



A CHRISTIAN ETHIC FOR BUSINESS

by Alexander Hill

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An ethical man is a Christian holding four aces.
MARK TWAIN

Man is too complicated. I would have made him simpler.
FEODOR DOSTOYEVSKY

You must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.
JESUS

Christianity has not so much been tried and found wanting, as it has been found difficult and left untried.
G. K. CHESTERTON

A Note from the Editors:

In a world that is flooded by moral relativism the Christian business man or woman faces the constant challenge of doing the right thing in ethical dilemmas, which is no easy task. As Niccolo Machiavelli suggested in *The Prince*, "...a man who strives after goodness in all his acts is sure to come to ruin, since there are so many men who are not good." Alec Hill's *Just Business* distills the essence of ethics from the morass of tolerated practices in a fallen world, lighting up the path for the right thing in God's eyes. Chapter One from Hill's classic work, reprinted here, sets the right tone for the entire discussion in this issue of the *Christian Business Review*. We greatly appreciate InterVarsity Press and Alec Hill for giving us permission to reprint this material.

Maria manages a small division within a manufacturing corporation. Roughly 60 percent of the division's annual \$250,000 budget is allocated to the salaries and benefits of Maria and her three subordinates, Abe, Barb and Carl. Maria's supervisor informs her that \$40,000 to \$50,000 needs to be cut from next year's budget. Since non-personnel expenses constitute only \$100,000 of the budget, Maria is inclined to lay off one of her employees.

Before the company moved Abe to Seattle from Chicago last year, Maria told him over the phone that his employment would "no doubt be a long-term arrangement." This was not written into his contract and is, Maria thinks, quite ambiguous. Abe has not worked out as well as Maria had hoped. His work is mediocre at best, and his interpersonal skills are poor.

A long-term employee, Barb was divorced from her husband two years ago. She is now a single parent of three small children, and it is evident that her work performance has suffered.

Carl works hardest of the three and regularly receives the highest annual evaluations. Another employee has informed Maria that Carl recently inherited a substantial sum of money from his parents' estate. Maria believes that Carl would have a much easier time finding employment else-

where than either Abe or Barb.
What should Maria do?

Is a Christian Ethic Possible in Business?

Managers regularly confront such nerve-wracking, heart-wrenching and (often) guilt-producing scenarios. In their quest to do the “right thing” for both shareholders and subordinates, they may experience a deep sense of uncertainty. Why? Because when the “shoulds” of life are dealt with, values and relationships are brought to the forefront. Ethics—the study of “shoulds” and of doing the “right thing”—attempts to provide a value-laden framework, a grid through which real-life decisions can be made.

Christian ethics is the application of Christian values to the decision-making process. What counsel does this perspective have for Maria? Does it provide a simple solution to her dilemma? One approach is to view Scripture as a book of rules to be applied to specific situations. Simply find the right rule and match it with the current problem and, bingo, the two pieces

table.¹ While this criticism misunderstands the heart of Christian ethics, it should give pause to those who would take a rules-based approach. In ambiguous cases, it is clearly deficient in its capacity to give precise answers in every situation. Ironically, research indicates that corporations with strict codes of ethics actually are cited more often for breaking the law than their counterparts without such spelled-out rules.² Perhaps either human nature rebels against minute regulations or a rule-keeping perspective provides little guidance in morally ambiguous situations. Ethicist (and theologian) Dietrich Bonhoeffer was bluntly uncharitable toward such an approach, labeling it “naive” and those who practice it “clowns.”³

Other critics attack the idea of a Christian business ethic from a different angle, arguing that Scripture has nothing relevant to say about business today. After all, they point out, the Bible was written between eighteen hundred and three thousand years ago, largely in the context of an agrarian economy. Israel’s entire gross national product under King Solomon was no doubt less than the net worth of Google or Microsoft. What significant insights, they ask, can Scripture give Maria

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fit like a puzzle.

