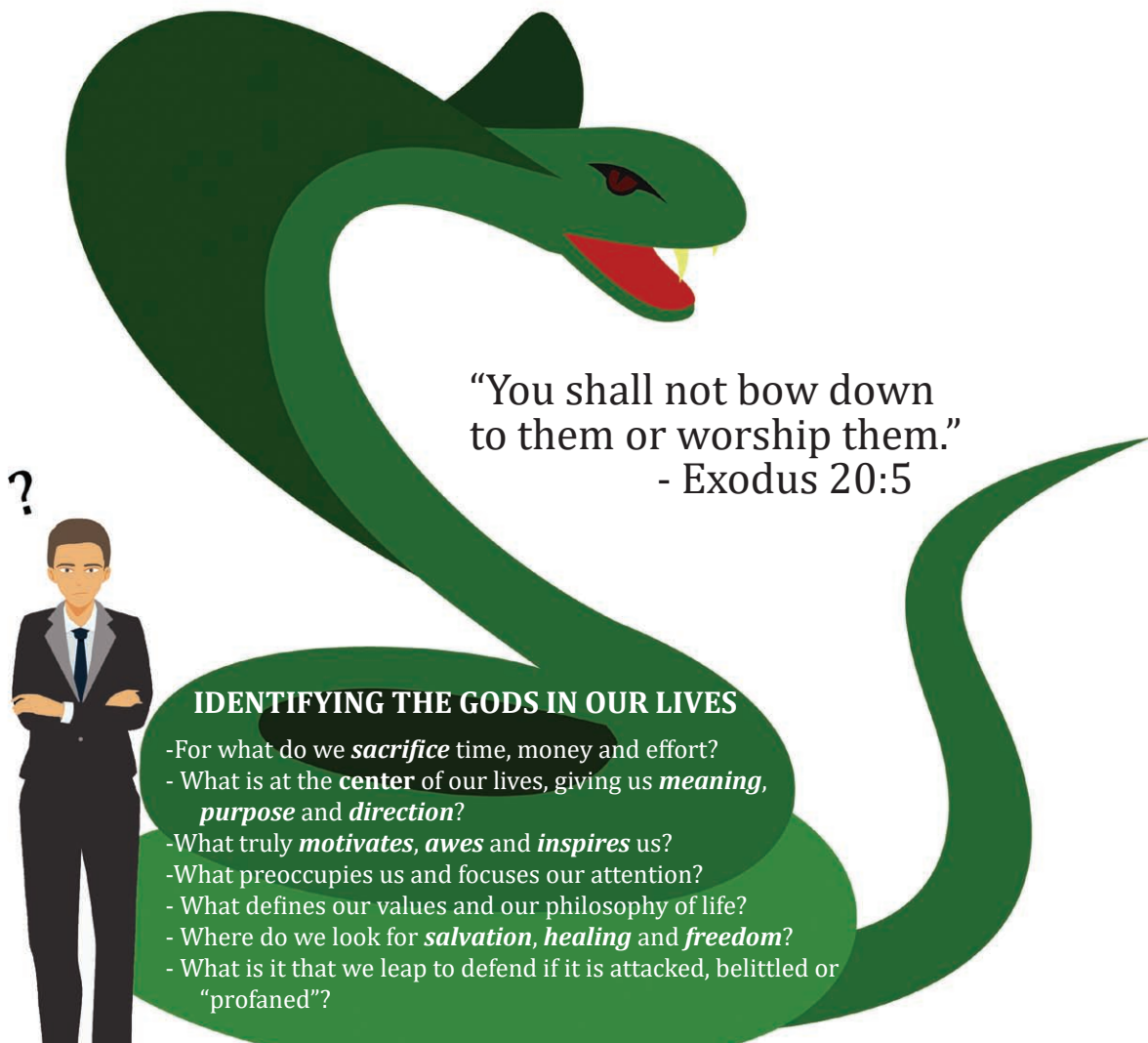


THE FIRST WORD
on
BUSINESS

by David W. Gill & Albert M. Erisman

What are the top ten ethical issues and challenges facing Christian business people today? Answers: honesty, corruption and bribery, fair wages for workers, executive compensation, debt, product quality, sales tactics, unfair hiring and promotion practices, dangerous or unhealthy products or services, employee gossip . . . you can imagine the list.

