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Towards a Statement on the Biblical Purposes of Business

JEFF VAN DUZER, J.D.

vandj@spu.edu

RANDAL S. FRANZ, Ph.D.

rfranz@spu.edu

GARY L. KARNS, Ph.D.

gkarns@spu.edu

TIM DEARBORN, Ph.D.

tdearbor@spu.edu

DENISE DANIELS, Ph.D.

ddaniels@spu.edu

KENMAN L. WONG, Ph.D.

klwong@spu.edu

Introduction

SKEPTICS WONDER HOW COMMERCIAL ACTIVITY can serve as a legitimate means of doing God's work in the world when it is conducted within a system that to them appears to be antithetical to Christian values. In particular, economic growth seems to hinge on exporting a Western consumption-oriented way of life to all corners of the globe. An increase in the wealth gap, the elimination of distinctive cultures and value systems and damage to the environment are mere tradeoffs to be made in the pursuit of the goal of growth.

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As a faculty in an evangelical Christian university's business school, we have been wrestling with the fundamental question of how God perceives the institution of business and how God intends for it to function. "Wrestling" is actually an appropriate word, for our debates have been vigorous as we seek to understand the vocation of business as an institution. (This paper focuses upon the vocation of business at the institutional level rather than at the individual manager or employee level, which has been the focal point in much of the wider discussions of vocation and business.) How should Christians, particularly the laity who work in business-oriented vocations, thoughtfully and faithfully approach their work?¹ Historically, Christians have opted for different orientations towards the "world" and their role within it.² Is there a particular approach that should be adopted for Christians involved with business? Should commercial activity be engaged exclusively through hostile "prophetic" means, enthusiastically embraced, or something in between?

In an attempt to answer these questions, we have undertaken to articulate a theological perspective on business rooted in an evangelical, Protestant worldview. We are convinced that such a theology of business is needed because business substantially influences the world, for good or for ill. Clearly, the current way of doing business is morally deficient and we have a unique opportunity to influence the direction of this pivotal institution. But, without a solid theology, Christians in business lack a sense of purpose or an adequate understanding of the spiritual environment in which they operate.

This paper is a reflection based upon three broad, biblical themes: Creation, Fall and Redemption. The Creation, Fall and Redemption framework was used by Walsh and Middleton³ as the basis for constructing a biblical worldview on a variety of life issues. It has, more directly, been applied to understand God's purpose for work and can also be used to understand business⁴.

Creation affirms that the world was created good, and that engagement with the world can be embraced with enthusiasm. Specifically, the creation mandate informs our understanding of the charge given to us to work with God in God's continuing creative activity. Fall is humankind's self-conscious rebellion against God's authority, and the consequences of this for all of creation. This reminds us of the need for caution and that realistically cultural engagement is, and will remain, far from perfect. The active intervention of God into the flow of events to restore humankind (and creation) into right relationship to God, redemption, evinces our role as participants in God's transforming work in the structures, institutions and activities of the world, ensuring that our work has ultimate meaning. Volf⁵ emphasizes this transformational view, asserting that we should not only

refer to Creation and Fall, for in light of the cross, the resurrection and the eschaton, are central to a theology of business. If “Fall” is a word of caution and realism, “Redemption” is a word of hope.

Creation - God’s Design and the Purposes for Business

Understanding God’s purposes for business comes through understanding God’s purpose for humans outlined in Genesis and understanding God’s purposes for institutions (principalities and powers outlined in the New Testament writings). Broadly, the purpose of business lies within the context of the purpose of life—i.e. the “chief end of humankind is to glorify God and enjoy God forever” (Westminster Confession). God is in the people-developing “business” to make a people to live in harmonious relationship with God and one another. As a relational Being, God chooses to relate to humans and endowed us with social abilities and needs. We are made to relate to other persons—both human and divine. God gives us not only free will (the ability), but free space (the opportunity) to make a decision to respond to God (and other people).

