

# The Hope and Peril of Introducing a Course on Christian Business Leadership into a College of Business Curriculum

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper examines the advantages and pitfalls of establishing a class in the business school to reflect on the impact of the Christian faith on business decisions. In class, students learn to apply broad Christian principles to specific business situations. Having a specific class allows an instructor to specialize in both theological and business concerns and supports a clear, intentional integration of faith into the business world. It does not eliminate the need to integrate faith in other parts of the curriculum; instead, it makes that integration even more important so that the message of the college is consistent.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Is there room in a business school curriculum for a class dealing exclusively with what it means to be a Christian in the business world? That is not an easy question for many business schools. The core is often full of classes, and just about every discipline has at least one class they would like to add to it. Surveying the curriculum of the CCCU member schools, I found only a small handful that had a class specifically dedicated to a Christian approach to business, and many of the existing classes were electives. Even schools clearly committed to integrating faith into the curriculum have found little room for a distinct class.

How important is leadership to the work of business? Many of the “management gurus” have come to focus more on leadership than on traditional management skills in recent years. Schools have begun to develop courses specifically in leadership, but those courses also run into the problem of full curriculums.

Four years ago the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor (UMHB) business faculty decided there might be room in the curriculum if the two concepts were combined. While there was some desire to see two separate classes, squeezing

even one more class into the core seemed a major step. Therefore, a sophomore-level class called Christian Principles in Business Leadership was added to the required business foundation (a sample syllabus is available upon request).

This paper explores the development of that class and considers challenges raised in adding a “Christian business” class as part of the core curriculum. It also addresses the positive and negative impacts developing such a class can have on the attempt to integrate Christian principles into the work of a business school. It is certainly not necessary to have a distinct class on Christian business leadership in order to show a commitment to integrating faith in the curriculum. However, the class has proven to be a valuable tool for focusing student thoughts on what it means to be a Christian in the business world.

## BACKGROUND OF THE CLASS

Our Christian Principles class is not intended to replace the general business ethics class by being more “distinctly Christian” in its discussion of ethics. The ethics class, which is a senior-level required course, addresses philosophical and biblical ethical principles and how they

apply to business issues. There are certainly similarities between the subjects discussed in class, but the aims are different. Is it possible to be ethical in business decisions but still fail to integrate any kind of Christian approach to business at all? If we do not carefully consider what it means to be a Christian in the business world, it is more than possible; it is likely. Few ethics classes consider such issues as vocation, the relationship of work to family, the proper goal of business, or the role of grace and mercy in the workplace. The aim of this class is for students to consider what it means to be a disciple of Christ in the modern marketplace.

One significant challenge in beginning a class like this one is finding a faculty member who fits it well. Professors with a background in business, theology, and leadership do not exactly grow on trees. That problem is going to be evident with any class having an interdisciplinary nature. The solution appears to be finding someone who fits part of the background and can catch up in other areas. I was offered the opportunity to develop the course because I had a background that included business experience, a graduate minor in management, seminary and Ph.D. level training in ethics and theology, and practical experience in leadership. The most significant catching up I had to do was in the academic study of leadership.

When I began developing the class, my original impression was that it was way too much to cover in one semester and needed to be split into separate classes for Christian business and leadership. When I discussed my impression with the dean, I discovered the level of compromise that had been involved in getting even one class approved. Regardless, I have changed my mind over the last couple of years. I am now convinced there is such a close relationship between leadership and Christian principles that they make a very nice combination for a class. More specifically, I would argue the application of servant leadership in the business world is an essential element of what it means to integrate faith into business. It is a topic for another paper, but I have come to believe the practice of servant leadership is a significant part of what it means to develop a Christian business character. Business leaders who focus on "helping others grow as they accomplish the goals of the business" are going to have significantly less room for behavior outside the norms of the faith.

#### **CLASS DEVELOPMENT AND ORGANIZATION**

My basic plan for the class was to divide it into three sections. First, we would consider what the Christian faith says about business and business practices. Second, we

would talk about effective leadership. Third, we would bring those two ideas together by talking about specific areas where Christian faith might impact leadership.

I have approached the class with a feel I associate more with graduate school. I assign readings for the students and then discuss the material in class on the assumption they have read and understood the material themselves. That is, of course, a dangerous assumption to make with college sophomores, and I do put some effort into "encouraging" reading by random quizzes and requiring written responses to some of the readings. I do make sure the most significant principles addressed in the reading are discussed in class, but my primary concern is with practical application. Of course, since many of the issues are rather difficult to resolve, practical application often involves talking about strengths and weaknesses of different approaches without coming to a clear conclusion. This does create a bit of cognitive dissonance for some students. I often have at least one student evaluation that says, "Sometimes I was not sure what the Christian principle really was." I am trying to make it clearer to students it has to be that way. My goal is to get students to apply their faith to their work and lives. If they attempt to do that consistently, I believe they will make better choices than if they try to apply my personal conclusions about specific dilemmas. I am not arguing here that teachers simply need to help students clarify their own values. When we address a subject, I seek to establish the principles that need to be the foundation of decision-making. It is the practical application of those principles that often cannot be legislated without descending into legalism. For instance, when discussing the Christian's relationship to the environment, the core principle is that God has made us stewards of the created world. God is the owner; the environment is neither ours to use for whatever we want nor more important than human needs. That still leaves questions about how that concept of stewardship applies to decisions that must balance uncertain dangers to the environment with potential harm to employees in lost jobs and opportunities.

