

*Philip Yancey and I were invited to be keynote speakers at a conference for young professionals from Eastern and Central Europe, a conference hosted by Mission Eurasia. This is the text of my presentation to the 500-600 participants.*

**Next Generation Professional Leadership Initiative (NGPLI) Forum**  
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**Your Marketplace Ministry**

Greetings, brothers and sisters in Christ! It is a joy and a privilege for me to be here with you. Before I share my thoughts on “Your Marketplace Ministry,” I want to ask you a few questions.

- How many of you have careers in business or are in school preparing to work in the field of business? Please raise your hand.
- How many of you have careers in information technology (IT) or are in school preparing to work in IT? Please raise your hands.
- How many of you have careers in health care/medicine or are preparing to work in this field? Please raise your hands.
- How many of you work in education as teachers or administrators or are preparing to work in this field? Please raise your hands.
- How about the legal field?
- Media/communications?
- Church work?

Isn't this impressive? Now think about this. What do you think God is up to? What's God's strategy and what is our role? If you are a follower of Jesus, and if you are convinced that your work is a calling from God, and not just a job, if you learn to see your work as a service that goes beyond merely your own personal interests, you are playing an important role in God's strategy for our time.

Look around the room. The people in this room who are followers of Jesus as all MINISTERS or, as the Apostle Paul says, AMBASSADORS. This room is full of Ministers of Business, Ministers of IT, Ministers of Health Care, Minister of Education, Ministers of Law, Ministers of Social Work, and Ministers of every other professional field. That's God's strategy!

Our work is one of the ways we make ourselves useful to others, rather than just focusing on ourselves. A British writer, Dorothy Sayers gave us this insight: “What is the Christian understanding of work? It is that work is not, primarily, a thing one does to live, but the thing one lives to do.” It is the way each of us does service to God, by serving others.

Friends, you are not second-class Christians. Your work is as important as that of pastors and missionaries – we are all ministers, working in different fields. We are all needed to fulfill God’s mission in our world and each of you is important to that work. This means there is no unemployment in the Kingdom of God – all of us have work to do, especially when we realize that our work is a ministry, a calling, a part of God’s plan to heal and restore His broken world.

### **A Brief Theology of Work**

I want to briefly talk some more about a **Theology of Work**, so you have a Biblical understanding of how you as young professionals are so important in God’s plan. Each of you can be an important part of God’s strategy. Let’s explore what the Bible says about work, about work as ministry, and about what your lives in the marketplace represents from God’s perspective.

The Bible has both good news and bad news about work. First, the good news. Work was created by God as a part of his original plan for men and women. It was not a result of the fall, of the sin of Adam and Eve. The earliest job description occurs in the Book of Genesis, in the creation account, in which God commands men and women to “fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion” (Genesis 1:28). This job description comes from a God who himself is a worker. It is striking to me that no other religion in the world holds to a belief in a God who works! This is important to understand because it highlights the reality that our work as professionals is part of God’s divine creative plan.

What this means is that we are each co-creators with God. Our work is much more than a mechanical process through which we make a living. The purpose of work, according to the Bible, is to serve God, help our family and others in need, and develop God’s creation in order that all of us can live in peace and enjoy blessings God has given to us as his people. Work is part of what it means to be human, according to God’s

design in creation. Work is as much a basic human need as food, beauty, rest, and friendship. Pastor Tim Keller has written that “Work is so foundational to our makeup as humans that it is one of the few things we can take in significant doses without harm.” Each of you was designed for work and given a calling to be a worker. That creates great opportunities for you as a follower of Jesus.

Just as God equips Christians to build up the Body of Christ/the church, so he also equips all of us for various kinds of work for the purpose of building up the human community. Let me repeat my first point about your work as ministry. If you believe God has called you to be his minister in the marketplace, then your daily work can be seen as God’s assignment to serve others, not just yourself. That’s exactly how the Bible teaches us to view work.

But there is also bad news about work, according to the Bible. As a result of the sin of Adam and Eve, recorded in Genesis 3, work is no longer the pure joy that God intended it to be. The blessing became a burden and the joy became toil – hard work. What Satan has done is turn work into hard mental and physical labor – often frustrating and monotonous. In addition, in our modern culture we are taught that we work to primarily benefit ourselves and maybe our family and we often become convinced that our work gives us our identity. Work, in fact, becomes an idol for which we make many sacrifices. We will go to schools for years, work long hours – often six days a week, because we want to excel and get recognized for our accomplishments. Work can become our love, but it makes for a lousy lover. Our identity needs to be in our relationship to Jesus, not in our achievements in the marketplace.

In the United States, Western and Eastern Europe and in Eurasia, technology and the market have become the idols of our societies. For most people, there is no longer any vision of a healthy human life or good human society. We are left with nothing but individual competition for personal success and power.

In my twenty years as a professor in the United States, followed by fifteen years teaching university students in Russia, I saw that many students do not choose work that actually fits their abilities or talents, but rather choose work that fits their imagination – work that will boost their own self-image. Choosing work that doesn’t fit them leads to

dissatisfaction or meaninglessness in work. The Biblical warning is not to define yourself by the status of your work. Your identity needs to be in your relationship to Jesus, not in your profession or job title.

Our secular, materialistic societies fail to provide meaning to our lives. Secularism does not and cannot answer the three questions every thoughtful person will ask at some point in their life: Who am I? Why am I here? How then shall I live? The 21<sup>st</sup> century has left us with a maximum of choice and a minimum of meaning! (Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name*, pp; 12-13).

