



FAITH & BUSINESS

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FEBRUARY 11, 2014

'Christian Business' ... or Godly Business?

The NY Times recently ran a rather intriguing article, at least for those of us interested in 'faith and business.' Entitled, "At Christian Companies, Religious Principles Complement Business Practices," the article raised, without answering, a number of compelling questions, including:

- Is publicly identifying oneself as a Christian or faith-based company — as Chick-fil-A, Hobby Lobby, In-N-Out Burger, the trucking company Covenant Transport, and the clothing store Forever 21 have all done — the essential distinguishing characteristic of a 'Christian' company?
- Or does being a Christian company mean insisting on certain music in one's stores (Hobby Lobby) and/or printing Bible verses on bags or food wrappers (In-N-Out Burger)? And, by implication, is having an evangelistic thrust a defining element of a Christian company?
- Does it mean embracing a conservative agenda? The article notes that Roman Catholic businessman Tom Monaghan, who founded and then sold Domino's Pizza, finances conservative causes and that Chick-fil-A is well known for its gifts to gay-conversion ministries. It also mentions the legal battle by Hobby Lobby to avoid complying with the Affordable Care Act's requirement for employee health coverage that includes morning-after contraception.
- What about how management treats — and pays — its workers? Here the article notes that Philip J. Clements, the Christian founder of the Center for Business Ethics Today, is "dismissive of living-wage laws, offering the example of Mexicans who work in the United States for below minimum wage. 'So give me a break on the whole concept of minimum wage or living wage,' Mr. Clements said, 'because these people are here working hard and sending money back.'" By way of contrast, the article also points out that Hobby Lobby offers "a minimum wage of \$14 an hour for full-time employees, about double that of the fast-food employees who struck nationwide this week for better pay and conditions."

In fact, the article closes with a comment from Douglas A. Hicks, a Presbyterian minister, the provost of Colgate University, and author of *Religion and the Workplace*, who contends that Christians must necessarily focus on how business affects people — especially its workers. He cautioned that businesses that behave in the most 'Christian' manner may not have marketing plans to make that visible. "It's the actions," he said, not the branding.

Picking up on that thought, let me suggest a more helpful way to think about all these questions. What we should really want to know is not so much what makes a company 'Christian,' but what makes a business pleasing, or displeasing, to God. In other words, the really important issue for Christian* business people and investors is not whether a business is labeled Christian, but whether, and to what degree, it fulfills God's intent for the purpose and practice of business.

In his book, *After Virtue*, philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre argues that you cannot determine whether something is good or bad unless you know its telos — its purpose. As an easy example, he asks, 'How can you tell whether a watch is a

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good one or a bad one?' You can't, he says, until you know what it was made for, i.e., the functional purpose for which the watch was created. If one tries to hammer a nail with a watch, and the watch breaks, that doesn't make it a bad watch. The watch was designed not to hammer nails but to tell time. It is only against that intended purpose that one can evaluate whether the watch is good or bad.

Renowned Christian preacher and author, Tim Keller, says the same principle applies to human behavior — explaining that we can't assess whether a human being is behaving well or badly unless we know the purpose for which humans were created. Business is no different. We must understand the purpose God has for business before we can evaluate whether a business is good or bad, whether it pleases or displeases God.

Scripture sums up with one word its entire understanding of human purpose and righteous behavior. That one word is: Love. Above all else, we have been created to love God and love our neighbor(s). Jesus tells us, in fact, that all the rest of God's commands flow from these two great commandments to Love.

The 'Love God' command provides the foundational reference point for all of our *spiritual* life — our relationship with, and behavior toward, the God who made us. 'Love your neighbor,' however, provides the plumb line for all of our *moral* life — our interactions with all of God's material creation, and especially with our fellow human beings. 'Love your neighbor' is, therefore, the gold standard — the divine intent and God-established reference point — for *all* the behavior by which human beings impact one another . . . *business behavior very much included*.

Importantly, God does not command us to love our neighbor primarily to give us noble moral advice. Rather, he is informing us of how to cooperate with, rather than run afoul of, the universe he created. So Scripture informs us in Galatians 6:7, "*Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.*"

If we sow good by doing good for our neighbors, we will in turn reap good, we will harvest blessing. 1 Samuel 26:23 tells us, "*The Lord rewards everyone for their righteousness and faithfulness.*" And Jesus says in Luke 6:38, "*Give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you.*"

But, of course, if one sows harm rather than good, the outcomes are quite different. Proverbs 22:8 tells us, "*Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity.*" In Psalm 39:11 we read, "*You rebuke and discipline men for their sin; you consume their wealth like a moth.*" And in Job 4:8-9 we are told, ". . . *those who plant trouble and cultivate evil will harvest the same. A breath from God destroys them. They vanish in a blast of his anger.*"

Bottom line: a good God has ordered his universe such that both good and bad conduct is, generally and over time, rewarded in kind. And 'Love your neighbor' is the First Principle of God's moral universe. It is both the reference point by which our actions are assessed, and the watershed divide by which our outcomes — whether blessing or blight — are determined.

