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Every Good Endeavor

Connecting Your Work to God's Work

TIMOTHY KELLER

with Katherine Leary Alsdorf

DUTTON

NINE

A New Story for Work

So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

1 Corinthians 10:31

Making Sense of the World

People cannot make sense of anything without attaching it to a story line. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, no one mentioned the event without placing it into some kind of narrative structure. Some said, "This is the result of America's abuse of its imperial power in the world." Others said, "There are many evil people out there who hate us because we are a good and free country." Depending on which story you believed, you would be associated with the antagonists or the protagonists, and your response—both emotions and actions—would be completely different.

A classic illustration of the need for stories comes from philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre in his book *After Virtue*. He asks that you imagine you are standing at a bus stop when a young man you do not know comes up to you and says, "The name of

the common wild duck is *Histrionicus histrionicus histrionicus.*" Even though you understand the sentence, his action makes no sense. What does it mean? The only way to make sense of it is to try to learn the story into which this event fits. Perhaps the young man is mentally ill; that would explain it. Or what if yesterday someone of your gender, age, height, and general appearance had approached the young man in the library, asking him the Latin word for the wild duck, and today he had mistaken you for that person? That would explain it too. Or perhaps the young man is a foreign spy "waiting at a prearranged rendezvous and uttering the ill-chosen code sentence which will identify him to his contact." The first story is sad, the second is comic, and the third is dramatic. But the point is, without a handle on the story, there's no way to understand the meaning of what happened and no way to know how to answer the man.[146]

If you call the police when it was a simple case of mistaken identity, it will be very embarrassing. If you pick a fight with someone who is a trained assassin, the result will be even worse! But in any case, if you get the story wrong, your response will be wrong. And if you get the story of the world wrong—if, for example, you see life here as mainly about self-actualization and self-fulfillment rather than the love of God—you will get your life responses wrong, including the way you go about your work.

Stories and Worldviews

What are the elements of a story? While there are many good scholarly analyses of narrative structure, here is a simple way to put it.[147] A story begins when something knocks life off balance. Then the story progresses, or the plot "thickens," as the protagonists

struggle to restore that balance and peace while antagonistic forces block and resist them. Finally, the story ends as the struggle results in either the restoration of balance or the failure to recover it.

So for a story to be a story, there must be a problem that makes life not as it ought to be. If we say, "Little Red Riding Hood took some food to her grandmother and they ate it together," we might have a charming description, but it is hardly a story, since it has no plot.[148] A story must also have some concept and possibility of things being put right. "Little Red Riding Hood was at her grandmother's house, but a wolf broke in and ate them both"—a more dramatic set of facts, but again, it's not a story. So a story must have an account of how life should be, an explanation of how it got thrown off balance, and some proposed solution as to what will put life right again.

Now, the significance of stories is this. While many stories are often no more than entertainment, narratives are actually so foundational to how we think that they determine how we understand and live life itself. The term "worldview," from the German word *Weltanschauung,* means the comprehensive perspective from which we interpret all of reality. But a worldview is not merely a set of philosophical bullet points. It is essentially a master narrative, a fundamental story about (a) what human life in the world should be like, (b) what has knocked it off balance, and (c) what can be done to make it right.[149] No one can really function in the world without some working answers to those big questions, and so, to provide those answers, we adopt a world-story, a narrative that explains things—a worldview.

Everyone knows that things in this world are seriously out of whack. No one claims that his or her own life is as it should be, let alone the whole world. There is something wrong *within* us.

Nothing ever seems to make us happy or fulfilled except in the most fleeting way. There is also wrong *among* us. The world is filled with poverty, war, suffering, and injustice. Something seems to have knocked the whole world off balance. But what is it? Who deserves the blame? And what is the solution? As soon as you begin to answer these questions, you arrive at a story that you will begin to live out. We are wired to move through our lives chasing and rehearsing narratives that will promise to bring the world back into balance.

MacIntyre argues that human actions are "enacted narrative." All people are living out some mental world-story that gives their lives meaning.[150] That story may be about the struggle of a just cause like saving the environment, or your personal quest to find true love or to be successful despite adverse social origins and expectations. Or perhaps the story is one of freedom and equality, in which you are bringing a family from an oppressive situation into a new country and new life. Maybe the drama is one in which you forge your own unique sexual, cultural, or political identity against the prejudices of others. In each case you are putting yourself into a larger story that assumes the world would be a better place if more people were doing what you were doing. You may believe the world would be dramatically improved if everyone were free-spirited and progressive and willing to defy oppressive traditions. Or perhaps you think the world would be far better off if we were standing for proven moral absolutes. In each case, the person assumes he or she is a protagonist, one of the good people contributing to the way the world ought to be.

