

The Meaning of Business

Christians in the marketplace, says Jeff Van Duzer, are not second-class citizens of the kingdom.

Interview by Rob Moll/ JANUARY 14, 2011

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Despite many books and conferences in the past decade that frame business as a divine calling, churches still wonder how best to support the businesspeople in their midst, many of whom feel demeaned for not doing "real" ministry.

Jeff Van Duzer, in *Why Business Matters to God: (And What Still Needs to Be Fixed)*(IVP), offers Business people guidelines for how to think about their role in God's plan. *Christianity Today* editor at large Rob Moll spoke with the dean and professor of business law and ethics at Seattle Pacific University about whether the free market system is still the best provider of goods and services, and how churches can help Business people face ethically complex choices.

Why does God want people to go into business?

Two answers: to provide goods and services, and to provide meaningful and creative jobs.

Those are two different purpose statements. One has an internal focus, and one, external. Externally, business is the only institution that creates economic value. A university provides intellectual capital but does not make things. Business takes the ideas and commercializes them. It relies on an array of values from other institutions, but it's the only one that adds value into the system. Business plays a key role by creating products and services.

But not every product a business could make is equally valid in the eyes of God. So a Christian in business should ask not only what will maximize the bottom line, but also what product or service could be made, given the core competencies under his control and the assets he is managing, that would best serve his community.

The second piece is that God designed humans to work. They are made in his image: God is a worker. And God's work is creative and meaningful. Business is not the only institution that creates opportunities for work, but it is certainly one of them, and this recent recession would suggest it is a very important one.

What is the purpose of business?

A business should serve—internally, its employees, and externally, its customers. A business exists for certain purposes. One purpose is to provide meaningful work. Another is to provide meaningful goods and services. It does not exist to maximize return on capital investment. There are a variety of things you might include that enable you to achieve those service goals, but you should not do anything that runs afoul of limits. A broad understanding of the notion of sustainability might be shorthand for describing limits. As business pursues what I think are its godly purposes, it must do so in a way that does not transgress the "do no harm" standard of sustainability.

The third purpose is partnership. It's a call for business to recognize its place in a system of institutions that collectively pursue the common good. The common good allows for the flourishing of the community and the individuals who make up that community.

Haven't we seen a flood of books over the past decade arguing that business is not only a legitimate calling for Christians but even a high calling? Why the need to continue highlighting this theme?

There has been emphasis on the broader understanding of vocation and calling, and a broader concern about a dualistic—Monday through Friday versus Sunday—Christianity. Even in our church, every now and then we will hear that someone is being called to "Christian ministry," and you know they are not talking about accounting.

Business people often complain that the church subtly communicates that their calling is a necessary evil or at best a second-class vocation. Is this a legitimate complaint? If so, why do churches approach business like this?

Yes, it is [a legitimate complaint]. The entire world is the Lord's, and all the work we are called to do is ordained by him, in service to his kingdom. There are a lot of people who have done sociological studies and have written about how Business people feel demeaned by the church, though I think the church is getting better.

What can churches do to communicate to Business people the value of their calling?

Church leaders need to understand and learn about what is involved in the day-to-day lives of parishioners. They need to know how theology applies in the lives of people; if they don't know their lives, they can't apply their theology. Hold a conference and invite business leaders to talk about the challenges they are facing. Go to the workplace and ask questions.

Leaders need to be careful with their language. There has been improvement, but there is still a tendency to refer to some things as ministry and others not.

Pastors need a richer understanding of the pluses and minuses of capitalism. They know the minuses, which often enough are true. But it comes across as if Business people are dancing with the Devil. Another thing churches can do is celebrate Christians in different professions.

Business people complain about the church's attitude toward business. But don't Business people see the church as wishy-washy, touchy-feely, or out of touch with the real world?

