

# whole life faith

Sue Holcombe considers the sacred-secular divide







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I have always yearned for a God relationship that spoke into every part of what I did and who I am. As such, I have long been inspired by Mark Greene and his teaching on the sacred-secular divide. For me and my husband, Chris, the daily energy that we put into our clinical work needed to be infiltrated with God's Holy Spirit and his Word filling our lives. That does sound rather as though we are super-Christians that march steadily into our roles in the NHS and are triumphant in everything we do. Not quite!! However, by taking time to think about how we are motivated and what we do that brings glory to God, then combining that with an understanding of how God works through our work (as described in the Bible), we can and do make a difference.

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First, let me unpack the expression 'sacred-secular divide'. This term refers to something which may not necessarily be your experience but speaks to the way in which we view what we do, where we do it and where we spend most of our time in relation to 'church-life' and 'work-life'.

There is a suggestion that some people may feel that some types of work are more glorifying to God – we could call this a hierarchy of Christian work. For example, a missionary may be at the top of the pyramid with a pastor or vicar coming a close second, followed by those who serve as Sunday school teachers or youth workers, etc. Unless you are in 'full-time ministry', specifically 'Christian work' might only be a small percentage of what you do during the week and be confined to Sundays.

So, what happens on a Monday? Many of us work in healthcare, whether that be full or part-time, or study medicine or nursing. How can we transform our daily lives where we are, so that the time we spend at work, be that at university, as a stay-at-home parent,





stacking shelves at a supermarket, or anything else we might be doing, can be seen in the light of working for God? It is important to know that God values our work.

Recognising that we all want to live our whole lives as people living for Jesus, what then is the daily challenge of being Christian doctors or nurses and how do we flourish in that environment?

Mark Greene says, 'Right now, 98 per cent of God's people (those not in church-paid work) are not being envisioned and equipped for mission in 95 per cent of their working lives.'<sup>1</sup>

### a sobering thought!

However:

- Surveys of people aged 14-35 has shown that they are yearning for an authentic, whole-life vision for their lives
- They don't want to be one person on Monday and another on Sunday
- They want purposeful work that makes a positive difference to people's lives and the planet we inhabit

I am sure that this applies to all people, whether young or old.

These three statements are taken from surveys conducted by Barna Group Research which looked at resilience in young Christians and can be further explored in the book *Faith for Exiles, 5 Ways for a New Generation to Follow Jesus in Digital Babylon* by David Kinnerman and Mark Matlock.<sup>2</sup>

We might then ask ourselves the question – is there a theology of work?

In Genesis we read of the creator creating man and woman for work. Work is what Adam and Eve are primarily given to do. The Bible then unfolds in a glorious illustration of the spiritual life and work in harmony. For example, Abraham's dealings as a wealthy herdsman; Jacob's transactions with Laban; Joseph's managerial roles under Potiphar and Pharaoh; Jethro's consultancy; Deborah's judgship, and Bezalel, the master craftsman of the tabernacle – the list is endless if we look at the Bible through the eyes of the worker.

We have considered biblical heroes but are there examples of ordinary men and women working out their faith in their workplace?

- Joseph the household and business manager – Genesis 39
- Israelite midwives fighting for the value of life – Exodus 1
- Boaz the honest farmer – Ruth 2
- Naaman's slave girl – 2 Kings 5
- Nehemiah the security agent and responder to his people's needs – Nehemiah
- The wife of noble character – Proverbs 31
- Daniel the civil servant – Daniel
- Lydia the trader in luxury goods – Acts 16

Surely these are men and women whose Godly character expressed itself primarily through their daily work in a rich variety of ways.

Current challenges in the NHS can cause us to either explode or become ineffective. They may cause us to think that we are useless as Christians and just give up, put our head down and be silent, or carry on doing our own thing and becoming a little bit different.

Alternatively, we may have a fundamental understanding of who we are in Christ; that God has a plan, and he is our boss. We can start to look at the Bible through workers'/students' eyes; we can pray and ask God to be present in all our experiences whether we see the point or not, asking for Godly wisdom and integrity. It is important for us to seek the fellowship and support of other Christians who can journey with us and share our challenges. In the context of being a student we can be actively seek out people who will be mentors in the faith. We can flourish in this difficult environment.

This leads me to bring in a tool proposed by Mark Greene called the 'six 'M's', which is a slightly different way of looking at where God wants us to be and how we can be Christians in the workplace. None of these things are new but they can revolutionise the way we see ourselves in our everyday lives, helping us to realise that we are already doing some of these things.



## the six 'm's:

- **model Godly character.** Most students will not remember or be aware of a fashion some years ago of wearing rubber wrist bands which had WWJD on them – What Would Jesus Do? Unfortunately for some this was just a fad, and the bands did not mention that you might need to know what Jesus actually did to be able to be like him! If we spend time learning about God's character by reading his Word and listening to him in our times of prayer and reflection, then modelling his character becomes more natural.
- **make good work.** How do you measure yourself? Who is your worst critic? For me it is myself. I will often look at people whom I admire and find that I don't measure up. However, God loves the work that we do. He created us to work and the time that we spend at work is important to him.
- **minister grace and love.** I find that, as people working in the medical profession, we are so privileged with this particular 'M'. During every patient and staff interaction we have the opportunity to show grace and love. Asking for God's Holy Spirit to be part of our every moment means that we can faithfully show Jesus' love in all that we do.
- **mould culture.** It never ceases to amaze me how much, when we walk into a room, the atmosphere can be upbeat or down, gossipy, or inspirational. The culture in the NHS can often be difficult and challenging. However, I also know that there are people who can change the atmosphere, change the culture and behaviour. Often this is done by sticking to our God-given values and not indulging in behaviours which do not allow people to flourish.
- **be a mouthpiece for truth and justice.** There are times when we will be called to stand up for what is right, which is especially difficult when something goes wrong. Here is an example of something that went wrong in theatre. A patient was sick following surgery after a swab was left inside. It was very convenient to blame the scrub

nurse for the incident, but there was a culture of not double-checking swab counts in some instances which was a fault of the whole team. The clinical director at the time, rather than allowing one person to take the blame for an operational fault, ensured there was a proper review, and safety checks then improved. In that instance it took a purposeful action not to 'go with the flow' but to question the event and then take appropriate action.

- **be a messenger for the gospel.** During my career I have had some opportunities to share the gospel at work, but this did not happen very often. However, sharing the gospel is so much more than praying the prayer of salvation. Every time we have an opportunity to share God's love in the way that Jesus did we can share the gospel. Praying for this is a key part of that and we find that committing our everyday tasks, our everyday meetings, and our everyday routine to Jesus is paramount to being the messenger of the gospel that Jesus wants us to be.

These are the six 'm's. We probably don't do all of them all of the time and sometimes we will be better at one aspect than another, but they do allow us to tell a story of love, hope and redemption every day.

Making a difference as a Christian means bringing God's light to individuals, to every situation, to the GP surgery and the wards. We are, though sinners and therefore fallible, saved by grace; therefore, we can show grace, be full of wisdom, and speak truth, demonstrate justice, and be fruitful and flourish because we are filled with the Holy Spirit.

So, here's what I want you to do: take your everyday ordinary life, your sleeping, eating, going to work and walking around life – and place it before God as an offering. (Romans 12:1, The Message) =

### REFERENCES

1. Greene M. *The Great Divide*. London, LICC, 2010
2. Kinnerman D, Matlock M. *Faith for Exiles, 5 Ways for a New Generation to Follow Jesus in Digital Babylon*. London, Baker Books, 2019