While this strategy works fine in relatively simple situations, such as when a worker is tempted to steal or an executive considers slandering a competitor, what about more complex situations like the one confronting Maria? If Abe approaches her first, seeking to keep his job, must she heed Jesus’ admonition to “give to the one who asks you” (Matthew 5:42)? What if Barb and Carl then make similar requests? Or what if Abe assaults Maria when he learns of the possible layoff? Is she to “turn the other cheek” (Matthew 5:39), or should she demand restitution and even bring criminal charges against him (Exodus 21:23—22:14)? Taking this line of reasoning a step further, is there a scriptural rule that provides guidance to Maria’s company in deciding how many units to produce or in which geographical areas to seek expansion?

Attempts to find easy answers to such enigmatic situations has led one philosopher to label Christian ethics “infantile.” He compares the “rule book” approach to the types of absolute commands typically given to children between the ages of five and nine—for example, don’t talk to strangers and no singing at the dinner

in deciding the fates of Abe, Barb and Carl? Indeed, is the Bible relevant to leveraged buy-outs and software copyright infringement situations? Using Scripture as a business rule book, they contend, would be like using ancient medical scholars such as Galen and Hippocrates to train modern doctors.⁴

If the critics are correct in arguing, first, that the Bible is rule-bound and, second, that it lacks relevance, we need not proceed any further. If they are right, Scripture has minimal applicability to modern business practices. However, if it can be demonstrated that Christian ethics is rooted in something much deeper, then they are wrong.

God’s Character

The foundation of Christian ethics in business is not rules but the changeless character of God. Scripture describes God as being the creator of all things, perfect, preceding and superseding all things. It also tells how we as human beings were originally created to emulate God. Christianity operates on the notion that ethics

(the study of human character) logically follows theology (the study of God's character). When we behave in a manner consistent with God's character, we act ethically. When we fail to do so, we act unethically. All of Scripture—from the law of Moses to Paul's list of virtues and vices—serves to illustrate behavior that is

A rule-keeping perspective provides little guidance in morally ambiguous situations

congruent with God's moral character.

This approach is quite different from human-based ethical systems, which generally focus on egoism (promotion of individual pleasure via material goods or career success), utilitarianism (the option that best maximizes pleasure and minimizes pain for all involved) or deontological reasoning (the keeping of moral rules such as "Don't harm others").⁵

This is not to say that Christian ethics rejects all of these values. To the contrary, there is much overlap between Christian ethics and many human-centered ethical systems. The major difference rests in its central priority. While concerned with human happiness and the fulfillment of ethical obligations, Christian ethics does not see these as its ultimate goal. Rather, it prizes the life that seeks to emulate God's character. Thus, the great Catholic saint Ignatius Loyola was eulogized as follows: "The aim of life is not to gain a place in the sun, nor to achieve fame or success, but to lose ourselves in the glory of God."⁶ In a similar vein, Reformer John Calvin wrote,

We are not our own: in so far as we can, let us therefore forget ourselves and all that is ours. Conversely, we are God's: let us therefore live for him and die for him. We are God's: let his wisdom and will therefore rule all our actions. We are God's: let all the parts of our life accordingly strive toward him as our only lawful goal.⁷

Holiness-Justice-Love

If being ethical in business is reflecting God's character, then the critical question becomes, "What is God like?" Christianity's answer includes such

common responses as God's orderliness and artistry in creation. It also goes much further, focusing on God's self-revelation as recorded in Scripture and through his Son Jesus Christ.

Three divine characteristics that have direct bearing on ethical decision-making are repeatedly emphasized in the Bible:⁸

1. God is holy.⁹
2. God is just.¹⁰
3. God is loving.¹⁰

Each of these qualities will be explored in much greater depth in the following chapters [of *Just Business*]. Here it suffices to say that a business act is ethical if it reflects God's holy-just-loving character. Such hyphenation is appropriate because the three qualities are so intertwined that it would be just as accurate to describe God as being loving-just-holy or just-loving-holy.