Now what would God's answers be? Would his list look like ours? The point is that God already has written the list: the Ten Commandments. On God's list, the first issue is always Who is going to be God here? The text makes this plain: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me." The reach of this command goes far beyond business, of course. In every arena of life, having the true



Today, our god substitutes are things like money, the nation, race, or gender.¹ Martin Luther warned against letting mammon (money and possessions) or “great learning, wisdom, power, prestige, family, and honor” rival the true God.² Jacques Ellul’s great little sociology of religion, *The New Demons*, argues that the major twin poles of today’s sacred are the nation-state and technology.³ It is to the government that we look for care, for solutions, for education in basic values and so on. It is in technology that we have faith and hope for medical cures, better food production, longer lives, more meaningful relationships and so on. People used to rely on God for healing or for rain. Today we rely on biotechnology and irrigation technologies. Probably the greatest rival to God in our era is the self. The gospel of self-satisfaction, personal autonomy and self-determination is wowing and wooing thousands of converts today. Mammon and material possessions *look* a lot like gods today but these are often means to serve the self, rather than sacred *ends* in themselves.

God on the throne is the decisive question, the point of departure.

The first commandment is stated as a simple, straightforward prohibition: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex 20:3; Deut 5:7). Jewish tradition actually views this as the *second* “word” with the earlier statement “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, the land of slavery” as the first. This “prologue” is really the precise “Gospel” counterpart (and foundation) to the “Law” prohibiting “any other gods before me.” “Yes” to the true Lord God; “No” to all rivals. “I am the Lord your God and nobody else gets to have my place.”

Jesus warned that we cannot serve two masters. We cannot worship God and Mammon, for example (Mt 6:24). He refuted Satan’s temptation by citing Deuteronomy 6:13: “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him” (Mt 4:10). The first commandment guides us to say to the Lord, “You are my Lord and God. I want nobody but you on the throne of my life. You

alone, you uniquely, will have this exclusive place in my life. This is not merely a commandment to *flee from* other gods; it is an invitation to *run to* the God of the universe, the Creator and Redeemer. “I will be your God,” promises the Lord, “and you will be my people” (e.g., Lev 26:12; Jer 7:23; 2 Cor 6:16).

In this essay we want to explore and unpack four rich and powerful lessons the First Commandment provides to Christian business managers and leaders. We believe that non-Christians will also usually resonate with these lessons because they bear the imprint of God’s image and likeness and because the law of God is written on their hearts and consciences.⁴

1. God Must Be God At All Times, Including in Our Working Lives

Anytime we narrow our view of God, or confine him to particular out of the way corners of our lives, we are in effect “having other gods before us.” Every area of life comes under his authority. Jesus said, “If you love me you will keep my commandments.” This does not mean we will ever be able to serve God perfectly. We are fallen people and can only seek to please him through the power of

the Holy Spirit. But our desire should be to grow in our understanding of him and what it means to please him in all areas of our lives.

One way we have other gods before us comes in how we set out priorities. Well-meaning Christians have often taught that our life priorities are, in order, (1) God, (2) Family, and (3) Work. This sounds pious and right, and is often the basis by which we might think we are “having no other gods before us.” But what does this mean in practice? That we spend more time in prayer, worship, and reading the Scripture than we spend with our family or at work? That our “religious” or “devotional” and “spiritual” disciplines and activities get more hours than anything else? For most people, this is just not possible. This cannot be what the first commandment requires.

Further, this way of setting out our life priorities sug-

AREN'T OUR WORSHIP OF GOD AND STUDY OF THE BIBLE MORE IMPORTANT THAN OUR FAMILIES AND OUR WORK? AND ISN'T OUR FAMILY MORE IMPORTANT THAN OUR WORK IN GOD'S PERSPECTIVE? WE BELIEVE THE ANSWER TO THESE QUESTIONS IS A RESOUNDING "NO!"

gests that family and work are areas where God is not directly present. We took care of God’s concerns first, then we move on to family and then to

work? But God cares deeply about our families and our work, and everything else in our lives. Separating him from these areas is another way of having other gods before us, since we are not serving a God who is over *ALL*. What the first commandment teaches us is that the list of priorities is: (1) God.

God cares about our worship and our church life, our families, our work. He cares about every aspect of our lives. He is not a separate priority alongside others; he is the priority in every area of life. He is God at all times. All that we do should be under his authority, and in a way that honors him. It is not God vs. our families or God vs. our work, but God *in* our families and God *in* our work.

But aren’t our worship of God and study of the Bible more important than our families and our work? And isn’t our family more important than our work in God’s perspective? We believe the answer to these questions is a resounding “No!” If God has called us to be a teacher, a banker, a software developer, or a construction worker, then this is important work. We cannot trivialize it. When we create these hierarchies, we are acting as our own gods, and in this way we are having other gods before us. We are not saying that it is okay to sacrifice your marriage or family for your work, or that your Bible study and prayer group are not of great and essential importance. What we

are saying is that God is God all the time, in every area, and creating any kind of abstract hierarchy that appears to bracket God off from being the leader of all parts of our lives has to be wrong.

How then do we set these priorities? How do we achieve balance among the conflicting demands we face in our lives? The ultimate answer is that we don't. Rather, we seek God's guidance and authority in our lives; we ask him to help us with our day-to-day priorities and need for balance. We believe this works in two parts.

