

Dare We Call it a Christian Business Division?

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ABSTRACT: The author in this article explores the question: What, if anything, distinguishes a Christian business program from a secular program? The author answers the question by suggesting some areas he believes should be distinctive. His purpose is to open up a dialogue that has not occurred at the program level, not to claim all that could be said about this topic. Most discussion has focused on the macro picture of Christian colleges or the micro picture of how one's faith might impact how one teaches a certain discipline. The article looks at themes or emphases in business programs that aspire to describe themselves as Christian.

INTRODUCTION

Many books have been written about the nature of a Christian college (e.g. Litfin, 2004). Many articles have also been written about how to teach a particular business discipline from a Christian perspective (see numerous articles in *The Journal of Biblical Integration in Business* and the *Christian Business Academy Review*). Roman Catholics have addressed the issue of what should characterize Catholic business programs (Clark, 2004). Yet, Protestant business programs have not done so with reference to their Christian orientation. The question arises, are there themes or emphases that should appear in programs attempting to be known as Christian? Are these themes different from secular programs?

Having been a faculty member for over 44 years in two universities that call themselves Christian, I have struggled at a program level with the question, what if anything makes us distinctive from a well-run secular department? This struggle has become more vital as my university encourages faculty to articulate how they try to integrate faith and learning. Today, I am more comfortable indicating that we are a business administration program within a Christian university rather than with some presumption

saying that we are a Christian business administration program. I like Marsden's (1997) way of putting it: "It might be best to refer to one's scholarship with the more modest 'faith-informed,' while readily identifying oneself as a Christian" (p. 67). Yet, operationally, the question persists: What is or should be distinctive? In this paper I shall try to explore some possible answers to this important question.

MISSION STATEMENTS

A good beginning point might be to look at the following mission statement created by the business faculty where I teach.

Mission Statement

The mission of the Business Administration Division is to provide young adults with a superior business and liberal arts education that prepares them for lives of ethical service and professional achievement in a competitive world. We seek to accomplish our mission through:

How we teach, by:

- Offering innovative, challenging, and academically excellent courses
- Fostering active learning with a focus on experiential learning, especially service learning
- Emphasizing the critical-analytical process with a focus on problem anticipation and prevention, recognition, and solution

What we teach, by:

- Offering a Christian perspective on business management and leadership
- Championing the concept of the leader who serves
- Emphasizing not only the content but also the process and ethics of business
- Teaching the interrelatedness of persons, disciplines, and nations
- Providing foundation skills that can be used throughout one's life of continuous learning

Our relationships with our students, by:

- Serving as positive role models to our students, striving to reflect Christian values in our own behavior
- Providing sound advice and counsel concerning curricula, careers, and life
- Treating students with respect, being open to constructive feedback
- Seeking to model lifelong learning, thus inspiring intellectual curiosity

Our personal and professional development, by:

- Engaging in our faith community
- Serving the campus community and the communities in which we live
- Participating in the professional community through research, scholarly papers, publications, and service
- Modeling effective stewardship of our time, talents, and resources in service to God, family, and others

Our relationship with our colleagues, by:

- Significantly collaborating in our teaching and research, building on our diversity and our various strengths
- Honestly and openly communicating loving and constructive feedback in order to foster growth and personal development
- Humbly recognizing our own weaknesses and striving for continuous growth

- Building each other up and developing a closeness that allows us to play together and to pray together

What strikes me about the above mission statement is how relatively few of the characteristics are different from those you would find in any excellent secular institution. Four characteristics stand out: offering a Christian perspective on business and leadership, striving to reflect Christian values, being actively involved in a faith community, and praying together. Regarding the Christian perspective and values, there is an inherent problem in that Christians have differing understandings about these matters. It would be difficult and certainly presumptuous to argue that one's view was the Christian view as serious-minded Christians might surely see some things differently. There may even be secular departments that at special times pray together, though such a practice is likely to be rare. None would expect individuals to be active in a faith community; this is an expectation at my college because it is believed that biblical Christianity is not a solo experience but one best realized in community.

