



Ethics in Brief

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Building God's Empire or Ours? The Purpose of Work in Business

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Christians in business often struggle with the question "What are you doing for God in business?" Our generation lacks an adequate theological answer to this question, but it is crucial to the sense of purpose of many thousands of Christians today. The problem is rooted in a popular theology of heaven as an immaterial and remote realm, which misunderstands the significance of God's mission in restoring creation through Christ. When work is seen as seeking God's kingdom, the role of business becomes clearer. Examples of what this means are given and the necessary virtues are discussed.

Introduction¹

A still-popular theology of 'heaven' sees it as a disembodied eternity populated by immaterial souls. Christians who 'go to heaven' are thought to leave their physical bodies behind and enter a 'purely spiritual' existence. But many recent commentators have shown that this is a profoundly sub-Christian – indeed unbiblical – concept.² Among other things, it serves to devalue the material existence which is central to the experience of business people. It implies that the work of the church is spiritual and of permanent value whereas the world of business is material and significant only until Christ calls time on physical life. And it contributes to a sense that the church does not value business except as mission field and funding agency. I begin by presenting a much broader biblical vision against which to see work, and then focus on the place of work in God's plans and God's calling for people in business.

Creation Renewed

At the beginning, God created the world and humanity and declared it all 'very good' (Gen. 1:31; and 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25). Also at the beginning, God ordained work as a good for humanity. Work had several aims – to subdue the earth, to work it and care for it, and, for global success in God's creation project, to be fruitful (Gen. 1:28; 2:15). The fall – human rebellion against God's good order – brought a decisive break in relationships between God and humanity implicating the whole earthly creation. The mission of Jesus was the restoration of these relationships, the re-affirmation of the creation order and the re-establishment of God's universal kingdom or rule – a mission inaugurated in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

The hope for creation and humankind, promised to us in Christ, is for the restoration of God's rule. This not only begins on earth, it will be completed *on earth*: 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven' (Matt. 6:10).

God's will is for his kingdom to be realised in the earthly realm as it is already realised in the heavenly. This is the renewal of creation which was once declared very good and will be declared so again, when Jesus returns to earth in glory and in power to judge sin finally and to establish his rule *de facto*. The idea that we go to some *other* place called 'heaven' when we die, though widespread in popular theology, is simply mistaken. God's people are those who collaborate with his vision of a world of wise order, glorious beauty and transparent justice, who hate the sin and evil which destroy good relationships and the earth's abundance. And

when God returns in judgement he will finally remove all that prevents his kingdom being realised on earth, and transform or perfect all that builds it (Matt. 25:31-46).

Work

Working the earth is about using the abundant capacities of the earth to grow food, rear animals, extract minerals, develop and fashion products, so that humankind can be fed, clothed, housed and enjoy rest. These activities, along with myriad others, are the stuff of daily work and business. Using, or 'subduing', the earth is less fashionable today than the requirement to care for it. Care for the earth is about *not* subduing it to the point of destroying its capacity for future abundance.

Work was spoiled by the fall, so alongside the good of work we also experience frustration and selfishness, ugliness and injustice in work. Workers can – despite good intentions – build empires which are alien, even antagonistic, to God's purpose.³ The fall brings not only a rupture in the purpose of work but a rupture in our willingness to share fairly the labour of work and the fruits of that labour. The human condition is now characterised by selfishness on behalf of ourselves and our business, and a tendency to leave for others the tidying up of our own mess.

However, just as God desires to renew creation, so He desires, not that work should *stop* in an endless holiday, but that it be renewed. How then should Christians approach work in the light of both the fundamental good which God desires that we find in it and the selfishness and frustration which attend work after the fall?

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus speaks of our desire for wealth, our need for clothing and food, and our tendency to worry about providing for our own needs: 'Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and your other needs will be provided for as well' (Matt. 6:33). God's kingdom comes where his fallen creation is restored to his rule, and his transparent justice, overcoming greed, reigns again. This is a kingdom of restored relationships and renewed beauty which subdues the earth to make it productive and glorious, which cares for the earth to ensure abundant and sustainable production into the future. It is achieved through 'righteousness' – God's quality of right living in delight and obedience, humility and service.

This is the kingdom which will be extended unreservedly throughout the earthly realm when Christ returns in power and glory to judge us and our work, eliminate sin and establish finally his ownership and leadership. Paul describes judgement as like purifying metal in a smelting process in which the dross gets burned or removed. Work which is like straw will not survive, though we shall escape 'as if through flames' (1 Cor. 3:15). But work which reflects the trust, values and priorities of God's kingdom will survive and be perfected and transformed for service in the kingdom. This brings *purpose* to our work. Work *for* the kingdom will be transformed to become part *of* the kingdom. This brings *meaning* to our toil and *hope* in our frustration.

Work in Business

What are some of the impacts of the fall in business? Firstly I observe the narrow – mostly financial – objectives of most businesses, and the equally narrow measurement of performance. Measured performance omits a good deal which *should* be measured but which is hard to measure. For example, I have often felt very flat both when I am presented with 'targets' and when my performance is assessed against them. Financial targets do not engage the whole person. A second impact of the fall is ugliness – the only word I can use to describe some outcomes of work. For example, the construction industry produces many buildings which are exceedingly dull. Might some behaviour exhibited in the worst housing estates be attributable to monotonous environments? Another example is the enormous quantities of waste which businesses produce.

A third impact of the fall at work is injustice – for example, the extraordinary poverty of most workers. Half the world's population lives on less than \$2 per day; yet even this statistic fails to capture the humiliation, powerlessness and brutal hardship that is the daily lot of the world's poor. Some think that market economics means that differentials will narrow over time – but differentials are widening. The 'trickle down' effect is wishful thinking.

