

Integrity In The Workplace

Some Christians contend that biblical truths don't work in the business world. Can you really do your job without ethical compromise?

by Robert J. Tamasy

Jerry frowns at the bid specifications in front of him. The design contract would give a much-needed boost to his fledgling architectural firm, but he could not complete the work as scheduled. "The only way I can get that contract," he mutters to himself, "is if I lie about meeting that deadline."

In another setting, an account executive sits across the desk from the president of a brokerage house. "Charles, you've been with the firm for nine years, and I appreciate your work. But as I've told you before, business and religion don't mix—at least not here. I won't tolerate any more Bible studies in this building, and no more proselytizing. You are paid to serve our clients and oversee your department, not to be some kind of missionary!"

How would you deal with these situations? Ethical dilemmas that seem so easily resolved in a Sunday sermon or a Bible discussion group are much tougher to handle in the everyday marketplace. Are Christian principles really valid in the business world? Is work without ethical compromise possible?

I once heard a real estate salesman who professed to be a Christian admit, "I don't always tell potential buyers facts that might influence their decision negatively. If I were totally honest, I'd never make a sale!"

Not long ago a business manager for a group of newspapers told me that he now refuses to grant credit to advertisers whose business cards or stationery bear Christian symbols or Bible verses. The reason, he explained, was that most of his overdue accounts were those of people who had boldly proclaimed they were running "Christian" businesses, yet had not found it necessary to pay for ads they had purchased.

When God presented us the Bible as His timeless manual for daily living, He did not provide the disclaimer, "Not Applicable for Business." To the contrary, the Scriptures show us that ethical behavior in the marketplace—as in all areas of life—is not an option, but a command. "LORD, who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live on your holy hill? He whose walk is blameless and who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from his heart ... who keeps his oath even when it hurts" (Ps. 15:1–4).

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTEGRITY

Working for the Right Boss.

One reason we wrestle with maintaining our integrity in the marketplace is that we misunderstand our primary purpose for working. Most people, Christians included, would say they work to earn a living, because they enjoy it, or so they can afford the "nicer things" in life.

The New Testament tells us God has a different perspective. Paul writes, "And whatever you do, whether in word or in deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Col. 3:17). He continues, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart,

as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving" (vv. 23–24).

Scripture tells us we are to work as if we are receiving our assignments from Jesus Christ, rather than "Mr. Harris" or "Ms. Abernathy." Would your attitude toward job responsibilities be different if the signature at the bottom of your paycheck was "God"?

Trusting the True Provider.

To avoid compromise in the workplace, we also need the conviction that it is God, not our employers or businesses, who will ultimately provide for us. While Heb. 11:1 defines faith as "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (NKJV), we find it much easier to place our confidence in the substance of a corporate logo, or to rely on the evidence of a supervisor's handshake. God does not guarantee us every promotion or the most successful business, but he has promised to meet our needs (Phil. 4:19).

Some years ago, Jerry, the architect, decided to stop his double life as devout Christian on Sunday and secular businessman on Monday. He determined to glorify God in all his business decisions, even if they seemed foolish from a worldly perspective. That commitment required becoming completely honest when bidding on projects. If he could not meet the specified deadlines, his bid proposals openly acknowledged he would need more time.

Ten years later, Jerry's architectural firm is thriving. He has missed out on some contracts because of his honesty, but in the process he has gained a reputation as a man of integrity who is true to his word. Clients frequently return to him with new projects, confident the work will be done well—when promised.

Serving as Salt.

Although our society often rejects the laws of God, people who live out their convictions are still respected. People of principle stand out as the "light" and "salt" we are called to be. But unless we retain our flavor, unless our actions are different from those of the people around us, we will be like salt that is "no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men" (Mt. 5:13).

Not long after Jerry resolved to serve God in every area of his life, he hired a young architect named Carl. They occasionally discussed the Christian faith, but what really caught Carl's attention was Jerry's determination to be unquestionably honest and forthright in his business dealings. This helped Carl recognize the reality of Jesus Christ in Jerry's life, leading to his own commitment to the Lord. Today, they are business partners having a strong impact for Christ in the lives of many other people.

Avoiding Spiritual Shipwreck.

The impact of our ethical behavior on those around us is important, but even more important is the effect our obedience has on our own relationship with God. Even small concessions can lead to spiritual disaster. Paul writes that by giving up a good conscience some had "shipwrecked their faith" and had even become guilty of blasphemy (1 Tim. 1:19–20).

Admittedly, consistent, upright behavior on the job is more easily espoused than achieved. What steps do Jerry and others follow when facing ethical dilemmas?

ESTABLISH BOUNDARIES

Our convictions establish boundaries for our behavior. Therefore, it is important to think through our convictions and decide how we will act in various situations before they occur. A moment of ethical crisis is not the time to begin wondering, "What should I do now?"

Steve, a department store executive, felt it was unfair for his merchandise buyers to keep all the clothing samples commonly given away by manufacturers. He directed that the free items be shared with other employees.

One morning Steve arrived at his office and found a sweater on his desk. An attached note from one of the buyers read, "Thought your wife would like this." For an instant, Steve considered keeping the sweater; but he knew he, too, had to abide by the new policy. He promptly returned the sweater to the buyer, instructing her to give it to a clerk who could not afford such an item. Sometimes ethical conflicts are best dealt with by avoiding them before they present themselves. When Janice was offered the position of national sales manager for her company, she was delighted. Her husband was fully in favor of the promotion.

