

Introduction

In many ways I am an unlikely author of a book on why business matters to God.

I grew up just outside of Berkeley, California, and went to high school there during the late 1960s and early 1970s. These were radical times in a radicalized place, and I was steeped in the "anti" ethos of the day. It was in the air we breathed—a kind of backdrop for all the usual traumas of adolescence. We were against the war in Vietnam. We were against the police. We were against the government. Indeed, we were against authority of any kind. Authority was "the man" and one could either actively resist it or just "turn on, tune in and drop out."

In this cultural milieu we were, of course, also against capitalism and business. Even without knowing where I learned this, I came to believe almost unconsciously (and certainly uncritically) that business and market economies were the source of much damage and evil in the world. Greedy capitalists were polluting the environment. Big business was profiting from the war and encouraging its continuation. Discrimination against blacks and women was rampant. Large international businesses were plundering the poor in what we referred to in those days as "third-world countries." And so on. Moreover as a Christian I was sure that God would agree with these assessments. A radical Jesus would want the tables of these money changers and merchants overthrown and the business leaders driven from the temple.

If you had told me as I graduated from high school that someday I would be the dean of a business school, I would have told you that you must be smoking something. (And in those days you probably would have been.)

Fast forward thirty years. After a number of different moves in my life, that in retrospect primarily prove that God is sovereign and has a tremendous sense of humor, in 2001 I was appointed the fourth dean of Seattle Pacific University's business school. SPU is a Christian university affiliated with the Free Methodist denomination. All of its faculty subscribe to a broadly ecumenical Christian faith statement, and I soon discovered that they took their faith very seriously. For the first time in my life I found myself working in a setting that invited me to think deeply and clearly about the discipline of business from God's perspective.

HOW IT GOT STARTED

Against this backdrop, a few early discoveries served as the seeds for many of the thoughts that I want to share in this book. First, I realized that from my adolescence I still had a well-rehearsed litany of critiques that I could lay at the doorstep of business. But now I was the dean of a business school. I was regularly being invited to speak on business to student groups, cross-campus gatherings, Rotary clubs and other community groups from the perspective of a champion and apologist. These folks wanted to know what was going on in our school and how the business leaders we were training would be agents for affirmative, life-giving change in the world. It became apparent to me that I had some work to do.

I set out to learn what I could say that was positive about business—and somewhat to my surprise, I discovered that I didn't have to look far. What I quickly learned was that my high school prejudices were in some cases simply wrong and in almost every case woefully one-sided. I began to meet with Christian business leaders who told me stories of how they went to extraordinary lengths to care for employees who were going through difficult patches in their lives. They talked about how their businesses gave them opportunities to serve in different ways in

their communities. They showed me how the products they were making were bringing health to sick people and Internet access to those who for centuries had not been able to get the information they needed. Most of all they shared with me the sense of joy and fulfillment that they were finding in their day-to-day work.

I also began to read about examples of business behavior around the globe and realized how business generates the economic capital that allows the rest of society to flourish. I saw small-scale examples of how modest loans and investments proved sufficient to launch economically prosperous communities. I saw how businesses often provided opportunities that never before existed so that, for example, young girls could now receive an education that was previously out of reach. I observed the benefits to larger economies when new businesses entered the market and allowed the community to become less dependent on a single industry. I found case after case where businessmen and women were playing leadership roles in pursuing systems and structures designed to better protect human rights. I discovered that many companies were on the forefront of efforts to address global climate change. In short, I found much to celebrate about the role of business in the world.

Of course, not everything was rosy. This was all unfolding for me at the same time that we were navigating through the collapse of Enron and the massive malfeasance of WorldCom, Tyco and many others. But to me, the good that business was doing did not get washed away in the wake of these failures. Instead, it stood out all the more—at least pointing the way toward a positive understanding of the role of business in society. I found myself often replacing my earlier reflexive criticisms of business with a more balanced view. Indeed, at times I found myself in danger of exhibiting a zealotry in defense of business that often characterizes the fervor of the recent convert.

A second early discovery was far less happy, however. When I met with business leaders I would sometimes ask them how their identities as Christians changed how they did their work. In other words, what difference did it make to their work that they were Christians? Unfortunately, far too frequently, the answer that I got back was some variant

of “Well, Jeff, business is business, but I try to be honest and kind.” In other words, everyone does business the same way.¹ There is nothing any more particular about Christian business than there would be about the molecular formula (H₂O) that a Christian scientist would use to make water from hydrogen and oxygen. Being a Christian means doing the same work everyone else was doing but just trying to be nicer about it—a perspective that I have come to describe disparagingly as “Enron with a smile.” And I found myself asking if this really was all that Christianity has to say about the practice of business.