The great thing about business is that business is not a zero sum game. It is possible to meet the needs of employers for profit, and customers for service – *and* to address other needs as well. It is possible to serve God in serving our businesses.

This simple truth presents business with its great opportunity to create true wealth for the kingdom of God. That is what it means to 'seek first the Kingdom of God' in business. Applying this truth is not easy. It is not good enough simply to leave the field entirely to those who are willing to engage in the risks of the market and to reap its rewards. Both Old and New Testaments reveal a God who requires His people to be holy in their devotion to Him and His service – and just in their dealings with each other. This requirement applies also at work.

Let me mention just two applications for people in business. The first is trade justice – the problem of the highly unequal access to global markets of the developed and developing worlds – which results in huge disparities in standards of living in the two areas. This should be as deep a shame to all who follow Christ as it is to many who do not. Fair trade is simply a matter of justice, and business people should support it actively; organisations like Traidcraft are a beacon to us all.

The second is less well known as a justice issue. Climate change for most westerners is a matter of needing more air conditioning in our offices in summer and of hearing news of occasional floods. It is a modest nuisance. But for those in the flood plains of Bangladesh, in the Caribbean or on low lying islands in the Pacific, climate change means more frequent and worse storms and continuous, permanent rises in sea level which gradually, but predictably, result in a complete loss of land and therefore home and livelihood as well. Or in other parts of the world like Ethiopia it means near permanent drought, mitigated only by floods. The primary cause of the change is now very widely accepted to be human emissions of greenhouse gases, and it is the wealthy in the developed world who pollute most and suffer least. If Africans, Asians and future generations are our neighbours, we will need to confront the Lord's searching assessment, 'What you did to the least of these my brothers you did to me' (Matt. 25:40).

The biggest part of our family business, NG Bailey, is the design and installation of heating, cooling, lighting and electrical power systems for buildings. These systems are both essential for productive occupation AND the cause of carbon emissions which damage our planet. Seeking first God's righteousness surely puts a heavy business demand upon me.

The result of taking justice seriously is that Christians face imperatives at work which for colleagues are simply strategic options. The challenge is to find means of speaking persuasively to our colleagues in language they will understand with proposals they will be willing to support – and that is not easy. A Christian with such a mission could be no more than a thorn in the flesh of a business enterprise. But a few examples will show that there are some who understand that a noble vision and great determination can result in a valuable and profitable contribution to companies. For example, Sam Guinness lived in Dublin during the nineteenth century potato famine and saw the ruin caused by gin addiction. His response was to establish a brewery to produce a less addictive, less costly and more nutritious alternative drink – and he made a huge contribution to the alleviation of poverty as well as developing a fine business for many generations of staff and shareholders.

Now consider some contemporary examples. Ray Anderson is the recently retired Chief Executive of the world's largest carpet tile manufacturer, called Interface Inc. He realised in the 1990's that while his business was highly successful in conventional terms – market share, profits, share price – there was a huge amount of carpet manufacturing waste which was filling up the rubbish dumps near his manufacturing plants. As he researched the issue he learned how many hundred years it would take for this waste to decompose, and how the oil which was his main raw material was irreplaceable. He was deeply shocked by what he discovered, he wept, and decided to stop 'plundering the earth' – his words. So he launched his 2020 vision – that by 2020 his business would have a zero impact on the environment, by reducing its waste, recycling what was left and recovering old carpet tiles from customers so that his product, both before and after it was sold, left no legacy of pollution for future generations. He struggled for some years to bring shareholders and staff with him but has now won them over. Incidentally his strategy sharply reduced his business costs which enabled it to weather the 2002 downturn better than its competitors. Interface is now well on the way to its 2020 goal.

Rachel works for a major UK builder. The housebuilding industry currently buys materials for 7 houses but builds only 6 – because of damage and over-buying – filling many holes with rubbish.

She has gained her directors' approval to manage the ordering process to avoid over-buying, to improve site processes in order to reduce waste on projects, to recycle what is left and so to eliminate waste to land fill by 2010. In doing this she will save the company a lot of money, motivate staff and improve our environment.

Muhammad Yunus, the founder of Grameen Bank, approached several mainstream banks for help in launching a new form of finance. His aim was to enable the poor in Bangladesh to purchase animals, sewing machines and other tools to enable them to work. This proposal had the potential to open up substantial new credit markets to these banks, but the absence of good security was a drawback. The banks universally rejected him. Yunus experimented with a loan of \$27 from his own pocket in 1974. Grameen Bank has since lent \$7bn in microcredit to the poorest people in the world. It has a repayment rate of 98% despite the complete absence of collateral – considerably higher than the average of AAA-rated western banks who today have serious bad debt. Yunus has enabled 7.5 million of the poorest people in Bangladesh to find dignity and income through work. He has developed a highly successful banking model developing new banking markets which is now being copied in over 100 countries including the US; he has also made money for his shareholders. In 2006 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Conclusion

God's will is for his original creation plan, his kingdom, to be realised in a renewed earthly realm. His call is to seek this kingdom – meaning that a Christian's priority in business is to seek to hasten this kingdom by diligent, humble, wealth-creating, justice-seeking, earth-sustaining service. This can bring great wealth – measured in the broadest terms – to our employers, to our customers, to our neighbours, and so give glory to God.

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1. This paper was first delivered in March 2008 at the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity.
 2. E.g., N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (SPCK, 2007).
 3. This is what the artist Brueghel illustrates in his famous painting of the Tower of Babel. He invites us to consider whether one of the builders is a hard worker who – unlike his colleagues – works solidly from clocking on to clocking off. Perhaps he spent last evening leading a house group and this morning studied Scripture and prayed; but he spends the greater part of his day working, not for God, but against Him. <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Brueghel-tower-of-babel.jpg>

For further reading

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