

**“DANGER! CHRISTIANS AT WORK”**  
**“Mission As A Subversive Activity”**  
*Matthew 5:13-16*

A couple of weeks ago we began to explore what it means to be a Christian at work (and, don't forget, we said that work was a shorthand way of referring to our daily occupations which bring us into contact with other people). The conclusion was that we are all called to be ministers of the gospel wherever we are, that our workplaces are contexts in which we should be living out the values of the Kingdom of God, and we should be supporting and helping each other in those “missionary” situations. But how do we actually do that? How do we involve ourselves in the task of mission in the places where called has called us to live and work?

In an article in this month's *Christianity + Renewal* magazine about the current Harry Potter phenomenon, Mark Stibbe helpfully summarised three approaches the church can adopt with regard to engaging with the culture around us. (You can be grateful for this, because he summarises it far more succinctly than I was intending to do!) He talks of the three alternatives of **evasion**, **invasion** and **pervasion**. We can try to evade what is going on around us and opt out into our little holy huddles, the safety of our ghettos, where everything revolves around our churchy activities and all our friends are other Christians. If we do come into contact with those who are not Christians, then we try to limit that contact in case we are contaminated by them and their ideas. In such a situation we fail to make any meaningful contact with those who need to hear about Jesus, and our evangelism is doomed to failure because we end up totally cut off from the world around us.

Alternatively, we can try to invade the culture around us with aggressive evangelism, shouting texts through megaphones, ranting about all that is wrong with our community, and trying to bring Jesus into it on the back of our confrontational outreach agenda. Once again, there is little contact with those who are not part of the church, except as targets for attack. It builds up resentment and hardens attitudes to us and to the Gospel.

Or we can try to pervade the culture around – our workplaces and neighbourhoods – with the love and integrity of Christ. Although it loses out in the alliteration stakes, I prefer to refer to it as **subversion**. We get involved in what is going on and attempt to subvert attitudes and patterns of behaviour, using what influence we have to move things around towards a more Christ centred situation. We don't necessarily do it explicitly – that's **invasion**. But we don't duck the issue – that's **evasion**.

As we said last time, God has called you to be where you are now. You are there for a purpose, and that purpose is to model something of the attitude of Christ, to live a life which connects with those around you, but does not capitulate to their priorities and agendas. It sometimes takes a bit of effort to blend in and win the confidence and respect of your colleagues and neighbours.

Jim was someone who had a real passion to share the gospel with those around him. But he realised that he had to take some risks as he tried to share something of the culture in which he lived. He shaved his head completely – except for a little patch of hair that he grew long. In the end he dyed it and wore it in a pigtail. He gave up the familiar suit he used to wear and dressed like the people around him, changed his eating patterns, his diet and the ways in which he ate. He tried very hard indeed to adopt their vocabulary and connect with them in their own street language, so that he could, when the occasion arose, say something about Jesus. Jim read the same things that they read, trying to find common ground. He actually moved into their neighbourhood and spent a great deal of time talking with the people around him.

Now you'd have thought that he would have been supported by the church as he tried to do this, but he wasn't. They misunderstood what he was trying to do. Some misrepresented him. Some actually

maligned him and turned their backs on him. But he kept going, trying to change peoples' attitudes from a situation where they were able to see the authenticity of his Christian life and to sense the relevance of it all to him. Eventually, Jim founded a ministry whose impact is still being felt today in the fastest growing church in the world. Jim – or James Hudson Taylor, as most of us might know him – founded the China Inland Mission. But it was hard, risky work. And he did it by getting involved, by blending into the culture in the ways that were appropriate, yet remaining distinctive in his faith and in his witness. If we have no contact with it, our society today can seem just as alien to us as Chinese culture seemed to Hudson Taylor those many years ago.

Jesus, in that motivational address that he gave his first disciples – which we call *The Sermon on the Mount* – used the analogy of salt. He said to his followers that they were to be “*the salt of the earth*”. Now salt that stays in the salt cellar is still salt – but it's not much use there. Christians who stay in the church are still Christians, but they're not much use. Salt that is thrown indiscriminately all over the food – be it mashed potatoes or apple pie, fried chicken or ice cream – is still salt, but it's presence is not always appreciated by the discerning palate. Christians who go into every situation with all their gospel guns blazing are still Christians, but their presence can often cause more problems than they solve.

