

10-16-2002

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Recommended Citation

Hawkins, Carl S., "Professional Service as a Christian Ministry" (2002). *Vol. 1: Answering God's Interrogatories*. 21.
https://digitalcommons.law.byu.edu/life_law_vol1/21

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Professional Service as a Christian Ministry

Carl S. Hawkins

We do not enjoy reminders that we are indebted to others, but sometimes reminders help to sharpen our perspective and increase our resolve. That is why I feel it is appropriate to remind you at the beginning of your legal education that you are indebted to the tithe payers of the Church for more than two-thirds of the cost of your legal education. Your own tuition (often paid in part by others) covers less than one-third of the operating costs of the Law School and makes no contribution to the establishment of this building, our library, and other capital resources.

I offer this reminder to make you think about why the Church has chosen to confer such generous benefits upon you. Surely it is not because you have personally inherited or earned some superior right or claim upon the trust funds of the Kingdom. Neither is it a good enough reason to suppose that the Church wants only to increase your earning capacity so that you can pay more tithing. Sadly enough, that is about as far as some students seem to get in their thinking about the justification of their educational subsidy. In fact, the future tithing on your increased earning capacity might be enough to repay the Church for its investment in your education. But if we are going to reduce this to bare economics, it would be cheaper for the Church, instead of establishing this Law School, to give you tuition grants to attend secular law schools, and it would still get the increased tithing returns on your larger earning capacity as a lawyer.

The Church's reason for subsidizing your preparation for a law career must be based upon some hope that you will get from this school something more than passage into an affluent profession. It must be based upon a hope that you will acquire here not only the necessary legal knowledge and professional skills, but also a commitment to using them not selfishly, but in the service of others. In that belief, I invite you to begin thinking about your law career as an opportunity for a Christian ministry through professional service. This high perspective will not be easy for you to acquire or to maintain. There will be many obstacles.

First, the attempt to idealize your profession as a Christian ministry may appear to conflict with theological disapproval of “paid ministries.” Pretensions to a ministry in a paid profession may even suggest the evils of “priestcraft,” condemned so often in the Book of Mormon. But priestcraft is the claim to exclusive custody of saving truths and ordinances of the gospel and the pretense of power to dispense them for personal gain. If we make no pretense of selling salvation, there is no priestcraft in accepting pay for professional services anymore than accepting pay for any honest hard work. And if we perform the service with our whole soul, skillfully, and as a witness of our love for God, it can become a kind of ministry to those we serve.

Another difficulty with viewing professional service as a Christian ministry is the irony that it may be easier for active Mormons to segment their lives and to satisfy their religious aspirations in formal church callings. You may feel content to say, “My mission was two years ago in Germany,” or “My ministry is my calling as a Relief Society teacher.” This may satisfy your need to feel that you are a religious person without having to worry about how your religion applies in the rest of your life. If so, you are deluding yourself.

When the Lord commands that we love him with all of our heart, might, mind and strength, he is not concerned so much with the intensity of our feelings as with the breadth and completeness of our commitment. For the committed Christian, every part of his or her being must become a living witness of love for Christ. Your life must become your ministry. Your roles as husband or wife, parent, friend, church worker, student, and lawyer must all become missions within that ministry, and your whole person, including your religious values, must become engaged in every part of that ministry.

Some of us who have taught at other law schools have observed that Christian law students from other churches who do not have our opportunities to serve in formal church callings unless they become professional ministers seem to feel more than we do the need to pour their religious fervor into their professional calling and to make that their witness for Christ. We should feel the same need no less, even though we have other callings from time to time to serve in other ways.

Another obstacle to viewing law school as preparation for a service ministry will be the daily grind of law school itself. Many of you will have to work harder than you ever have before. There will be stress and anxiety caused by having to learn new ways of thinking, aggravated by a lack of adequate feedback on how you are doing. Your sense of security and, for some of you, even your sense of worth may be threatened temporarily as you seem to be competing in faster company than ever before. And very little that goes on from day to day in the classroom will remind you of the higher aspirations of a Christian ministry. Most of your learning efforts will be spent on acquiring secular knowledge of the law and developing the lawyer’s tough-minded skills of analysis and advocacy.

