

The U.S. Senate's Unanimous Vote

John D. Beckett

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My heart was pounding as I began the hike down Commonwealth Avenue. The counsel I would receive from Dr. Ferris could determine my life's direction. Dr. Ferris, the imposing rector and thought-provoking preacher at Boston's Trinity Church, Copley Square, had become larger than life for me, though we had never met personally. His sonorous weekly sermons were the extent of my spiritual input as a student at MIT. Now, with his accumulated wisdom, surely, he would give me the direction I was seeking.

"I have a dilemma," I blurted out, "and I thought you could help. My question is whether to launch my career in business or ministry. Even before I began college, I wrestled with whether some form of Christian service would be a 'higher call'. Now that I'm about to graduate, I think I'm drawn toward engineering or business, but don't want to disobey God if he is calling me into ministry." Dr. Ferris' response was terse, but profound. "If God is calling you into ministry, you'll know it." I realized my impulse was rooted in a sense of obligation rather than a true call. As if to confirm the point, the very next day I received a job offer from Boeing—not exactly a Christian ministry!

Still, as I began my career as an engineer (with a different aerospace company) the nagging question remained—was I being fully obedient? Frankly, I had no context for a life of Christian service outside church-related work. It was a full seven years later when, after a series of large and bitter challenges that I earnestly implored God for clarity. It was then that I heard, I'm sure from heaven, "John, I've called you to business. I want you to do it with all your heart."

The relief was palpable. My response was specific: "I will do my utmost to conduct business consistent with my faith." That faith was rooted in the Scriptures, a collection of 66 books that would become my lifelong guide. Every aspect of my business dealings would have a reference point: to the best of my capabilities, decisions would be ethical; people would be valued; finances would be impeccably managed; customer relations would be transparent and honest. Values like honor, integrity and compassion would be etched deeply into the fabric of daily activities. My goal would be to serve a larger purpose, one that would transcend the proverbial bottom line.

I was, by this time, in a family business that manufactured components for heating systems, a small but growing enterprise begun by my dad during the Great Depression. We believed we were unconstrained by any laws that would limit applying our faith to our work. Perhaps we were naïve, for indeed we had seen encroachment in other sectors, especially education, beginning with prayer being removed from the classroom in the late 1960s.

In the fall of 1993, our sense of security was shattered. The EEOC, by now a powerful regulatory watchdog, had issued guidelines that many felt could severely restrict workplace freedoms our nation had always enjoyed. In our case, we concluded the commission's approach would directly impede our

desire to align our work with God's design. It was almost by accident that we became aware of these impending restrictions. Here's how it happened:

An attorney in Atlanta was perusing a recently published *Federal Register* and stumbled on proposed guidelines amending the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Immediately, she saw some ominous provisions that could severely constrain what we could and couldn't do as an employer. She put her head down and dashed off a brief, which I received just prior to the close of the sixty-day period for public comment. I hastily expressed my concerns to the EEOC and encouraged other business friends to do the same.

It appeared nothing could stop the guidelines from sailing through Congress to become law. Our letters of objection, fewer than ten, were impotent. Hey, I thought as my agitation mounted, these bureaucrats are messing with our turf! They're going to shut down workplace Bible studies. No more prayer before business meetings. Carols at a Christmas dinner? Forget it! Don't even think about displaying a poster for a church-related event. Leave that jewelry with a religious symbol at home in the dresser drawer.

I felt like a flea staring down an elephant. But there were subtle encouragements to push back, for example the verse I read in Isaiah 28, assuring that the Lord would give strength to "those who hold back the battle at the gate." Time was of the essence and the battle was before us, right at the gate. Act now, or it would be too late. If these guidelines became law, we would never reverse their impact. The prohibition of religious expression would silence every person of faith, from the owner of the corner drugstore to the salesman or production worker with a multinational corporation. Already, in anticipation of the decision, a major airline had begun censoring bulletin board notices, forbidding any reference to religious content.

Though dismayed, I was about to learn a valuable lesson on God's provision. I discovered that while the public could no longer comment, members and former members of Congress could. I reached out to Mark, a congressman from Michigan. He immediately realized the danger and jumped into the fray. He was inspired! It wasn't just Mark. It was God, who just happened to send a paralyzing blizzard to Washington D.C. that delayed the January reconvening of Congress. That delay gave us needed time to get this issue on the radar screen of several members of the House and Senate.

The effort picked up steam. A nationwide crescendo of prayer ensued. A TV network did a story at our company illustrating the kind of activities, such as an employee prayer gathering, that might have to be abandoned. Other news sources picked up the story, including the *Wall Street Journal* which wrote a hard-hitting article for which I was interviewed. Congressional offices were besieged with mail and phone calls. In contrast to the earlier trickle, people bombarded the EEOC with more than 100,000 letters of protest, ten times the number they had received on any previous issue. Practically no one wrote in support!

Part way through the process, a coalition was invited to meet with EEOC attorneys to discuss the guidelines. Yes, the Lord has a sense of humor! The coalition included the unlikely combination of the conservative National Association of Evangelicals and the liberal American Civil Liberties Union. The meeting with the EEOC was cordial but combative. As I was leaving EEOC's headquarters in Washington, I noticed an attractive poster in an office cubicle that featured a verse from the Bible. I couldn't resist drawing one of the EEOC attorneys aside to whisper that under the proposal it would have to go. She winced. The matter had come close to home. I imagined the Lord's smile. He was in this!

The final breakthrough came as a resolution was introduced into the U.S. Senate, one that would cut off funding to the EEOC to further promote these guidelines. Miraculously, in a rare display of unity, the

Senate voted 100 to 0 for passage! Soon after, the House followed with an overwhelming, though not unanimous, vote. Faced with this wall of resistance, in the fall of 1994 the EEOC withdrew the guidelines.

It was a tremendous victory, an affirmation to me that the same God who created the far-flung heavens also cares about our having uncontested freedom to voice matters of faith in the workplace.

It was also a wake-up call, especially to those of us in business, that our liberties must not be assumed. The EEOC challenge brought us within a razor's edge of a government mandate that could have cost us these liberties forever. This battle further confirmed that we in business must be bold in the exercise of our freedoms, that their continued practice is the price of our retaining them.

Do you see your work as part of a broader mosaic? If you do, your vision is consistent with the Bible's comprehensive description of God's domain and of his destiny. We are going somewhere. A clear expression of this is found in the writings of the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk. In a vision he foresaw a coming day when the glory of the Lord would fill the entire earth.

"Earth" as the prophet used the word was intended to include everyone and everything on the planet. "Glory" signifies honor, substance, renown and visible splendor—the opposite of instability, temporariness and emptiness—and actually reflects the very presence of God himself. Imagine. That kind of glory filling the entire earth! And that ours is the privilege of being participants.

For the longest time I could not comprehend that my "calling" might apply to everyday work. It was certainly limited to a higher, lofty realm, one elevated to strictly religious endeavors. How wrong I was! I now realize you and I can be called to every legitimate endeavor. Look through a different lens and this becomes clear in the lives of many deemed mighty in scripture—Moses, Joseph, Nehemiah, David, Daniel, and even the Lord himself, the carpenter from Galilee.

Be refreshed in this truth. Walk in faith and confidence. As you've heard along the way, "Bloom where you are planted." You are integral to God's grand design. His glory WILL fill the earth and we can be right there in the midst.