

Lifelong Learning in Christian Business Education: A Framework and Case Study

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ABSTRACT: Christ-centered business education aims to build Christ-honoring character in Christians engaging the marketplace. Effective faith-work integration requires a proper understanding of biblical precepts (orthodoxy) and their proper applications (orthopraxy). When professionals progress through their careers, the contextual emphasis and significance of orthopraxy inevitably evolves. A framework of a pedagogy that will properly address the lifelong learning needs of Christian professionals should incorporate the mission goals of competence, discernment, stewardship, and community as borne out in Jesus' commissioning of his disciples in Matthew 10. A survey of existing institution-based faith-learning initiatives reveals an overall scarcity of programs addressing the dynamic, multidimensional nature of lifelong learning needs of marketplace professionals. The Center for Christianity in Business at Houston Baptist University is one program that aims to address the diverse, changing needs in the life cycle of Christian business professionals. A review of the program's progresses and challenges shows the promises of such initiatives and helps raise the awareness of the need for more participation by and collaboration among faith-based business programs. Christian business professionals can be effective agents in the redemptive work for the Kingdom only if they are properly equipped as they grow and mature as emissaries of Christ in the marketplace. As these equipping opportunities remain largely outside the scope of traditional business pedagogy, a lifelong learning pedagogy is required to answer the needs of Christians in the marketplace.

INTRODUCTION

A fundamental tenet of Christ-centered education is the belief in the universal beneficence of a biblical worldview in action. Communities of scholars who subscribe to such beliefs, the Christian Business Faculty Association being a unique example, serve on the front line of bringing traditional education to bear in effectuating faith-learning/faith-work integration. While traditional academic scholarship and education serve important purposes in this endeavor, there is necessarily deficiency in practice as students become practitioners who in turn mature into organizational leaders. The shepherding of this maturation process requires a pedagogy that effects life-long learning. These pedagogies are generally rooted in an abiding respect for the life experiences and knowledge adult students bring to the learning environment as well as their goal-orientation and preference for relevant and practical learning outcomes (Wuestewald, 2016).

A strategic program of business education positioned to meet the needs of lifelong learning fills a critical gap that churches are often ill-prepared to bridge. An alignment of orthopraxy (correct practice) and orthodoxy (correct theology and discipleship) would bring skills and understanding to members in the business community, giving them the means to be true, just, honest, and faithful toward God and toward one another (Moreland, 1997). They would be equipped as agents of change in redeeming the world of business for the Kingdom.

LIFELONG LEARNING OBJECTIVES FOR CHRISTIAN MARKETPLACE PROFESSIONALS

An outline of the key objectives for a program of life-long practical training can be glimpsed from Jesus' teaching in Matthew 10 as the Lord prepared to send out his newly minted small group of disciples into the field for the first

time. The objectives may be identified as *competence* (analytical, critical thinking, and leadership skills), *discernment* (capacity to execute moral judgment), *stewardship* (ability to act as agents of change and managers of “profits”), and *community* (the active fellowship and mutual support among members driven by shared goal and vision).

Competence

Traditional business education prepares students for workplace readiness and employability, often by focusing, sometimes exclusively, on technical proficiency and transfers of core professional knowledge. The ability to accomplish career goals, however, rides on skills beyond the scope of textbooks and idealized constructs conceived to facilitate learning. Textbook-based instruction pays scant attention to such pivotal skills for career success as time management, interpersonal relations, and followership/leadership (especially servant leadership) capacity. Soft skills constitute a critical component in self-efficacy, which plays a major role in how one approaches goals and confronts challenges in life (Bandura, 1977).

An overarching objective of Christian business education is the preparation of business professionals as emissaries of Christ. As such, an instructional framework that focuses on secular knowledge is inadequate. While such knowledge might offer a solution to career challenges, only knowledge informed by proper biblical perspectives can offer solutions consistent with the Kingdom mission. Even Jesus’ disciples, who were instructed under divine authority, would fail to accomplish goals because they lacked an understanding of the mission and its critical success factors (e.g., Matthew 17:4-18, 26:56). The proper avenues for soft-skill and faith-integrated instructions are internship and mentoring opportunities. Also instrumental are faith-based works of scholarship that illustrate the universal relevance of a biblical worldview in God’s economy (orthopraxy).