Creation Mandate

Core to the purpose of business then, are the Creation mandates of provision and creativity found in Genesis:

- God affirmed the dignity of humankind by making us in the image of God. *“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness,’...So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them”*⁶.
- God gave us a “ruling” role and affirmed the value of work as stewards of creation *“... and let them rule over the fish of the sea... The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it...”*⁷.
- God invited men and women to participate in God’s creative activities - to fill *“...’Be fruitful, fill the earth and subdue it.’...He brought them to the man to see what he would name them...”*⁸.
- The activities of men and women were to preserve—to guard ... *“and take care of it”*⁹.
- God gave men and women freedom with boundaries *“... you are free...but you must not...”*¹⁰.

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Creation affirms work as a God pleasing activity¹¹. Work was mandated by God and was intended to provide satisfaction and joy. Engaging in work is a means of what Martin Luther called God's "provisional activity." According to Calvin and later Puritan thought, it also is an outlet and opportunity for to the expression of the creativity inherent in human beings created in the image of God. Business is a major venue in which people contribute alongside God in God's ongoing creative work¹².

Creation affirms relationship. God created us because he desired to be in relationship with us. The Trinity is the model after which people were created ("in Our image..."). Such fellowship/community is the end, or goal, for which people were created, and for which they were uniquely equipped. At creation, God put into place all the pieces needed to realize "a people for himself" but God did not (due to the implicit nature of relationships) mandate the relationships. People could relate to God; but would they? In order to "build" the kind of people with whom he wants to relate, God imprinted them with his own image. God entrusted them with the dignity of causality and gave them stewardship responsibility for creation.

Institutions in Creation

The creative, filling, guarding provisional work goes beyond the self-production that individuals can achieve by themselves ("It is not good for the man to be alone, let us make a helper suitable for him"¹³). Community (i.e. corporate structures, institutions and organizations) are part of God's design. They are ways for people to organize their life together and thus participate in God's purposes for humankind and creation. They maintain order and facilitate God's creative activity. They can be understood as the pillars that hold the roof up and as tools in the hands of God that God uses to achieve God's purposes. Support for this view can be found in scriptural teachings about government¹⁴, family¹⁵ and church¹⁶.

Indeed, institutions may be the face of the "principalities and powers" referenced in many New Testament writings¹⁷. Institutions as collective models (i.e., shared social conventions) are not subject to any particular person, nor are they confined to, nor owned by, one group. They are "public property" and as such "owned" by any who choose to adhere to them. In this way institutions literally take on a life of their own. They truly become "powers" and "principalities" to

* While there is Scriptural support for the establishment of these and other institutions, they have taken very different shapes historically. Our modern understanding of "the state" or "the family" is quite different from that practiced in biblical times. We contend that while there might be preferred solutions to the human needs, there is not a single, God-ordained solution to these problems. That is, there are values we can bring to bear, but no absolute models.

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be reckoned with. Therefore God cares not only about how individuals function within an institution, but also about the acts and effects of the institution itself. If the “principalities and powers” label applies, it appears that institutions are wholes greater than the sums of the individuals at work within them.

That the role of trade and commerce—business—is to enable humankind to glorify God and participate in God’s creative and redemptive activity can be deduced in that we were designed to be in relationship with one another, that we were designed to be interdependent and that we have differing gifts and abilities. Bringing individuals together into productive organizations (businesses) as a collection of diverse gifts to accomplish work beyond what an individual can achieve adds a new complexity to the issue that merits exploration of a theology of business, distinct from a theology of work by itself. This is a basis for understanding our work together through institutions, “companies” of persons.

Business is an institution because it is the means by which a group (society/culture) chooses to solve one of its core social problems—in this case the production and distribution of goods and services. From a theological perspective, the “main purpose” of business (or any institution for that matter) is to contribute to the establishment of God’s kingdom (i.e., the creation and redemption mandates)—and its unique role to play in that endeavor is to serve (notice the subservient orientation) the community by producing the goods and services needed to further the primary goal (i.e., kingdom community) and to foster the development of the giftedness of the persons in the business.

Because God created people in God’s image we are designed to live eternal, abundant lives in relationship with God and in community with other people. The purpose of every institution is to enable and encourage the realization of such a life. Specifically, the institution of business accomplishes this by:

- Creating, producing and justly distributing the “good” products and services people need to live full lives.
- Providing opportunities for vocationally rich work through which people develop and exercise their creativity and their gifts, thus contributing to their communities.
- Facilitating and developing community at all levels (corporate, local, global) by building trust and exercising responsible corporate citizenship in its support of and participation in the ongoing work of other social institutions (e.g., government, family, religion, education, etc.).

