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# How Can You Live Like That in a Place Like This? Christian Witness in Corporate Settings

JIM STREET

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Christians have always maintained and displayed faith under conditions of constraint. Conceived in the mind of the God who struggled with the faithlessness of the faithful, inaugurated in the life and teaching of the crucified Christ, and launched into a hostile world, the faith has always encountered resistance. At times that resistance has manifested itself in murderous attacks, torture, as well as political and economic repression. At other times, the resistance has shown itself in rude remarks and unkind barbs. From the very beginning, the people who place their trust in the scandalous Jesus have always faced social constraint.

Christians who work in corporate settings often experience constraints around the issue of expressing the faith within those settings. While there are notable exceptions, many corporate settings place severe limit—if not prohibition—against active expressions of faith by Christians in the workplace. The constraints are often, if not usually, rooted in valid corporate concerns.

Corporations strive to maintain peaceful co-existence between diverse employees. People from all walks of life and many backgrounds gather corporately to produce products and services that benefit customers and maximize the return on investment for the shareholders of the company. In so doing, the workers also produce benefits for themselves. To accomplish these ends, conflict over nonwork matters must be kept to a minimum. The corporate leader maintains as peaceful a setting as possible, one that does not interfere with the purposes for which the business was conceived. Any extra-work information that could lead to disagreements among employees and distract them from the principal concerns of the business is controlled.

Corporations strive to create environments that operate so as to minimize costs and maximize profits. Efficient processes that produce the maximum effect for the bottom line help grow the business and assure a favorable return on investment, higher productivity, and growth in jobs. As a result, activities that distract from the goals of efficiency and effectiveness are held to a minimum.

Corporations take care to avoid litigation. The American corporate workplace is located within a field of legal assumptions that are often interpreted in ways that constrain the expression of faith in the workplace. Leaders in corporate settings often feel constrained from displaying their faith, especially to direct reports, for fear that they will be accused of showing favoritism toward employees who agree with those religious convictions while penalizing those who do not share those convictions.

Because of the many valid reasons that corporations have for constraining expressions of faith, workers who wish to advance in the company sometimes fear bringing anything into the workplace that would label them as distracting co-workers and fellow team members. The fear of being branded as overly religious by co-workers and of being overlooked for significant projects sometimes leads the average worker to hide his or her faith rather than be exposed as someone whose convictions cause friction or distract from the task at hand. Further, given the instrumentalist assumptions that underwrite many employees' work,

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employees often feel compelled to be less than forthcoming about matters of faith as a way to ensure their own livelihoods.<sup>1</sup>

Although all workers are constrained by the political, economic, and legal and production needs of the corporation, Christians experience those constraints as operating against their desire to express the faith in the marketplace. As such the corporate work setting is a place where Christians must constantly explore the possibilities of living the faith in secular life. The challenge for Christians is to find ways to demonstrate respect for authority, the job, and the stakeholders in the company while living faithfully before God.

### **RESPECTFUL MINISTRY**

Peter's first epistle provides helpful insight into how to go about displaying one's faith under conditions of constraint. The Christians to whom Peter wrote faced a daily grind of resistance, if not out-and-out persecution. Although there are many differences between the experiences of contemporary Christian corporate employees and those who first lived out the faith in ancient environments, they do share the experience of constraint. The words of Peter are as applicable to contemporary Christians who work in corporate environments as they were to those first-century Christians who lived among the pagans. Just as the first-century Christians were called to display Christian conviction in their own environment of constraint, so contemporary Christians are called to do likewise.

Although there are many ways to display the faith in environments of constraint, the focus of this article will be upon the display of Christian hope. Hope figures heavily into Peter's teaching regarding living the Christian life in an unbelieving and constraining world. He reminds the disciples that God, in his great mercy, has given them a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus (1:3). As those who have been born into hope, the disciples were told to "set" their hope fully on the grace to be given to them when Jesus Christ is revealed (1:13). The Christians were to rest their hope in the God who in faithfulness raised Jesus from the dead (1:21). He reminded the women that it was the purity and reverence of their lives as well as their hope in God that made them beautiful and powerful to win over their husbands without even saying a word (3:1). He encouraged all of his readers to remember that it was their hope, as it was displayed in the public arena of constraint, which evoked the curiosity of unbelievers (3:15).

In 1 Peter, hope is more than simple optimism that depended upon the resolve of believers to keep their chins up. Christians were born in hope and were to place their hope not in themselves but in the God who raised Jesus from the dead. They were to hope not in their own self-confidence but in the faithfulness of God. When they displayed hope, whether in family or in community, they would find curious unbelievers attracted to them. Because their hope was set upon the God who is faithful, the disciples were freed to live the life they were called to live, trusting that nothing could separate them from the object of their hope.

