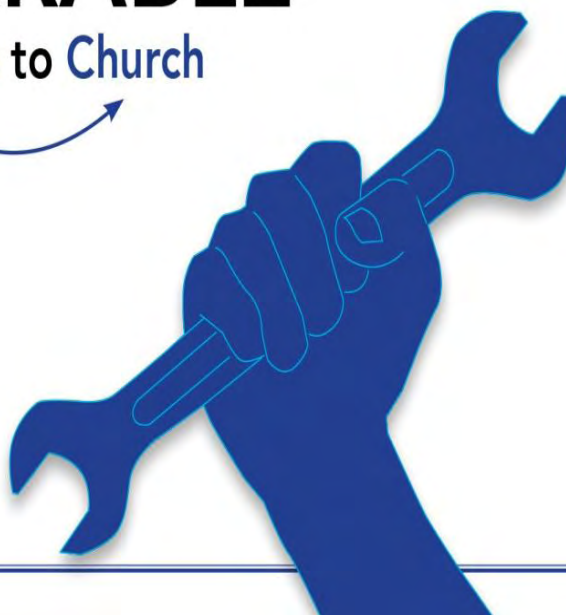


TRANSFERRABLE

Skills from **Business** to **Church**

How believers' professional skills and knowledge can be used to build up the church and their own spiritual lives.

By Dru Stevenson



Much of the discussion of “Christianity in Business” focuses, quite naturally, on how a Christian businessperson’s faith can influence one’s secular work – in the way we treat others, the ways we conceive and execute our business mission, and the way we make our faith known to others. Less attention goes to the intricate relationship between the successful businessperson’s secular work and involvement in spiritual

activities and events, like church. Our secular enterprise is part of who we are, part of the person God loves, redeems, sanctifies, and uses to do His work. Not only should our faith impact our work life, but our work identity can positively impact our spiritual pursuits.

Transferrable Skills and the Body of Christ

Most evangelical Christians in business are members of a church. For many, unfortunately, their involvement stops there – successful people are usually busy people, and often feel too busy to be “involved” in their church. Even those who are devout enough to attend, give, and appreciate the services often leave the work of organizing and leading to the church staff and leadership.

This essay presents a dual challenge to Christian businesspersons and to the leadership of their churches, as both have

Dru Stevenson is professor of law and Helen and Harry Hutchins Research Professor at the South Texas College of Law in Houston, Texas. A graduate of Wheaton College (B.A., Biblical Studies), the University of Connecticut (J.D.), and Yale University (LL.M.), he served in full-time ministry before becoming an Assistant Attorney General for the State of Connecticut. His writings cover criminal law to civil procedure, with an emphasis on the intersection of law with economics and linguistic theory.



a role to play in helping professionals in the congregation better integrate their spiritual and secular lives. For the Christian in business, it may require a greater commitment of time – and perhaps a more proactive approach to one’s faith – in order to achieve the goal described below. For the leaders, there may be a need to break from the norm and take an innovative approach to utilizing the skills and talents of the believers in their flocks.

Yet the New Testament presents a very different model for the church. All the members integrate and synergize as “living stones” comprising a “spiritual house” (1 Peter 2:5 *(NIV)*). Each businessperson in a congregation brings a unique set of experiences, talents, perspectives, and skills related to their secular employment outside of church. Many of these traits and abilities are transferrable skills that are incredibly useful in furthering the work of the ministry.

Transferrable skills are a common topic in the secular workforce. Workers and prospective employers are very aware that skills, knowledge, and experience acquired in one job can be useful in the next job, even in another industry. Experience as a delivery driver can make one a better dispatcher; experience in procurements can make a salesperson or

marketer more effective, and vice-versa. The best managers often are those who know how to do the jobs of the workers they supervise.

The same is true when we enter a church. Churches and religious organizations desperately need input from people who understand accounting, or who are experienced builders, or who grasp insurance concepts, or who under-

stand liability and risk management. Every skill, ability, or talent of a member is part of the intangible wealth of a church, just as the aggregate skills, knowledge, and experience of employees are part of the assets or wealth of a corporation.

Pastors and ministry staff often have little training in finance, insurance, IT, risk management, or

legal issues. They rely on advice for these matters either from minimally educated support staff, or from expensive outside consultants and contractors (who know they are dealing with unsophisticated clients). Overlooked are the people in the pews who have relevant knowledge or skills.

The modern model of the church tends to ignore this fact, instead imposing an unhealthy dichotomy between “God’s work” and secular work. This dualistic thinking results in leaders who view members as clients/customers – people who come to receive what the church

“Instead of thinking of church members as a walking coupon for professional services, church leaders should include them in the affairs and decisions in the church so that each individual can positively influence the institutional culture and practices.”

offers, and who tithe in exchange for what they receive.