- Guarding, tending and nurturing the earth as a shared resource and interdependent system.

Fall – Corruptions of God’s Purposes for Business

While creation helps us understand God’s purposes for business, fall evinces that the world no longer clearly reflects these purposes. With the introduction of sin in the Garden (the Fall) our experience of life and work are not what God intended at creation. By its nature sin entails a distrust of God, followed by a denial of God’s authority and an unwillingness to accept our assigned role in creation as stewards, rebellion against God’s purposes and the limits God placed on humans. This denial of God’s authority leaves a vacuum into which we too often gladly step. As fallen people we tend to usurp God’s role, interposing our own goals, purposes and interest in place of God’s. We assume for ourselves the rights due only to God and curtail and neglect our responsibilities to anyone but ourselves.

The Fall has consequences for our relationships with God and with others, for the created order and for work itself. When sin was introduced the relationship that Adam and Eve had with God was broken. Rather than submitting to God’s authority, they chose to try to assume his role (“...you will be like God...”¹⁸). As a result, rather than acting as caretakers and stewards of God’s creation, the primary organizing principle of human behavior became that of self-interest—protecting one’s own rights. And so, our relationships with others were also affected by sin. Creation, too, suffers the effects of the Fall. When it comes to stewardship, we don’t have the proper perspective to “take care of” creation unless we acknowledge and accept God’s sovereign ownership over it. Usurping ownership of resources for our own benefit is an expression of sin. Finally, work itself is corrupted by sin. Adam and Eve are told that because of their disobedience to God, the ground they work will be cursed, “through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life...By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food...”¹⁹. Work has become toilsome and laden with vice including aversive attitudes toward it, idolatry, and immoral practices.

Institutions

Parallel to people’s usurping of God’s authority in the Garden of Eden, institutions are subject to their own form of corruption. There is a legitimate role for social institutions—a subservient role. Institutions only find their meaning and significance when serving a broader, bigger

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purpose. They are always solutions to a problem; means to an end. They are NOT the end. When institutions usurp their subservient role of meeting a need (in complement with other institutions), and become the need itself, they cross the line into corrupt and dysfunctional “powers.”

Business activity takes place in this larger context of systemic/structural evil (sin). The rebellion of business enthrones Mammon and a willingness to grant absolute priority and prior moral right to the forces of the market. Business practiced within the context of market capitalism, while indeed creating wealth, may do so most efficiently by relying upon and supporting immoral systems and societal structures²⁰. Forced child labor and sweatshops are but two examples. When the profit motive becomes the idolatrous focus and measure of success, other of God’s purposes for business are undermined; servicing people’s needs to live well, respect for human dignity, vocationally rich work and community are diminished. Work itself is marred further by making it an idol to pursue. While profit may be necessary to maintain a business and provide for legitimate needs, its role in many organizations has been elevated far beyond this provisional one.

Market capitalism is imperfect, but cannot realistically be replaced by non-market based organizations to meet the material needs of the world. (Even if NPO’s, NGO’s or government agencies could become large enough producers, Fall would still be an issue making them imperfect institutions too.) In light of the reality of individual and systemic evil, boundaries in addition to those originally established in creation are necessary to restrain business from inflicting harm. In our view business activity should not transgress these boundaries if it is to fulfill its purposes:

- Treat or affect people in a manner inconsistent with human dignity;
- Fail to pay employees just compensation;
- Require that employees work under unreasonably dangerous conditions;
- Be inconsistent with the long-term sustainability of the created order;
- Fail to comply with all duly adopted and applicable laws;
- Mislead people;
- Preclude people from keeping the Sabbath or disrupt god’s intended rhythm of rest and work;
- Fail to reflect God’s intended balance of beauty and function.

While the Fall changed the nature of work and of business, it did not eliminate either the meaning or significance endowed by God at creation²¹ nor did it change the role that business can

play in God's purposes for creation. But how can business be restored to the purposes for which it was intended? Moreover, how can it participate in God's coming kingdom?