First, every task we do should be done under his authority and with his guidance. Whether this is on our job, in our family, or during worship, each task at that moment is carried out in sacred trust. *Second*, we also set our schedules under his authority. We acknowledge all that he has given us to do is "under God" and seek his help in laying out the schedule of our days. This doesn't mean being paralyzed by fear over getting it wrong. He has entrusted the work for us to do and has given us gifts and abilities to carry it out. But it does mean that we should be open to his interruptions. We have a schedule but an event happens that requires us to do something else. We need discernment to assure this new task is from God, and then to do it willingly, even giving up what we may have thought was the priority.

One of the authors was recently on a long airplane trip and had a book he was eager to read. Settling into his seat, he heard a question from the person sitting next on the airplane. That question resulted in a five hour conversation across the country with a young agnostic software engineer. It seemed at first to be an interruption, but it was clearly God resetting his priorities. We need to be open to these kinds of "interruptions" and not treat them as problems but as opportunities.

Together the setting and carrying out of the many tasks in our lives is a clear way we "have no other gods before us." All is done according to his priority, and each task is done under his authority. We have broken our own hierarchies, and acknowledged God's interests in every aspect of our lives. So the first step in "having no other gods before us" is to recognize God's authority over all of our lives, not simply the spiritual domain. The God who we worship is one who made us in his image, who gave us our work to do, and who calls us to live our whole lives in relationship to him. He is Lord of all, including our work. When we fail to acknowledge this we are worshipping a different god.

2. Purpose Motivates and Specifies Ethics

The Moral Architecture of the Decalogue

The second lesson from the Decalogue is that it is God (command #1) who determines what is good (commands

#2 - #10). The Decalogue shows us a moral architecture where God, the ultimate purpose and End, *motivates* obedience to the laws that follow. We follow his ways out of love and duty to him. But the Decalogue also shows us a moral architecture where the very *content* of that ethical guidance flows from his character. Our understanding of what is right and good flows organically from God's character and will. For example, we observe the Sabbath and work six days out of obedience and love for God; but we do this because God is himself the Creator for six days and the Sabbath rest for one day. The great French Reformed pastor Alphonse Maillot wrote that:

...this commandment is *the Commandment*, the commandment par excellence, of which all the others are only the consequences or commentaries...Thus, in truth there are not ten commandments but one plus nine. One true, one great, one alone, and nine which develop it, explain it, and show its consequences. This is why I would repeat my reticence before a too strong distinction between two tables of the Law . . . just as in the same way it is erroneous to separate too much the two commandments of the Summary of the Law. It is fundamentally the same: "you shall love. . . ." God is the one who delivers and Israel is a people liberated in all of its existence. . . Fundamentally there is only one table, that of the new life, that of freedom for Israel. . . It is not only at worship, not only in my prayers, nor only when I read my Bible that I may not have other gods, but it is in all of my life. In my work, in my family, in my political actions, in my relations with my neighbor, there is no question that I could have another God, another reference, another criterion than the one who delivered me from Egypt out of all my slaveries.⁵

The nine commandments are merely elaborations of the first. They delineate nine direct implications of having Yahweh as our living God. If God is truly on the throne of our life, then, we will make no idols; use his name respectfully; remember his sabbath day; honor our parents; protect life, marriage, property and reputation; and avoid covetousness. There are nine implications of having this God in his unique place. As Luther put it, "Where the heart is right with God and this commandment is kept, fulfillment of all the others will follow of its own accord."⁶

This pattern or "architecture" of the Decalogue provides us with an important insight for our participation in organizational, institutional and business ethics. Learning from this model, Christians should work first at calling attention to the broader, deeper purposes of such organizations, perhaps questioning them and prodding them toward a richer and better content. If we can prod colleagues and organizations explicitly toward the justice, love and freedom of God, that's great. But even if our companies

do not commit themselves immediately or explicitly to the service of God in their mission statements, our encouraging them to commit to larger, positive, godly purposes can help leverage better ethical performance in the details of daily work. Anytime Christians can encourage others to address the broader questions of the meaning and purpose of life, work and business, they have contributed something significant.⁷

Lacking an intimate connection to such an ultimate purpose, much of today's business ethics is reduced to little more than case-by-case "damage-control." Various moral crises, dilemmas, quandaries and problems spin out of control and beg for careful analysis and creative resolution. Unfortunately, at this damage-control level our responses tend to be narrow, negative, legalistic, and reactive. The best outcome is pretty much "get through this situation with as little damage as possible." That is hardly an inspiring motive to be ethical; and the very definitions of "ethical," "right," and "good," are at sea. What we need is an "ethics of mission control" rather than an ethics of "damage control."

