



REDEMPTION

BY
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Introduction: A Wider View of Redemption

Some Christians in business have too narrow a view of redemption. For them redemption is only about one thing: salvation from sin, in Christ, by faith. Period. Witnessing to this narrow view of redemption limits them to talk only about a theological framework given to concerns about salvation. This makes it easy to talk about redemption in terms of spiritual salvation from sin¹ or the forgiveness of sin². Redemption is about salvation from sin, but it is more.

The biblical concept of redemption is broad, encompassing many dimensions of human experience. Anytime God takes an action which results in a change from worse to better, from misery to shalom, from hurt to healing or from welfare that is harmed or put at risk to wellbeing that is improved or made more certain, the Bible considers this redemption.

To understand this better we must see how the Bible uses the concept of redemption. Redemption is a central theme of Scripture; some would say that is the central theme around which all other themes relate. This theme is universal as it relates to all the major Scripture themes. Redemption is presented in a variety of ways in the Bible,

yet the basic idea is the same each time: God reaches out to people and delivers them from something that is threatening their wellbeing. If for no other reason than this, Christians in business will be interested in exploring how this central message and theme is relevant to their work in the marketplace. They will seek to advocate on behalf of a redemption point of view.

Redemption in the Old Testament is sometimes discussed in terms of paying a ransom to buy back someone who is in bondage or to set someone free³. The Exodus experience recorded in the Old Testament is the highest example of how God works to fulfill promises while delivering from oppression. Sometimes redemption is presented in terms of removing us out of a snare (Psalm 91:3) or bringing us to safety (Joel 2:32). At other times its focus is on preserving life (Genesis 19:16, 19). Other times redemption is when God brings his people from misery to flourishing, from threat to protection (Psalm 18:18-19). Both Testaments of Scripture refer to renewing the heart⁴.

In the New Testament, redemption involves spiritual, moral deliverance, healing or being made whole⁵. The experience of Jesus Christ is the supreme example of God's saving power (1 Corinthians 1:30). The term uses the economic-laden metaphor of paying a ransom that results in freedom⁶. Elsewhere redemption seems to emphasize the reconciliation of conflicting parties⁷ and deliverance from the oppression of hostile powers. God acts with redemption by finding and saving the lost (Matthew 18:11; Luke 19:10). Redemption is spoken about or alluded to when the Bible writers refer to the new birth, cleansing and giving the gift of eternal life⁸. It involves reconciling us in our relationship with God⁹ but extends to our relationship with each other (John 13:34-35).

One way to think about redemption is to see it as a grand, overall Plan of restoring all things, all relationships, all social structures, all systems. This includes human organizations, our relationships and our marketplace institutions. Broader still, the Plan of Redemption encom-

passes not only sinful human beings and the organizations they create, but also the whole earth (Romans 8:19-22). Thus, redemption is applicable to the so-called "cultural mandate" to create and manage social structures which advance flourishing life.

More than this, unless faith in salvation by God's grace alone moves a person toward *faithfulness in action* and *transformation of character*, such so-called faith is not truly faith (James 2:17, 26). Without transformational renewal that results in faithfulness of our actions, faith is nothing, it is dead (James 2:14-26). Thus, the Plan of Redemption is also about the process of transformation of character, the restoration of the image of God in humans¹⁰ which is the driver to renewed human behavior. It is here that the day-to-day activities of business can be seen in their deeper significance.

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In all these ways, and more, that the Bible either explicitly or implicitly refers to redemption, God is at work renewing, restoring, remaking, and recreating. He invites us to participate in the process in our sphere. At a deeper level we see the message of Scripture beginning with God's action of creation by which he came to give abundant life (Genesis 1-2). He comes again to renew and restore that

we might have abundant life (John 6:33; John 10:10). At the consummation of the great plan of redemption he comes again to give eternal life.

Imitatio dei: Ministers of Redemption

Redemption is multifaceted. If humans are to find their place as ministers of redemption to emulate God's action, it must be in the wider understanding of the concept. The simple reason: Humans do not have power of salvation from sin. The Plan of Redemption involves restoring in humans in the image of God. It is in this restoration process we have opportunities to emulate God's character and thereby bear witness to the work of God.