The human body provides a helpful illustration. If holiness is comparable to the skeleton in providing core strength, then justice is analogous to the muscles ensuring balance, and love is similar to the flesh emanating warmth. Obviously, all three are needed in equal measure. Just imagine a body with only a skeleton (or a business with only a code of ethics)—it would be rigid and immobile. Or picture muscles without a skeleton and flesh (or a business steeped in detailed procedures and policy manuals)—they would be cold and improperly focused. Finally, consider flesh unsupported by



any infrastructure (or a business trying to meet every need)—it would be undefined and undisciplined.

Christian ethics requires all three characteristics to be taken into account when decisions are made. Holiness, when untethered from justice and love, drifts into hypercritical legalism. Likewise, justice that loses its anchor in holiness and love produces harsh outcomes. And finally, love when it is orphaned lacks an adequate moral compass. Each of the three contains a vital ethical ingredient. Christian ethics does not involve either-or analysis—as if we could choose between holiness, justice and love—but rather a synthesis in which all three conditions must be met before an action can be considered moral. Each, like a leg on a three-legged stool, balances the other two.

Highly respected clothing maker Levi Strauss has six core values. Interestingly, three of these—integrity, fairness and compassion—directly mirror the biblical principles of holiness, justice and love. The company's remaining values of honesty, promise keeping and respect for others are also important secondary principles to be discussed later. Significantly, former CEO Robert Haas discarded the corporation's thick ethics rule book because "it didn't keep managers or employees from exercising poor judgment and making questionable decisions." Instead the company now focuses on the core principles and conducts extensive employee training.¹¹

Flawed Humanity

Unfortunately, being holy-just-loving is easier said than done. A quick glance at the deception and broken promises common in the marketplace indicates that something is fundamentally wrong. Why is it that, despite our noblest intentions, we seem so incapable of living as we ought? Why, after a massive tsunami hit Indonesia, did ten Oxfam charity workers tasked with rebuilding

destroyed homes end up colluding with local contractors? The result was tragic: homeless Indonesians were forced to move out of their second residences due to shoddy workmanship.¹²

The "why" questions go on and on. Why do employers feel compelled to give "honesty tests" to job applicants? Why do American employees steal billions of dollars worth of goods from their companies annually?

Why did Sanjay Kumar, former CEO of Computer Associates International, commit securities fraud by back-dating over \$2 billion in sales?¹³ Why did a prosperous company like HealthSouth systematically overstate its earnings by at least \$1.4 billion?¹⁴

Scripture labels the fundamental human flaw "sin." At its core, sin is the refusal to emulate God and

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instead to set our own independent agendas. This attitude of self-sufficiency, of elevating self to god-like status, results in spiritual alienation. The apostle Paul goes so far as to call us “enemies” of God in a state of rebellion (Romans 5:10). Analogous to cancer, this moral disease infects our entire being, clouds our moral vision and alters our very character. J. I. Packer describes it as “a perverted energy...that enslaves people to God-defying, self-gratifying behavior.”¹⁵ The result is a chasm between us and God. He remains holy-just-loving, but we have become dirty-biased-selfish.

An important distinction must be made at this point between the concepts of “sin” and “sins.” While the former term describes our defective moral character, the latter includes actions that naturally follow—lying, promise breaking, stealing and so on. Two sports metaphors describe our situation. First, like archers with poor vision, sin has affected our ability to properly focus. The bad shots that follow—we often fail to even hit the target—are like sins in that they are the natural outcome of our bad eyesight. Second, we are comparable to high jumpers with broken legs. Try as we may, we cannot even come close to clearing the standard. As theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wryly observed, “The doctrine of original sin is the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith.”¹⁶

Our fallen natures are like petri dishes in which sinful actions flourish. This is particularly problematic in the marketplace, where financial stakes are high, career destinies are decided and the temptation to rationalize unethical behavior is strong. How else can one explain the \$3.8 billion improperly booked by WorldCom?¹⁷ Why did partners at PricewaterhouseCoopers overlook financial problems in audits for such scandal plagued companies as Microstrategy?¹⁸ What caused the CEO of Tyco International to take \$170 million in unauthorized compensation?¹⁹

Lest the finger of accusation be pointed too quickly, we must all acknowledge our own susceptibility to the temptation of justifying unethical or imprudent behavior. Lewis Smedes correctly observes: “Self-deception is a fine art. In one corner of our mind we know that something is true; in another we deny it. . . . We know, but we refuse to know.”²⁰ For example, despite alarming evidence against him, Adelphia Corporation’s president pled innocent to multiple counts of fraud and conspiracy. He was later found guilty of all charges.²¹ Psychologists have a label for such behavior—“denial.”