**That's my first point: Ask God to help you hear his calling so that you can view your work as a ministry, a way of being a co-creator with serving others – loving your neighbor as yourself through your work!**

### **Wednesday Luncheon Group**

My second point: it is really hard to be a faithful minister of Jesus in the marketplace on your own. The pressures are too great. Being a loner will lead to failure – you need partners, friends – people who love you and care for you and who will be truthful with you.

Let me share with you an experience I had when I was about your age – which was a long time ago! I attended an Evangelical church in Washington, D.C., in which our pastor told us every Sunday: **You go nowhere by accident!** Our pastor would periodically remind us that if God is a sovereign being, if he is the one who impacts our life, every place we go, everything we do, is not an accident. It has a purpose.

The second theme we heard every week was this: **Be the presence of Jesus everywhere you go!** He said this meant in our jobs, in your workplaces. **Be the scent of Christ, the aroma of Jesus.** I have never forgotten this!

After hearing these words week after week, four of us decided to begin a Wednesday luncheon group on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., where we all worked in the Congress or in education or for the government. When we first began to meet, our pastor encouraged us to hold each other accountable for being good husbands and good fathers and not to

sacrifice our marriages or our children on the altar of our jobs, which often happened in the competitive work environment in America's capital city. We would pray for each other, share developments in our families, and challenge each other to be witnesses for Christ in our workplace. When we failed to be witnesses, because we were embarrassed or too timid, we confessed this to each other and asked the others to pray for us to become more courageous. The slogan we used was this: "Let's build a bridge of friendship that can carry the weight of truth!"

After a number of years, we then began talking about how our faith impacted the work that we did every day. Because we had learned to trust each other, to become close friends, we now were able to talk about issues related to what we did on the job and how our faith in Jesus should make a difference in the work we did. We needed each other's help to see how we were the "aroma of Christ" at our desk five or six days a week. Our group which grew to be a dozen men who met every week for fifteen (15) years - these guys became life-long friends of mine. Do you have a group of friends like this? I would encourage you to build a small network of companions who can support you and challenge you to be witnesses to the truth of the Gospel in your workplace.

By the way, when I was President of the Russian-American Christian University (RACU) in Moscow, we formed a similar group with ten young Russian and American businessmen using the same principle of first building the "bridge of friendship" so we could talk about true issues in our lives. The Russians in our group had very few friends in their workplace and they were unsure they wanted to share with anyone about their personal lives for fear that it would be used against them somehow. It took almost two years to develop trust between all of us, but once we did, some amazing things happened. I would encourage you, as young professionals, do form similar groups. We need each other because the pressures in our world are very strong and push us in directions that are destructive.

### **Become Agents of Hope**

Point one: Your work is a ministry and you can be ambassadors for Jesus in the marketplace. Point two: You can't do this alone – you need partners who will hold each other accountable for being faithful to Jesus.

My final point will be brief: in the marketplace, in your families, in the communities where you live, be agents of hope. The default position for most people in our societies is cynicism, anger, resentment and fear. Do you know what the most often-repeated command in Scripture is? **Do not be afraid!**

As followers of Jesus, we need to be agents of healing, builders of a just society where all people are treated as equals and with the respect they deserve because they were all created in the image of God. God the Father sent Jesus into the world to announce his Kingdom and Jesus has passed on this responsibility to us. We are to bear witness to God's desire that the world needs healing and restoration and we are his agents to make this happen. One of my teachers taught me a long time ago that hope has three dimensions: imagination, faith and passion.

Do you have enough imagination to see what God wants us to do to heal the wounds in our societies? In the American context, Martin Luther King Jr's speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., on August 28, 1963, was a model of this. Dr. King spoke words which will never be forgotten in America. He said he looked forward to the day when all of God's children would let freedom ring. 'Free at last, free at last; thank God Almighty, we are free at last!' He had the imagination to see what society would look like when there are no racism and when all people would be free, despite the color of their skin.

Second, genuine hope is grounded in faith in God. It is God's desire that there be peace and justice in the world which would allow men and women to live a harmonious life. The Bible teaches us to see beyond our own self-interest and to see the world through the eyes of others and to focus on their needs. Biblical hope has a wide-angle lens – it takes in whole nations and peoples, the entire created order.

Third, Biblical hope involves passion. It is one thing to imagine, it is another to ground that imagination in faith, but it is essential that there be passion and desire related to hope. When we view injustice and evil, we can say with conviction, "It doesn't have to be like this!" Instead of

cynicism, which allows us to simply walk away when we see evil, Biblical hope says these things have to be changed.

One final thought: the Bible describes a triad between faith, hope and love. By its connection with love, Christian hope is freed from all selfishness. Hope cannot exist apart from faith, and love can not be exercised without hope.

Let me re-affirm: First, God is asking us to be his ministers, his ambassadors, his disciples, and if we remember that “we go nowhere by accident” and are called “to be the presence (or aroma) of Christ” wherever we live and work, our lives will have meaning and purpose far beyond anything we can imagine. Second, don’t go through life alone; nurture friendships with other Believers who are committed to support each other. And finally, be an agent of hope, an agent of reconciliation and grace in our broken world, following the model of Jesus.

Thank you for your attention. Blessings, dear friends!

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Words of encouragement for you as young professionals:

“Do you not know? Have you not heard?  
 The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.  
 He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding  
 no one can fathom.  
 He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.  
 Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but  
 those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength.  
 They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary,  
 they will walk and not faint.”  
 (Isaiah 40: 28-31, NIV)