The theme of imitating God (*Imitatio dei*) runs throughout Scripture¹¹. Imitating God involves working in ways, in our sphere of influence, just as God works in his sphere of influence. In our sphere, our work involves improving the ability of people and the earth to flourish. One can argue that imitating God involves being as productive as possible but in ways that are consistent with covenantal living. In other words, imitation is not limited

The dominant view of business in the so-called secular marketplace, one could argue, is that humans create happiness through market efficiency and making optimal economic choices from among market basket alternatives we have in a situation of scarcity. Humans save themselves through economics, technology and political processes. If this is all that the Christian sees in the purpose of busi-

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to private spiritual experience alone but can be applied to all dimensions of human experience, all moral actions in a social context. If this is true, it also applies to the world of productive work.

Certainly, we imitate God when we participate as ministers of redemption. Whenever we encourage others to respond to the Gospel, we are serving as ministers. But in the marketplaces of the world there are often difficulties that come with openly sharing religious faith. A person might feel free to be open about personal religious beliefs if that person owns the company. But, lacking this level of authority, it is not always possible to openly verbally witness to the Gospel in the marketplaces of the world or the corporations. And, sometimes it is not appropriate to verbally witness to religious faith regardless of your level of decision making authority. Serving as a minister of redemption cannot be limited to bearing verbal witness to the theological frames of the Gospel.

Are there other opportunities, though less direct, to serve as a minister of redemption when you are constrained by the culture of the marketplace? Absolutely! One might even argue that these other opportunities for serving as a minister of redemption are important precursors to direct conversations about the Gospel.

Contrast with the Dominant View of Business

ness, it seems this comes up short of the message of Scripture regarding the Plan of Redemption. In contrast, the Scripture perspective, while not unmindful of the power of humans to influence happiness and our responsibility to contribute to shalom, views business as organized attempts to work together with God in the restoration of his image.

Seeing this from a slightly different point of view, it is faithfulness in marketplace actions where we find the potential of fusing together business activities with religious faith. Fusion is when two things are united in such a way that they are not two separate things any more, but instead have become one. We participate as ministers of reconciliation in part when we contribute to flourishing life for those around us while we engage in business activities, when we reconcile those who are at odds with each other (a leadership role), and when we allow God's power to free us from the desire to take revenge in business situations.

Application: Redemption in the Human Sphere

We can see redemption (or attempts at redemption) in many places in organizations.

- An entrepreneur who fails at the first attempt (or more) at starting a company finally succeeds after repeated attempts.
- A top-level leader is forced out of an organization by other powerful people only to learn from this experience and emerge as a more effective leader elsewhere.
- A persistent customer is unrelenting in advocating on behalf of what they believe is the truth and is rewarded by a manager who “gets it.”
- Workers oppressed by unscrupulous bosses organize and achieve relief from injustices.
- A worker spends his entire career working in so-called menial tasks and learns at retirement that such tasks, when performed to a level of consistency and quality, were what allowed other workers in the organization to have, in comparison, a relatively easy work life.
- A court takes an action permitting a company to restructure its liabilities. This is society’s structured mechanism for giving an organization another opportunity to continue serving the community.

Would we be surprised when considering that these are not mere analogies to redemption but instead are examples of how we participate with Christ as ministers of redemption in our sphere of influence?

Seeing the multifaceted nature of biblical redemption, the reader will think of applications in the aspects of business most familiar. The more obvious applications of redemption have been mentioned by other authors including, to name just a few, Lee Hardy¹², R. Paul Stevens¹³, and Kenman Wong and Scott Rae¹⁴. Leaders have opportunities to correct injustices inside and outside the organization. Business professionals can advocate on behalf of the least advantaged in society.

Whenever a person promotes the principles bound up with redemption (faithfulness to promises, loyalty, deep commitment to covenant relationships and other elements of God’s character), when a person advocates on behalf of them in the organization and integrates them into personal habits, such a person is telling about the Redeemer just as surely as when mentioning him by name.