A Mixed Moral Bag

Imagine a society operating entirely under the paradigm of sin. Sellers and purchasers could never trust

each other, so deals would be difficult to transact. Managers would constantly spy on subordinates to prevent theft and laziness. Slavery, child labor and bribery would be common. Since “might makes right” would be the guiding principle of business, companies would hire armed personnel to protect and pursue their interests. Prisons would be full and new ones would be needed at an accelerated pace. Society would so distrust business that government regulators would be assigned to every company. These bureaucrats would in turn be inept and corrupt. As a result of all these factors, the costs of doing business would skyrocket, and the very foundations of capitalism would be undermined. While some pessimists view this as an accurate description of the direction in which our culture is heading, it is clearly a bleak picture.

Thankfully, as Henry David Thoreau chided his generation, this paradigm is not the complete story of Christian ethics: “Men will lie on their backs, talking about the fall of man and never make an effort to get up.”²² At least three factors encourage us to arise from the moral muck.

First, despite our sinful nature, our spiritual core has not been erased; we retain the “image of God.” We continue to aspire for wholeness and regret when we fall short of our ideals. Our conscience, though less reliable than originally designed, is still operative. We also remain capable of reciprocal kindness—of providing for those who in turn give something to us. Hence we ought not be surprised by acts of managerial benevolence toward hard-working, loyal employees.

Second, God has established social institutions such as government, the legal system, family and business to check human sin, preserve order and provide accountability. Human authority and tradition provide the framework necessary for communal living; government punishes wrong-doers, law requires fair play, parents discipline their children, and businesses provide societal order. Without such institutions, anarchy would reign. Reformed scholars call this “common grace” because these protections extend to all members of society, regardless of whether they acknowledge God. Of course this is not to say that all governments, parents and employers are ideal. To the contrary, authority figures often abuse their power; they too are infected by sin. Rather, common grace merely affirms the general principle that human authority is necessary in an imperfect world and should ordinarily be respected.

The third force for good are those whom Jesus identifies as the “salt and light” of the world (Matthew 5:13-16). As salt prevents decay and light illuminates the darkness, so Jesus expects his followers to positively affect their surroundings. Corruption is to be confronted and high moral standards are to be set. Examples

of business leaders who serve as salt and light in the marketplace include David Browne, CEO of Lens-Crafters, who leads his company using the servant-leadership model of Jesus. "At first," he reflects, "I was a classic numbers only butthead. . . . But now I want to serve folks, to help them be the best they can be."²³ Bill Pollard, former CEO of ServiceMaster, grew a billion-dollar company on the belief that every individual, including every janitor and launderer, is an image-bearer of God. By bringing this value to the marketplace, he has enabled thousands to find dignity in their work.²⁴ Likewise, Dennis Bakke, former CEO of energy giant AES, included fun as a core corporate value due to his belief that God intends for humans to enjoy the thrill of creativity.²⁵

These business leaders, while realistic about human nature, did not base their careers on a half-empty-glass paradigm of sin. Rather, they saw the glass as being at least half full, with opportunities to be holy-just-loving in one of the most challenging arenas of all—the marketplace. This book [*Just Business*] is an exploration of how we might follow their lead in wrestling with tough, real-world issues.

Creative Morality in an Imperfect World

To summarize, Christian ethics recognizes that the vast majority of humans are neither "wicked" nor "angelic" but fall somewhere in between on the moral continuum. Christian ethics also acknowledges that it is difficult to be holy-just-loving, not only because of human foibles but also because worldly institutions and systems are marred.

