



The Lawyers' Christian Fellowship

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Free in Christ: ego and the workplace

Timothy Laurence (July 2011)

Introduction

How do you write an email to a client when you've missed a deadline? What happens when your PA or trainee lets you down and puts another lawyer's work first? What happens when you've briefed a colleague about a point of law and you've realised you were wrong? What happens when the other side in a dispute have made an error?

What drives our responses to these situations?

The vision of the LCF is to bring the whole good news of Jesus Christ within the legal world. To do that we need to understand both the "legal world" and how the "good news" of Jesus relates to it.

To most the *legal world* is our world from Monday to Friday, and the *good news of Jesus* is our world on Sunday. Often the legal world is located in the centre of town shaped by economic realities, whilst the good news of Jesus is located near our local church shaped by theological realities – and as a result these become parallel lives.

But what if these two spheres are not totally separate – what if the legal world is just a theological world in disguise? What if the defining concerns of today's legal world are the defining concerns of the Bible story? or put another way, What if we see the human condition and the outworking of the gospel *in the office* even more clearly than we see them *in the church*?"

The tendency is to think that our Christianity can take a back-seat during our professional lives, but in reality we ought to be seeing our Christianity driving our professional lives.

The cultural mindset

I'd like to suggest that **the central driving concern of today's legal culture is the ego**. For most people, the way we act depends on who we think we are and the professional identity we are shaping for ourselves. These fictional characters may be familiar.

- John is in the running for partnership. He is intent on rapidly building his own network of client relationships. He wants to be known by the client as the dependable one of the team who they can give the work to and count upon. Today John needed to send a draft back to a client at 3pm. His trainee gave him the draft of the document by mid-morning but John's day has been busy with other

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meetings. Only by 3.30pm has he reviewed the work and is ready to send it out. Now what is the client going to think of John? So rather than send out the work himself, John e-mails it to his trainee to send out. The client will then associate the lateness with the trainee's name: a subtle exercise in damage limitation.

- Charlotte is a senior associate. She's smart and has developed a reputation for navigating complex legislation and secondary legislation impeccably. Yesterday however, she completely confused a junior associate when introducing her to a new piece of draft legislation. The junior associate comes back a day later still confused, despite having spent four hours following all Charlotte's instructions. Charlotte realises she mis-read the relationship between two clauses, but rather than admit this to her junior colleague, she embarks on a convoluted explanation of the true position, and asks the junior associate to do the work again before Charlotte sends it out, having wasted both of their time and charged it to the client.
- Grant is enjoying his new role in chambers. He turned a case around last week that others were reluctant to take on because it looked like a disaster. Miraculously, he won, but unknown to his colleagues it was all due to a mistake by the other side. Now he's conscious that people are noticing him and even some of the silks are nodding as he goes past.

We all recognise these kinds of caricatures, and can think of others. Each is conscious of their identity within the profession. We all want to be utterly reliable, with an impeccable legal brain and be capable of juggling a busy work load. We desire to be the promising young star or the magnanimous boss.

These are all issues of identity. People sub-consciously create an identity for themselves, and then all the actions we take are the outworking of that mindset. I am this, I am that, I am the other, I need , I, I, I, I, – the Greek term is 'ego'.

The ego is the sense of the self-determined identity which drives our actions and is the identity-mindset which shapes all our behaviour. It drives every detail of our working life and career and also explains so many of the negative aspects of legal culture.

Why is law particularly susceptible to the dominance of the ego?

Our profession places a high premium on the individual question of your self-determined professional identity. You are what you make yourself.

An entry in the Legal 500 or Chambers guide is the sign of a flourishing career, particularly if you are a 'key individual'. Our profession is built on client relationships and revolves around personal reputation and our own individual website profiles – we are quite literally self-made. We've all had to progress through the same education and professional qualifications: there is an identifiable sub-culture: there is such a thing as a legal world – which can have its big and little fishes.

Whilst legislation, governments and clients change it is your reputation and identity as a lawyer that must remain constant: you are who you make yourself to be.

If we are going to be discerning about today's legal culture, we need to realise that for everyone the question of "Who are you?" defines our identity – which in turn impacts on our mindset and then drives how we act.

So what about us as Christians within this context?