Mission Control Ethics

What is the foundation of an ethical organization? Contrary to some common thinking, it is not the company code of ethics. Nor is the key step to hire an ethics officer, or to schedule some employee ethics training. The foundational step is not to create a list of common ethical infractions and start doing some case studies on them. None of the preceding steps will have much power to leverage or guide behavior unless they are intimately linked to a compelling overall organizational mission and vision. First get the mission and vision straight. That's where healthy organizational ethics begins. All moral guidelines with any power to actually lead us, point back to, and are dependent on, their connection to a compelling purpose and mission. If we don't buy the mission, we won't buy the principles and rules. The architecture of the Ten Commandments clearly displays this "mission control" pattern. If God's position is solid and unrivaled, then his agenda of justice, love and freedom will follow, and we will be formed by the other nine specific area principles.

It is encouraging that some of the best and most popular business books have promoted this sort of mission-control ethics. James Collins and Jerry Porras's best-selling

study of great businesses, *Built to Last* (1995), argued that the best long-term companies first "preserve the core" and then "stimulate progress."⁸ The order is crucial, they say. The core mission and fundamental values must be the first priority. Collins and Porras define core purpose (what we're calling "mission") as "the set of fundamental reasons for a company's existence beyond just making money. Purpose is broad, fundamental, and enduring; a good purpose should serve to guide and inspire the organization for years, perhaps a century or more. A visionary company continually pursues but never fully achieves or completes its purpose - like chasing the earth's horizon" (p. 77). Collins and Porras argue that mission-driven, visionary companies have experienced greater business success, over longer periods of time, than companies that were not mission and vision focused. Max DePree's books, such as

Leadership Is an Art, make the same point in other language: the leader's chief responsibility is to tell the story that establishes the identity, mission and values of the company.⁹

Once the core purpose is clarified, the question be-

comes "what kind of value-embedded corporate culture and what kind of principle-guided practices are needed for the business to achieve its mission?"

What guidelines will get us from here to there with excellence? Business writer Douglas Sherwin explained how ethical values relate to mission and purpose in a classic essay several years ago: "The values that govern the conduct of business must be conditioned by 'the why' of the business institution. They must flow from the purpose of business, carry out that purpose, and be constrained by it."¹⁰ Ethics is essential to fulfill the "why" of business. If the ethical guidelines are not integral to the company's purpose and mission, they will fail. When the purpose is clear, the guidelines are compelling, and the specific dilemmas and problems can best be resolved or managed. From mission to guidelines to problem-solving.

This moral architecture is demonstrated by the Decalogue and biblical ethics. But it is confirmed by common sense and broad human experience, by common grace and natural law. It is the stamp of the Creator's image on all people. It is the "law written on the heart and conscience." Think about an athletic team: only when a team is truly gripped by an intense, shared vision of winning a championship will they sacrifice and suffer through extra workouts. Only then will the players subordinate their individual egos to team interests. Only then will the play-

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ers study the play book with total seriousness. Only then will they follow the exercise and nutritional guidelines for exceptional fitness. Only a compelling mission changes team behavior.

Think of how a person's bad habits and long-entrenched behavior sometimes change radically. This doesn't happen very often but when it does it is often because that person fell in love and wants so badly to please or win another person that they will change their ways. And think of how in an era of epidemic childhood obesity we see an impressive band of super-fit kid athletes (gymnasts, skaters, basketball players). What makes these kids behave so differently from their peers? A major factor is their vision of getting a gold medal at the Olympics or playing in the NBA. Mission and vision motivate and leverage behavioral change like nothing else.

Negative feedback can have some impact on human performance, of course. Threats of punishment, insults, and shaming can motivate some behavioral improvement in both sports and business. Such negativity, though, makes for a generally weak foundation for ethics (most sexual harassment employee training is of this negative type). Positive, shared vision is much more powerful over time (in raising children, coaching athletes, building nations, or leading organizations).

Toyota watcher and management expert Jeffrey K. Liker describes the first principle of the "Toyota Way": "Base your management decisions on a long-term philosophy.. Have a philosophical sense of purpose that supersedes any short-term decision-making. Work, grow, and align the whole organization toward a common purpose that is bigger than making money." Liker goes on: "Throughout my visits to Toyota in Japan and the United States, in engineering, purchasing, and manufacturing, one theme stands out. Every person I have talked with has a sense of purpose greater than earning a paycheck. They feel a great sense of mission for the company and can distinguish right from wrong with regard to that mission. . . Toyota's strong sense of mission and commitment to its customers, employees, and society *is the foundation of all the other principles* and the missing ingredient in most companies trying to emulate Toyota."¹¹ Costco is another great company that gets the priority and importance of mission. Here is how they articulate in the introduction to their Code of Ethics. "***Our Mission: To continually provide our members with quality goods and services at the lowest possible prices. In order to achieve our mission we will conduct our business with the following Code of Ethics in mind.***" (emphasis added).