Discernment

By their nature business transactions harbor moral hazards stemming from asymmetric information inherent in contracting parties of stakeholders (vendors, partners, employees, and customers, etc.). Hazards may also arise from ethical challenges instigated by opportunistic behavior. The cumulative cost of business misjudgments, whether measured in money, time, energy, or lost opportunities, could be substantial and even crippling to a business entity. To the Christian business man or woman, these hazards go beyond the “immorals” of a material and/or psychological nature. Often they represent compromised spiritual, specifically biblical, standards. To safeguard against bad decisions

or poor judgement, one needs to be able to distinguish the good from the bad and the right from the wrong. This constitutes “discernment,” or the capacity to judge morally and with shrewdness. Pastor and theologian John MacArthur (2017) describes discernment as “the ability to think biblically about all areas of life and is indispensable to an uncompromising (spiritual) life.”

In commissioning his newly minted followers, Jesus forewarned the disciples that they were being sent out “as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16). Being shrewd is being wise and prudent, and being innocent is being harmless and gentle. These are hallmarks of maturity in the character of Christ followers. With Jesus as their teacher and mentor whose actions they observed daily, the apostles learned discernment first hand from Jesus’ wisdom and gentleness. Yet even Jesus relied on God’s Word to overcome the adversary’s treacherous temptations (Matthew 4:1-11). God’s Word provides the believer with the needed discernment about every issue of life.

Discernment intersects the Christian life at every point (MacArthur, 2017), and it is the responsibility of every Christian to be discerning in confronting life’s challenges (1 Thess. 5:21-22). A true, living knowledge of God underpins the believer’s ability to be discerning (2 Peter 1:3). A Christian business education that would enable a discerning student of business who is also a follower of Christ should start in the classroom with learning informed by a biblical worldview. Like the disciples, this learning must continue through life as students study the examples of Christian leaders in action. A Christian business leader can inspire with teachable moments from his/her own career, including episodes of humiliating moral failures.

Stewardship

Stewardship is the faithful exercise of care by an agent on behalf of the owner for the latter’s best interest. The idea of looking after someone else’s interest, let alone a presumed owner of all creation, runs counter to the traditional understanding of business as powered by the self-interested pursuit of profit maximization. Even the modern, liberalized enterprise, when it affirms such ideals as corporate social responsibility, sustainability, stakeholders’ interests, or even stewardship, acts in self-preservation. This is because the humanistic worldview bestows the right to ownership squarely on humankind, who must be accountable for its own destiny.

Biblical stewardship, in contrast, has a Kingdom focus. With God being the owner of all things (Psalm 24:1), 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 (Cafferky, 2017). Jesus instructed his followers to “freely give” as they have “freely received” (Matthew 10:8). He also pleaded with the rich young ruler to “go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Mark 10:21). In both instances his message connotes the redemptive purpose of stewardship. As Christians our trusteeship of God’s possessions has its priority in giving with a view to furthering his Kingdom. The reward, on the other hand, comes by way of being entrusted with more (Luke 6:38).

The exercise of stewardship in the biblical worldview is intentional, not incidental or an afterthought. It celebrates the idea of exercising our God-given talents to enable human flourishing while resisting the lure of materialism. This is because simplicity in life magnifies our dependency on God (Blomberg, 2000; Matthew 6:25-27, Phil. 4:11-13, 1 Tim. 6:6-8). Such an idea, however, is both abstract and distasteful to the aspiring, entrepreneurial minds struggling to gain supremacy in the fiercely competitive marketplace. The objective of a business education on stewardship must be about recasting the concept of business endeavors in redemptive terms. It must also help students recognize their spiritual gifts so that they seek vocations where they might find fulfillment apart from material success. It takes a deliberate, persistent process to deliver such objectives.

Community

At its most basic level, a Christian fellowship lives and exists by the intercession of its members for one another, or it collapses (Bonhoeffer, 1978). Community is at the very core of the believer’s maturation process (Hebrews 10:24-25, 1 John 1:7) as well as the mechanism that effectuates the Kingdom mission (Acts 2:46-47). Jesus encourages his disciples to seek hospitality and support amidst fellowship of sympathizers (Matthew 10:9-11). The Christian in the business community would, therefore, be well to find encouragement amongst practitioners of like mind and mission.

The right kind of community also underpin the infrastructure for organizational resilience. Research identifies accessibility of broad resource network where external resources can be readily deployed to support adaptive initiatives as essential to restoring stability in groups and organizations when misfortune or turbulence strikes (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011). Christians who believe in God’s trustworthiness live a life suffused with a strong sense of moral purpose, core value, and vision. They form a genuine community of brotherly love and a trusted network of external resources readily available to the despondent when adversity knocks (Liang, 2012).