Worldviews, however, are not private or unique. In fact, whole groups and cultures have their own preferred world-story with generally accepted answers to the big questions and shared idols

that heighten the drama. Leslie Stevenson's classic book, *Seven Theories of Human Nature*, lists influential views of human nature pioneered by prominent thinkers who influenced whole societies. Plato saw our main problem as being the physical body and its weakness; for Marx it was unjust economic systems; for Freud it was inner unconscious conflicts between desire and conscience; for Sartre it was not realizing we are completely free since there are no objective values; for B.F. Skinner it was not realizing we are completely determined by our environment; and for Konrad Lorenz it was our innate aggression because of our evolutionary past.[151] Each of these theories is really a story—of what is wrong with us and what we can do about it. And each of these views of reality has been enormously powerful, influencing societies and fields of inquiry and work. When any one of these worldviews grips the imagination of a culture, it has a profound influence on how life is lived, even for those who do not accept that worldview.

One of the main places that we personally live out the drama of our personal and social narratives is in our daily work. Our worldview places our work in the context of a history, a cause, a quest, and a set of protagonists and antagonists, and in so doing it frames the strategy of our work at a high level. At a day-to-day level, our worldview will shape our individual interactions and decisions.

As we read in the foreword, Katherine Alsdorf was given a new story—the gospel—that was different from the dominant story of Silicon Valley, which evangelized fervently and optimistically about the power of technology to change the world for the better. The advertising executives we mentioned in the last chapter worked amid a story in which self-expression, sexual pleasure,

and affluence were the meaning of life, and survival of the fittest was just the way life works. The gospel, however, teaches that the meaning of life is to love God and love our neighbor, and that the operating principle is servanthood. These contrasts may sound at first rather high and abstract, but they became very practical when these two executives crafted messages in their advertising.

The Gospel and Other Worldviews

We have said that any worldview consists of posing and answering three questions:

1. How are things supposed to be?
2. What is the main problem with things as they are?
3. What is the solution and how can it be realized?

Stevenson's book on human nature includes Christianity among its "theories," but the author points out how different Christianity is from the alternatives. He observes that "If God has made man for fellowship with Himself, and if man has turned away and broken his relationship to God, then only God can forgive man and restore the relationship."[152] In other words, the biblical worldview uniquely understands the nature, problem, and salvation of humankind as fundamentally *relational*. We were made for a relationship with God, we lost our relationship with God through sin against him, and we can be brought back into that relationship through his salvation and grace.

Plato, Marx, and Freud identify some part of the created world as the main problem and some other part of the created world as

the main solution. The protagonists and antagonists of their respective world-stories are played by finite things. Thus, Marxism assumes that our problems come from greedy capitalists who won't share the means of economic production with the people. The solution is a totalitarian state. Freud, on the other hand, believed that our problems come from repression of deep desires for pleasure. The villains are played by the repressive moral "gatekeepers" in society, like the church. The solution is the unrepressed freedom of the individual. Many people have a worldview that to some degree is indebted to the Greeks and Plato. They think the problem with the world rests in undisciplined, selfish people who won't submit to traditional moral values and responsibilities. The solution is a "revival" of religion, morality, and virtue in society.

Philosopher Al Wolters writes:

> The great danger is to always single out some aspect of God's good creation and identify *it*, rather than the alien intrusion of sin, as the villain. Such an error conceives of the good-evil dichotomy as intrinsic to the creation itself . . . something in the good creation is identified as [the source] of evil. In the course of history, this "something" has been variously identified as . . . the body and its passions (Plato and much of Greek philosophy), as culture in distinction from nature (Rousseau and Romanticism), as authority figures in society and family (psychodynamic psychology), as economic forces (Marx), as technology and management (Heidegger and existentialists). . . . As far as I can tell, the Bible is unique in its rejection of all attempts to either demonize some part of creation as the

> root of our problems or to idolize some part of creation as the solution. All other religions, philosophies, and worldviews in one way or another fall into the trap of [idolatry]—of failing to keep creation and fall distinct. And this trap is an ever-present danger for Christians [as well].[153]

Look again at the uniqueness of Christianity. Only the Christian worldview locates the problem with the world *not* in any part of the world or in any particular group of people but in sin itself (our loss of relationship with God). And it locates the solution in God's grace (our restoration of a relationship with God through the work of Christ). Sin infects us all, and so we cannot simply divide the world into the heroes and the villains. (And if we did, we would certainly have to count ourselves among the latter as well as the former.) Without an understanding of the gospel, we will be either naïvely utopian or cynically disillusioned. We will be demonizing something that isn't bad enough to explain the mess we are in; and we will be idolizing something that isn't powerful enough to get us out of it. This is, in the end, what all other worldviews do.