Mission-control ethics also happens to be the standard way ethics has been understood, taught, and practiced for millennia. Aristotle began his *Nichomachean Ethics* with "The good is that at which everything aims." Ethical/moral goodness is about "Ends," and means to those ends.

An Aristotelian approach asks "what makes for a good knife?" Well "what is the purpose of a knife?" Answer, "to cut things." Therefore the virtues of a good knife are things like sharpness, safety, durability, etc. If the purpose of a knife was to be displayed in a museum, things like shininess and color might be among its core virtues; if the purpose is to cut, then sharpness tops the list. Identify the purpose first, then detail the characteristics necessary for excellence in carrying out or achieving that purpose.

So mission and purpose don't just motivate ethical behavior, they specify the *content* itself of an effective ethics. By analyzing what it will take to achieve the mission and fulfill the vision, we can figure out the appropriate values and guidelines. The mission of "cutting things" logically leads us to conclude that the first virtue must be "sharpness." After a business gets its mission and vision straight, it then (and only then) figures out the core values it must embed in its culture and the basic principles that must guide its practices in order to achieve success and excellence. This is, by the way, a common mistake made by many businesses and other organizations, i.e., separating and treating as independent the mission and vision, on the one hand, and their core values and ethical guidelines, on the other. This of course is an alert that the character of that purpose and mission is of decisive importance. If "moving money from your pocket to mine" or "building myself the biggest pile of money in the shortest amount of time" is our business purpose, watch out for the behavioral practices and cultural values that follow from that choice!

We should not be surprised if philosophers, management experts, or any other careful observers of life figure out that purpose and mission drive ethics, or that the End drives the Means. This is witness to common grace and the imprint of God's image on people. But what is vaguely and intermittently seen in these common ways is explicitly and clearly seen in biblical revelation, and in the structure of the Decalogue and Commandment One in particular. When God is on his throne in our life, things happen. William Barclay commented on the First Commandment:

People necessarily wish to be like the gods in whom they believe, and, therefore, the kind of gods they believe in will make all the difference to the kind of life which they live. . . It is of the first necessity to get the idea of God right, for a man will quite inevitably become like the god he worships. . . It is from here that ethics takes its start. A man's god dictates a man's conduct, consciously or unconsciously.¹²

3. Seeing Creation & Redemption As Two Basic Aspects of Godly Purpose and Mission

Let's take the analysis one step deeper by considering who this God is on the throne of our lives. There are many ways of describing God's character, being and action. He is the Almighty One, the Prince of Peace, the Everlasting Father, and so much more. But if we are to focus on the two most basic descriptions, it would have to be Creator and Redeemer. In the Decalogue we are explicitly told that he is the Lord "who brought you out of Egypt, the land of slavery (Redeemer) and he is the one who created the world in six days (Creator). The focus on these two aspects of God is reinforced by the themes of the two great songs of eternity praising God as Creator (Revelation 4) and Redeemer (Revelation 5).

The God whom we serve is the Creator of good and beautiful things - and he is the Redeemer of lost and broken things and people. He is the Innovator, Designer, and Builder par excellence. It is in his character; he is the Creator. And he is the compassionate Healer, Liberator, and Savior par excellence. It is in his character; he is love; he is the Redeemer. And every man, woman, and child today and throughout human history has been made in the image and likeness of this Creator and Redeemer. As broken and sinful and wounded as we are, we have some of that creator and redeemer "DNA" in our character as well. The first commandment challenges us to be sure that it is precisely the Creator and Redeemer who are on the throne, inspiring and guiding our values and behavior in the workplace and everywhere.

If a company has a clear purpose but it is a bad or negative one, be prepared for negative ethical consequences. For example, if the mission is really all about maximizing short-term financial payoffs (perhaps especially for a handful of executives), the characteristics that are generated may include ruthlessness, greed, selfishness, cunning, and willingness to step on others. The fall of Arthur Andersen (described in detail in *Final Accounting: Ambition, Greed, and the Fall of Arthur Andersen* by Barbara Ley Toffler) offers a clear case study of how a mission turned bad rapidly led to behavior turned bad and unethical.¹³

Our mission cannot simply be to "relieve customers of their money." There must be some basic product or service we are delivering in light of which people will part with their money. It is that essential product or service, that change we leave behind in our customer's life, that is our core mission. So, what is it? What does the company want to accomplish? What is the target out there? What is its business in the most basic sense? Only beggars and thieves can have "relieve you of your money" as a stand-alone mission. A successful, sustainable business depends fundamentally on delivering some product or service well enough to keep customer cash flow coming in. What, in a brief phrase or sentence, is that core product or service?