A business education that positions the young professional for spiritual growth and success in a career that will face eventual turbulences must integrate the experience of community—community of believers willing and able to share spiritual lessons learned as well as knowledge and skill honed in the marketplace. As believers, not one of us can function effectively by ourselves; we need each other (Getz, 1976). It is through such fellowship and sharpening we purpose to build up the body of Christ so that all become mature and attain the fullness in the knowledge of God (Eph. 4:12-16).

LIFELONG LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A BRIEF SURVEY

A survey of existing institution-based education programs for Christian marketplace professionals shows there is a serious lack of initiatives that address all or even a majority of these objectives. The obvious reasons include, (a) such initiatives are typically outside the mandate of traditional education programs, and (b) they require sustainable sources of funding. More fundamentally, there exists an unfortunate but persistent divide between academic scholarship, with its emphasis on conceptual issues, and the daily practice of management, which demands transferrable skills for solving complex, real-life problems. Consequently traditional business education programs are not the best source for skill and knowledge transfers required by practicing professionals. Moreover, to be able to integrate faith and practice into the pedagogy is challenging from both a delivery and quality-control standpoint. For example, the involvement of senior members of the business community as guest speakers or student mentors requires networking and careful vetting, and the organization of outreach events demands planning and marketing resources that are often hard to come by.

Table 1 provides a brief summary of the few institution-based U.S. programs that are identifiable through an internet search. A quick review of the web contents shows that most of these programs are narrowly focused on a specific dimension of the lifelong training of the Christian marketplace professional, such as ethics, leadership, or the theology of work. A majority of these programs also cater to an exclusive constituency, such as current students or pastors, who are not practicing marketplace professionals. As well, several of the initiatives appear to be operating independently of the institutions’ business programs, if one exists (Biola, Gordon Conwell, and LeTourneau).

This brief survey finds that the Center for Christianity in Business (CCB) at Houston Baptist University (HBU)

TABLE 1: INSTITUTION-BASED LEARNING CENTERS FOR CHRISTIAN BUSINESS PROFESSIONALS

Institution/Center	Focus	Relation to Business Practitioners
Baylor University: Center for Professional Selling	Teaching salesmanship excellence to current students, which is filtered through a Christian worldview	Indirect. Focus is on current students
Biola University: Center for Faith, Work and Economics	Equipping pastors with theology of work	Relationship is indirect as the focus is on equipping pastors
Charleston Southern University: Whitfield Center for Christian Leadership	Leadership and local networking	The Marketplace Institute hosts events throughout the year that provide opportunities for collaboration and leadership development.
Gordon Cornwell Theological Seminary: Mockler Center for Faith and Ethics in the Workplace	Theology of Work	Relationship is indirect as the focus is on equipping pastors with a theology of work.
Houston Baptist University: Center for Christianity in Business	Equipping present and future Christian business leaders to integrate biblical values and principles in their personal and professional lives	Publications, streaming videos, and podcasts on faith/work integration; luncheons, lectures, conferences, and executive training seminars/certificates for leadership and vocational proficiency; student mentoring conferences
LeTourneau University: Center for Faith and Work	Blog site focused on the theology of work	They offer blogs and videos that feature the stories of Christian business leaders.
Regent University: Center for Entrepreneurship	Business as mission	Christian executives are invited to make "Kingdom impact" by mentoring entrepreneurs in emerging nations
Seattle Pacific University: Center for Integrity in Business	Business ethics	They offer consulting/advisory services by the center, and professionals are to participate in center-sponsored conferences and workshops.
University of Notre Dame: Center for Ethics and Religious Values in Business	Business ethics curriculum development for current students	Business leaders are brought in as guest speakers for the benefit of students.
<p><i>Sources:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Baylor University. http://www.baylor.edu/business/selling/index.php?id=89592 • Biola University. http://www.talbot.edu/cfwe/ • Charleston Southern University. http://www.csuniv.edu/whitfieldcenter/index.php • Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary. http://www.gordonconwell.edu/resources/About-the-Mockler-Center1.cfm • Houston Baptist University. https://www.hbu.edu/center-for-christianity-in-business/ • LeTourneau University. http://www.centerforfaithandwork.com/ • Regent University. https://regententrepreneur.org/ University of Notre Dame. http://cerv-mendoza.nd.edu/ • Seattle Pacific University. http://spu.edu/academics/center-for-integrity-in-business 		

appears to be one program that addresses the multiple dimensions of lifelong learning for the Christian marketplace professional. The CCB was founded with a view to bridging the gap between orthodoxy and orthopraxy for business leaders, both current and future. The initiative was driven by a conscious attempt to address the absence

of similar efforts in the universe of Christian institutions of higher learning. A better understanding of HBU's initiative, particularly the success to-date and challenges it continues to face, will help other business programs as they consider getting involved in this important endeavor.