The Christian story line works beautifully to make sense of things and even to help us appreciate the truth embedded in stories that clearly come from another worldview. The Christian story line, or worldview, is: creation (plan), fall (problem), redemption and restoration (solution):

> *The whole world is good.* God made the world and everything in it was good. There are no intrinsically evil parts of the world. Nothing is evil in its origin. As Tolkien explained about his archvillain in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, in the

> beginning "even Sauron was not so." You can find this "creational good" in anything.
>
> *The whole world is fallen.* There is no aspect of the world affected by sin more or less than any other. For example, are emotion and passions untrustworthy and reason infallible? Is the physical bad and the spiritual good? Is the day-to-day world profane but religious observances good? None of these are true; but non-Christian story lines must adopt some variations of these in order to villainize and even demonize some created thing instead of sin.
>
> *The whole world is going to be redeemed.* Jesus is going to redeem spirit and body, reason and emotion, people and nature. There is no part of reality for which there is no hope.

The gospel is the true story that God made a good world that was marred by sin and evil, but through Jesus Christ he redeemed it at infinite cost to himself, so that someday he will return to renew all creation; end all suffering and death; and restore absolute peace, justice, and joy in the world forever. The vast implications of this gospel worldview—about the character of God, the goodness of the material creation, the value of the human person, the fallenness of all people and all things, the primacy of love and grace, the importance of justice and truth, the hope of redemption—affect everything, and especially our work.

Here's an example. Early in his career as a school administrator, our friend Bill Kurtz started to see that this gospel story line—what the world should be, how it had gone wrong, and the hope for the future—gave him a better vision for education in poor

inner-city schools. All the individual stories of brokenness—of problems at home, of no sleep and inadequate nutrition, of gangs on the street and drugs in the building—had reinforced a culture of rebellion and hopelessness in the schools. The attitude about school for many of the kids was "why bother." He wanted to bring the hope of the gospel story into his work.

Now in the field of urban education today there are many competing story lines about what education should be, what its main problem is, and what needs to change. As a matter of fact, education itself is often viewed as the savior for the ills of poverty and systemic injustice. Students are the subjects of continuous analysis as one strategy or another is applied to their educational experience. Bill found that the gospel gave him a more comprehensive understanding of the problems facing the schools and a hope for redemption that incorporated some of the best practices of his field but did not idolize them.

His approach has been holistic, with the recognition that the gospel could actually shape the culture of a school community. In 2004 he launched a public charter high school in Denver to serve a very diverse student population. One grade at a time he helped create a culture of shared accountability and success in the school. Every morning students gather, along with their teachers, for morning meeting. Morning meetings provide an opportunity for the community to celebrate success through weekly awards, by giving shout-outs to one another for acts of service and living the school's values, and by sharing stories that point to a story of hope. But the brokenness is addressed as well. To help change behaviors where students fail to live the values of the community, students participate in public apologies where they hold one another accountable and support one another to live

the school's core values better. If a student or teacher is late to school, they apologize to the rest of the community. He recognized the students' innate need to be known but held accountable and created en environment where no one could be lost in the cracks. While good teachers have certainly been key, Bill attributes the school's success to its culture and their shared, singular goal to get 100 percent of its seniors into four-year colleges. The school has seen amazing success—every single senior in the school's history has earned a four-year college acceptance. This first school has grown into a network of six top-performing schools across Denver.

The Gospel and Business

The gospel worldview will have all kinds of influence—profound and mundane, strategic and tactical—on how you actually do your work. Every field of work is to some degree influenced by alternate worldviews and their attendant idols, each assigning ultimate value to some idol—that doesn't fully take into consideration our sin or God's grace. The particulars of how the gospel works out in each field are endlessly rich—in fact, hundreds of people meet each month at Redeemer to discuss these very ideas within their respective fields. So, while these ideas deserve book-length treatments in their own right, let me sketch here the outlines of the gospel implications in just a few fields of work.