Redemption – Transformed & Transforming, Now & Yet To Come

Any consideration of a theology of business is incomplete without a thorough understanding of the impact of the cross, the resurrection, the outpouring of the Spirit and the eschaton (what we are calling collectively, "redemption"). Indeed, it would be difficult to characterize a theology of business as "Christian" without a detailed understanding of the impact of Jesus Christ on the purpose and practice of business. Unfortunately, however, this is also the section of the theology most difficult to "wrestle to the ground." What follows is a mere sketch of the general direction of our current thinking, realizing that more work needs to be done in this aspect of our theologizing about business.

Redemption is about correction and restoration. Jesus declares that "the Kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe the good news"²², calling people out of sin into repentance (i.e. changed heart and lifestyle) and into restored relationship with God. Further, redemption is about the ongoing transformative work of the Holy Spirit that brings increasing Christ-likeness ("...be transformed by the renewing of your mind."²³). The kingdom (i.e. reign or rule) of God is that state in which people do the will of God and God's intended purposes for humankind are fulfilled.

Redemption of Institutions

Did Jesus come to redeem the institutions? Not as his primary aim, but in order to redeem a people for himself, he also has to redeem the institutions within which those people live and do the work of their calling. While we acknowledge an appropriate role for social institutions, we are also fully aware of their "fallen-ness" and corruptive propensity. In his redemptive work, Christ revealed the rebellion of institutions, demonstrated that he was stronger than they were and "disarmed" their ability to deceive mankind as authorities of ultimate significance²⁴. The way to unmask and thereby delegitimize a particular social convention is to make it concrete and bring it out of the unconscious realm into the arena of deliberate choice. When we become mindful of the influence of institutions and aware of their proper role, we are able to reshape them in more appropriate/deliberate forms. As Berkhof²⁵ states, "for him who sees and believes this, it means an immense liberation..."

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While perhaps not exhaustive, difficulties in clearly articulating the contributions of redemption to a theology of business stem from at least three debatable issues. First, what happened at the Fall? To what extent was the “image of God” as originally embedded in human beings at creation effaced, marred or distorted? To what extent did the “good” of creation lose its “goodness” and become, truly, “bad.” Is the institution of business a product of a fallen world and at odds with the Kingdom of God to such an extent that it ought to be shunned altogether or can it be “redeemed”?

Second, what happened at the cross? How do we address the “already-not yet” paradox of Scripture? On the one hand, Scripture clearly affirms that with Christ’s death and resurrection we have already become “new creatures.” In fact, by some accounts all that remains to be done is to recognize the implication of God’s radical activity and “put off” the old clothes and “put on” the new²⁶. The Kingdom of God is at hand. Under this understanding the final consummation is nothing more than the final unveiling of that which has already happened. In the words of Christ on the cross “it is finished”²⁷.

Alternatively, however, Scripture suggests that while Christ’s victory at the cross has made the final end of history inevitable, there nonetheless remains the task of working out of the consequences of Christ’s liberating sacrifice. The finish is certain but not yet realized. Human beings work in cooperation with God to continue to build toward the final kingdom. The final consummation is not merely the unveiling but the completion of God’s transforming work.

Finally, what will happen at the end of human history? Are we returning to the Garden or are we moving into the City of God? How will the “new heaven” and “new earth” come into being? Will these be created out of nothing, *ex nihilo*, after all that is here is burnt up and cast aside? “The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire... everything will be destroyed in this way”²⁸. Or will the great fire on the Day of Judgment be a fire not of total destruction but only of purification, a fire that will leave only that which is good and in concert with God’s kingdom values as “the building blocks” that God will use to fashion his “new earth”?

“But each one should be careful how he builds. ... If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss...²⁹

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In large part because of the different answers to these questions, the church throughout history has struggled with alternate ways to conceive of its allegiance to Christ and its call to participate with the culture of its day.

A Typology of Redemption

While arguably incomplete and perhaps somewhat dated, Niebuhr's classic *Christ and Culture*³⁰ can still serve as a helpful tool in categorizing the church's various responses. Niebuhr's categories have more recently been used by Louke van Wensveen Siker³¹ in an insightful article translating the *Christ and Culture* types into the business realm by linking the different types to different approaches to business ethics. Niebuhr and Siker each identify five "types": Christ against Culture/Business, Christ of Culture/Business, Christ above Culture/Business, Christ and Culture/Business in Paradox, and Christ Transforming Culture/Business.