A CASE STUDY

Background

The Center for Christianity in Business (CCB — www.hbu.edu/ccb) at Houston Baptist University is an initiative that addresses the need for lifelong learning/training for Christian business professionals. Founded in 2009, it is funded by a modest initial endowment and occasional donor support driven by the growth of its ministry. The Center’s mission is to “build” Christian business leaders, specifically by “challenging and equipping them to integrate biblical values and principles in their personal and professional lives.”

The Center’s operation is directed by an executive director who also happens to be a full-time faculty member of HBU’s College of Business. Strategic and financial oversight of the center rests on an advisory board primarily consisting of community business leaders. The center functions as an integral part of the College of Business but receives no funding from either the college or the university. Services by the center, when provided at a fee, are offered at a largely break-even basis. The center currently has no support staff apart from contracted outside resources.

Program Initiatives

The CCB’s vision is to equip business professionals with the knowledge and tools necessary to function as shrewd stewards, effective leaders, and bold witnesses in God’s economy. The CCB operates a series of programs purported to have global impacts, and they are designed (some in partnership with the business community) to meet the specific challenges of the objectives outlined in Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 10 (Table 2). CCB’s primary constituency consists of marketplace professionals at all levels of management responsibility, although certain activities are designed to benefit current HBU students exclusively.

The Center’s initiatives can be broken down into three strategic functional areas: research, communication, and education (Table 3). Under the research function, the center issues on an annual basis the *Christian Business Review* journal, which publishes both peer-reviewed as well as editorially reviewed articles primarily related to orthopraxy in the context of business and management. It aims to provide highly readable insights and commentaries from both practitioners and academics on various aspects of faith and work. In addition, the center organizes themed symposia that visit

TABLE 2: HBU CENTER FOR CHRISTIANITY IN BUSINESS

Objectives	Programs		
	<i>Functions</i> Luncheons, lectures, themed conferences and symposia	<i>Training</i> Executive education programs, workshops	<i>Communication</i> Publications (<i>The Christian Business Review</i> journal), podcasts, streaming leadership videos, blogs, newsletters
Competence		√	√
Discernment	√	√	√
Stewardship	√	√	√
Community	√	√	

Source: <https://www.hbu.edu/center-for-christianity-in-business/>

TABLE 3: HBU CENTER FOR CHRISTIANITY IN BUSINESS FUNCTIONAL GOALS AND SAMPLE ANALYSIS

Research	Communication	Education
Consulting engagements**	Luncheon and speaker series*	Annual mentoring conference*
Scholarly journals*	Christian business leadership video series*	Executive education programs*
Research symposia*	Podcasts*	
Resident scholars program**	Blogosphere*	
	Webinars**	

Source: www.christianityinbusiness.com
 *Currently active initiatives
 **Expected future initiatives

issues of contemporary interest, such as “faith and work in practice across the globe.”

Under the communication function, the center hosts a quarterly business luncheon series that is open to both marketplace professionals and students from the Houston area. Each luncheon features either a keynote speaker who is a known, respected business leader from across the country (or overseas) or a panel of business leaders/experts. The goal of these discussions (which cover topics of practical interest such as biblical investing, entrepreneurship, Kingdom stewardship, servant leadership, employment law and faith-based enterprises, and biblical ethics) is to offer testimonies and reflections on best practices for the benefit of the believer in the marketplace. The center provides streaming videos of all keynote and panel presentations on its website for the benefit of the business and student community at large.

A more regular channel of communication is a blogosphere that distributes articles of personal insights by established authors, business leaders, and academics on issues relating to leadership and management from a biblical worldview. An initiative introduced in late 2015 offers podcasts of interviews of well-known leaders and work-faith movement authors who have unusual impacts on the Kingdom community. The podcast and blog series have been able to engage a growing readership from countries around the world.