You will have to keep in mind that such knowledge and skill are indispensable preparation for an effective life of professional service, even if they are not enough to fulfill your higher aspirations. Your preparation at this Law School will be no less rigorous than at other good law schools. That sometimes disappoints some of our students, who seem to expect that, because this is a church-sponsored school, and because they are religious persons, their professional development should come easier by some special dispensation without having to work for it, or else they suppose that their religious beliefs will somehow make them superior lawyers without having to acquire all of the tedious knowledge and hard skills that are required of less pious lawyers. That is, of course, a perversion of our religious beliefs.

The Lord has never promised to give us knowledge or skill without effort and pain, and the Ninth Section of the Doctrine and Covenants states explicitly that in seeking to understand a matter, we must first work it out for ourselves. This is not to suggest that spiritual insights have no place in your legal education, but only to remind you that your secular knowledge of the law must be acquired by the same grinding process that applies to everyone else, and only after that may you expect to receive occasional spiritual insights into the higher significance of what you have learned.

Many of you will have difficulty viewing law as a Christian ministry because you harbor ambiguous feelings about the moral character of lawyers. From our larger culture, you have absorbed mixed impressions or images of lawyers as persons of power and prestige and as defenders of sacred rights, on the one hand, and as aggressive manipulators, hired guns, defenders of the guilty, protectors of wealth and special privilege, and moral equivocators, on the other hand. Certainly you cannot aspire to law as a Christian ministry until you are at least tentatively reconciled to the possibility that a lawyer can be professionally effective and still be a morally good person. That process of reconciliation should begin now, with the first day of law school, even if it cannot be completed here.

You can start with the reassurance that the General Authorities of the Church believe that it is possible to be both an effective lawyer and a devout Christian. That is why they have given you J. Reuben Clark, Jr., as a model. Unfortunately, most of your generation know of President Clark only dimly as a great Church leader, counselor to Presidents Heber J. Grant, George Albert Smith, and David O. McKay. But for 27 years before he became a Church official, J. Reuben Clark was a successful, powerful, and prestigious lawyer in government service, in private practice, and in the service of great corporations in Washington, D.C. and on Wall Street. Surely the message implied by establishing this Law School in his honor is not that a lawyer can become a good Christian only by abandoning the legal profession for full-time church service. The message must be that J. Reuben Clark was a good Christian while he was an effective lawyer in the professional service of his

country and his private clients. I urge you to begin studying that model by reading Frank Fox's superb biography, *J. Reuben Clark: The Public Years*.

There are two paths you can travel in seeking to accommodate your professional calling and your religious beliefs. One is the path of delusion and segmentation; the other is the path of reconciliation and integration. The path of reconciliation is the harder way, but it is the truthful way. The easy way is the delusion that you can separate your Christian aspirations from that part of yourself that is engaged in earning a living. It is easier because you can then let the secular world define your professional role for you, and you can limit your professional aspirations by the ethics of role. The study of professional ethics for lawyers is a serious and worthwhile part of your legal education. Professional ethics will lift your standards above the daily mores of commerce and politics, but they cannot be substituted for your Christian aspirations if you want to be at a peace with yourself.

That is why I invite you to begin now upon the higher path of reconciliation, to prepare for the legal profession as a Christian ministry. It will be a lifetime process and a highly personal one, for which you must accept individual responsibility. It has to happen within you. We cannot inject it into you. We may be able to help you a little. We are concerned that we may not have tried to help enough. We are resolved to try harder. For those who wish to try it, the Professional Seminar, offered for the first time this year, will provide an intimate forum for explicit discussion of these very concerns.

For those of you who are not Mormons, I hope these remarks about religion and profession will not cause you to feel any less welcome. We recognize that your ideals and aspirations can be just as high as ours. I hope you will interpret my remarks as urging you to make your professional career a ministry in the service of your highest ideals and aspirations. And please feel free to share your beliefs with us. You will make our education richer by doing that, which is part of why we have invited you here.

And for all of you, I hope this somber message has not dampened your enthusiasm for the adventure which you are about to begin. Learning to become lawyers can be exciting and stimulating. It can even be fun. So let's get on with it.

This address was given to the entering class at the BYU Law School on August 22, 1981. Reprinted from the Clark Memorandum, Fall 1999, 8–11.

Carl S. Hawkins received his J.D. from Northwestern University School of Law in 1951, clerked for Chief Justice Fred Vinson of the U.S. Supreme Court 1953–53, and served as Dean of the J. Reuben Clark Law School 1981–85. He was named an emeritus professor in 1991. His book, The Founding of the J. Reuben Clark Law School, was published in 1999.