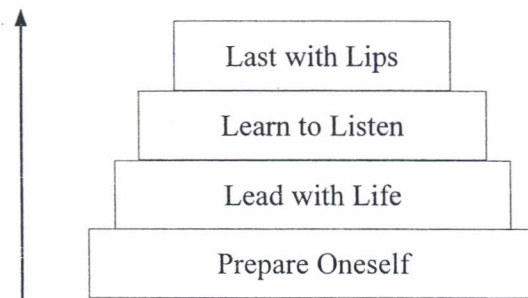
One text within 1 Peter (3:15-16) speaks very clearly to the ministry of hope in a constraining environment.

But in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting of the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame.

### **THE PYRAMID MODEL**

During my own foray into corporate America, I explored 1 Pet 3:15-16 to learn what I could about how to express Christian faith in a constraining corporate environment. I call the model I developed "The Pyramid Model of Ministry" and have since taught it in different settings as a way for Christians to learn to live their faith in any environment of constraint. The model may be illustrated as follows.

The Pyramid Model is a simple visual to help the believer remember that there are not only certain things to be done but also that those things are given a particular priority. Like the food pyramid, the



believer is encouraged to do more of those things at the bottom and less of those things at the top. Whereas many Christians believe that witness is always other-oriented, this model suggests that the believer would do well to spend far more time preparing the self than speaking to the other. Further, whereas many Christians believe that witness is principally about speaking, the model suggests that witness grows out of self-preparation and manifests itself first in a certain quality of life—a life marked by hope.

The priority suggested by the pyramid flows from Peter's teaching. The believers are first commanded to "sanctify Christ in their hearts" and be prepared to give a reason for the hope that they have. Being prepared to *give a reason* suggests that someone comes to them inquiring about the quality of their lives. Because the nonbeliever is moved by that quality of life to ask a question, the Christians must learn to listen deeply and hear what the nonbeliever's question is. Only then are they in a position to give an answer—one characterized as gentle and respectful.

#### **PREPARE YOURSELF THROUGH HOPEFUL WORSHIP**

Peter commanded his readers to "sanctify Christ as Lord" in their hearts. On the surface, such a command seems to state the obvious—that Christians are Christians by reason of the fact that they name Christ as Lord. However, Peter may have also commanded such because of the situation in which those to whom he wrote lived and worked. As people who faced rejection, persecution, and hardship, they had to be sure to keep Christ at the center of their lives as Lord. Otherwise, they could yield to the temptation to "go along to get along" and sacrifice the very convictions that made them a distinctive people.

The act of setting apart Christ as Lord was not to be thought of as a one-time event. Rather, the sanctifying about which Peter spoke was a process that was to continue across time and setting, one that was to be constantly enacted if his readers were going to keep faith in that very constraining environment. The life of faith lived outwardly in the world was grounded in right worship.

The work of ongoing, inward sanctification of Jesus as Lord required that the Christians avail themselves of every Lord-affirming practice available. Such practices included gathering with other Christians for worship and mutual edification. Further, the Christians to whom Peter wrote had to maintain vigilance and watch out for Satan who walked about "as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour" (5:8). They were to work hard to protect the community of faith and refrain from any activity that undermined that unity. In the process of relating to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, they would learn how to relate to others as Christians in an atmosphere of faith and mutual respect.

Christians who work in the contemporary corporate setting must also work to sanctify Christ as Lord on an ongoing and consistent basis. Like their first-century ancestors in the faith, modern corporate Christians face a number of challenges in the workplace. As a result, they must engage the practices that sustain faith in the marketplace as well as every other area of life.

Engaging the practices of faith whether in or away from the corporate environment is a response to Peter's charge for the Christians to "prepare (their) minds for action" (1:13). Just as a major-league batter does not wait until the moment he steps into the batter's box before he practices his swing, Christians who

work in corporate settings should think of their spiritual practice as preparation for their own foray into the batter's box, the 40-60 hours they spend in the marketplace mission field.

In the practices of hopeful worship centered on the Lord Jesus Christ who must be constantly sanctified in the heart, corporate Christians prepare themselves for the opportunity to witness and to serve.

### **LEAD WITH A HOPEFUL LIFE**

The life about which Peter taught was marked by hope in the faithful God who raised Jesus from the dead. Believers were to display a "living hope" in light of the coming of God. They were to live in reverent fear, love for the brethren, and resistance to any and every form of evil that would subvert the unity of the community of faith and hamper their testimony concerning the risen Christ. That life invited nonbelievers to pose questions as to its basis. The ultimate aim of living that life would be to lead unbelievers to "glorify God on the day he visits" (2:12).

Because the hope of the disciples was grounded in the faithfulness of God, the disciples were called to show respect toward those in authority as placed there by God (2:14). They were not to retaliate against authorities who mistreated them but follow the example of Christ who "committed no sin" and in whom "no deceit" was found (2:18-23). Like Christ, they were to entrust themselves to the One who judges justly (2:23). The life of faith had the power to win over the unbeliever without a word being spoken by the believer (3:1-5).