My conversations with these business leaders also revealed another factor that has animated this book. Quite often, these leaders felt ignored or treated like second-class citizens in their churches and in the broader Christian community. They told me that they would never ask for business advice from their pastors since their pastors would have nothing to tell them about how to make Christian business decisions. Their pastors didn’t understand business and didn’t seem particularly interested in learning. Indeed, at times business was characterized from the pulpit as the expression of sinful greed—perhaps a necessary evil but certainly nothing to be encouraged. A calling to business was always put in third place behind a calling to a position in the church or the mission field or a calling to one of the “helping professions”—a designation that incidentally never included business. Their work was never celebrated in the church community. When they got a promotion nobody at their church ever suggested a commissioning service for them. Conversely, many heard sermon examples of “exemplary Christians” who left successful business practices to go to the mission field. The message was clear. One serves God by leaving business. Apparently what was once sordid or at best neutral could now be redeemed in so-called full-time Christian service.²

¹As one longtime business consultant and counselor scoffed, “There is no such thing as a Christian business. *Christian* is better used as a noun than an adjective” (quoted in Laura Nash, *Believers in Business* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1994], p. 24).

²This sense of disenfranchisement has been well documented in the literature. See, for example, R. Paul Stevens, *Doing God’s Business: Meaning and Motivation for the Marketplace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), p.79; D. Michael Lindsay, *Faith in the Halls of Power: How Evangelicals*

In short, many owners and managers of businesses seem to feel disenfranchised from God’s work in the world. For most of their working hours these businessmen and women feel only indirectly connected to what God is doing. For them, business is at best an instrumental means to an end. They work for most of their lives at what they characterize as essentially neutral activities. With the money they earn, however, they can support a missionary, a local church or a not-for-profit ministry—that is they can fund the “real work” of God in the world. Their part in God’s grand scheme is limited to providing resources to others and, along the way, abiding by a personal code of ethics that calls them to act with integrity and kindness. In effect, God’s sacred realm invades their secular activities only at the level of personal behavior. Work (and its products) remain neatly divided between the secular (which hardly counts) and the sacred (which is ultimately all that matters). But this is a false dichotomy and bad theology that limits the advance of God’s kingdom.

These discoveries led me and my colleagues to begin a multiyear effort to find and read what had been written on these subjects. Specifically, we began to ask how God sees business. If God has a role for it at all, what would God want business to be about? What should it do—that is, what is its purpose? And what should it not do—what are its limits?

Remarkably from our standpoint, when we began this effort we found very little written that discussed these issues at a macro level (although much more has been written recently). We found a modest amount written about a theology of work and more written on a biblical understanding of money and wealth accumulation.³ We found a number of useful resources about personal ethics in the workplace but little

Joined the American Elite (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 161–65, 195; David Miller, *God at Work: The History and Promise of the Faith at Work Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 9–13, 63, 91–93.

³On a theology of work see, for example, D. Sherman and W. Hendricks, *Your Work Matters to God* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1987), and Lee Hardy, *The Fabric of This World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990). On money and wealth accumulation see Ron Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1977); and Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possessions and Eternity* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1989).

or no work on building the underlying theological framework for the discipline as a whole.⁴

The purpose of this book is to encourage conversation around the development of such a theological framework. I am not writing to criticize the church (or for that matter, Christians in business). Other recent works have begun to explore why those trained in theology and pastoral ministry often have difficulties providing helpful advice to their parishioners on business issues.⁵ Nor would I want to claim that this book represents the first efforts to explore a theology of business. I am clearly “writing on the shoulders” of a number who have gone before and who have written about business issues and on related theologies of work and wealth.⁶ Still, at least relative to other theological inquiries and to the development of systems of ethics, the theological foundation for an understanding of business remains underdeveloped.⁷

SEVERAL TENSIONS

As this project has unfolded three sets of tensions have arisen. The first should have been obvious to me from the beginning. This book is interdisciplinary; in it I hope to connect theological and biblical studies, on

⁴On personal ethics see, for example, Alexander Hill, *Just Business: Christian Ethics for the Marketplace* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997); Richard C. Chewning, John W. Eby and Shirley J. Roels, *Business Through the Eyes of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990).