There is, however, in the above mission statement an implicit belief that in the moral realm there are some normative principles, i.e. some values are better than others or normative. This, of course, is not to say that any one person might definitively know the norms. Many students receive massive indoctrination from kindergarten through the twelfth grade pushing the idea of moral relativity, that there are no absolutes in life; everyone does by definition what is right in his own eyes. They are taught that there is no objective standard for judging oneself and certainly not for judging others. If you choose some standard for yourself, that is fine so long as you do not even dare to suggest it is required for others. In our attempt to encourage tolerance of views that differ from our own we have, intentionally or not, gone beyond tolerance of other ideas to a belief that all values are equally valid and worthwhile. On careful analysis, most back off this position but not on very stable grounds. This moral relativity permeates the thinking of some avowedly Christian students who maintain this position of moral relativity while not seeing the inherent contradiction with Christianity. Jesus' teaching makes it rather clear that there is at least one absolute value — love — which gets operationally defined in specific ways, though most of the application is left up to us to determine using our God-given minds.

Most business schools today emphasize values and ethics in light of recent highly publicized ethical lapses on the part of well-known businesses. Charles M. A. Clark

(2004) indicates that the “grounding” of these values is “left up in the air” (p. 6). Putting it quite succinctly, he says, “Adherence to the postmodern outlook prevents them from asserting any substantial values, any higher authority, any bottom line on what is right and wrong” (p. 6). There is no real meaning in the phrase that business programs use when they say they provide a “values-centered” education. It is rather vacuous, for there are all kinds of values. Every institution values something. Yet, a Christian program in business can provide a metaphysical foundation in Christian values that firmly secures or anchors those values.

It would appear to me that faculty endeavoring to deliver a “Christian” program should by life and teaching indicate that relativity on all moral matters is problematic. (As an aside, relativists are being quite absolutist in a philosophical sense when they insist that all values are relative). While always showing love for those who differ with us, I would suggest that Christian faculty should, nevertheless, be willing to take normative stands when and where appropriate, even as Jesus did, reflecting clearly a belief in some normative (superior?) values. This is not to say that anyone understands fully and accurately God’s will in every circumstance of life; nor is it to say that there is only one representation of Christianity, for God created us with infinite variations in personality, intelligence, and capacities. From a pedagogical standpoint, I suspect faculty are wise not to prematurely reveal their thoughts on a particular moral issue lest students be unduly swayed to their position without thinking it through for themselves. However, in many cases, perhaps not all, faculty should be willing to share their insight from their faith-based perspective without pushing their view as *the* Christian view. At other times there could be educational value in letting the moral issue in question “hang” out there without a definite conclusion and/or without the faculty member’s opinion even being expressed.

Faculty need to be careful in sharing their theological perspective about values lest students perceive them as proselytizing, which would likely be a major turnoff for most students. Faculty should feel free to quote Scripture or refer to Jesus’ teaching to indicate why they believe some value is better than another, at least as they interpret it from their faith perspective. One should not sermonize when quoting a scriptural reason for his or her views, and one would need to be open to students sharing their own theological reasons for a position, be it from a Christian or any other perspective, even that of an atheist. Such openness should be a hallmark of any collegiate classroom in a Christian environment; unfortunately, many secular institutions would not be as open and certainly would

frown upon a faculty member citing Scripture as a foundation for a viewpoint. Yet, that freedom is precisely what should characterize a “Christian” program. Ethics textbooks often describe law as a common understanding of what is deemed right and wrong in society. Codes of ethics of professional organizations are usually of a higher order than society’s laws; the upper level of analysis is reserved for religious values, which one may have but could not insist upon others’ having. Yet, a faculty member who is integrating faith and learning in a “Christian” program can work at all three levels of inquiry with impunity. Those in a secular program dare not tread to the upper level of such ethical reasoning.

I would suggest that a Christian’s motivation for work and relationships is founded on and sustained by theological truth and thus may be more likely to persist than that of a typical humanist. This theological truth starts with Paul’s assertion that we are to work as though we were working for the Lord (Colossians 3:23). This would mean that we treat everyone we encounter in the workplace in this manner. Additionally, treating individuals as ends with infinite value because they are made in the image of God would be another source of motivation in dealing with even the most difficult of people, be it students, colleagues, or staff. I must admit that I have known a number of humanistic, non-religious faculty who, in their behavior, appear exactly as a Christian might when trying to live by the above concepts (working for the Lord and viewing individuals as having infinite value). I applaud such behavior. I suspect that such faculty are living the values that they have inherited from the Judeo-Christian culture of which they are a part. And, some of them may persist in such laudable behavior as long or longer than a Christian might.

