

Christ-Centered Businesses - Disciple-Making in the Midst of Profit-Making



by Darren Shearer

Introduction

It is true that business institutions cannot be considered as “born-again,” for that unspeakable joy and privilege is reserved for individual people who possess a spirit, soul, and body. However, insofar as certain charities can be considered “Christian” charities and local church institutions can be considered “Christian” organizations—despite that not every person sitting in its pews has been born-again in the John 3:3 sense—businesses may also be labeled as “Christian” in this regard.

Rather than labeling a business—or, for that matter, any other organization—as “Christian,” it may be more theologically and biblically-consistent to label such businesses as “Christ-centered.” Here is a working definition of a “Christ-centered business”:

...a value-creating, profit-generating, and law-abiding organization dedicated to making disciples of Jesus Christ through leadership by born-again Christians who are led and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

It is assumed that all business leaders want their companies to survive over the long-term, which is only possible through creating value, generating profit, and abiding by the laws of the land. Given the scope of this article, we will focus on the latter two criteria of what it means to be a Christ-centered business:

1. A Christ-centered business is *dedicated to making disciples of Jesus Christ.*
2. A Christ-centered business is *led by born-again Christians who are, in turn, led and empowered by the Holy Spirit.*

1: Dedicated to making disciples of Jesus Christ

The mission of Christ-centered businesses is to spread the awareness of God’s glory, Jesus Christ, throughout the marketplace and beyond.

What is God’s “glory”? The writer of Hebrews said, “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (Heb. 1:3). There is our answer:



Jesus Christ is the glory of God. Thus, we can interpret Habakkuk 2:14 as follows:

For as the waters fill the sea, the earth [including the business world] will be filled with an awareness of the glory of God [Jesus Christ].

In the verse above, Habakkuk has prophesied the fulfillment of the “Great Commission” Jesus entrusted to his disciples in which he charged his followers to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19). Collectively, individual disciples of Jesus are called to disciple entire groups of people—that is, to reveal Jesus (the glory of God) throughout all spheres of all cultures in all societies.

As this corporate disciple-making happens in a business, the business becomes increasingly Christ-centered.

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In a Christ-centered business, Jesus is revealed through the leaders of the company and, ultimately, throughout the entire culture of the business. When aligned with this disciple-making mission in word and deed, Christ-centered businesses can be used as tools to help individuals, communities, nations, and industries reveal the glorious image and character of Jesus.

Based primarily upon an exposition of the Creation accounts in Genesis 1-2, Van Duzer has proposed that the purpose of business is two-fold: 1) “to provide the community with goods and services that will enable it to flourish,” and 2) “to provide opportunities for meaningful work that will allow employees to express their God-given creativity.”¹ However, this definition does not account for the disciple-making mandate of the Great Commission that must be central in how Christians aim

to honor God through business. Embracing the Great Commission is a central part of what distinguishes Christ-centered businesses from other businesses that are led by well-intentioned people.

In addition to what has become known as the Cultural Mandate—that is, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule...” (Gen. 1:28)—the Great Commission Mandate in Matthew 28:18-20 must also be foundational in defining the redemptive purpose of business. Only as the mission of the business becomes aligned with the disciple-making, glory-revealing mission of Jesus Christ can we say that the business is “Christ-centered.” With an emphasis on global evangelism and church multiplication, Rundle and Steffen have offered a definition of what they have termed “Great Commission Companies”:

...a socially responsible, income producing business managed by kingdom professionals and created for the specific purpose of glorifying God and promoting the growth and multiplication of local churches in the least-evangelized and least-developed parts of the world.²

If “Great Commission” companies are only those operating in the “least-evangelized and least-developed parts of the world,” how is the Great Commission relevant to businesses led by Christians in other parts of the world? If in a business context, the Great Commission is about revealing Jesus throughout all aspects of business—regardless of geography or demographics—this interpretation of what it means to be a “Great Commission Company” is insufficient. Fundamentally, the Great Commission is a call to reveal Jesus individually and corporately, a mandate incumbent upon all Christ-followers and the companies they lead.

In *Business for the Glory of God*, Grudem’s objective is to show how various facets of business—such as ownership, productivity, employment, commercial transactions, etc.—can be used for the purpose of “imitating God.”³ For instance, he writes,

We can imitate God’s attributes each time we buy and sell, if we practice honesty, faithfulness to our commitments, fairness, and freedom of choice.⁴

Although Grudem does not explicitly use the “discipleship” language of the Great Commission in stating his case, “imitating God” is precisely the essence of discipleship. As the

disciple follows the teacher, the disciple begins to act like the teacher (Luke 6:40).

The more business professionals become aware of Jesus (i.e., becoming increasingly Christ-centered), the more they will imitate him, revealing His image in and through the companies in which they work. Ken Eldred describes such Christians as “role models of a comprehensive gospel,” a gospel that provides well-being for both the economic as well as spiritual lives of people.⁵

Cafferky exhorts the Christian business professional to apply the “grand themes” of the Bible in one’s daily business ethics and practices (e.g. “holiness, truth, loving kindness, wisdom, righteousness, justice and others”).⁶ These “grand themes” are the character qualities of Jesus that Christ-centered businesses present to their stakeholders through their corporate cultures. As these “grand themes” are modeled consistently over time, disciples of Jesus are made as the glory of God is revealed.