As they prayed about the new position, however, they began thinking through the new responsibilities Janice would have. The job required traveling around the country and meeting in motels with sales representatives—many of them men—to encourage and motivate them. Although Janice and her husband had a strong and happy marriage, they understood the dangers of courting temptation.

When she met with the company's executive vice president, Janice told him how much she wanted the job, but also expressed why she felt she could not accept it. A long discussion followed, and afterward the company established dual national sales manager positions. Janice was given the responsibility for only the female sales representatives around the country.

SEEK AN ALTERNATIVE

Since God wishes for us to be salt—and not vinegar—it is often advantageous to suggest an alternative to avert an ethical conflict. Proclaiming, "I can't do that—I'm a Christian!" may indeed communicate one's convictions, but it may also sound judgmental and condescending, and may hinder future witnessing opportunities. Sometimes a silent prayer asking for God's wisdom and intervention is a better course of action than a direct confrontation with a superior.

Daniel and several other Israelites were among an elite group selected to serve the king of Babylon and to eat from his table. But since the food served would break Jewish dietary restrictions, "Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine" (Dan. 1:8). He could have said, "Hey, no way I'm going to eat that garbage!" but instead chose a more conciliatory approach: He asked the chief official for permission to test an alternative diet. The official was reluctant at first, but finally agreed to let Daniel and his friends eat and drink nothing but vegetables and water for ten days. At the end of the trial period, they looked healthier than those who had eaten food fit for a king!

Years ago, I was publisher of a community newspaper belonging to a corporation that owned other newspapers and printing plants throughout a large metropolitan area. I was notified that effective the following day, our plant would begin printing a newspaper for homosexuals. Previously, the company had printed the publication elsewhere in the city.

I was distressed and angered by the decision. After praying and seeking counsel from friends, I wrote a lengthy letter to my superior. I explained that from a Christian and moral perspective, I was opposed to my plant being involved with the "gay" newspaper in any way. In addition, I pointed out that the decision would threaten the good will and support of our conservative, family-oriented community.

Within two weeks, the decision was reversed. Responsibility for printing the homosexuals' newspaper was assigned to another area of the city. I would like to say that my moral opposition prompted the change, but the decision was made strictly from a business perspective.

One problem remained. I was responsible only for the work in our plant, yet my company still printed a publication that clearly endorsed lifestyles that God opposes. This was a "gray area" for me. I could have resigned in protest, but I determined my role as "salt and light" within our company would be served best if I stayed.

STAND FIRM!

Ethical dilemmas cannot always be avoided, nor are there always alternatives that permit everyone to save face. Sometimes we have no choice but to cling to our convictions, look to the Lord, and refuse to compromise our faith.

While King Darius was preparing to put Daniel in charge of the whole kingdom, jealous administrators plotted to dispose of the prophet. Knowing Daniel prayed to God before an open window three times a day, they convinced Darius to issue a decree outlawing prayers to anyone but the king.

Daniel continued his public prayers to God. Darius regretfully arrested Daniel and had him thrown into the lions' den. The account tells us the Lord "shut the mouths of the lions" (Dan. 6:21), sparing Daniel's life and affording him greater opportunities to glorify Him.

Daniel knew holding to his convictions could cost his life, but saw the conflict as unavoidable and without an alternative course of action. His trust in God proved sufficient.

Yet the reward in remaining faithful to God is not always immediately forthcoming. In the midst of descriptions of such champions of the faith as Abraham and Moses, we find this sobering statement: "All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance" (Heb. 11:13).

Fred, a high school teacher, felt it was his duty before God to teach the biblical view of Creation as well as the theory of evolution. This often gave him an opportunity to present the gospel to individuals in his class. Eventually one parent, incensed to learn her son had prayed to accept Jesus Christ, demanded that the principal prohibit the teacher from "imposing his faith on young, impressionable people."

The principal ordered Fred not to teach about Creation or to talk about his Christian faith in the classroom. Fred did not argue, but the next time he taught the theory of evolution he again presented the scriptural account of Creation. Fred was soon confronted by the principal and fired.

Pam agreed to work on a major project for a Christian businessman, but when she completed the products he refused to pay for them. Following biblical guidelines, she approached him

individually, then took some witnesses with her, and finally brought the matter before their church. The businessman still did not pay. Pam eventually lost more than \$100,000 because she obeyed the scriptural injunction not to take a fellow believer to court (1 Cor. 6:1–8).

Jesus exhorted His disciples to count the cost of commitment. That cost can be great financially, vocationally, physically, or socially. But the Lord said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk. 9:23).

NO EASY ANSWERS

The Bible is not a simple "how-to" guide for dealing successfully with every situation. Just as no two people are alike, neither are the ethical dilemmas they encounter. But God's principles are clear.

What is your situation today? Would a person be able to determine you are a Christian simply by observing your actions on the job? Have you established specific, biblically-reasoned ethical boundaries for your life? Do you seek out alternatives when you are asked to compromise your convictions? Are you willing to stand up for Christ, no matter what the cost?

If any of your answers is "No," or "Not always," don't despair. None of us could claim total success. Even the Apostle Paul wrote, "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me" (Phil. 3:12). We too must press on, with the solid assurance that God will give us the strength to do anything He asks of us.

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