What are some of the idols of business, for example? Money and power certainly top the list. But remember that an idol is a good thing that we make into an ultimate thing. Corporate profits and influence, stewarded wisely, are a healthy means to a good end: They are vital to creating new products to serve customers,

giving an adequate return to investors for the use of their money, and paying employees well for their work. Similarly, individual compensation is an appropriate reward for one's contributions and is necessary to provide for oneself and one's family. But it is not our identity, our salvation, or even our source of security and comfort. The Christian worker or business leader who has experienced God's grace—who knows "You are not your own; you were bought at a price" (1 Corinthians 6:19–20)—is free to honor God, love neighbors, and serve the common good through work. In fact, at Redeemer we believe this idea is so important for life in the city that we work with entrepreneurs and offer classes to help them think through how the story of the gospel shapes their vision for their new venture. Whether it's a for-profit business, a nonprofit, or an arts venture, we point each entrepreneur to a vision of serving a need in a way that reflects God's plan for the world.

We find and share examples of good leaders—Christian and otherwise—who balance the interests of all the company's stakeholders: stockholders, customers, employees, suppliers, and even the surrounding community. Milton Hershey, for example, founded the Hershey Chocolate Company in 1903 with the innovation of putting milk into the chocolate bar. The company prospered, as did all the dairy farmers in the surrounding countryside. When the Depression hit and business fell apart, Hershey committed to not lay off his employees. Instead he created his own public works projects in the town and put the employees to work building houses, an amusement park, and a hotel. Toward the end of his life, he and his wife (who were childless) founded a boarding school for orphans to give them practical life skills within a supportive community. The trust that runs the school owns a large portion of the company stock, so today the school is funded by dividends and stock appreciation.

At one level, this should all seem to go without saying. The idea that businesses should advance the social good has been regaining its proper place in the last decade, helped along by the string of business scandals in recent years. As a case in point, in a 2009 speech James Murdoch, son of News Corp. Chief Executive Rupert Murdoch, told the audience at the Edinburgh Television Festival that the "only reliable and perpetual guarantor of independence is profit." Yet in the wake of the phone-hacking scandal at News Corp.'s UK newspaper unit, his sister Elisabeth Murdoch could say to the same audience three years later that her brother "left something out," declaring "profit without purpose is a recipe for disaster." She went on to say, "Personally, I believe one of the biggest lessons of the past year has been the need for any organization to discuss, affirm and institutionalize a rigorous set of values based on an explicit statement of purpose."[154]

Yet despite this growing consensus, it is probably fair to say that the implicit assumptions in the marketplace are that making money is the main thing in life, that business is fundamentally about accumulating and wielding power, and that maximizing profit within legal limits is an end in itself. The reason is that sin runs through the heart of every worker and the culture of every enterprise. The result is polluted rivers, poor service, unjust compensation, entitlement attitudes, dead-end jobs, dehumanizing bureaucracy, backstabbing, and power grabs. This is why it is so important for us to be intentional in applying the counter-narrative of the gospel to business.

While from the outside there might not be immediately noticeable differences between a well-run company reflecting a gospel worldview and one reflecting primarily the world-story of the

marketplace, inside the differences could be very noticeable. The gospel-centered business would have a discernible vision for serving the customer in some unique way, a lack of adversarial relationships and exploitation, an extremely strong emphasis on excellence and product quality, and an ethical environment that goes "all the way down" to the bottom of the organizational chart and to the realities of daily behavior, even when high ethics mean a loss of margin. In the business animated by the gospel worldview, profit is simply one of many important bottom lines.

My friend Don Flow has overlaid the story line of the gospel on the prevalent worldview of the automotive dealership business. The typical narrative in an auto dealership is to sell each car for the highest price you can, and so sales people are rewarded for identifying and wooing the highest paying customers. Don's vision emphasized the value of a good automobile to each and every customer. But he discovered a problem: Women and minorities were paying more for their cars than more negotiation-savvy white males. He decided to set a flat-rate on all cars—no negotiating—to effect equal opportunity pricing.

Now, Don was the owner of his company and had the authority to make major changes. Most people do not have this freedom. Yet one of the things less senior employees can do is ask questions about the company's mission and, if it is a sound one, treat it seriously and help keep it in the conversation. Leaders often feel overwhelmed by the cynicism and apathy of their employees and lose their drive to hold true to the company's values. Your care and commitment to those values, assuming they are good ones, could be just the encouragement your boss needs.

To be a Christian in business, then, means much more than just being honest or not sleeping with your coworkers. It even

means more than personal evangelism or holding a Bible study at the office. Rather, it means thinking out the implications of the gospel worldview and God's purposes for your whole work life—and for the whole of the organization under your influence.