The center’s third functional focus is on education. This function aims to equip current students and Christian professionals with practical workplace skills and knowledge that enable them to function at an increased level of competence and a heightened level of awareness as a Kingdom worker. An initiative geared toward HBU students is the annual mentoring conference. In this event C-level business executives from the local community are invited to present personal testimonies and then facilitate small group

discussions on faith-work issues with participating students. Students are encouraged to engage these executives as mentors going forward, both in a professional and spiritual sense. An upcoming conference purports to help students discover their own spiritual gifts, which are then used to shape a sharper focus on their vocational callings.

Lastly, the center organizes executive education seminars/workshops for marketplace professionals that last between one to a few dozen weekend sessions. Some workshops offer non-credit certificates of completion. These continuing education opportunities are open to professionals from all walks of life and cover specific sets of workplace proficiency, such as practical leadership or entrepreneurship skills. A common denominator of these training sessions is that the speakers and instructors share from a distinctly biblical perspective. As a result these continuing educational experiences double as evangelization platforms for non-Christian participants.

Success and Challenges

Since the CCB’s inception, the center has gradually expanded its ministry to address the lifelong learning demands of its constituency. Christian marketplace professionals need strong grounding in the theology of work and leadership skills consistent with a biblical worldview. The center has focused its luncheons, blogs, podcasts, and publications on transferrable skills that address these needs. In addition the center offers seminars, workshops, and symposia that also focus on general knowledge conducive to the career success of Kingdom workers. Past topics, for example, include employment law, entrepreneurship/innovation, and money management/investing. Although it is difficult to measure the center’s accomplishments using any quantitative metric, it is helpful to point out that the luncheon and continuing education programs are often fully subscribed,

TABLE 4: HBU CENTER FOR CHRISTIANITY IN BUSINESS SELECT MINISTRY OPERATIONAL STATISTICS

Initiative	Results
<i>Christian Business Review</i> journal	Print edition circulation ~450 Free access online edition
Luncheons	Luncheon attendance ~100-150 (venue capacity) Lecture attendance ~100-350
Mentoring conference	Attendance ~110 (venue capacity)
Executive education seminars	Attendance for latest seminar on “Entrepreneurship” (Spring 2017) ~35 (class capacity)
Blogs	Email distribution ~1,300
Podcasts	Downloads ~8,000 in 56 countries
Social media	Twitter followers ~450
Email announcements for local events	~5,000
*As of September 2017.	

the podcasts are reaching listeners in dozens of foreign countries, and the *Christian Business Review* journal is viewed and used by hundreds of professionals and academic readers between its online and print editions (Table 4).

Despite the modest accomplishments, the CCB faces significant strategic and organizational challenges. The strategic vision of the center is to impact Christian professionals beyond the local Houston community. However, to deliver on such goals requires considerable increase in financial resources to fund web-based programming needs, such as webinars and online courses. There is also an expectation to develop joint programs with overseas institutions and host networking events such as conferences at foreign venues.

At the organizational level, the current arrangement that integrates the executive and teaching faculty positions is untenable for obvious time constraints. To support expansion of current initiatives, such as increased frequency and outreach of the luncheon, executive education, podcast, and publication activities, a full-time support staff is needed to manage advancement, marketing, and operational objectives. These additional resources are not supported by existing revenue sources. In response a long-term plan to raise a named endowment is being put in place.

CONCLUSIONS

The Apostle Paul implores believers to “work out their salvation” so they can “fulfill [God’s] good purpose” (Phil. 2:12-13). Believers engaged in marketplace activities, who account for the vast majority of all Christians, need to be equipped with the tools and knowledge so that they become competent and shrewd stewards in the Kingdom economy. It is only then can they be expected to contribute to the redemptive process in the marketplace for the glory of God. Just as the university as a neutral intellectual setting can provide the place where an advancing professional can re-strike a balance of approach to a new range of problems, lifelong learning initiatives sponsored by business faculties in Christian institutions of higher learning are ideal platforms for the continued education of Christian business men and women advancing in their careers. Unfortunately there is a glaring shortage of such broad-based initiatives across the nation.

HBU’s Center for Christianity in Business offers a platform that addresses a spectrum of these needs. Its modest success will help to raise awareness of other business school programs with respect to the lifelong learning needs of Christian marketplace professionals. The universal nature of such needs, however, suggests that to equip business

professionals with Kingdom preparedness likely requires collaborative efforts amongst business faculties in Christian colleges and universities across the nation. It is hoped that a society of scholars such as the Christian Business Faculty Association can provide a forum where such efforts are brought into sharper focus. It is a worthwhile strategic mission of Christian educational institutions to shepherd believers in the marketplace to fulfill their redemptive mission for the glory of God.

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