Christ against Business sets the call of Christ over against and in opposition to the call of culture. It represents a form of "prophetic shouting from the outside." Because of the fallen nature of the world and its institutions Christians are to remove themselves and to decline to participate. Many of the early Christian writers took this approach emphasizing that to live faithfully as Christians meant to live outside of the dominant culture. This approach has continued to find expression down through history in various religious traditions including (at times) the monastic movement and the Anabaptist movement. Christ against culture typically reflects an extreme view of the Fall, i.e. that which was "good" has become irretrievably "bad." Likewise it often reflects an *ex nihilo* understanding of the end times that emphasizes the radical discontinuity between the "new earth" and the world in which we live today. As Siker indicates, this is a position that is fundamentally an "anti-business" position. Often in less thoughtful hands, this position finds expression in the naive chastisement by the church of those active in business. From this vantage point, business activities are characterized as nothing more than the expression of sinful greed with resulting unjust and destructive consequences.

On the other hand, the Christ of Business model finds no real tension at all between the call of Christ and the demands of the dominant culture of the day. In today's business terms, it aligns completely the forces of the capitalistic market economy with God's kingly values and believes that Adam Smith's invisible hand is actually no less than the hand of God. Because of the complete alignment between the call of Christ and the call of culture those holding this view see no need to transform or critique culture or business. In business, this viewpoint is most often expressed by

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those who repeat the mantra “good ethics is good business.” Those who fall into this “type” typically evince some combination of the following viewpoints. They tend to minimize the extent to which the Fall has distorted God’s original intent for humankind and the rest of creation. Their understanding of the “end times” tends to be a triumphal consummation of human activity. No radical discontinuity between now and then is to be expected. Enabled by the redemptive power of Christ, we are working out the kingdom here on earth. Finally, those who hold this viewpoint are likely to ascribe heavily to the “already” side of the “already-not yet” paradox. Truly the world was realigned by Christ’s death and resurrection on the cross. Thus, those who live in accordance with kingdom values will find that, in fact, they will be working in concert with the world and will receive material rewards in the here and now.

Obviously, the Christ against Business and the Christ of Business mark two ends of the typological spectrum. Niebuhr (and Siker) posits three intermediate positions as well. The “Christ Above Business” suggests, in effect, that the call of Christ is not fundamentally inconsistent with the call of the culture but simply additive. Cultural understandings formed apart from Christ can be affirmed, but through a step-by-step progression can also be brought to a higher level of understanding. The culturally determined “good person” is moved (typically through a rational explanation of the higher call of Christ) to a more enlightened condition. Thus Christians and non-Christians can find much common ground. Many of the secular calls for ethical business behavior are entirely consistent with those that would be raised by Christians. It is just that Christians bring something more to the table. For example, Christians can affirm a call to integrity and to just behavior in concert with non-Christians but can add to these a call to self-sacrificial love that elevates the conduct of business to a higher plane. Like the Christ of Business believers, those holding to this viewpoint tend to minimize the adverse consequences of the Fall and reject the need for a radical transformation at the end of time. In contrast to the Christ of Business believers, however, those holding to this view are likely to have a more balanced sense of the “already-not yet” paradox. Christ’s battle has already been won but there remains a need to bring into effect the consequences of his victory.

The Christ and Business in Paradox is essentially a dualist position whose adherents see limited hope for true transformation of the world before the end of time. Those holding to this viewpoint acknowledge that they live in two kingdoms, one of which is the kingdom of this world, a corrupted kingdom that must be endured. The other is God’s kingdom. By virtue of being born into this world Christians have no option but to participate in both. Indeed, this requires that at times

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they must participate in evil. Such participation is never excused; it remains sin in need of forgiveness but is nonetheless inevitable. In a business context this sometimes finds expression in settings where market forces appear to require behavior that is ungodly because strict adherence to godly principles would result in the demise of the business. Paying a true livable wage in a highly competitive industry where one's competitors pay substantially less in light of the prevailing market conditions would be one such example. Living constantly in paradox, torn between two worlds, the Christian in paradox humbly makes decisions on a case-by-case basis. Adherents to this "type" fully appreciate the extent of evil present in the world as a result of the Fall. They live at the very heart of the already-not yet paradox. They see, however, little hope that our work in this world will serve as "building blocks" in the hands of God when he rolls out his final kingdom. Consequently, those who hold to this viewpoint tend to emphasize and look forward to the day when this earth will pass away and something completely new and different will be substituted in its stead.

