



Root Canals and “Real” Ministry

Greg H. Parsons



Recently a friend of mine, a businessman in India – we’ll call him “Bill” – needed a root canal. One advantage to living in this region and needing this kind of work is the price: US\$30!

If you were the dental patient in this instance, would you ask yourself, “Does this oral surgeon really know what he is doing? Was he in the top or bottom of his class? Was that school at the top or bottom of all dental schools?”

You might also ask, “Is this oral surgeon a Christian?” Actually, reflecting on this later, Bill hoped he was not! Why?

Somehow many have lost the idea of the priesthood of all believers during Monday through Saturday.

Bill has worked with those from a Christian background in this area. Somehow in this area – and in some other areas – Christians have a mentality that says, in effect, “Work is a means to an end, it is of little value to God, it is a necessary evil. If you are really spiritual, if you want to make the greatest impact, you will get into the ‘ministry’ – perhaps even ‘full-time.’”

Such a way of thinking is pretty sad. Somehow many have lost the idea of the priesthood of all believers during Monday through Saturday. Yet others remind us that quality, faithful, diligent, honest work is something that has value in itself. (One such reminder comes from *Your Work Matters to God*, by Sherman and Hendricks, NavPress, 1987.) That kind of work points to God and allows our words to be heard.

The reality is that those of us in “full-time ministry” will never have as much impact as those in the workplace, in your neighborhoods, in your schools. Pastors and missionaries don’t normally live on your street or go to your workplace. The words of a full-time worker or pastor may not carry much influence because many believe they are paid to say the right words.

Statistics show that we will never reach the world through full-time workers alone. We will continue to see only small gains in many of the difficult places until we see the whole Body of Christ engaged and seeing

themselves as active, everyday, servants of the Lord to those they can impact.

Back to Bill and his root canal: the procedure turned out just fine, and Bill never learned if his surgeon was a Christian or not. But Bill found himself reflecting on this question because – in more than one business – Bill had provided jobs for Christians in a region where (a) there aren’t many and (b) people aren’t accustomed to working hard. Furthermore, Bill had discovered that Christians would not work as hard or as long. They might arrive late or leave early. They might have other priorities for their time and mental energy. And a pastor who desires for them to be in “real” ministry might encourage this way of thinking and working.

Bill had needed to terminate the employment of many of these Christians. It has been very hard for him to process these issues, but he couldn’t operate successful businesses with employees whose hearts were not in their work.

How do we view work? Business books will tell you that the goal of any business is to maximize profits. But it should *also* be to *do good* both to those who work for you and in what you are actually doing! Dennis Bakke notes in *Joy at Work* (2005, PVG): “The purpose of business is not to maximize profits for shareholders but to steward our resources to serve the world in an economically sustainable way.” Bakke goes beyond personal honesty and faithfulness to the collective good in wider impact.

Do we believe and teach that in our churches? Do we live it out during our workday and in our work? As Ralph Winter reiterates in his editorial in this issue of *Mission Frontiers*, in many places in the world evangelicals are the trusted ones. I hope and pray that this will become true in more places so that the witness of true believers will shine through in every aspect of life. 🌐

Statistics show that we will never reach the world through full-time workers alone.



Rev. Greg Parsons is General Director of the U.S. Center for World Mission.