This brings us back to the case involving Abe, Barb and Carl. Economic realities require that the budget be cut. In God's original plan for a perfect world, such a decision would no doubt have been unnecessary. But since humanity and its various systems, including the market, are imperfect, difficult choices must be made. It is quite probable that the final solution for Abe, Barb and Carl will be less than ideal but may represent what is possible under the circumstances. Like an optometrist during an eye exam, Maria's task is to line up the three lenses of holiness, justice and love so that they align as much as possible.

It is imperative that Maria not constrict her range of possible choices too hastily. While it would be simple



to frame the problem as having only three options—fire Abe, fire Barb or fire Carl—she should opt to emulate God's creativity instead. Rather than abandoning us in our moral failure, God lovingly devised a plan for our restoration. It is important to note here that in doing so, neither holiness nor justice was sacrificed. In a stunningly creative move, God took the radical step of substituting his own Son for us, casting our punishment on him. The roughly analogous act in the situation in-

volving Abe, Barb and Carl would be for Maria to fire herself!

A more modest integration of holiness, justice and love might lead to some type of job sharing, joint reduction in hours, a deferral in capital spending or, at minimum, a severance package for the dismissed employee. In any event, Maria should explore all options before acting and choose the one that is most pure, fair and benevolent to all involved.

Notes

¹Humanist philosopher P.H. Nowell-Smith, quoted in Richard Higginston, *Dilemmas* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1988), p. 55.

²R. Meiners, A. Ringleb and F. Edwards, *The Legal Environment of Business*, 5th ed. (Minneapolis, MN: West, 1994), p. 191.

³Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: Mcmillan, 1979), pp. 232-33.

⁴William Barclay, *Christian Ethics for Today* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 27.

⁵For a further discussion of the difference between ethics and morals see Meiner, Ringleb and Edwards, *Legal Environment*, p. 193.

⁶Donald Bloesch, *Freedom for Obedience: Evangelical Ethics in Contemporary Times* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 32.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁸For a more complete discussion, see chapter two of *Just Business*.

⁹For a more complete discussion, see chapter three of *Just Business*.

¹⁰See also chapter four of *Just Business*.

¹¹John McClenahan, "Good Enough," *Industry Week*, February 20, 1995, p. 59.

¹²Jane Perlez, "Aid Groups Are Criticized Over Tsunami Reconstruction," *New York Times*, July 27, 2006, A3.

¹³Associated Press, "Ex-CA Executive Pleads Guilty," *New York Times*, July 22, 2006, C22. See also Matt Hamblen, "Former CA Chief Sanjay Kumar Indicted on Fraud Charges," *Computerworld*, September 22, 2004.

¹⁴"SEC Charges Health South CEO Richard Scrushy with \$1.4

Billion Accounting Fraud," U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (March 19, 2003), <www.sec.gov/news/press/2003-04.htm>

¹⁵J.I. Packer, *Rediscovering Holiness* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 1992), p. 107.

¹⁶Oliver Williams and John Houck, *Full Value: Cases in Christian Ethics* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 61.

¹⁷Jack Ulick, "WorldCom's Financial Bomb," *CNN Money* (June 25, 2002) <www.money.cnn.com/2002/06/25/news/worldcom/index.htm>.

¹⁸Janice Revell, "The Fires That Won't Go Out," *Fortune* (October 13, 2003), pp. 139-42.

¹⁹Julia Boorstin, "The World's Most Corrupt Leaders," *Forbes*, March 29, 2004.

²⁰Lewis Smedes, *Mere Morality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 18.

²¹Associated Press, "Adelphia Founder John Rigas Found Guilty," MSNBC.com (July 8, 2004) <www.msnbc.msnl.com>.

²²Williams and Houck, *Full Value*, p. 28.

²³Kevin Miller, "Blending Faith and Work: Secrets of Success," (2005), posted on August 18, 2007, at <www.secretsofsuccess.com/people.browne.html>.

²⁴Tim Ferguson, "Inspired from Above, ServiceMaster Dignifies Those Below," *Wall Street Journal*, May 8, 1990, A25.

²⁵Angela Tennant, "Dennis Bakke's Ode to Joy," *Christianity Today*, July 10, 2005, p. 63.



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