Create and Redeem – Corporate Mission Examples

The mission of Walt Disney has been a good example of the inspiring potential of the "create something beautiful" theme: *To bring happiness to millions.* While some recent events may give us pause, the broader Disney story has been one of mission-driven, ethical business success. Who wouldn't be inspired to work for a company whose mission is "to bring happiness to millions"? As might be expected, the great pharmaceutical companies have (in the past at least) tapped primarily into the "help somebody" theme. Johnson & Johnson's mission has been *"to alleviate pain and disease."* Merck described its mission as *"the business of preserving and improving human life."* As long as, and to the extent that these phrases really focus the mission and purpose of these companies (assuming of course a reasonable financial success), employees find these companies inspiring places to be associated with.

Sony's older mission statement was an inspiring statement of creativity with a secondary "help somebody" theme: *To experience the sheer joy that comes from the advancement, application, and innovation of technology that benefits the general public.*

Hewlett-Packard's "H-P Way" also picked up both the creativity/innovation and helpfulness themes. Some of its key elements: *To make technical contributions to fields in which we participate... To make a contribution to the community... To provide affordable quality for customers. . . To provide respect and opportunity for H-P people including opportunity to share in H-P success.*

What is the change your business makes in the lives of its customers that warrants their paying you?

Not just customers but employees are affected by our mission. What kind of business mission and purpose will motivate people to want to get out of bed in the morning and bring their best self to work? We believe that an inspiring mission and purpose taps into one (or both) of the two basic theological themes: creation and redemption. All human beings are made in the image and likeness of the Creator and Redeemer, whether they know it or acknowledge it or not.

Creation

When a company challenges its people to innovate, create, and build in some way, it connects with something profoundly human, something God planted in human nature that persists no matter how wounded by sin and ignorance. People are rarely inspired by jobs that have no space for creativity, that ask just for repetition, compliance, and maintenance. There are some classic psychological and anthropological studies of this human characteristic (Latin, *homo faber*, “man the maker”). But it is also common sense and personal experience: think about how good it feels to take on a challenge and have the freedom and responsibility to carry it out. Think of how good it feels to finish the project and be able to look back on it. Getting a book published, finishing a deck building project, running a marathon - completing an acquisition project at work, etc.: human beings are builders by nature.¹⁴

Great companies tap into this creative “build something good” characteristic in their workforce. Toyota is a model: “Central to the Toyota Way is innovation . . . from the small workplace changes made by plant workers on the shop floor to fundamental breakthroughs in production technology and vehicle engineering.”¹⁵ Toyota’s development of both the Lexus and the Prius are expressions of creativity and innovation unleashed by a mission-driven organization. So here is the first way we motivate our people to want to get out of bed in the morning and bring their best self to work: we challenge and empower them to express their God-given creativity for something good, useful, or beautiful. Quench, ignore, or repress that side of human personality and we’ll watch their lackluster, half-hearted, perhaps even negative performance on the job.

Redemption

This refers in general to setting people free, healing their hurts, fixing their brokenness. The whole creation groans, waiting for this ultimate redemption. This is who God is, the Redeemer who is love and, in effect, can’t help but reach out in love to the lost, hurting, broken, and rebellious. We know that every man, woman, and child has been created in the image and likeness of that Redeemer God. No matter how fallen, wounded, and selfish we have become, there remains something in us, most of us anyway, that responds positively to the opportunity to help somebody, fix some problem, comfort and heal someone hurting. People are inspired by organizational missions and visions that help those in need, heal the sick, liberate those in various kinds of bondage, and overcome hunger, ignorance, or oppression in some form.

Again, there are academic studies of this “herd instinct” and altruism but the evidence of common sense and observation is powerful enough by itself.¹⁶ Think about how people respond to disasters and human cries for help - there is something in us (most of us, most of the

time) that makes us want to help others. When a tsunami, earthquake, hurricane, or terrorist assaults our neighbors, most of us join together to help. When a child falls down or an older person struggles to carry something, most of us step up quickly to help. It actually makes us feel good about ourselves to be able to help others. We de-humanize ourselves when we could help someone in need and we selfishly turn away. A viable, inspiring mission and purpose either helps people “fulfill their dreams” or it helps people “overcome their nightmares.” Tapping into one or both of these themes is really about aligning the organizational mission with the best aspects of human nature, and more profoundly with the character of God on the throne.

Aligning Misaligned Missions

How do we work all of these out in a setting where we don’t have influence over the company’s mission? In other words, what does this look like when the mission of our company doesn’t appear to line up with God’s mission for work, if it is not about creating good and beautiful things for people or fixing broken things and healing hurting people? If we are to “have no other gods before us,” we must align our personal mission with God’s mission and this may create some dissonance. Here are three suggestions of how one might respond:

First, we can try to see the work God has given us in a missional light that may not be otherwise evident. The old story of two men working in the middle-ages makes this point. The two men were doing the same job, hauling rocks. One said, “I hate my job. It is hot, dirty work and seems so meaningless.” The other said, “I love my job, I am building a cathedral.” Barry Rowan, CFO of Vonnage, says we need to bring meaning to our work rather than find meaning in our work.

