and hearts to the Lord, sometimes by making music to him, we not only reflect on his glory together but actually start to be reflections of it ourselves, and to be transformed into his likeness.²⁵ This metamorphosis is the Spirit's intention for all believers.

The passage ends by going back to 'everything' - the 'all things' that we have often found hard to cope with, or even considered walking away from. We have been reminded of our calling, of the great gift of himself that God has given and still gives, along with unique competencies for use in his service. His goal is to develop our characters to become like his. No wonder we are challenged to a new attitude in the workplace: *always* giving thanks to God the Father for *everything*, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.²⁶ Still thinking of getting out? First make sure that you have invited him in.

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This article is based on a talk by Canon Mark Brown at a recent CMF day conference.



Many complain that their workload is subduing them!

references

1. John 4:6
2. Luke 22:42-44
3. Hebrews 4:15
4. Acts 20:22-25
5. Ephesians 1:4,11
6. Ephesians 1:6,12,14
7. Ephesians 1:10
8. Ephesians 1:8
9. Ephesians 4:1,4
10. Ephesians 4:2
11. Genesis 1:28, 3:17-19
12. Romans 5:17
13. 2 Corinthians 12:12
14. 1 Corinthians 9:2
15. 1 Corinthians 12:28
16. 1 Corinthians 12:4-11
17. Ephesians 4:12,15,16
18. Ephesians 1:14
19. Ephesians 5:1
20. Ephesians 5:2-18; Galatians 5:22
21. Ephesians 5:3-5
22. Ephesians 5:9,10,14