Making disciples in the business world may sound more complicated than it is. As with the Apostle Paul, a disciple-maker simply invites prospective followers to “imitate me as I imitate Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). Both individually and corporately, this is a calling to represent and model the character of Jesus as accurately as possible to the world around us.

Discipling Employees: Case Study of Polydeck Screen Corporation

When an employee at the Polydeck Screen Corporation receives Jesus as Lord and Savior, with consent from the employee, one of the company’s corporate chaplains provides him or her with an orientation about the Christian faith, helps the new believer find a local church, and helps him or her to get started with Bible reading.⁷ Of course, this is only the beginning of the discipleship process. New believers at Polydeck grow as disciples of Jesus throughout each work day as they observe and model the Christ-like attitudes and behaviors demonstrated by their co-workers within the Christ-centered business culture at Polydeck.

How do Polydeck’s leaders promote and reinforce the Christ-like character it desires to see modeled throughout the business? One example is the company’s successful “I Caught You Caring” program in which employees can nominate their co-workers when they observe them displaying acts that are consistent with the company’s Christ-centered core values. At the monthly gathering where

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employees' birthdays and anniversaries are celebrated, those nominated are publicly honored and given a t-shirt that says "I Caught You Caring."

Polydeck's employees also grow as disciples of Jesus by discovering and using their God-given talents daily in their workplaces.

Because Jesus is our standard for excellence in all things, on a corporate level for Christ-centered businesses, the Great Commission is a call to set the standards of excellence in service and character for entire industries. Beyond discipling individual employees within businesses, this is a step in the Great Commission Mandate to disciple entire nations.

Discipling Industries: Case Study of Wanamaker's

Through his legendary store in Philadelphia, John Wanamaker (1838-1922) was one such industry disciple-maker as he is considered the "Father of Modern Advertising." Among his many innovations, Wanamaker opened the world's first major department store because he wanted to provide a store so complete and welcoming that people would not want to leave. In those days, it was unheard of for a store to be a meeting place and even a place for relaxation and enjoyment.

At a time when salespeople could charge whatever they could get from their customers because prices were not displayed, Wanamaker introduced price tags to the retail economy, which was the first universal pricing system of its kind. He didn't want people to worry about whether or not they were getting fair prices while they shopped. He wanted his customers to be able to relax and feel welcome in his store.

Wanamaker's Christ-centered business innovation led to a shift in the entire retail economy, in effect, discipling entire industries who followed his company's example. He wanted his business to reflect the character of Jesus. This would have been impossible if his customers didn't feel welcome or if they felt they were being taken advantage of by the company.

Ultimately, his gift of hospitality was used to invite people into a relationship with Jesus. When the famous 19th-century evangelist, D.L. Moody, wanted to come to Philadelphia for one of his evangelistic meetings, Wanamaker hosted the event in his store free-of-charge and donated the services of 300 ushers from among his own paid staff to assist with the event. In the same place where these staff members served customers, they heard the Word of God preached to their community by one of history's greatest Christian evangelists.

For Wanamaker, the extent to which he revealed Jesus through his business was his "bottom line."

Specifically and practically, how can a business make disciples of Jesus by revealing him, the glory of God,

through the business? This brings us to a second characteristic of a Christ-centered business.

2: Led by born-again Christians who are, in turn, led and empowered by the Holy Spirit

We can only say a business is Christ-centered to the extent that its leaders are centered on Christ vis-à-vis the Holy Spirit. If a company is in business to fulfill the mission of God, it follows that the company would be led by God Himself. He leads and empowers business leaders through the presence and voice of the Holy Spirit in the lives of born-again Christians.

Here are four ways in which business leaders can be led and empowered by the Holy Spirit, causing their businesses to become increasingly Christ-centered.

Inviting the Presence and Will of God into the Business

To be considered a "Christ-centered business," the voice of Jesus Christ via the Holy Spirit must be of paramount importance regarding the vision, mission, strategy, and tactics of the business.

After Jesus' disciples had been out fishing all night, he instructed Peter to drop his nets on the opposite side of the boat (see Luke 5:1-11). Despite how counterintuitive this would have seemed to this experienced fisherman, he followed Jesus' instructions and benefitted from a massive, net-breaking catch of fish that required assistance from other boats and fishermen.

Enabled by the Holy Spirit, this deep level of listening and obedience to the voice of Jesus will be evident in a Christ-centered company. Expressions of this would include regular and ongoing personal prayer times, Bible study, and worship on the part of the company's Christian leaders. Other expressions would include times when the Christian members of the leadership team gather corporately for prayer, Bible study, and worship. These disciplines will prepare the company's Christian leaders to hear from and obey the Holy Spirit at a moment's notice during the day-to-day operations of the company as they make Spirit-led decisions and represent Jesus to the company's stakeholders.