Worse, the instances where ministers approach professionals in the congregation for help often border on inappropriateness, such as trying to squeeze free legal advice from a lawyer in the congregation, either for the church's litigation or for another member's legal problems, or imposing on a mechanic in the congregation to work on the pastors' son's car. For free.

Instead of thinking of church members as a walking coupon for professional services, church leaders should include them in the affairs and decisions in the church so that each individual can positively influence the institutional culture and practices. Unfortunately, church leaders may not grasp the concept of transferrable skills. They expect the lawyer-member to be useful when there is a legal problem, but are unaware that lawyers usually have a sophisticated understanding of insurance concepts, negotiation practices, mediating disputes, or that lawyers are highly trained in extemporaneous public speaking and formal writing.

Ministers may not fully understand that insurance agents in their church know a lot about social and family networks, how people make major decisions, the best time of day to contact people, and what types of consequences result from making exceptions to established policies – all of which are very important for the tasks that churches and ministries undertake. Instead, they naively hope that a computer network specialist will be able to fix the bugs in the PowerPoint presentations used on Sunday – because the member “works with computers.” Overlooked is the network specialist's unique ability to plan and schedule in advance for staggered upgrades,

phased-in purchases, and ever-changing norms about privacy, accessibility, and security; again, issues that come up in seemingly unrelated domains of ministry work.

Change must come from the ground up. It is incumbent on the businessperson in the pew, therefore, to step forward, to take initiative, to sacrifice the time it takes to get involved. A major asset of religious organizations currently goes unused, essentially dormant.

As mentioned in the introduction to this essay, the challenge here is twofold. Church leaders may need to change the way they think about the businesspersons and professionals who attend their churches, to foster better integration of their members' lives and skills. At the same time, members will often need to be proactive in offering their services and finding ways to serve. It could revolutionize many ministries, churches, and denominations if we could release the treasure-trove of knowledge capital among the membership.

These traits must operate in tandem with the member's spirituality. Many intangible spiritual characteristics affect how “effective and productive” we are in our faith activities (2 Peter 1:8): spiritual gifts, anointing, Christian character/virtue, prayer life, depth of faith, and knowledge of the Bible are all factors that contribute to our spiritual fruitfulness. Yet most Christians hear plenty of teaching on these points, without any word about how to integrate the rest of our personality and identity with our spirituality. Many believers simply dichotomize in their minds, and assume that nothing from their life outside of church is relevant once they enter the sanctuary.

Peter and Paul provide examples of this integration of life within the community of Christ, and the “outside” world.

Peter was, of course, a fisherman – probably with little formal education – before he found himself thrust into the top leadership of the early church. Most believers have heard the oft-repeated idea that Peter illustrates God’s sense of irony, in that Jesus picked seemingly unqualified (unsophisticated) people to groom as Apostles. Acts 4:13 recounts the religious leaders of the day making a similar observation about them. Many believers today see Peter as an illustration of the promise, “God’s power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

The reality is more complicated. We glean from the gospel narratives glimpses of Peter’s work life. He and his brother Andrew were not anglers – they caught tilapia and other lake fish in nets cast from the side of small boats. It was incredibly uneven work, with long frustrating periods of catching nothing, punctuated by large catches of hundreds of fish at once. The unpredictable large catches required Peter and his three partners to spring into action quickly, to coordinate their motions, to exert full physical strength in a frenzy, then to get the fish ashore and to market while still fresh. Along the way, they had to sort the fish. During lulls, they attended to the tedious work of mending the nets. This was a lifestyle that spanned decades. Galilean fishers grew accustomed to spurts and lulls in activity, doing well in emergency/crisis situations (a full net) and making effective use of the downtime to prepare for the next round of catching, hauling, and sorting fish. Month after month, year after year.

Now consider the first ten years of the church in Jerusalem. In one day, it exploded from 120 members huddled in an all-night prayer meeting to 3,000 new adherents (see Acts 2:38-47). Then there seems to have been a respite, then another

surge that brings the number to 5,000 (Acts 4:4). There was no professional staff, no church facilities, no Christian curriculum for small groups or Sunday School. Somehow, the Apostles managed to sort people overnight into small, manageable meetings in homes, organize large public teaching events for full audiences, arrange for meals to be provided to (apparently dozens of) widows, and accommodate hundreds of people requesting prayer for their infirmities and other personal problems. Then there would be a lull, then another round of crisis mode. Retention of new converts seems to have been much higher than we see today.