Sometimes it is not always clear to the leader which course of action is the one that leads toward redemption. Redemption can work in two, seemingly opposite ways in terms of human resource management depending on the situation. In one instance, managers who decide on keeping instead of firing an employee may serve as the catalyst for redemption for not only that person but also the entire organization. Forgiveness is a requirement of those who are forgiven. Tasked with deciding whether or not to fire a worker, the wise manager will look deeper than superficial causes. There are sometimes deeper, organizational reasons why workers act out or are unfaithful to their commitments. Addressing the root causes instead of

merely assigning personal blame demonstrates that the organization cares about its people and the extent to which people try to tell the organization that it needs to change. In a different situation, a person

fired from one organization is given the choice whether or not to align with the goals and values of the company. Such a person may find a better fit in a different organization. Redemption in this case may have been achieved for both the employee who was let go and also for the organization who let the employee go.

The accountant who keeps careful records which are used later to successfully defend the organization against accusations and litigation acts redemptively. The same accountant who follows Generally Accepted Accounting Principles, prevents hundreds if not thousands of people from acting in destructive ways to each other.

It is not only people who need to be redeemed and their characters transformed. Organizations, too, need redemption and transformation. Standard operating procedures sometimes need to be redeemed. Look around an organization. Where do we see need of repairing and restoring the organization to biblical principles so that it serves society in a way that fosters well-being for all including the earth? This is one reason there is so much interest in developing effective leaders. Left to itself, an organization tends toward entropy, i.e., chaos, lack of goal attainment and low productivity. A leader’s job, in part, is to care for the needs of the organization and its commitment to its community just as it is to care for the needs of individual workers. A leader assesses the situation of an organization and as a result makes changes to the division of work, makes adjustments to decision making authority or improves how collective effort is coordinated. These and other organizing leadership actions tends to foster

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redemption for the organization. When this effort is successful, it also promotes redemption to the experience of individual workers.

Caring for the organization, at times, means putting boundaries for employees who otherwise would act in destructive ways toward others. Placing boundaries to prevent bullying or, as the J. M. Smucker Co. does, forbid open expressions of anger among employees are examples of managerial constraints designed to foster redemption. Managing the tension between caring for the needs of one employee while caring for the needs of the whole group of workers is not always easy. At times management must place limits on individual requests for exceptions to policy in order to act redemptively for the organization. At other times managers will be flexible with company policies in order to provide for exceptions in a way that brings redemption to the individual.

Salvation involves substitution¹⁵. Every manager who takes the place of a subordinate, to actually (not merely metaphorically) walk in their shoes at work, acts in substitutionary ways. Every leader who has the strength to bear the blame (take responsibility) for problems rather than shift blame to others acts for redemption. Every time a manager helps other employees see the importance of sharing the work load and making mutual adjustments to responsibilities promotes redemption and teaches about God.

Letting interpersonal conflict fester is like feeding a cancer that will grow until it destroys the whole team. Thus, when work teams or team members come into interpersonal conflict, redemptive leaders will call a meeting and reset the key players to move toward common goals.

While business organizations should not be expected to repair every relationship, business can do its part by healing economic relationships that involve any of the players in the market: employees, customers, suppliers and strategic alliance partners. Beyond this, a business that operates on principles of integrity and justice plays a key role in bringing stability to all relationships within its sphere of influence.