Seeking Wise Counsel

One of the primary means by which the Holy Spirit leads business leaders is through godly advisors to whom the leader chooses to be accountable. The Bible says, "Where there is no guidance the people fall, but in abundance of counselors there is victory" (Prov. 11:14).

There are many thought leaders in and around our industries whom we respect for the advice they share. The

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problem is that many of them do not know God, nor do they share our desires to lead Christ-centered businesses. A diet of business advice and guidance fed primarily by non-Christian thinkers will condition a person to believe that God is not relevant to his or her business. As Larry Burkett said in *Business by the Book*, “The difficulty isn’t the advice they give; it’s the advice they don’t give, specifically, the lack of spiritual insight.”⁸ Leaders of Christ-centered businesses give priority to the voice of counsel from those who share their Christ-centered values and mission.

Leading from Spiritual Gifts (Charismata), Not from the Ability of the Flesh

A “spiritual gift” (*charismata*) is a special ability given by the Holy Spirit through a born-again Christian to the people of God for the purpose of spreading the awareness of the glory of God throughout the earth.⁹ Because spiritual gifts constitute the anatomy of the “body” of Jesus Christ, who is the “head” of the body (see 1 Cor. 12), using spiritual gifts (e.g. administration, service, prophecy, etc.) literally puts Jesus on display in front of the world. As discussed above, making people aware of what Jesus looks like through the lives of born-again Christians is a prerequisite to making disciples. They must first see demonstrated what they are called to imitate.

Christian business professionals have access to the Holy Spirit’s supernatural power in business. This power is demonstrated through one’s spiritual gifts, which are individual parts of the body of Jesus Christ. Jesus said, “Apart from Me, you can do nothing” (John 15:5). By choosing to operate with spiritual gifts in business rather than from the natural abilities of the flesh, the business professional is choosing to be completely dependent upon the power of the Holy Spirit. The Bible tells us, “For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit” (Rom. 8:5).

Fueling Spiritual Gifts with the Fruit of the Spirit

Natural abilities can be motivated by all sorts of selfish motives. They can help a person to achieve extraordinary worldly and temporary success, gaining massive amounts of money and influence.

Spiritual gifts, on the other hand, can only be fueled by the fruit of the Holy Spirit: “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23). For instance, a Christ-centered business leader may operate with a Spirit-empowered spiritual gift of “administration” (see 1 Cor. 12:28) while another may operate with a pride-fueled natural ability of administration. Paul writes,

If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. (1 Cor. 13:2)

Our spiritual gifts are useless for making disciples and changing our industries for the glory of God unless they are motivated by love for the people we are serving. Love and the other fruits of the Spirit provide the passion and proper motivation that fuel our spiritual gifts, enabling us to make an eternal impact in the marketplace.

Unlike spiritual gifts, which are given by the Holy Spirit, spiritual fruit must be cultivated in partnership with the Holy Spirit. This “fruit” is the Christian character that each of us must develop over time. These fruits are the Christian business ethics and values we should all be bringing to the marketplace each day. Without this fruit, our spiritual gifts can accomplish nothing for the glory of God in the marketplace.

Conclusion

Until the “awareness” of the glory of God, Jesus Christ, shines into the marketplace through Christ-centered businesses and business leaders, the world of business will remain in bondage to sin and all of its nasty expressions: corruption, greed, poverty, selfish ambition, pride, godlessness, spiritual emptiness, depression, and much more. This provides a redemptive opportunity for Christ-centered businesses. Jesus instructed us to spread the awareness of God’s glory, Jesus himself, by being “salt” and “light” to triumph over the decay and darkness in our fallen world (Matt. 5:13-14).

Indeed, Christ-centered businesses must create value, generate profit, and abide by the laws of the land. Two

distinguishing features of Christ-centered businesses are that they also are dedicated to making disciples of Jesus Christ and are led by born-again Christians who are, in turn, led and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

While the relationship between disciple-making and profit-making is not a difficult one to understand, we must continue to develop a theology of business without making these critical concepts mutually exclusive.

Notes

¹ Jeff Van Duzer, *Why Business Matters to God: And What Still Needs to Be Fixed*, (Downer's Grove: IVP Academic, 2010), 42.

² Steve Rundle and Tom Steffen, *Great Commission Companies: The Emerging Role of Business in Missions* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 41.

³ Wayne Grudem, *Business for the Glory of God: The Bible's Teaching on the Moral Goodness of Business* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2003), 15.

⁴ Ibid., 37.

⁵ Ken Eldred, *God Is at Work* (Montrose, CO: Manna Ventures, 2009), 161.

⁶ Michael E. Cafferky, *Business Ethics in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: IVP Academic, 2015).

⁷ Steve O. Steff, *The Business Card* (Wor-K-ship Publishing, 2015), 143-44.

⁸ Larry Burkett, *Business by the Book* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 89.

⁹ Darren Shearer, *The Marketplace Christian: A Practical Guide to Using Your Spiritual Gifts in Business* (Houston: High Bridge Books, 2015), 63.

About the Author



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