The Gospel and Journalism

We must think out the Christian worldview's implications in every field, and often those implications are subtle. For example, does the gospel have an impact on how you do journalism? You could say, "No, I just report facts objectively." But there is no "view from nowhere." Even the choice of what is reported on as news reflects someone's values and beliefs about what is important. This is why we can readily identify the editorial strategy, or bias, of every journalistic outlet: This one is progressive, while that one is conservative; this one idolizes innovation, while that one idolizes wealth; and this other one idolizes self-determination. Furthermore, if success is too important to a journalist—if it functions as an idol in his or her life—then that goal will color the filter of what they decide to report on and how they write about it.

It is impossible to do a story without heroes and villains. The best journalists do a good job of reporting empirical facts as objectively as possible. But the facts you play up and the ones you play down or leave out, and how you relate them to one another—all this is done in the service of a background narrative filled with assumptions about which forces in the world are good and which are bad. It is seldom difficult, if you pay attention, to see that narrative at work in how the story is presented. Some have argued convincingly that the field of journalism, like many voca-

tional fields, has a "religious" character to it, with sets of doctrines and folkways that are enforced by a kind of priesthood.[155]

What might Christian journalists do differently? I would argue that the gospel worldview—which does not idolize or demonize anything in creation—can uniquely equip a journalist to be even-handed and open-minded in his or her reporting and writing. As we observed above, every other worldview tends to put too much faith in some things and too little in others. So whatever the basic worldview of a journalist, it will lead to being more naïvely positive or unnecessarily cynical and skeptical than if they held the gospel worldview.

Let me offer a simple example. In most stories of crisis our modern, cause-and-effect worldview very quickly seeks someone or something to blame. After Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans there was a finite period of time in which the basic news of devastation was reported. Very quickly, the story devolved into attempts to cast blame: on the builders of the sea wall or the federal government and its slow response. Not to say that flaws in city planning or unresponsive government agencies aren't problems worthy of reporting, but the need to blame some aspect of creation is a human impulse—not a gospel one. The gospel tells us the fall results in brokenness in nature and in people. The real "story" of the gospel is the evidence of redemption and renewal. The stories of sacrifice and perseverance are a more fitting culmination of the gospel narrative than stories of neglect.

The Gospel and Higher Education

Andrew Delbanco's fine book *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* explains how changes in our culture's dominant world-

views have led to crises in the area of higher education. He notes that older worldviews (both Christian and Greco-Roman) believed that much important wisdom had to be rediscovered afresh by new generations as they wrestled with older texts about how to understand and live well in the world. Today we are more influenced heavily by the Enlightenment view, which saw only empirical and scientific knowledge as true in the highest sense. "This way of evaluating the worth of knowledge . . . poses a severe challenge to the humanities—at least to the extent that humanists remain concerned with preserving truth by rearticulating it rather than advancing truth by discarding the old in favor of the new."[156] C.S. Lewis put the same idea like this:

> For the wise men of old the cardinal problem had been how to conform the soul to reality, and the solution had been knowledge, self-discipline, and virtue. For . . . applied science . . . the problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men; the solution is a technique.[157]

Delbanco shows how this change in worldview is having a direct negative impact on the study of humanities in Western societies, which he argues is crucial to developing people capable of "reflective citizenship." Elsewhere in his book he laments how a college education is becoming increasingly inaccessible to those without means. The intense competition for a relatively small number of openings in the great universities of our country means that only those very well prepared, tutored, counseled, and financed can get in. Students from poorer communities cannot hope to get the same kind of support. Increasingly, the best educa-

tion enables the elite classes to simply perpetuate themselves and leave the rest of the population behind. Not only are there fewer poor students getting into elite schools, there is a widening gap between top academic institutions and much of the middle class, who see these institutions as arrogant and out of touch with the values and experience of ordinary people. Underlying all these trends is the modern idea of meritocracy—the belief that those who get into the good schools deserve to be there because they are the best and the brightest. In a *New York Times* op-ed piece, "A Smug Education?" Delbanco points out that there is some truth to the charge that when students make it into the most selective universities, they are taught that others who could not get in are beneath them, which breeds "smugness and self-satisfaction."

Remarkably, the Columbia professor points out that the original founders of Ivy League schools were "stringent Protestants" who believed "the mark of salvation was not high self-esteem but humbling awareness of one's lowliness in the eyes of God. . . . Those whom God favors are granted grace not for any worthiness of their own, but by God's unmerited mercy."[158] Delbanco is not himself a Christian, and he hopes that our secular culture can come up with some basis upon which to humble our elites, but he is clear-eyed in his recognition that the Christian worldview has the resources to keep the egos of the successful and wealthy in check, which is an enormous boost to social cohesion. But today the Christian idea—that no one deserves a good life, that all wealth and talent and power are only a gift of God—has largely been lost in our culture, and the "dark side of our meritocracy" is now creating greater inequities than existed before.

