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THE MYTH OF SECULAR WORK

by Eddy Hall and Gary Morsch

Jan Lundy runs a ministry organization, but you won't find it listed in the Yellow Pages under that heading. You'll have to look under "Laboratories." Her business, Precision Histology, is a medical laboratory that prepares microscope slides from which doctors diagnose patients' illnesses.

Precision Histology has been going for ten years now, and as the world measures success, it has not made much of a splash. For the first few years Jan had to reinvest all her earnings into the company to buy equipment, and today she earns only a modest wage. But that's okay with Jan because Precision Histology is succeeding at what it was created to do.

"From the beginning, our main purpose has been to help people," Jan explains. This happens in various ways. Jan hired lab technicians with little or no technical skill and gave them on-the-job training. Often these were mothers from low-income families who lacked the resources to pay for formal training. One technician she hired was already trained but was recovering from drug addiction and not physically able to go back to work in the hospital.

Jan also made it possible for employees to keep their children with them at work by providing a play area at the lab and, when necessary, hiring a child care worker at no cost to the mothers.

Karen, one of Jan's first trainees, returned to work for Jan full-time after gaining hospital experience. "Jan gave me a job when I had no job and no training to get a job," she says. "Christy was just six weeks old, and because Jan arranged for me to keep Christy at work I was able to nurse her."

As part of its ministry, the lab has prepared slides at no charge for three local nonprofit clinics serving low-income patients. But, at its most basic, the lab ministers through providing lab services. As the company name implies, Jan insists upon meticulous work, both from herself and her employees. "I treat each slide as though it is for a member of my own family," Jan says. "After all, each one is for somebody's mother, brother, or sister. When my slides help doctors accurately diagnose illnesses, I am ministering to the patients whether they know it or not." Most of the people to whom Jan and her coworkers minister, then, are people they never meet, but that doesn't make their ministry any less real or important.

Secular or sacred?

God doesn't view work the way our culture does. Our culture identifies a few vocations—those involving "professional ministry"—as sacred. Other vocations—such as accountant, sanitation worker, homemaker, and mechanic—it labels secular. These jobs, according to the conventional wisdom, are not concerned with religion.

But God does not want us to divide life into the religious and nonreligious, the secular and the holy. God calls us to so live that our entire lives are sacred. Paul writes, "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31). God calls us to do everything we do, from eating breakfast in the morning to working during the day to playing with our kids in the evening, with the purpose of bringing glory to God—causing others to think more highly of him. For the Christian, every aspect of life, every moment of every day, is to be holy.

Ministering through our work means more than simply ministering while at work. Looking for appropriate opportunities to talk about faith with coworkers, clients, or customers is important, but ministering through our work goes beyond this.

Ministering through our work means ministering to people's needs by the very work we do. Is this possible? Is it possible to minister by the act of baking bread? By the act of typing a letter? By the act of changing a diaper or washing dishes? Is it possible to minister by the act of driving a truck or building a house?

If we understand that ministry isn't restricted to meeting spiritual needs but includes responding in Christian love to any kind of need, the answer is yes. You may have been ministering through your work for many years, even if you haven't known to call it that.

Does this mean that all workers minister through their work? No, it doesn't. Whether your work is also ministry depends on the kind of work you do and the spirit in which you do it.

Assessing Your Job as Ministry

Test #1: Does your work meet needs?

In the New Testament the primary word for ministry is diakonia which means "service." If you compare different versions of the New Testament, you will find that the various forms of diakonia are often translated "service" and "serve" in one version and "ministry" and "minister" in another, or even in both ways within the same version. To minister, then, is to serve. It is to meet another's need.

When Jan Lundy and her employees prepare slides, they are meeting needs. They are helping to diagnose patients' illnesses so their doctors can prescribe appropriate treatment.

The cashier at your grocery store is helping to provide your family with food—an important need. The auto mechanic who repairs your car meets a need. Because the people doing these jobs meet people's needs, their jobs can be ministries.

Some jobs, though, do not meet people's needs. No matter how socially respectable a job may be, if it doesn't help to provide a service or product that meets people's needs, it is not ministry.

Test #2: Do you have a servant spirit?

For a job to be Christian ministry, though, it is not enough that it meet a need. It must also be motivated by servanthood.

When Melody, Eddy's wife, was in the hospital for the birth of their fourth child, she felt surrounded by God's care. This was due in no small part to the ministry of compassionate Christian nurses. One nurse, though, did not want to be there. She came into the room complaining that she had been called in. She complained about which floor she had been assigned to. She performed her duties, but never had a pleasant word for the patient. For her, taking care of Melody was not an opportunity to serve; it was just a job. Melody did not feel ministered to by that nurse.

A servant spirit can transform any useful job into a ministry. If a bank's computer programmer approaches his work not just as a way to earn a paycheck or increase the bank's profits, but as a way to serve the bank's customers with fast, accurate, dependable service—something we all need—the job can become a ministry, even if he never meets the customers. Being motivated by God's love for others is what makes the difference.

Whenever a Christian works with a caring commitment to serve those to whom he or she is providing needed goods or services, the work itself becomes more than a job; it is transformed into ministry.

The people you serve

When you work—whether at home, in an office, or in the cab of an eighteen-wheeler—who is it you are serving? Whose needs are you meeting by the product or service you help to provide? If you can answer that question, you are halfway toward having a ministry job rather than a secular job.

To go the other half of the way, you simply have to do your work for those people. Your goal, as you work, is to serve them, to meet their needs.

A Christian builder prays for the family that will live in the home he is building. A quilter prays for the family that will spend cold nights snuggled under her quilt. These workers have found ways to remind themselves who it is they are serving. They are inspired by the fact that their work will minister to specific people though they have not yet met them. Not only are they lovingly preparing a house and a quilt for their future owners, but by their prayers they are also releasing God's blessing into the lives of those they serve.

Remembering who it is you are serving can turn ordinary tasks into ministry. One mother we know confesses that when her baby demands to be held, she is tempted to feel like she's wasting time. As she rocks her baby, she isn't getting lunch cooked. She isn't getting the laundry done.

But one day as she was impatiently rocking her baby, she remembered the last sentence of a magazine article she'd read. It said, "A baby needs to be held when a baby needs to be held." That line reminded her that she was engaged in one of the most important ministries in the world—showing love to her child. She was then able to relax and concentrate on "doing love," confident there was no better way to invest her time.

How can you remind yourself of who it is you're serving with your work? By putting a picture of a representative customer on the wall above your desk? By praying for the person who will receive each package you ship out of the shipping room? By offering a warm smile and a kind word to each customer you wait on? Whatever your reminder is, allow a vision of the people you serve through your work to inspire you to add the secret ingredient of love to every task. When love for those you serve inspires your daily work, your work becomes ministry.

No Christian should do "secular" work—work that is not sacred. Whether paid or unpaid, performed at home or the office or the factory, any legitimate work can glorify God and serve other people. Every Christian's work can be holy.

This article is adapted from *THE LAY MINISTRY REVOLUTION: How You Can Join* by Eddy Hall and Gary Morsch (Baker Books). Designed for use in study/action groups, the book is a tool for mobilizing the laity within a local church for ministry.

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