

# The Christian Business: If It Exists, What Does It Look Like?

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Virtually every believer called to the marketplace desires to work in, help manage, or build a business enterprise honoring Christ. Many have called this idea, working with or building a "Christian business." That, of course, raises the question of exactly what a Christian business is, and if it exists, what does it look like? Over the years, I have sat in many a discussion trying to definitively answer that question. It raises interesting issues we need to continue to discuss. What follows is an attempt to at least broadly sketch out some of the main concerns surrounding this issue and, hopefully, some helpful observations and working conclusions.

## What is a "Christian Business"?

Good questions generate helpful answers. Permit me to ask several that should help us see deeper into issues that define the kind of business that glorifies Christ.

1. Spiritually speaking, is a business a noun, a verb, or both? Put another way, isn't a business more a description of something in motion more than a fixed and static object? While it's both a noun and a verb in this sense, we all should agree that it is a living thing, and therefore constantly defining itself by its responses and disciplines. Like all living things it is in flux and therefore capable of running like a "Christian business" one year, and less so, or more so, the next year.

2. Is a business an impersonal thing and therefore not capable of being "Christian," and therefore don't Christians simply run the enterprise in a Christ-like manner? This is a common opinion, true or not.

3. How do we evaluate the word "Christian" when applied to an organization? Is that top-to-bottom and all practices in between, or what? Can a "Christian business" be full of syncretistic mixture and still be "Christian"?

4. Are we clear enough yet to definitively define economic policies, as well as service policies, as to what accurately constitutes a "Christian business"? Where do we stand on what scriptural verses apply here, and how do they apply beyond our preconditioned, liberal-conservative, socially engrained paradigms?

Having raised these issues, let me now attempt to define what a Christian business looks like in motion:

## Our Working Model Definition

A Christian business is a commercial enterprise that consistently serves its customers, suppliers, and employees with monetary compensation, products, and services which bring value to their lives before God, applying biblical principles and ethics in such a way that God's Spirit has free access over the actions, operations, and profits of those who own and operate the organization.

Now let's begin to unpack what this comprehensive definition attempts to communicate. We know up front that it won't "do it all." Nonetheless, the exercise should help us all think through what we are after; God's Kingdom impacting the marketplace and thereby glorifying Christ in the here-and-now.

Essentially, my compound definition will encourage us to discuss twelve different aspects of what constitutes a Christian business. I trust that what follows are the essentials.

### **An Analysis of the Premise**

Taking my definition apart, let us now analyze its components phrase by phrase:

#### **Issue #1: "that consistently serves":**

As already stated, a "business" is truly both a verb and a noun. It is alive and in motion. "Consistently" deals with the phenomenon that having set Christian policies and practices once-and-for-all, begs the reality that life and rulership, while guided by laws and principles, require constant decision-making and application. As Paul says in 2 Cor. 3:6, "The letter kills but the Spirit gives life." Truth, while conceptually static, is in fact Christ's life in motion (John 14: 6). The legalists and the "walking frozen," modeled by the Pharisees, hated Christ because He lived out this reality. The motion and constantly diligent application of biblical principles must keep time and rhythm with the daily challenges of their proper application. A temple or church may have been consecrated as a "Christian building," but depending on what is going on in it now, it may in fact bear little resemblance to Christ. A Christian business is so, not because of what it was, as so much as what it is now.

#### **Issue #2: "serves its customers":**

This is a relative no-brainer but worth noting. An organization's ability to serve its customers in a biblical manner presupposes that it sees people as objects of Christ's love, whose needs must be met in such a way that the Christian organization becomes a godly epistle "known and read of all men." In other words, our services and products should be *evangelistic* in their excellence; *prophetic* in anticipating customers' needs; *pastoral* in relating to people with dignity, not using them; *teaching* by modeling principles throughout the organization and calling people up to them; and *apostolic* by demonstrating how a multi-tasked organization lives internally righteous, while reaching out as a mission that exemplifies virtue, and transcends simply "profits and return on investments" as its driving force.

#### **Issue #3: "suppliers":**

Those who supply our ability to conduct our business should be honoured and not constantly pressured to "bless us" at their expense. Suppliers are often treated as those low on "the food chain." Our suppliers should be paid promptly and certainly not used to help us manipulate the cash-flow game. Our suppliers' testimony of our business should be as exemplary as our customers'.

#### **Issue #4: "and employees":**

All that I am saying about serving the customers and suppliers must apply equally to the employees. The principle is simple: God's Word is a sharp, two-edged sword that cuts both ways. When we apply it outwardly, it cuts back into us and measures us against God's Word and standards as well. In this sense, if the "customer is always right," so are the employees. Christ's "Golden Rule" is alive and well in any truly Christian business. We must treat others as we treat ourselves. By analogy, true success must be defined by the flight of a balanced and free-flying bird: the wing of

the customer and the wing of the employee are properly connected, functioning, and equally balanced by the guiding leadership directing them both.

#### **Issue #5: "monetary compensation":**

Paying people and organizations fairly and competitively is the beginning point of economic justice. A Christian business should be known as an excellent provider and one that not only stimulates excellent work habits but service beyond the norm because their compensation models this concept. Beyond that, profit-sharing and ownership stimulants should reflect God's principle of co-working and proprietorship (Rom. 8:17).