Finally, Niebuhr's obvious preferred alternative: Christ the Transformer of Culture/Business. As Niebuhr points out this approach is, in some ways, the "glass half-full" flip side of the Paradox view. Like those that hold to the Paradox type, the transformers fully appreciate the corrupt nature of business. Whereas the Paradox types, however, see little hope for change, the transformers believe that, by the power of the Spirit, Christians can redeem the culture and the practice of business. These can be brought more into alignment with godly values. While perhaps never being able to successfully complete the transformation, those holding to this viewpoint believe significant steps in the right direction can be taken. The transformers acknowledge the consequences of the Fall but refuse to believe that the image of God has been completely erased or so permanently marred that it is beyond redemption. They are comfortable with the "already-not yet" paradox believing on the one hand that the outcome of their work is assured and, on the other hand, that there is work yet to be done. Finally, the transformers would reject any theology that suggests that all their work will be wiped out in a final fire of judgment. For them, transformation work, as enabled by the Spirit of God, is actually participating in the building of the "new kingdom."

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	What happened at the Fall?	Already/not-yet tension	What happens at the end of time?
Christ against Business	Image of God erased	Not-yet emphasis	Radical discontinuity - all works burn up
Christ of Business	Image of God slightly distorted	Already emphasis	No radical discontinuity - works building future kingdom
Christ above Business	Image of God distorted	In balance	No radical discontinuity - works building future kingdom
Christ and Business in Paradox	Image of God seriously marred	Not-yet emphasis	Radical discontinuity - all works burn up
Christ the transformer of Business	Image of God seriously marred	In balance	No radical discontinuity - works building future kingdom

In the midst of this plethora of viewpoints, what conclusions can we reach? First we reject both of the polar positions. Neither Christ against Business nor Christ of Business is adequately nuanced to carry the weight of accurately describing Christ’s redemptive work. In Christ’s command that we emulate his life by taking up our cross and following him, we recognize that the cross points to the inevitable conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world. We acknowledge that Christ lived a life in perfect obedience to the Father. The result of his perfect obedience, however, was not material success but rather a sentence of death by the cruelest instrument of torture then known to the Roman Empire. Repeatedly Scripture assures us that we should expect nothing better. “Remember the words I spoke to you: ‘No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.’”³²

It might be argued that not all aspects of Christ’s life were intended for imitation. Obviously, none of us are called to serve as the messiah for our people (on the grandest scale), nor are we all required to be carpenters or itinerant preachers (on the smallest scale). But of all the various features of Christ’s life, the one most clearly held up as a model of behavior is his sacrificial love. “Be imitators of God, therefore, as duly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God”³³. “Anyone who does not take his

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cross and follow me is not worthy of me..."³⁴ The cross embodies the fundamental and fierce tension between the ways of God and the ways of this world. Thus we must reject the Christ of Business conclusion that all godly behavior in business will yield an enhanced bottom line. Businesses operating in accordance with God's kingdom values should expect that they will, at least from time to time, be required to "go to the cross." The redemption portion of any theology of business will require a redefinition of Christian business success.

The cross and subsequent resurrection are clearly more than mere ethical models. They stand at the decisive center of human history and mark Christ's victory over death and sin. They also are events that triggered the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. As such, they represent not only a call to self-sacrifice, but also an assurance of power that enables Christians to live out God's kingdom values in the midst of a fallen world. Enabled by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are both called and enabled to bring evidence of God's triumph into the world. "[Y]ou will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."³⁵ We testify to God's victory not only in words ("for the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power,"³⁶) but by deeds that evidence the out-breaking of God's justice and righteousness ("I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these..."³⁷). Thus we must also reject the extreme position of Christ against Business. The original beneficial purpose intended by God for the institution of business has been reinstated. Once again, "in him all things hold together."³⁸ As individuals, we are set free not only for salvation but also, empowered by the Spirit, to live into this world signs of God's realigned kingdom.