Assuming that Jesus foresaw this rollercoaster phase of the early church, his selection of the launch team now seems strategic instead of ironic. The first church leaders had to be able to respond rapidly, had to stay focused on not losing anyone from the latest “catch,” had to work together well, and had to make effective use of downtime between the waves of influx. The religious culture of first-century Jerusalem would instead have picked leaders based on seniority, sagacity, family name, and patronage. Yet the apostles succeeded at rapid-response ministry work, crowd management, and retention. They successfully managed a mega church without buildings, staff, sound systems, media, or spreadsheets. This gives deeper meaning to Jesus’ prediction to Peter, Andrew, James, and John that He could turn them into “fishers of men.” Lake fishers were perfect for the job in Jerusalem, it turned out.

Phase Two of the early church was the shift from being an obscure localized phenomenon to being an international organization. This meant jumping a cultural barrier – from Aramaic-speaking

Jewish converts to Greek-speaking pagans throughout the Roman Empire. Someone would need to cover huge distances, pitch the message to polytheistic Gentiles (instead of Jews already expecting a Messiah), and organize cells that would be self-replicating and self-sustaining. The task fell to Saul (Paul), an ultra-orthodox Rabbi who had led a vigilante effort against the first Christians in and around Jerusalem. This choice seems as ironic as Peter running things in Jerusalem: a super-strict rabbi is going to remove the Jewishness from the faith enough to have pagans embrace it. Again, there was a strategic advantage beneath the apparent irony.

Paul, though tutored for years under premier rabbis in Jerusalem, had been born in a Roman colonial city called Tarsus (in modern Turkey). Anyone born there had Roman citizenship – as if they had been born in the city of Rome itself – analogous to American citizenship conferred on babies born on U.S. military bases overseas. Paul was probably the only rabbi in Jerusalem who could travel freely throughout the Roman Empire with special legal rights and protections. Childhood in Tarsus would have made Paul fluent in Greek and some local dialects. Paul had first-hand experience in Jewish synagogues functioning far from the homeland, as branches in remote locations. His reputation as a stickler for kosher rules and traditions gave him gravitas when insisting that those rules and rituals were unnecessary for Gentile converts. He was single, which made constant travel much more feasible. Finally, Paul had a purely secular skill – tent-making – that enabled him to support himself in any urban center he visited while he planted a church there; he did not need to depend on the members of the

new church for his livelihood. These traits turned out to be incredibly helpful.

Ending the Compartmentalization of Our Spiritual Lives

Unfortunately, many believers tend to separate their spiritual lives from their secular routines. Helping believers bring their faith into their work is essential in breaking down this mental compartmentalization – we must be actively Christian everywhere we go, in everything we do. Many other writers have made this point.

Less common, however, is the observation that bringing our secular lives into our spiritual activities also breaks down the unhealthy compartmentalization. Our “secular” abilities and talents are resources within the local and global church. Learning to deploy our skills and abilities in faith-based endeavors makes it easier for us to “walk in the Spirit” even when we are using those skills at our workplace. Believers become integrated individuals who see God permeating every area of their lives, rather than churchgoers who have a spiritual side and a worldly side.

The concept of transferrable skills may prompt some Christian businesspersons to rethink the question of where to attend church. We can think strategically about advancing God’s purposes. Many factors weigh into the decision about which local church to join: geographic proximity, doctrinal beliefs, worship style, preaching quality, etc. These are valid considerations, but an additional dimension merits discussion.

Conclusion

It is wonderful to see so many Christians today thinking about how to bring their faith into their work. They are learning to live out their Christianity in practical ways by treating coworkers honorably,

being exemplary in integrity and transparency, and trying to be more altruistic, “doing good while doing well.”

The other side of the equation, however, is to bring more of our work into our faith activities. Instead of dichotomizing our spiritual and secular pursuits, we should recognize that God sees us as an integrated person, a person whose career gives us special insights into Christian faith, practice, and outreach. We all acquire transferrable skills in our jobs, and these are useful not only for our future career, but for our efforts to serve God and spread His Word as well.

In John 17:6, as Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane, he thanks the Father for his disciples:

I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word.

There is a deep mystery contained in these words – disciples are a gift that the Father gives to his Son. Salvation as

God’s free gift to us should be perfectly familiar to believers; but perhaps we need to add to that belief the idea that each of us is a gift from the Father to Jesus, intended to be an asset to his work. In verse 4, Jesus says that the Father entrusted the Son with a mission, a “work to do” in this world – the project of salvation. Toward this end, the Father gives the Son a gift, dedicated followers who will serve him and further the work.

Suppose that as an expression of the perfect, eternal love between the Father and the Son, the Father gave His Son a gift. We would assume that such a gift would be wonderful, eternally valuable, and quite significant. That gift was you and me.

It may be appropriate to think of ourselves as helpless, and even passive, when we contemplate the forgiveness we receive for our sins. Yet in terms of the “other” gift involved in our salvation – the gift from the Father to the Son – we are the handpicked members of his dream team, a task force carefully selected to bring the work of Jesus toward the fulfillment of its goals and objectives. ☙☙