Redemption involves becoming transformed from the inside out as faithful business professionals. In some cases, becoming transformed may involve thinking more deeply about our work in terms of God's acts of redemption. If redemption encompasses all human institutions and systems, yea all of creation, our work in the marketplace takes on added significance. For example, the person who works in the marketplace in a distribution system has more to do than move product from point A to point B just in time. Each person in the distribution system has a sacred part to play. In the manufacture, distribution, marketing promotion of necessary products such as food and shelter those involved work not only with the things that came from the hand of the *Creator*. These same things and the people who use them were purchased by the *Redeemer*. Because of this, our work in business has double

significance. The cross of Christ is embossed on everything that we need, that we buy and sell, to sustain life. Every house that is built, for either poor or rich, is made possible by the purchase of Christ on Calvary. Each plate of food served at restaurants, in institutions and in homes was purchased by the Blood of Christ. Every truck load of food traveling from farm to distributor to retailer drives down the *via dolorosa*, whether or not the driver recognizes it. This journey of food (and other products) through the distribution system binds us together in the marketplace in an interdependence that is deeper than that which was established at Creation. We are also bound together by the Cross of Christ. In other words, we are not just agents of Creation but also ministers of redemption.

Final Thoughts: The Purpose of Business

The Bible portrays the understanding that God wants us to use our assets (possessions) to serve others, which includes serving the poor¹⁶. God's plan of redemption comprehends everything he has created. As imitators of God, leaders in organizations act redemptively toward all of God's creation including the human forms of organization designed for mutual benefit. Since redemption is a central theme of Scripture, we conclude that it must have something to say about the deeper purpose of business.

The purpose of business can be integral to the mission of the church, namely, that business is a support for a setting in which the gospel of Christ can be extended around the earth. Simply put, the purpose of business, like any other human endeavor, is to be the means by which we glorify God and serve him in ways that are redemptive for the fallen human condition.

Business must be an integral part of the whole plan of salvation, not merely the profession of faith in God for forgiveness of sins or mental assent to the truthfulness of Scripture. In business we are not only preparing people to receive the message about the Savior, which leads to initial saving faith. We are also preparing people for and encouraging them to participate in a lifetime process of transformation. Additionally, in a broader way, the purpose of business seen through the lens of redemption involves preparing others for the plausibility that the character of God is relevant to all dimensions of human well-being including economic activities.

When we review the content of Jesus' teachings in the four Gospels, we conclude that, like Moses in Exodus, Jesus expanded on the Character of God and what it means for people in relationships just as much as what it means for God's relationship with us. Participating in redemption involves something larger and deeper than teaching about doctrine even if that doctrine is the doctrine of salvation. It also means *showing* the Character of God in action, central to which is the desire to redeem.

About the Author



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Notes

¹ Matthew 1:21; John 1:29; Acts 4:12; Romans 5:14-17.

² Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14.

³ Exodus 6:6; Psalm 77:14-15.

⁴ Psalm 51:10; Jeremiah 32:39; Ezekiel 11:19-20; Romans 6:4; 1 John 3:2.

⁵ Matthew 1:21; Luke 1:69; 19:9; Acts 13:47; Romans 1:16.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 6:20; Romans 3:24; Ephesians 1:7.

⁷ Acts 15; 2 Corinthians 5:19; Romans 5:10-11; Ephesians 2:16.

⁸ See John 3:3-5; 1 Peter 1:23; 1 John 2:29 with reference to new birth; cleansing: 1 Corinthians 6:11; Ephesians 5:26; Titus 3:5; and gift of eternal life: John 3:16; Romans 5:21; Romans 6:23.

⁹ Romans 5:10; 2 Corinthians 5:18-20; Colossians 1:22.

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10.

¹¹ See, for example, Leviticus 11:45; 19:2; 20:7; Matthew 5:48; Luke 6:36; John 13:15; Ephesians 4:23-24; 5:1; Philippians 2:2-11.

¹² Lee P. Hardy, *The Fabric of This World: Inquiries into Calling, Career Choice, and the Design of Human Work* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990).

¹³ R. Paul Stevens, *Doing God's Business: Meaning and Motivation for the Marketplace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006).

¹⁴ Kenman L. Wong and Scott B. Rae, *Business for the Common Good: A Christian Vision for the Marketplace* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011).

¹⁵ See Mark 10:45; Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24; Hebrews 9:22; Romans 4:25; Romans 8:32; Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 5:2.

¹⁶ See Deuteronomy 15:8; Psalm 112:5-9; Proverbs 19:17; Isaiah 58:7; 1Matthew 5:42; Luke 12:33.