#### **Issue #6: "bringing value to their lives before God"**

Now we get into the weighty issue of whether or not the services or products we are offering are truly serving people, and their needs and wants, in accordance with what scripture lines out as pleasing to God. Giving the customer what they want is, in some cases, contributing to their death - either spiritually, physically, or both. Simply put, a very well- run and profitable brothel, serving its clients efficiently, hygienically, and at reasonable prices won't qualify! Perhaps my example is too obvious. Okay, what about products or services that solely cater to vanity? How about legal services that defend people in ways that make the issue about the "law," not innocence, guilt, or justice? How about pricing that is common to the market but systemically exorbitant? And of course, the "sin" commodities of alcohol and tobacco have been debated for years. Services that a Christian company cannot offer and remain "Christian," no matter how well the enterprise is run demand serious thought and prayer by all believers.

#### **Issue #7: "Applying biblical principles"**

I will assume we all believe and seek to apply God's Word, as the final and authoritative standard for our conduct and services, both personally and in our marketplace ministries. Nevertheless, we must confess that the issues of omission and commission are more in play than we might like to admit. I will go out on a limb and say that, in many ways, few churches are yet successfully exegeting God's Word in terms of biblical economics and business policy. I've personally been at it many years and harbour few illusions that I see but a portion of what is there. We are beginning to see more and more discussion of God's Word as it applies to these areas. Yet, we may have a long way to go, especially when we throw into the mix the tension and balancing of social productivity with social justice. I suggest the path of humility here, and an aspiration to become a truly Christian business, rather than claiming we have arrived there.

#### **Issue #8: "and ethics"**

Indeed. Ditto to what we just pointed out. While we may see more in this area, I suspect there is still much more to understand. Ethics brings into play not just the more obvious virtues of honesty; justice; biblical morality; truth; virtue; etc. Ethics takes us into the realm of relational climate, discipling, and the like. Is it biblically ethical to not empower others if they are willing and able to be discipled at the workplace? That is certainly an ethical issue. Ethics likewise touches fair wages and incentive profit-sharing. It demands the very core question, "if Jesus ran this company totally, what would it be like to work here, and how would He relate to His

clients?" Ultimately, ethics are about love, and the balance between love and efficiency is the bridge all believers long to discover and walk out.

**Issue #9: "God's Spirit has free access":**

If, as scripture says in Romans 14:17, the "Kingdom of God is in the Holy Spirit," then a Christian business must, in some real way, be in and led by the Holy Spirit. He is here to lead us into "all truth" (John 14:16), meaning economic truth, business truth, and ethical truth, and He is here to help us interpret God's laws as already cited. He must be the Chairman of the Board and CEO in order for our business to begin to qualify as truly Christian. We must be able to discern His voice and find His peace and consensus within us, both personally, and with the other leaders of the enterprise. That means that we must do more than simply pray at our corporate times of decision-making and implementation. It means that we must grow to know His voice with humbled consciousness, but discernable clarity. To say that the Holy Spirit has free access is a real mouthful. That means from the bathrooms to the boardrooms; from our spoken thoughts to our unspoken thoughts; from our pricing policies to our unspoken "political games" within the organization. If the Holy Spirit is really there, there will be a climate of faith, and a release of His power and gifts that are appropriate to both His presence and the spiritual capacities of the believers and non-believers alike in the enterprise. If we want prayer in school, and if we want our Congress to open with prayer, what about its role in the marketplace? I have seldom found prayer to be an offense amongst unbelievers if it is God-centred and invoking His safety and enabling presence for all concerned.

**Issue #10: "over the actions, operations, and profits":**

While we may have no problem with the "actions" and "operations" side of the business, do we believe that it is "fanatical" to bring in the issue of "profits"! We must. How will they be handled, and who will decide? If profits are viewed as *man's* issue, or a stockholder's issue, I think we have a problem with the Spirit of God having free access. This takes us to the next two points.

**Issue #11: "of those who own" and Issue #12: "of those who operate":**

Combining these two separate issues, for the sake of brevity, we can say one thing for sure: requiring those who operate the business to function in a godly way, even if they are different than the owners, is both a relative "given" and a relative no-points-scored here item. The owners have control or should have control over the operators. The issue here is, does God have control of the owners, or does someone else? Many years ago I heard Bill Gothard raise this question in an indirect manner. His question was, "Why should God bless you in a publicly-held corporation when He has to bless so many sinners to do it?" While the question is a little different, it is in the same business phylum. Can an otherwise truly Christian business be such, if the control of its fruit is not fully subject to God, but rather subject to secular banks, creditors, shareholder or the like? I rest my case.

Some of you will surely have thought of errors and omissions but our goal here is to stimulate insight and debate. While we may not have answered all the questions surrounding a "Christian business," I trust the short journey together has been profitable and will elicit questions worthy of our Master's responses. We thank God for the revival that is coming through and in the marketplace. The proof of its coming is the eruption of numerous forums, such as this magazine, that have captured the

interest of the major secular magazines such as Time, Newsweek, and Fortune over the recent times. The real issue is, will we produce something vital enough to bring real transformation to the world, or simply something "Christian" enough to gain notoriety, but so weak that it only provides an inoculation against the real thing which God surely desires to bring?

I submit to you that if we will take these twelve general attributes of a Christian business seriously and seek God's help in responding in depth and consistency to them, we will not simply inoculate, we will transform. Please, re-read the definition and refine it, measure yourself against it, and make its application company policy as it serves your purposes. What an opportunity and responsibility God has given to us in the marketplace in this dawning hour!

***By Dennis Peacocke. Originally published in Jan/Feb 2003 edition of Business Reform magazine***