⁵See generally Miller, *God at Work*; Laura Nash and Scotty McLennan, *Church on Sunday, Work on Monday: The Challenge of Fusing Christian Values with Business Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

⁶Several authors have written sociological works analyzing how Christians in business actually behave. These include Nash, *Believers in Business*; Miller, *God at Work*; and Lindsay, *Faith in the Halls of Power*. Others have approached the subject more theoretically, developing and laying out theological insights. See, for example, Stevens, *Doing God's Business*; Michael Novak, *Business as a Calling: Work and the Examined Life* (New York: Free Press, 1996); Richard C. Chewning, ed., *Biblical Principles and Business: The Foundations* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1989); Helen Alford and Michael Naughton, *Managing as If Faith Mattered: Christian Social Principles in the Modern Organization* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001). The Alford and Naughton work is a particularly rigorous and well-developed work drawing on Catholic social principles to establish, in effect, a theology of management.

⁷Amazingly little theological reflection has taken place in the past about an activity which takes up so much of our time. The number of pages theologians have devoted to transubstantiation—which does or does not take place on Sunday—for instance, would, I suspect far exceed the number of pages devoted to work that fills our lives Monday through Saturday” (Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* [Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2001], p. 69).

the one hand, with the disciplines of business and economics, on the other. From my experience, however, interdisciplinary work is often disappointing to practitioners and scholars because it inevitably lacks the depth that could be brought to bear in a work that focuses on a single discipline. Scholars in both disciplines will no doubt wish for more explanations and nuance in some of what follows.

More importantly, however, interdisciplinary work not only seeks to combine the expertise from different fields, it necessarily tries to bring different ethos—different scholarly cultures—together. Different fields have grown up essentially alone. As such, over time they have developed their own ways of looking at the world, of asking questions, of using language, of pursuing truth. Embedded in these disciplinary silos are essentially different worldviews. Any interdisciplinary work, however, will require that these cultures leave their silos and coexist in the same room. Anyone who has ever met the parents of his or her child's future spouse for the first time may have some sense of the awkwardness of this endeavor. Each family brings years of their own traditions, memories and histories to the meeting, but now in anticipation of the upcoming nuptials these family cultures will, at least periodically, need to learn to coexist and blend together.

I had the great privilege of having several of my colleagues in business and theology read an early draft of this text. Their responses were very helpful but also illustrative of these different worldviews. My business associates criticized the text as being too negative about business. As one suggested, at times this reads like “a left-leaning author who was grudgingly dragged into business and was fighting it, trying to justify his presence there, or, at a minimum, change the ugly capitalistic world in which he found himself.” My theology friends, however, argued just the opposite. I was insufficiently sensitive to the legitimate critiques that have been directed at business down through the centuries and unduly positive about businesses' current work in the world. Nowhere did these views clash more directly than in the discussion of profit-making and a market economy—which is why I have sought to devote additional space to these particular features of business in today's global economy in what follows.

The second tension reflects some of the structural challenges inherent in reflecting theologically on what is essentially an applied discipline. I did not set out to write a bifurcated book—a book where the first half was all about the Bible and theology, and the second half was all about business. I wanted to integrate the two from the outset.

The structural challenge, however, arose from my decision to approach this topic by looking separately at each of the movements—the “chapters”—of the big story of Scripture. As I will explain at greater length, I have found it useful to approach the biblical story by looking separately at creation, Fall, redemption and consummation. I believe that together these four movements make up the big story but that each of them contributes new insights into how God sees business today. Consequently, there is value in reflecting on each of them one by one.

In a very real sense, however, I also believe that we will need to consider the whole story in order to fully appreciate its implications for the purpose and practice of business. A consideration of creation independent of the Fall will end up ignoring much of the reality of today’s world. Considering the Fall without considering Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection will leave us unduly hopeless. Similarly, considering Christ’s work at the cross without reflecting on God’s “end game” will provide us with only a partial picture of how we are called to live in light of the new creation. In each case, while there are helpful observations to be gleaned from the individual movements, the fullest understanding of Scripture’s teaching can only be appreciated from the vantage point of the story in its entirety. In other words, we can best answer some of the big questions about business only after the whole story has been told.

So, I have compromised. In each of the first four chapters I consider one of the four movements of the story. And in each case I end the chapter by briefly highlighting some implications for business and for Christians in the for-profit world. Hopefully this will allow me to highlight some of the implications that flow from that piece of the story and will prove at least minimally sufficient for those readers who are eager to get on to the application.