This is all highly suggestive for Christian educators and any others who work in the realm of ideas. In future decades, it may be that

Catholic and Protestant colleges will be in the forefront of the preservation and recovery of the humanities—as the monasteries saved the works of ancient literature during the Middle Ages. Christian educators should be motivated by the gospel to find ways to resist the enormous economic pressures that are today working against both the quality and accessibility of higher education.

The Gospel and the Arts

The art world also has its idols, to be sure. As in any field, some artists will make financial profit the ultimate value and do their work accordingly. And, in general, those who play to the crowd, as it were, produce work that is highly sentimental and saccharine, or filled with shock value, gratuitous sex, and violence. Many artists disdain colleagues who make art for profit; instead they uphold self-expression, originality, and freedom as the ultimate values controlling the work they do. But their self-righteous attitudes betray the fact that there are deep worldviews in play—each with its own sets of demons, idols, heroes, orthodoxies, and redemptive pursuits.[159] Often the artists most disdainful of the public produce art that is, to put it mildly, a great deal of beauty and hope.

How does Christianity affect an artist's work? This has been and will continue to be a worthy topic for entire books. But in short, the gospel worldview equips the artist, as it does the journalist, for a unique combination of optimism and realism about life. The gospel is more globally pessimistic about human nature than virtually any other view of things. There is no one class or group of people responsible for the world's situation; we all are responsible. Each of us is capable of the worst kind of evil, and there is nothing we can do to change ourselves, or even see ourselves in our true light,

without God's help. And yet, on the basis of God's salvation in Christ, the gospel allows us to be at the same time deeply optimistic, envisioning not simply heaven but a perfectly renewed material creation. So artists shaped by the gospel cannot be characterized either by sentimentality or bitter hopelessness.

For example, the movie *Lost in Translation* assumes that life is ultimately meaningless but afford some small comfort in friendship; the movie *Babe* inspires us that even a pig can be a sheepdog if he defies tradition and tries hard enough. I believe that Christians can appreciate either kind of story, if it is well told, because from a gospel perspective, both naive and cynical stories are partly true. Life in this fallen world *is* to a great degree meaningless, our aspirations are constantly being frustrated, and sometimes the respectable people are oppressive and bigoted. And yet there is a Good that will triumph over Evil in the end. From a Christian perspective the problem with both kinds of stories is that they tend to blame problems on things besides sin and identify salvation in things besides God—and therefore are ultimately too simplistic. The richness of the gospel world-story includes the insights of both darker and more sanguine worldviews, and it weaves them into a larger tapestry so that neither overwhelms the whole picture. Christian artists have access to a broader and more balanced vision of the world, which is why, over the centuries, that vision has produced such great works of art.

The Gospel and Medicine

To let the gospel of Jesus shape how we work means to heed the influence of both the psychological idols within our hearts as well as the sociological idols in our culture and profession.[160] For an

example of this I will turn to the field of medicine. Some years ago I did an informal survey of several Christians in the medical profession. I asked them, "What are the factors inherent in the practice of medicine today that make it difficult to work as a Christian in this field? What are the main temptations and tests?" I was surprised, instructed, and helped by the answers I received.

One of the main problems mentioned was a deeply personal one—the great temptation to lose sight of your identity in your profession. The British preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones was previously a successful physician in London. In one of his lectures to medical students and doctors, he said candidly, "there are many whom I have had the privilege of meeting whose tombstones might well bear the grim epitaph . . . 'born a man, died a doctor'! The greatest danger which confronts the [medical professional] is that he may become lost in his profession . . . this is the special temptation of the doctor. . . ."[161] Another British doctor added:

> . . . the temptation [is] for medicine to take over your life and rule your life as an enslaving power. It's a subtle one because . . . there is a kind of moral ego massage because you are giving so much—hours, responsibility, stress—to do so much good in other people's lives. There's a lot of self-justifying power in that kind of idolatry. It's much easier to feel morally superior as a doctor than as a stockbroker. . . . There is also, in some people, the need to be needed and the power buzz you get from having influence. . . .[162]

Those in the helping professions (and that includes pastoral ministry as well as medicine) are tempted to feel superior because

our work is so noble and so draining. And although medical professionals pour themselves out in long, stressful hours and literally save lives, they meet plenty of ungrateful, unreasonable, and stubborn people who repay their hard work with venom and lawsuits. This can lead to a correlative spiritual peril. One doctor wrote:

> It is easy to become extremely cynical about people and emotionally hardened to life. You see so much of the messy stuff of life and death that you feel your essential defense mechanism is to become emotionally detached and keep a distance in order to maintain your sanity.