To truly answer the question of what makes for a God-pleasing, or God-displeasing, business, therefore, we must answer these two First Principle questions about the application of 'Love your neighbor' to business:

We serve others by placing as much or more importance on outcomes that are good for them as on our own self-interest.

- How does business actually love its neighbors?
- Who are the neighbors that business is meant to love?

These answers are of paramount importance. They describe the difference between business that pleases versus displeases the God of the universe . . . and between business that is divinely rewarded or reproved. Both questions require thoughtful attention. The balance of this column tackles 'How does business actually love?' and the succeeding column addresses the equally important *Who* question, i.e., 'Just who exactly is business meant to love?'

Our English word 'love' is used primarily to express a range of feelings — feelings of enjoyment, appreciation, affection, or romance toward someone or something. But Scripture has a quite different, much more pragmatic, understanding of love: self-sacrificial service. So Jesus, the ultimate embodiment of love, tells us, *"The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."* (Matthew 20:28) And in Galatians Paul says, *"Do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love."* Similarly, Peter exhorts, *"Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others."*

Tim Keller describes this fundamental biblical understanding especially well when he says: "There are only two kingdoms, and each has a foundational operating principle. For the kingdom of God, the operating principle is Serve. For the 'kingdom of this world,' the operating principle is Be Served." Love, then, is the overarching principle of the kingdom of God, but Serve is its operating dynamic. Serve is love in action, love made practical.

And what, really, does it mean to serve? The bible is clear: we serve others by placing as much or more importance on outcomes that are good for them as on our own self-interest. In today's vernacular, we commit ourselves to 'win-win' outcomes. And when there are no 'win-win' outcomes possible — Jesus could not, for example, both save us and save himself from death — we choose what is good for the other. When we do, in fact, fulfill God's 'Love your neighbor' command, when we actually Serve by committing ourselves to the good of others, the lives of those others are enriched . . . blessed . . . people flourish. Of course, we can do the opposite, we can serve ourselves at the expense of others ('win-lose' outcomes) — and sow blight rather than blessing.

Business is an immensely powerful engine for value creation. Business loves and serves its neighbors, therefore, by creating value for them. When business does so, when it creates real value and blessing for others, it also reaps blessing. It creates a virtuous cycle in which both people and business flourish. Of course, business can do the opposite, it can serve itself at the expense of (one or more of) its neighbors. In which case, rather than creating value, business *extracts* value. Scripture refers to this dynamic — to taking value from those to whom it belongs — as 'stealing' and 'plunder' and says it brings death to all involved (see Proverbs 1:10-19). Such plunder businesses both sow, *and reap*, blight.

And now we can answer the first of the questions posed earlier. Businesses fulfill or violate God's 'Love your neighbor' command by either creating or extracting value. God-pleasing businesses create real value for their neighbors. Displeasing businesses do the opposite, they plunder (one or more of) their neighbors. God may be perfectly happy to see Bible verses on burger bags. But when it comes to

business, what he really wants is to see Love fulfilled — by companies creating compelling value for all their neighbors.

(And just who those business neighbors are is addressed in the following column.)

** As noted above, a good God has ordered his universe such that, generally and over time, good and bad conduct is rewarded in kind — with 'Love your neighbor' serving as the watershed reference point that shapes those outcomes. This is true whether one is Christian or not. It is a moral principle that, like the law of gravity in the natural realm, operates for all regardless of their faith or lack thereof. Tim Keller puts it this way, "The Bible tells us we live in a moral universe. The universe is not simply made of metal, and wood, and nature — the physical world — but it is also made of moral truth, and moral values, and moral principles. Those moral values are every bit as real as the physical world. And if you won't acknowledge those moral principles, you will knock your head against them every bit as hard as you will against a brick wall."*

It would be prudent, therefore, for both believing and non-believing business people alike, to pay close attention to what business behavior God favors and what he frowns upon. But for obvious reasons, non-believers are unlikely to come to that conclusion based on biblical instruction. In some cases, however, they do come to a similar conclusion based on the strength of the empirical evidence — i.e., they learn through observation and experience that 'Love your neighbor' business behavior leads to superior outcomes. More about that in the following column.

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0539-NLD-2/5/2014