But salt that is added in the right places and the right amounts can have a very beneficial effect. It doesn't necessarily show up for what it is – it's dissolved or stirred in or rubbed in and then works from within the food – but it doesn't half make a difference to that food. It may flavour it – adding a dimension to it that would be sadly lacking otherwise. It may well preserve it, preventing it from becoming or brown or inedible. It may create a thirst for something more, but it makes a positive difference.

You and I are called by God to act like salt in our society, in our homes and workplaces. We *need* to be there. God wants us there. He has called us to be there. You are at that counter, in that staff room, at the front of that class, in that workshop – wherever it is that God placed you – because you are needed to make a difference. To bring some flavour to a tasteless world. To bring some goodness to a rotten society. To give people a thirst for Jesus by the way you live your life.

And you do that by living a life that is steeped in righteousness and justice and integrity. It is vital that you do not “*lose your saltiness*” as Jesus puts it here. As I've said before, you come across people in certain jobs who say they're there not because of the salary or the kudos, but because it's vital that there's a Christian at that level of the company or in that particular part of the organisation – but then they make no attempt to live, to behave like a Christian there. They blend in with the rest to such an extent that there is no difference between their ethics and those of their colleagues, no difference between their language and that of their colleagues, no difference between their values, priorities, attitudes and those of their colleagues.

In your workplace, you need to act with integrity, to show an authentic Christian faith, so that others know they can rely on you, and to be distinctive in those things that matter. Easier said than done, of course. And to keep that saltiness you need to keep praying, to keep reading the Bible and to keep seeking the help and support of others. As we said last time, be prepared to ask others to pray for you, share your problems (and your joys) with those who can identify with your situation, look for help when you need it. I think part of the reason why many churches have not supported their members in their workplace ministry in the past is that people have not felt able to talk about their needs in church: it has seemed somehow “*unspiritual*”, or might be seen as a sign of failure on their part, or is not thought to be part of the core mission of the church, so it doesn't matter.

The lone spy who goes into enemy territory to try and subvert what is going on may appear to be acting alone, but he or she will have a huge back-up organisation back in the home base. The undercover policeman who infiltrates the organised crime network will have all the help he needs at the press of a button. Those who are out in the world day by day (and that's really all of us, folks) – possibly the only Christian in their workplace – should have others praying for them regularly and frequently. On all the

responses I've had back so far to the questionnaire about work (and it's not many, I must admit), the first thing folk have said the church could do for them is pray. It's tough changing people's opinions, gently steering attitudes into different ways of thinking, offering alternatives to the nihilism and frustration of post-modern thinking. It's bad enough trying to do it in church! But prayer can help.

But Jesus uses a second image here as well. And it seems a bit at odds with the first. Salt works powerfully but largely unseen to carry out its job of changing things from within. Light, on the other hand, cannot remain unseen, as Jesus says himself. How can we be salt *and* light at the same time? Having told his followers to act as salt, subverting society and shifting attitudes, why does he then say, "*Let your light so shine before others*"? Well, I believe it comes back to this idea of integrity and authenticity. Although we are called to get involved in our world, in our workplaces and neighbourhoods, as we've already said, we are to be involved *as Christians*. It should be obvious that there is something different – not necessarily wacky or weird, just different. And that distinctiveness should be due to our faith in Jesus and our desire to live according to his teaching, following his way of living. People may not know what it is initially, but there's something about you that marks you out as a person who not only behaves differently, but thinks differently. It may prompt questions – which is why Peter writes as he does in *1 Peter 3:15*.

Light stands out. A lamp cannot be hidden. But the light is there to illuminate other things. It stands out by virtue of what it is, but enables people to see something else. Christians stand out because of what they are, but – if they are living with integrity and authenticity – they enable others to catch a glimpse of Jesus Christ. Jesus actually says that his followers are to live in such a way that other people "*see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven*." Your behaviour and attitudes in the workplace should be such that people don't just say what a wonderful worker you are, but what a wonderful God you must have.

God has called you to be his ministers out there in your places of daily occupation and given you the task of subverting the culture around you – gently, gradually, influencing others in their attitudes and behaviour by your own lifestyle, your own priorities, your own faith. As you live out the ethics of the Kingdom of God, the light of God's presence should be shining through you. It is not easy. God has not called us to a life of comfort and ease. But he has given each of us all the back-up we need in terms of his own Holy Spirit and the support of others. Just as you pray for the help of the Holy Spirit in situations of difficulty and stress, so you should be able to call on the support of others to pray for you and stand by you when needed. Get out there and change the world!