#### **BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF THE CLASS**

Addressing questions that cannot easily be answered is one of the values of the class. The interdisciplinary perspective needed to teach the class should give an instructor more confidence in approaching subjects with theological weight. At a conference I attended a few years ago, an economics professor expressed his concern that by attempting to integrate faith and learning he would be presenting "Ph.D. level economics and Sunday school level theology."

Having heard some theologians speak about economics, I have wished they had a similar concern in the other direction. That is not to say a person needs to have a perfect interdisciplinary background to teach the class. Just as I have had to catch up on leadership, others may have to catch up in other areas. What it does mean is that the person teaching a class like this one has more reason to read and think carefully about both theological and business concerns than a person teaching a standard economics or business class.

A second strength of the class is that by combining leadership and Christian principles in the same class, there is room for students to see significant value for both their Christian walk and their business growth. Moreover, this can be accomplished while teaching leadership in a way that improves their ability to apply their faith to their business practice.

Having a specific class on Christian business also adds an intentionality that even well intentioned faith integration would find difficult to match. Subjects like vocation, stewardship, relationships at work, and even the appropriate opportunities to share faith at work are all important topics for Christians in the business world to consider. Where exactly, though, does each of them fit into a business school curriculum? One economics professor might talk about stewardship issues, but another feel that it is outside the subject area of the class. A management professor might address vocation issues, but the other management professors not even think about it in relation to management classes. Unless the business school faculty is going to divide responsibility specifically for such topics, there is a good chance some students will be challenged to think about them and others will not. While teaching a Christian principles class does not prevent other faculty from addressing the issues, it does provide more certainty the questions will be addressed.

The primary concern I have for the class is the relation of the class to other elements of the curriculum. Several students have expressed the frustration that other classes seem to contradict the basic understanding of the relation of business and faith presented in the class. That illustrates the greatest danger related to this type of class. If other classes do conflict with what is being said in the Christian principles class, it can give students the impression the class is irrelevant. Students may be led to believe the Christian principles class represents what we wish were true, but other classes have to deal with real life. The integration of faith by professors across the curriculum may become even more important than if no distinctly Christian course existed.

While the concern that faith should be integrated across the curriculum and not relegated to a single class is a serious concern, I do not believe it outweighs the advantages of the class in terms of intentionality and allowing professors to specialize in the intersection of faith and business. That would be especially true for schools like UMHB that have a diverse background in the business faculty. Faculty do have to be active Christians who are committed to Christian education, but they also come from a wide variety of denominational perspectives. As a Baptist institution, the school also places a very high premium on academic freedom. That diversity and commitment to freedom would make it much more difficult for a school like UMHB to be certain that the full breadth of questions raised about the application of faith to the business world are addressed without a class like this one where it is specifically addressed.

### IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES

The first major problem in implementing the plan was finding books. The possibility of finding actual textbooks was slim. That did not worry me too much since I seldom use traditional textbooks anyway. I am inclined to think this class will work best with multiple topical readings rather than with a single textbook. My original choice for the Christian principles element of the class was Richard Foster's *The Challenge of the Disciplined Life: Christian Reflections on Money, Sex & Power*. Students found Foster's discussion of money especially challenging. Foster describes both positive and negative aspects of money in relation to the Christian. He does a nice job of challenging the "as long as I tithe, I can pursue all the riches I want" mentality many American Christians bring into a discussion of money. At the same time, Foster rejects attempts to reduce Christianity to social criticism of those who generate wealth. He presents one of the most well balanced views of money I have seen. On the other hand, his writing was more oriented toward personal discipline than toward the business world.<sup>1</sup> For the last two years, I have been using *Just Business: Christian Ethics for the Marketplace* by Alexander Hill. Hill builds a Christian business approach on the holiness, justice, and love reflected in the character of God. He presents a strong challenge to Christians to avoid the "false exits" used as excuses not to allow faith to impact business decisions. He then addresses a number of issues we face in the business world and explores how his character-based approach speaks to the issues.

A key problem in developing the class was finding a well-developed leadership text that spoke with a clear

Christian voice. Christian texts on leadership tend to focus on the church. Business texts on leadership, even those written by Christians, often avoid being obviously Christian. Furthermore, many of the better-known Christians writing on leadership are rather hierarchical in their approach to leadership. That approach does not fit well with Jesus' teaching. While there may be significant debate in the business world about the best approach to leadership, Jesus did not leave Christians with much choice. His rejection of authoritative leadership and his clear statement that "whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant" (Matt. 20:26) leaves little room for any other approach to leadership.