What can we say about the other three positions, positions that Niebuhr refers to as "The Church of the Center"? From experience, we must acknowledge that there is at least some truth in all of these other positions. One often finds a relatively close alignment between acts of righteousness and business decisions that prove financially successful. While we would emphatically deny that good ethics always translates into profitable business, empirical evidence suggests that it often does so. In most cases, being honest with customers, caring for employees, honoring promises and the like tend to both further the kingdom of God and to enhance profits. This alignment suggests (as the adherents to the Christ above Business would argue) that much of the image of God remains embedded in us and in our world notwithstanding the Fall. Christians can build upon and need not necessarily tear down the natural order of things.

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Other experiences, however, are more consistent with the Christ and Business in Paradox position. At times, as citizens of two worlds, it does appear that the only choice we are left with is the lesser of two evils. The power of the market set in the context of a fallen world sometimes requires that Christian managers engage in sinful behavior in order to “stay in the game.” As such, there is no pure system available for Christians to implement. Business decisions require a step-by-step walk through a muddy field trusting that at the end of the day God’s grace will wipe away the dirt.

Finally, our experience also testifies to the possibilities of transformation. We are not forever stuck with the pessimism of the Paradox type. We have witnessed at times how individuals committed to Christ have had a salutary influence in redirecting and even transforming the ethics and culture of various corporate entities. Numerous existing businesses attest to the transforming power unleashed by the Spirit and at work in Christians.

Volf³⁹ gives theological credence to the possibility of, and call to, transformative work. Harkening back to the Garden of Eden, he notes that from the beginning human beings were intended by God to function as co-workers to complete creation. The Garden was not God’s intended final resting place for his creation. It was a bountiful bundling of resources, awaiting the industry of God’s human co-workers to release its possibilities⁴⁰.

He argues, however, that any theology of work (and we would argue any theology of business) must be grounded not only in the creation mandate of the Garden but also in the certainty of the New Jerusalem. “[M]undane human work for worldly betterment becomes a contribution—a limited and imperfect one in need of divine purification—to the eschatological kingdom...”⁴¹ Volf preserves the notion of a radical discontinuity between this world and the next alongside the conviction that our work has eternal significance.

Through the Spirit, God is already working in history, using human actions to create provisional states of affairs that anticipate the new creation in a real way. These historical anticipations are, however, as far from the consummation of the new creation as earth is from heaven. The consummation is a work of God alone. But since this solitary divine work does not obliterate but transforms the historical anticipations of the new creation human beings have participated in, one can say, without being involved in a contradiction, that human work is an aspect of active anticipation of the exclusively divine *transformatio mundi*.⁴²

Thus while our efforts at transformation will never be sufficient, they are undertaken in light of the twin assurances that the transformation we strive for will be complete and that our efforts

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matter. And not only is the individual Christian in business liberated from the idolatry of the market and set free to pursue, with assurance of power, a business life lived in obedience to Christ, but it is also possible that the institution of business can be transformed through Christ's redeeming power.

So then, how does Redemption inform our understanding of business?

- First, God's intended purposes for business continue unabated. The Fall has not erased those purposes nor has redemption added to them. Business operated in accordance with God's design continues to aim at the same targets as outlined above.
- Second, the nature of our work has been changed. Had there never been the Fall, all work in the Garden would have been additive, that is, moving without interference from the bounty of the Garden to God's final intended new heaven and new earth. Because of the Fall, however, redemption work now needs to be corrective and restorative—going back to heal, undo, and fill in—as well as additive.
- Third, whether characterized as unveiling that which is already present (“already”) or working to flesh out the consequences of that which was irrevocably set in motion at the cross (“not yet”), the existential experience of Christians seeking to conduct business for the purposes designed by God will be, at least on occasion, an experience of struggle, pain and loss. In these in-between times, we are still called to “pick up our cross” and follow Christ.
- Fourth, Christians seeking to be faithful in business between now and the eschaton should expect to find times when implementing kingdom values will be congruent with worldly success and times when only the lesser of two evils remains as a viable option. Christians must reject any notion that the natural outcomes of an economic system (i.e. free market capitalism) will be in all cases consistent with God's design.
- Fifth, Christians in business are participants by the Spirit in the redemptive work of God. A calling into business is intrinsically a holy calling. It touches God, people made in God's image and resources belonging to God. They can freely rely on God's Spirit to give wisdom, creativity, compassion and competence for their engagement in business as they fulfill God's redemptive purposes.
- Sixth, Christians can conduct business with the assurance that their work has eternal significance. Post-redemption, pre-consummation Christians seek to manifest signs in the present of that which has already been assured in the future. More importantly, however, it is work that cooperates with God in ushering in God's Kingdom. At the end, faithful