Several doctors told me that only the gospel enabled them to see the traits of pride, cynicism, and detachment that were creeping into their characters. One said, "In the early days of a medical career you work such enormous hours that your prayer life just dries up. That is deadly. Only if Jesus stays real to the heart can you be consistently joyful enough in him to avoid making medicine your whole self-worth, and then becoming hardened when you meet so much ingratitude."

My survey also revealed pressures on doctors that came from the culture. One woman I corresponded with pointed me to an article in *The New England Journal of Medicine* titled "God at the Bedside."[163] The author was a doctor who often found that patients' spiritual beliefs and practices were very much a factor in their health issues, but "in the modern era, religion and science are understood as sharply divided, the two occupying very different domains." He wrote that he often found that patients' guilt and fears were factors in their illness and also that their faith in

God was part of how they healed, but he felt completely unprepared by his training to address any of these realities. "Doctors," he wrote, "understandably are leery of moving outside the strictly clinical and venturing into the spiritual realm."

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones makes the same point in one of his lectures to medical professionals. Lloyd-Jones was on staff at Saint Bart's in London under the famous chief of staff Lord Horder in the late 1920s. At one point the junior physician was asked by Lord Horder to rearrange and reclassify his case history records. He created a new filing system, arranging the cases not by name but by diagnosis and treatment. As Lloyd-Jones did this task he was astonished that Horder's diagnostic notes in well over half the cases included comments such as "works far too hard," "drinks too much," "unhappy in home and marriage." At one point he spent the weekend with Lord Horder and took the opportunity to ask him about what he had seen in the case files. Horder responded that he reckoned only about a third of the problems that are brought to a physician are strictly medical—the rest are due to or aggravated by anxiety and stress, poor life choices, and unrealistic goals and beliefs about themselves. Severe cases, of course, could be sent to the psychiatrist, but most of the time that wasn't appropriate. So, Horder concluded, a doctor should basically mind his or her own business. Lloyd-Jones said that after he heard that response:

> . . . we argued for the whole of the weekend! My contention was that we should be treating [the whole of the person's life]. "Ah," said Horder, "that is where you are wrong! If these people like to pay us our fees for more or less doing nothing, then let them do so. We can then concentrate on the 35 percent or so of

> real medicine." But my contention was that to treat these other people [taking into account their whole life] *was* "real medicine" also. All of them were really sick. They certainly were not well! They have gone to the doctor—perhaps more than one—in quest of help.[164]

Lloyd-Jones was not proposing that physicians were by themselves competent to do this, but rather that together with other counselors and helping professionals they needed to address the whole person. People have a spiritual nature, a moral nature, and a social nature, and if any of these are violated by unwise or wrong beliefs, behaviors, and choices, there can be interlocking physical and emotional breakdown. And even patients whose original illness was caused by strictly physical factors eventually need much more than mere medicine to recuperate and heal.

That conversation took place in 1927, but two trends have only exacerbated the situation that Horder and Lloyd-Jones were addressing. First, there has been an enormous increase in specialization, so that no single helping professional ever seems to have the luxury of looking at the whole person. Just as important is the growth in influence of a view that has been called "evolutionary social constructivism," which believes that "all aspects of every level of reality [have] a single evolutionary explanation."[165] In effect, the very concept of the whole person is vanishing. Our consciousness and emotion, our choices and desires, our goals and joys are increasingly seen to be the results of our genetic hardwiring. The old idea of a person consisting of body, mind, and spirit is gone—now there is only a body that has mental, emotional, and spiritual neurology. In addition to this reductionistic understanding of human nature, the increasing economic

and legal pressures on doctors and hospitals are likely to push medical professionals more cautiously to "mind their own business" when it comes to treating the whole person.

Because they understand the effects of both creation and fall on the human person, Christians in the medical profession can resist the narrowing implications of this view. The Christian view of human nature is rich and multifaceted. God created and will resurrect our bodies—and so they are important! If God himself is to redeem our bodies (Romans 8:23) then he is the Great Physician, and the medical vocation could not be loftier. But God does not care only about bodies; he created and redeems our souls as well. So Christian physicians will always bear the totality of the human person in mind. Their faith gives them the resources to muster the humility and the ingenuity necessary to see patients as more than just bodies.