After several disappointing books, I discovered the seminar series Ken Blanchard has developed called *Lead Like Jesus*. Blanchard's seminar, which has also been developed into a book (*The Servant Leader*) and video training material (also called *Lead Like Jesus*)<sup>2</sup>, focuses on the character of the leader. The strength of the material is its teaching about developing a character that makes servant leadership possible. James Autry and James Hunter have written good texts on servant leadership recently, as well. Hunter's *The World's Most Powerful Leadership Principle* is probably the most practically oriented of the texts. I enjoyed using Blanchard's seminar series, but struggled with how it affected my pedagogical approach. By attempting to facilitate a seminar, I had to move away from the "read and discuss" approach I prefer to use in the class. I also feel Blanchard's approach is better suited to leaders who already have some experience in the business world. I have, therefore, shifted to using Hunter's work. I believe it will allow me to approach subjects students need better while supplementing the material with some of the stronger elements of Blanchard's material. Blanchard's teachings on controlling the ego and developing meaningful vision and values are both very valuable leadership concepts.

After talking generally about what a Christian approach to business is and then specifically about leadership, I turn to topical discussions of issues that affect Christian leaders. This has been the most difficult area to find a single workable book. I have used a number of supplementary articles from writers as diverse as Dennis Bakke, Florence Littauer, and Henry Blackaby. My current text is *Behind the Bottom Line* by Graves and Addington. While the book approaches topics I believe are important, I am less than thrilled with how it approaches them. The authors relate each topic (stewardship, vocation, grace, etc.) to a specific biblical story and then develop principles to consider in relation to the topic. The problem is that a number of the stories seem forced, and, therefore, undermine the principles developed.

Still, many of the chapters are good, and they do provide good foundations for discussion.

One of my favorite discussions has been over the issues of decision-making and vocation. I assign a small reading from Richard and Henry Blackaby where they argue, "The world's way of decision making is to weigh all the evidence, compare the pros and cons, and then take the course of action that seems most sensible. If spiritual leaders make their choices this way, they could easily lead their organization in the opposite direction of God's will" (Blackaby, 179). I then begin the class by giving students a business decision that does not seem to fit with the moral questions we often address. In groups, they have to decide which of two locations to put a store and tell me why they chose it. I invariably get good business reasons for the decisions, but I never hear anyone say anything about prayer or God's will, even in jest in relation to the passage. I then ask if they disagree with the Blackabys' statement about spiritual decision-making. This generally opens up a discussion of the role of God's will in the decisions we make about business and the whole meaning of vocation.

## EVALUATION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The Christian Principles in Business Leadership class has been rather popular at UMHB. Students have responded well to the class and asked about other possible classes. Student evaluations at UMHB tend to focus on the professor rather than the class, but the rating numbers have been consistently quite good. The scale goes from one to five, with a score of one being the best. According to the dean of the College of Business, any score below 1.4 is very good, with a score around 1.1 being excellent. Over the semesters, the average rating for the most general evaluation of the class as a whole has been 1.18. I have done my own evaluations a couple of times for the class to get a better feel for what students believe is most valuable to the class. Generally, the students have been very positive about how much they learned about putting their faith into practice in the workplace. They have also noted the practical nature of the class; many express surprise that the class turned out to be far more applicable to day-to-day business than they expected. Non-traditional students who come to the class from the workplace have consistently been the most enthusiastic in expressing their belief about the value of the class.

While the class will certainly continue to evolve gradually, its place in the curriculum appears secure. There are two areas where I hope to see growth in the near future. First, I would like to see more interaction between the Christian principles class and more traditional classes in business. That

is, I hope to develop more dialogue with other professors about how their disciplines intersect, amplify, and challenge the core assumptions of the class. I believe this dialogue will help to address student concerns about the relationship between the classes, and provide an opportunity to strengthen the overall integration of faith in the curriculum.

The other major area of growth I hope to see for our curriculum is the development of a concentration in leadership. My hope would be for us to make four to five leadership-oriented classes available to students wanting to improve their understanding of leadership from a Christian perspective. That would give students some choices to make a nine-hour concentration possible. These classes might focus on areas like leading change, guiding businesses to be more ethical or developing and leading diversity in business. This would provide an opportunity to get multiple faculty members involved in developing courses having a very strong integration component.

## CONCLUSION

A course distinctly oriented to a Christian approach to business and business leadership can be a significant support to the effort to integrate faith in the business school curriculum. By combining the two concepts, we make it easier to fit the course into an already crowded major and encourage a character-driven approach to business that should encourage better application of the faith by students. Rather than eliminating the need for integration in other courses, the class actually raises the importance of a consistent message across the curriculum.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> From a business class perspective, it also did not help that one third of the book was about sex. However, his discussion of sex is frank and powerful. We generally spent one day talking about it. Many students told me it was the most honest discussion anyone had ever had with them about sex. While I did not feel it necessarily belonged in the College of Business curriculum, it belongs somewhere in our education process.

<sup>2</sup> Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges are releasing a new book in 2006 called *Lead Like Jesus: Lessons from the Greatest Leadership Role Model of All Time*. Blanchard and Hodges are supposed to be addressing feedback on their earlier material that suggested that some of Blanchard's older work was simply being "fitted" onto Jesus. The new work is meant to build a leadership model more directly from Jesus' practice.

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