Christians should expect that some of their work has lasted and as transformed by God remains as part of his eternal reality.

- Seventh, Christians can conduct business with complete confidence that in the end God's purposes for creation will be completely fulfilled.

Implications

We have come to rough consensus on the component pieces of the theology of business, above. We are now turning our attention to the implications of such a theology for the structure and practice of business. To that end we invite discussion about the following issues (in addition to comments and reaction to the theology itself):

1. Although profit is not a focal point in the proposed "purpose of business" statement, we are not anti-profit. What, then, is the proper role of profit? How much profit is enough? How should profits be distributed? How do we "sell" such a purpose of business to a market seemingly fixated on profit maximization as an underlying assumption? Our view, at this point, is that the current maximization-of-shareholder-wealth paradigm for business is flawed. As Jesus turned many notions of his day upside down, we too stand this paradigm on its head. Rather than seeing customers, employees, community and creation as instruments to achieve profit, we argue that profit is instrumental in providing or drawing resources to a firm so it can serve customers, employees and community (i.e. "kingdom purposes") more and better.
2. How does a stewardship orientation inform our understanding of property and ownership? Where ownership emphasizes one's rights, stewardship highlights one's responsibilities. What are the responsibilities of "ownership" in an enterprise? Who should be included as owners/investors? What about those who invest their intellectual capital? How does stewardship inform the distinction between shareholders and stakeholders? Integrating the "dominion" view of Genesis 1 and the "stewardship" view of Genesis 2 is necessary for developing Christian strategies for sustainability.
3. Can a redemptive approach to business model actually be implemented in a marketplace where most competitors play by the traditional approach (i.e. profit maximization and property acquisition)? If so, what are Christian strategies for the accomplishment of the

common good and caring for the “least” among us⁴³? If not, what are the implications for Christians involved in business? While some are promoting the notion that business can “do well (financially) by doing good (social responsibility),” we are trying to envision ways to encourage “doing the good” without characterizing such actions as instrumental for the bottom line. Faithfulness in participating in kingdom-bringing should rather be motivated by love for God.

4. What is the nature of institutions? Are they God-ordained “powers” with delegated authority of their own and subject to corruption due to the Fall, or are institutions human-made solutions to the “problems” of living together implicit in creation and subject to the abuse or distortion due to the fallenness of the people who create and use them? How should institutions relate to each other? What or who is accountable for the content and consequences of institutions? Can we manage institutions? We continue to develop our understanding of transformation as it applies to individuals and to institutions or systems. Systemic level change is needed along with individual level change, which will in itself be systemically influential in business institutions.

Conclusion

Our theology of business is grounded in the biblical worldview framed by Creation, Fall and Redemption. While we are critics of business, we are assuredly not anti-business. Creation establishes the vocation of business as good. We are not just incrementalists who just want to “fine tune” how businesses function. Fall convinces us that the problem goes deeper than regulatory oversight or even personal morality (although both of these are important). The fundamental mission of business and the organization of self-supporting, free enterprise companies are all acceptable—but the underlying structure of those companies and their assumed models of people and the distribution of rights and responsibilities are profoundly broken. Redemption calls us to participate with God in transforming business. This theology of business leads us to the position that our Christian values do much more than merely circumscribe acceptable business conduct, they propel us to enter into business (trade & commerce) as a form of service to our neighbor and, ultimately, as our participation in establishing the Kingdom of God.

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