The eschatological hope displayed by the disciples was to be attractive to unbelievers and lead them to inquire as to its basis. The ultimate aim of such a life would be to draw unbelievers to faith and worship. However, even before that, the disciple's life of hope should evoke a specific question.

### **LISTEN WITH A HOPEFUL HEART**

The non-Christians who observed the hope of the Christians were led to ask a variant of one particular question: "How can you live like that in a place like this?" Having observed the quality of the Christians' lives in the face of persecution, unbelievers felt compelled to inquire as to the basis of the hope that marked their lives. Because unbelievers asked such questions, the disciples had to learn how to listen in such a way that they were able to provide answers to those attracted to their hope.

Contemporary "corporate" Christians would do well to understand listening as a ministry in and of itself. Nondefensive openness to the curious inquiries of those who are touched by the quality of Christian hope demonstrates respect toward those seeking to understand and experience the liberating hope that Christians enjoy. Further, to listen to another is to display something of the very character of God whom we worship. As Hedahl has written, "effective listening reflects the very nature of our personal and corporate relationships with a listening God."<sup>2</sup> As such, listening is a form of proclamation and points beyond itself to the God whom we worship, the one who ever leans forward to hear our prayers.

Listening requires more than simply hearing the question that the unbeliever asks. Listening requires "hearing beyond" the words themselves in an attempt to discern the nature of the yearning behind the question. Failure to listen "beyond the question" often results in a "mind to mind" conversation rather than a "heart to heart" dialogue. In listening to the question posed by the unbeliever, the corporate Christian should strive to hear the words but also the yearning behind the words and the obstacles the inquirer perceives that prevents him from embracing the hope of the disciple. Further, disciples would do well to determine the aspects of their own lives that speak most clearly to the unbeliever.

Christians are freed to listen by their hope in a faithful God. Through such hope they can open themselves to possibilities of dialogue without fearing that somehow what they hear will automatically cause them harm. Because the hope is in the faithfulness of God, Christians are liberated to hear the words of the unbeliever and also to be challenged by them. As Hedahl has written:

Truthful listening ... is costly. We might hear what we hoped we would not or could not. It may create relationships whose complexities daunt us. Good listening may take us to places with God and humanity that leave us with an entirely new set of questions and concerns. It is possible that good listening will open for each of us a window on our own lives that yields light and challenges the darkness ... good listening will allow us to hear the passion, love and complexity of ourselves and the world around us.<sup>3</sup>

Compassionate listening holds the power to draw us into an ever-deepening relationship with the unbeliever and enable us to engage them at their own level without fear.

### **SPEAK OF GOD WITH A HOPEFUL TONGUE**

Many Christians conceive of "witness" as *primarily* verbal. As a result, many end up hiding behind excuses of not knowing what to say when approached by a nonbeliever. This "not knowing" is not principally a matter of lack of Bible knowledge or not knowing how to debate or offer an apologetic but is a complete lack of understanding as to why one lives as one does. Many Christians do not know how to speak because they do not know how to worship, how to live, or how to listen. Hopeful worship, life, and listening give way to hopeful speaking. Peter's approach seems to suggest that the primary aspect of witness, especially in constraining environments, begins with preparing oneself to live and to listen. Although the witness entails words, witness is principally nonverbal.

The words spoken by Christians are addressed to the unbeliever's *specific* question: "How can you live like that in a place like this?" The question is directed toward understanding the hope the unbeliever sees in the Christian's life. The answer to it is rooted not in clever argument but in the hope the believer experiences as a result of his or her worship. The believer's answer concerns the God who is faithful and who demonstrated his faithfulness in raising Jesus from the dead. The claim on the part of the believer is that the God who raised Jesus from the dead will raise all who hope in God from their own deaths and the many deaths they die in a lifetime.

The believer should speak words that answer the specific question of the nonbeliever, do so in a way that lessens the likelihood that the nonbeliever will be tempted toward malice, and in a way that leads the nonbeliever to an awareness that he or she has misjudged the believer. To accomplish that, the believer should attend to the content of her or his answer but also to his or her manner of delivery. The words should be marked by forbearing gentleness, reverence for God, and respect for the unbeliever.

### **SUMMARY**

Christians have always lived under conditions of constraint. While contemporary Christians may experience those conditions of constraint in many settings, the corporate workplace is a common setting for such experiences. Although corporate constraints are put in place for valid business reasons, Christians must find ways to be faithful to God and respectful of those who employ them.

Christians can be beacons of hope in the corporate setting. However, to accomplish that end they must prepare themselves spiritually, lead with their lives, learn how to listen, and speak with words that point beyond themselves to the faithfulness of God.

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### **ENDNOTES**

- 1 See Philip Kenneson's article in this edition of *Leaven* for a discussion of instrumentalist assumptions.
- 2 Susan K. Hedahl, *Listening Ministry: Rethinking Pastoral Leadership* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 14.
- 3 *Ibid.*