If we're honest, it is not just that we ourselves feel the effects of other people's egos, but we all take part in the ego circus. As Christians we don't escape the question in our legal culture of "who are you?"

It may be tempting to think that this topic has very little to do with the central realities of the gospel and the concerns of the church, but what if, in stumbling across this issue of the ego and our self-defined identity, far away from our home in the church, we have unwittingly come face to face with the central matter with which the Bible is concerned?

As Christians the call for alternative living within the ego-culture of the legal world is not a specialised optional matter for advanced Christianity, but it is at the very heart of what it means to have a relationship with God. The Bible teaches that **the ego is the central spiritual problem of the human race**, and if that is the case, then unless we live differently in the office, we have no functional Christian life at all. We are effectively not Christians.

That is a big claim to make, but this is exactly what the Bible teaches.

You might say that the Bible says that sin is the problem, but what is sin? It maybe we are used to thinking of sin in terms of different battles, the battle against...anger, lust, alcohol, gossip, laziness or overwork, bad-language.

However the Bible says it is much simpler than that: these are 'merely' outworkings of the flesh.

"The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God."¹

But what is the flesh? On the one hand our human bodies descended from Adam and on the other our sinful mindset descended from Adam. It is the latter we are interested in.

In the garden of Eden Adam effectively said: "I will be who I want ...". He wanted to forge his own identity, to do it his own way. He wanted to be like God. He wanted to be self-defining. And so for us sins are not just sins, they are the outworking of a mindset saying that I want to be independent of God. The human problem is not what we do, *but how we think*.

"The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and

divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.”ⁱⁱ

So while no-one is murdering each other in the office (although it can sometimes seem like that!), the underlying problem is still the same. Without Christ we are caught up in the proud self-defining ego-orientated mindset that is cut off from God and having to define itself.

So if we can understand how the good news of Jesus tackles our sinful behaviour, we can understand how the same good news will transform our lives in the office – even in things we might not automatically recognise as spiritual issues.

The good news of Jesus Christ sets us free by giving us a new identity

If your identity shapes your mindset which in turn shapes your actions, where do you tackle the problem?

In our ego-centric world we too often try to tackle the problem at the external level of our actions, thereby putting even more reliance on the ego-mindset - “I can sort this out by my own efforts, rules, regulations”. This of course is the wrong way. Self-reliance will end up failing us again.

“Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules: “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”? These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The only way of enabling our lives and our mindset to be changed is at the root: when our whole identity is changed by being joined to Christ. This is what happens when we are born again and become a Christian. As Paul said to the Corinthian church, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.”, and to the Galatians:

“For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”^{iv}

So when Jesus died and rose again, he was changing our identity from being cut off from God to being part of God. As a result, if you are “in Christ” it is factually incorrect to describe your identity or perceive yourself as yourself other than in your connection to Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit in you.

When we are joined to Jesus by the Holy Spirit, our mindset can and should follow suit, so that we are always aware of our relationship with Christ, and enjoy our freedom. Making ourselves mini-gods at work is no longer necessary and we have no need to create our own identity. We have no need to fear, and instead have

‘spare capacity’ to allow Christ’s love to overflow positively from our hearts to others in our working environment. This is what it means to walk by the Spirit, and this is what we should do.

The irony is that if we live like this, with Christ in the office, we actually gain a reputation of being dependable, personable and hard-working. Jesus said: if you lose your life you will find it, but if you try to save your life you will lose it.

Who are you as a Christian lawyer and how are you defined? Remember, if you are a Christian, whether you like it or not, your identity is in Christ. With this in mind we can freely put our trust not in ourselves but in Christ, remembering at all times the good news of the gospel, and letting this mindset change our actions. The power of Christ sets us free to walk by His Spirit and not by our flesh, which is good news for us and for our profession.

Bio: Tim Laurence delivered this seminar as Chairman of the London Committee. In 2010 he left practice as a solicitor within Hogan Lovells’ financial institutions group in order to work with LCF in public theology and strategy, and to study with KLICE, Cambridge and London Theological Seminary. He also serves in the leadership team at his local church in South East London.

ⁱ Galatians 5 v 19-21 (NIV)

ⁱⁱ Romans 1 v 18-23 (NIV)

ⁱⁱⁱ Colossians 2 v 20-23 (NIV)

^{iv} Galatians 2 v 19-20 (NIV)