Absolutely. I talk about this in the context of the call to partnership. Various institutions tend to see themselves as godlike. They demand loyalty and insist on the extension of their characteristics into other spheres. Government and the church can be disdainful and distrustful of business, and certainly business is disdainful and distrustful of government. We need to see other institutions as common allies in

support of a common mission for the good of humanity. We would then say to business [institutions] that they shouldn't apply their metrics, like efficiency, to an artist or a church committee. There are other values embedded in the nature of those institutions that need to be respected.

The best way you can unleash creative juices is to help employees understand that their work connects to something bigger, something that has long-term value.

You say that the free market is in the best position to deliver goods and services. In today's economy, can we be so confident that this is still true?

Don't make my claim stronger than it is. I certainly don't claim godlike status for markets. In fact, I think the free market is one of the great idols of our age, particularly among Christians in business. The market's claim is to send price signals to allocate resources. That is just one of a number of goods that society should hope to have, and it's a long distance from shalom. Government should play a significant role in creating some protections against bubbles and other things that distort market signals. However, relative to state-directed economies, the free market is more efficient at allocating resources.

Some socialist democracies, like the Scandinavian countries, have managed to produce goods and services as well as further the common good, offering an array of social services like free health care and free education. Isn't this a better economic model for society, given your ideas?

I sometimes get accused of being a socialist. But there is a fundamental difference between the view of business I argue for and a socialist economy. In a socialist system, the government is directing the economy. I'm not talking about that. What I'm saying is that individual Christians should align their vocations toward godly desires.

Every system has a mix of government direction and the free market. There are a number of ways government can help the market run more efficiently. Different cultures draw the line in different places. I'm addressing Christians in their world and in business.

Your vision for Christian business would not be recognizable in many business schools.

There is a significant minority movement in business in which people are saying that business has to be about more than just maximizing the bottom line. You can find it in what's called creative capitalism or conscious capitalism. None of those ideas are precisely what I'm advocating. But they are not so far away that someone would look at mine and think I was from Mars.

Some argue that your idea—that the purpose of business is to help the common good—is old, and that "maximizing profit" for its own sake is the new idea. Do you think this is true?

Historically, maximizing shareholder value as the purpose of business has not been the prevailing view. The notion of maximizing shareholder wealth dates back to the 1970s. Companies that existed before that had a different initial understanding of what they were about. This is a recent and fairly destructive idea that came about through various and complicated reasons.

Do any companies practice business in the way you advocate?

It's hard to tell. A lot of what I'm talking about is motivational. We have Costco here in Seattle. Its mission statement—"To continually provide our members with quality goods and services at the lowest possible prices"—aligns directly with what I'm saying. As a practical matter, shareholders have done very well. It's possible that the ceo goes home at night, laughs, and says that what he's really about is maximizing returns—but I don't think so.

Would someone following this model be at a competitive disadvantage?

I don't ever want to suggest that doing the right thing will always redound to the bottom line. The phrase "good ethics is good business" is true most of the time. If all ethics made money, we would never teach ethics at business school. Increasingly the value and wealth of a company is tied up in the creativity of employees. Even if the only thing you care about is making money, you want to unleash those creative juices. The best way you can unleash creative juices is to help employees understand that their work connects to something bigger, something that has long-term value. A model that tells you to think about how your company can best serve the community is also the model that's most likely to tap into employees' creativity.

Most Christians are employed by businesses that don't follow your model. What is your word for them?

This is the most important question churches could be talking about today. If we live in a fallen world, how do we live in this messy middle? When is it okay to compromise? When do you pay a living wage and ride the company into bankruptcy because it's the right thing to do, and [say], "If God wants to rescue it, then he will"? Or, when do you say you want to pay a living wage, but you just cannot make it pencil out?

Christians can't accept a position of compromise until it is the very last option. They have to strain for that creative solution that allows them to do it all. Then, when they are absolutely forced to choose the lesser of two evils, they have to acknowledge that nonetheless, they are choosing evil. That should call them to confession, repentance, and a deep longing for the day when we won't be living in this kind of world anymore.

I wish the church would help us think through principles about how to navigate this messy middle. I try to provide a theology that will help Business people understand how their activity can fit into the overall scheme of God's kingdom work.

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