Second, we have enough scope for leadership that we can help some in the company see a connection between their tasks and the broader vision. Bill Pollard, former CEO of ServiceMaster, used to do this for the people who did the dirty work of cleaning toilets and bathrooms in the hospitals where they worked. He had the medical people meet with his cleaning people to build awareness of the link between their task and the larger mission. Cleaning the toilets and bathrooms was an important task on the team that was helping patients get well.

Finally, in our imperfect world if we can’t nudge the company mission in the direction of God’s bigger purposes, we may need to do something else in order to “have no other gods before us.” Making this difficult call is best not done individually, but in a community of believers. We can be blinded by the money from the job, our own egos, or even a misplaced sense of self-righteousness that clouds our own vision. Our families may have needs that make leaving a job especially difficult. Leave or stay, Jesus said that we should be salt and light wherever we are, and

working this out in the workplace is one of the most important ways that this happens.

4. Treating God and Those Bearing His Image with Uniqueness, Value, and Exclusivity

We saw in the opening paragraphs of this essay that God wants to be our only God. His first command is that there be no rivals allowed into his rightful place: “You shall have no other gods before me.” We can call this the principle of “exclusivity” or “the unique place.” The Decalogue teaches us that this is the first way we love God, that God has a right to be accorded this exclusive place. He is unique, not replaceable or dispensable. He is valuable, not to be discarded or ignored.

This first command habituates us to a basic pattern of how to treat people made in the image and likeness of God. As we learn to love God, we learn at the same time how to love a neighbor made in God’s image and likeness. Our business corollary to the first commandment can be stated as follows: *The first way to love and care for the other is by granting them a special, unique place in our existence and not letting any rivals emerge to threaten or take that place.*

The first movement of love is to make sure people have—and know that they have—a unique and irreplaceable place before you. If they think they are replaceable, all is lost. Children need to feel and know that, no matter how many other people are in the family, they have a unique place in their parents’ lives. In a flash, something occurred to one of the authors as he was giving a lecture on the Decalogue to a group of university students about thirty years ago: “this is exactly the first thing that my wife wants from me: to have her place in my life unthreatened by any rivals.” (Of course he knew this about marriage before that night: the new insight was that the first movement of love and justice was the same for God, for a spouse, for anyone). In the case of marriage, you may have other good friends, people you love. But no one should be offered the special place of life-long soul-mate, lover, and unconditionally intimate life partner that you dedicated and committed to your spouse. While there are many ways of threatening a good marriage, the most threatening of all is to allow a rival to enter the picture, to begin to come between you and your spouse. The point is easily seen in the marriage illustration but it applies equally to parenting: each of your children must know that they occupy a unique, irreplaceable position in your heart and mind. If they come to doubt that, the relationship is in trouble.

The principle applies in business as well: each of our employees (and customers and colleagues) need to feel

valued and unique by their employers and colleagues if they are to flourish. Are they overlooked, dispensable, replaceable, or “just a number”? How will they perform if that’s the case? People can usually sense whether we notice them and value their individual existence. The fact is that every person is unique in their DNA, in the upbringing, experience, and perspective. Everyone has value somehow, somewhere (even in the case where they do not fit into our organization and must be replaced). Because people are unique, they deserve - have a right - to be treated as unique individuals.

Legendary founder of Hewlett-Packard David Packard wrote “Our strong belief [is] that individuals be treated with consideration and respect . . . Every person in our company is important and every job is important.”¹⁷ Stanford business school professors Charles O’Reilly and Jeffrey Pfeffer concluded their major study of personnel and management practices of successful companies by arguing that “These places are also better at attracting and retaining people as a byproduct of how they operate. That is because great people want to work at places where they can actually use their talents, where they are treated with dignity, trust, and respect.”¹⁸

It is not surprising that common sense and experience would lead many observers - philosophers as well as managers - to see the importance of treating people as unique and valuable. Immanuel Kant stated his “categorical imperative” as “act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means.”¹⁹ Don’t use people as means; value them as “ends.”

We don’t propose this principle simply on the basis of common sense or expediency, however. We argue that the Decalogue clearly teaches that the first way we must treat God right is by granting him a place that no one else can have and valuing him as he deserves. Because people are made in his image and likeness, they too wish to be so treated. It is important to let this implication of the first commandment permeate us and reform our relationships. We need to pray, “Lord, help me to truly see those around me as you see them: unique, valuable, made in your image. Help me to carve out a special place for each of them in my heart and my affections, my consciousness and my actions. Help me to value them and protect their place in my life. Help them to know where they stand with me.”