The Christian Worldview Shapes All Work

So when we say that Christians work from a gospel worldview, it does not mean that they are constantly speaking about Christian teaching in their work. Some people think of the gospel as something we are principally to "look at" in our work. This would mean that Christian musicians should play Christian music, Christian writers should write stories about conversion, and Christian businessmen and -women should work for companies that make Christian-themed products and services for Christian customers. Yes, some Christians in those fields would sometimes do well to do those things, but it is a mistake to think that the Christian worldview is operating only when we are doing such overtly Christian activities. Instead, think of the gospel as a set of

glasses through which you "look" at everything else in the world. Christian artists, when they do this faithfully, will not be completely beholden either to profit or to naked self-expression; and they will tell the widest variety of stories. Christians in business will see profit as only one of several bottom lines; and they will work passionately for any kind of enterprise that serves the common good. The Christian writer can constantly be showing the destructiveness of making something besides God into the central thing, even without mentioning God directly.

And while the Bible is not a comprehensive handbook for running a business, doing plumbing, or serving patients, it does speak to an enormous range of cultural, political, economic, and ethical issues that are very much part of how we all live. Also, the Christian worldview has made foundational contributions to our own culture that may not be readily apparent. The deep background for our work, especially in the West—the rise of modern technology, the democratic ethos that makes modern capitalism thrive, the idea of inherent human freedom as the basis for economic freedom and the development of markets—is due largely to the cultural changes that Christianity has brought. Historian John Sommerville argues that Western society's most pervasive ideas, such as the idea that forgiveness and service are more important than saving face and revenge, have deeply biblical roots.[166] Many have argued, and I would agree, that the very rise of modern science could have occurred only in a society in which the biblical view of a sole, all-powerful, and personal Creator was prevalent.[167] So we all owe more than we may realize to the unique contours and power of the Christian worldview.

Are you thinking about your work through the lenses of a Christian worldview? Are you asking questions such as:

- What's the story line of the culture in which I live and the field where I work? Who are the protagonists and antagonists?
- What are the underlying assumptions about meaning, morality, origin, and destiny?
- What are the idols? The hopes? The fears?
- How does my particular profession retell this story line, and what part does the profession itself play in the story?
- What parts of the dominant worldviews are basically in line with the gospel, so that I can agree with and align with them?
- What parts of the dominant worldviews are irresolvable without Christ? Where, in other words, must I challenge my culture? How can Christ complete the story in a different way?
- How do these stories affect both the form and the content of my work personally? How can I work not just with excellence but also with Christian distinctiveness in my work?
- What opportunities are there in my profession for (a) serving individual people, (b) serving society at large, (c) serving my field of work, (d) modeling competence and excellence, and (e) witnessing to Christ?

Of all the ways that the Christian faith affects work, the realm of worldview is the most searching and yet also the hardest to put into practice. All Christians live in cultures and work in vocational fields that operate by powerful master narratives that are sharply different from the gospel's account of things. But these narratives work at such a deep level that their effects on us are hard to discern. An American who first moves to a foreign country is shocked

to discover how many of her intuitions and practices that she considered common sense and universal are actually particularly American ones—and are ridiculous to many other people. By living in another culture she gets a new vantage point from which she can be critical of herself, and as a result she will slowly change, dropping some attitudes and adopting others.

Becoming a Christian is a lot like moving to a new country; only it is more profound, because it gives us a new perspective on every culture, every worldview, and every field of work. In the long run, the gospel helps us see everything in a new light, but it takes time to grasp and incorporate this new information into how we live and pursue our vocations. And we can be sure that this ultimate learning experience will never truly end; we are told the angels themselves never tire of looking into the gospel to see new wonders (1 Peter 1:10–12).

TEN

A New Conception of Work

Whatever you do, do well.

Ecclesiastes 9:10 (NLT)

Everyone Participates in God's Work

The Jewish community has contributed hugely to the flourishing of New York City. They have led in the advancement of hospitals and medicine, arts and cultural centers, and strong communities that sustain the elderly and nurture the young. Their Scriptural heritage and beliefs give them a strong commitment to "act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). They are not Christ followers, but God no doubt continues to work through them. Another group often noted for their commitment to moving to neighborhoods that have fallen into disrepair and rehabilitating them is the gay community. They have worked hard to improve many of the worst parts of our cities over the last several decades. And, of course, we all know someone in our field who is not a Christian who seems to hold the best values and produce the most elegant product, beautiful