Only in the last two chapters, however—after the whole story has been told—do I set out in a more comprehensive fashion how all of this applies to business. In chapter seven, the penultimate chapter, I identify an overall framework for business that builds on my earlier discussion of the biblical narrative. Then, in chapter eight, I set forth answers to key philosophical and practical questions that may arise as Christians seek to live out this approach in their places of work.

So, it is my hope that you will find helpful insights in what follows on a chapter-by-chapter basis. But I also hope that you will be rewarded with a richer and fuller understanding by persevering to the end.

The third tension emerged from the dual purpose of this book. In short, I hope that this book can play both a priestly and prophetic role. But there seems to be an inherent tension between these two functions.

In the Old Testament, one of the functions of the priest was to pronounce God’s blessing. I hope this book will help business practitioners better understand that their daily work is blessed by God, has great significance for God’s work in the world and is consequently endowed with great meaning. By providing a conceptual framework for understanding business from God’s perspective, I hope to help Christians in business better understand the *sacred* nature of their daily tasks. In short, I hope this book serves as a useful reminder that a calling into business is a noble, kingdom-advancing calling.

To this end, this book seeks to affirm that the day-to-day, seemingly mundane tasks often associated with running a business can indeed be tools that God uses to achieve kingdom objectives. Of course, these tasks often look similar when performed by Christians and non-Christians. Analyzing a spreadsheet, preparing a quarterly income statement and entering into a lease agreement are acts that from the standpoint of the outside observer may look the same regardless of the faith of the practitioner. But from the inside it makes all the difference. If Christians can understand that the work they are doing is God’s work they can bring a sense of joy, meaning, purpose, pride and hope to their tasks that might otherwise elude them. In a world where there is a “meaning crisis” in so many work places, hopefully this theological framework can be a valuable help.

In its priestly role, then, this book seeks to pronounce God's blessing on the work *as it is currently being done*. It seeks to affirm that God is *using* business for divine purposes—in effect, that God likes business and values the work of women and men in business.

But the book also hopes to play a prophetic role. Yes, God likes business but God also has purposes and plans for business that we can align with or oppose. While wanting desperately to affirm the kingdom nature of business work, I also do not want to be guilty of just sprinkling holy water on all business practices.

Specifically, by providing an alternative paradigm to the existing emphasis on maximizing profits at all costs, I hope that I can actually play a small part in redirecting the flow and impact of business activities. Business need not be just business as usual. There are alternatives. It can be conceived of and practiced differently, and these differences matter. By focusing on a consideration of business from God's perspective, I am also hoping to engender deeper thinking about the purpose and practice of business that will, where appropriate, lead to *on-the-ground changes in behavior*.

So throughout what follows you may experience the tension that I have encountered as I have sought to pursue these two goals. On the one hand I hope that what I have written can be a life-giving affirmation to a whole class of Christians who for too long have felt like their work had, at best, only instrumental value to God. To this end I simply want to affirm what is. On the other hand I do believe that the dominant paradigm that governs much of our business practices today is flawed and needs to be changed. I seek to call Christians to be at the forefront of these changes. Affirming and challenging. Priest and prophet.

WHY IT MATTERS

The twenty-first century is destined to be the century of global business. More than any other institution, business is likely to shape the face of our world. The sheer magnitude of the resources controlled by corporations makes it almost certain that business will dwarf the influence of other traditional institutions. Of the 150 largest economies in

the world, nearly half are not countries. They are businesses.⁸ Annual sales from the top two hundred corporations are larger than the combined economies of all but the twenty-five largest countries in the world.⁹ Moreover, businesses are increasingly multinational or transnational in reach. Notwithstanding the retraction in global trade and investment accompanying the 2008-2009 recession, it is very unlikely that we will see a long-term diminution of the cross-border influence of companies. In short, companies doing business will, in many ways, dictate the kind of world we will live in. Thus, for Christians interested in advancing God's agenda of peace, justice and reconciliation, a focus on business and its role in society is critical.

⁸Fortune 500 list of companies for 2008 (2007 revenues) <www.money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune500/2008/full_list/index.html> compared to the "World Economic Outlook Report, October 2008" of the International Monetary Fund for "GDP, current prices" by country for 2007 <www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2008/02/weodata/index.aspx>.

⁹Ibid.