This is, more often than we might think, really a matter of justice as well as loving care for others. Our women colleagues, for example, have a right before God to be granted dignity and value equal to what is given to men. This is justice, not grace! Our spouse and our children deserve to be treated as unique, valuable individuals; we are not doing them a “favor” when we do so. This is guarding their freedom to be who they are - who God wants them to be. Our workplaces can be transformed by those who live out this

principle: “Treat all people as unique, valuable individuals. Never treat anyone as though they are dispensable, without value, or “just a number.”

Conclusion

It is a powerful experience to relate to the God of the universe and to have no other gods before us. This is not just for us in church or for us in our personal lives. We are whole people, and this first commandment should be at the core of everything. It starts with getting a right and full understanding of who God is. While we can never understand him fully, we at least know that he is God over everything including our work and business lives. To have no other gods before us means that there is no corner of our lives where we can retreat and not be involved in living this out.

Understanding God moves us to carry out his mission in the world. Serving him is our mission. Our work is part of his mission, and doing our work missionally is part of what it means to live under his sovereignty. It leads us to an ethic that is much bigger than not doing wrong; it is about doing right and advancing the mission. God’s mission in the world involves both creative work and, on this

side of the Fall, redemptive work. In all of the work he has given us, we need to “work at it with all your heart as working for the Lord and not for men” (Col 3:23). As we pursue and promote godly creative work and godly redemptive work we are living out what it means to have no other gods before us but Yahweh.

Finally, because every person is made in the image of God, living out our acknowledgment of “no other gods” causes us to treat image bearers of him in a unique and singular way, parallel to the way we treat God by protecting and valuing his unique place in our lives. James and John both remind us that we cannot say we love God and mistreat our brothers and sisters. We demonstrate our love for him in the way we treat each other.

Do the commandments, and in particular the first commandment, have anything for the Christian who is “not under law but under grace,” the marketplace Christian in the 21st century? We can’t miss it!

About the Authors



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Notes

¹ Actually, it is not nation, race or gender per se that threaten God's place but rather nationalism (and Americanism is no better than Serbianism or any other), racism (in all forms, covert and overt) and sexism (including genderism in either of its two potential versions).

² Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, trans. Robert H. Fischer (1529; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) pp. 9-10.

³ Jacques Ellul, *The New Demons* (New York: Seabury, 1975).

⁴ On the ethics of the Ten Commandments see David W. Gill, *Doing Right: Principle-Guided Practices* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004); "Ten Principles of Highly Ethical People," *Radix Magazine* (2002) 29.02: 4-7, 27-30; and "A Fourth Use of the Law? The Decalogue in the Workplace," *Journal of Religion and Business Ethics* (2011), vol 2, issue 2, art 4.

⁵ Alphonse Maillot, *Le Decalogue* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1985), pp. 22-23. (David W. Gill translation)

⁶ Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, p. 15.

⁷ A general market business ethics book that articulates and illustrates this kind of mission-driven approach is David W. Gill, *It's About Excellence: Building Ethically Healthy Organizations* (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008/2011).

⁸ James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras, *Built to Last* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994).

⁹ Max DePree, *Leadership Is an Art* (New York: Doubleday, 1989).

¹⁰ Douglas Sherwin, "The Ethical Roots of the Business System," *Harvard Business Review* Nov-Dec 1983, p. 186.

¹¹ Jeffrey K. Liker, *The Toyota Way* (McGraw-Hill, 2004), pp. 37, 71-72. Emphasis in the original.

¹² William Barclay, *The Ten Commandments for Today* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1973), pp. 17-18.

¹³ Barbara Ley Toffler with Jennifer Reingold, *Final Accounting: Ambition, Greed, and the Fall of Arthur Andersen* (New York: Broadway Books, 2003).

¹⁴ Nikos Mourkogiannis describes this as "discovery," one of four basic core purposes grounding great companies, in *Purpose: The Starting Point of Great Companies* (Palgrave Macmillian, 2006), pp. 30-31.

¹⁵ Jeffrey Liker, *The Toyota Way*, p. 42.

¹⁶ Mourkogiannis also highlights this theme, calling it "altruism," one of his four basic core purposes. He suggests "Excellence" and "Heroism" as the third and fourth core purposes undergirding great companies. There is no single way to describe our topic but, in our view, excellence and heroism are more about how we approach "creating good and useful products and services" and "fixing broken things and helping hurting people" (the "two great themes") than separate thematic purposes. See *Purpose: The Starting Point of Great Companies*, pp. 32-37.

¹⁷ David Packard, *The HP Way* (San Francisco: Harper Business, 1995), p. 127.

¹⁸ Charles O'Reilly and Jeffrey Pfeffer, *Hidden Value: How Great Companies Achieve Extraordinary Results With Ordinary People* (Harvard, 2000), p. 3.

¹⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysic of Morals* (1785).