The concept of the servant leader, which is attracting much attention in today’s climate, is another theological truth that has implications for our relationships at work. Jesus indicated that when we lose our lives in service to others that we truly find ourselves (Matthew 10:39). Of course, he was a great example of a servant leader. It would seem that at a minimum we should highlight servant-leadership as a viable alternative based upon the highest examples of humanism through history; at a maximum, we should highlight it as a superior approach for those who endeavor to pattern their lives after Jesus and his example. Operationally, servant leaders love associates with agape type of love. This love does not primarily consist of feelings but rather is willing what is best for someone. At times this might mean tough love or action; at other times, it might mean showing mercy and forgiveness. This kind

of love is always interested in building others up rather than tearing them down or manipulating them. In the servant-leadership literature, one of the key considerations in determining whether or not one is a servant leader is found in whether one's people grow and develop as a result of one's leadership (Frick and Spears, p. 2). Servant leaders are not preoccupied with enhancing their positions but are concerned about others' growth and well-being. This type of work is not easy, for it takes thought, patience, commitment, kindness, time, and self-control.

AFFIRMATION STATEMENTS

My university has an affirmation statement that may suggest further thoughts on some distinctiveness that a business program might demonstrate when functioning in a Christian university.

Affirmation Statement

We Affirm

THAT GOD IS

That He is revealed uniquely in Christ

That the educational process may not, with impunity, be divorced from the divine process

That the student, as a person of infinite dignity, is the heart of the educational enterprise

That the quality of student life is a valid concern of the university

That truth, having nothing to fear from investigation, should be pursued relentlessly in every discipline

That spiritual commitment, tolerating no excuse for mediocrity, demands the highest standards of academic excellence

That freedom, whether spiritual, intellectual, or economic, is indivisible

That knowledge calls, ultimately, for a life of service

Values inherent in the above affirmation would be partially shared with secular institutions but the following would appear to be somewhat distinctive values or assumptions: (1) belief in God, (2) God is uniquely revealed in Christ (not exclusively or only), (3) students are valued as ends precisely because they are creatures of God, (4) the goal of education is a life of service, (5) it is important to be concerned about the quality of life of students, and (6) truth is to be relentlessly pursued in every discipline.

The latter three values often are characteristic of secular programs but may not always be as strongly held as in Christian ones. There is an implication in this affirmation statement that any program trying to fulfill this affirmation statement's values needs to live in harmony with these values. Specifically, atheists do not belong; even if not strong believers, faculty should respect the belief that Christ did reveal important information about God's nature. Students should be treated with respect and dignity regardless of how they behave. Faculty interest in students should go beyond the classroom and into their lives as individuals, not just as students. Standards for conduct and professional work should be the highest we can attain. We should be open and honest truth seekers. Finally, we should model servant-leadership in our own lives with each other and especially with our students.

Lest some believe that taking a faith perspective in a business program means that we are easy on tackling challenging topics with our students or that we are low in our expectations, I would argue that it is imperative that Christian faculty exhibit as much competence as they can muster with their abilities and that we push our students likewise to master their academic concepts. John Gardner, in another context, has a relevant comment: "The society which scorns excellence in plumbing because plumbing is a humble activity and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy because it is an exalted activity will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy. Neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water" (Maxwell, 1999, p. 30). As Christian business faculty, we cannot tolerate mediocrity.

The question of methodological assumptions in scholarship raises a fundamental difference in faith-informed perspectives and those of a secularist. The secular faculty member or the Christian who does not seek to let her faith inform her scholarship sees truth as only that which is empirically verifiable, a position that amounts to what some have called "naturalistic reductionism" (Marsden, p. 77). All would agree that there is indeed truth to be discovered empirically. In business there is clearly a technical way of determining profits, but a question about whether profits can be obscenely high is a question that arises from values, not the technology of accounting theory. To paraphrase Marsden, it does not follow that because there is no Christian view of profits that there are no Christian views of business practices. The fact is that our views of the world and our values influence even our empirical efforts to ascertain truth. For example, religious beliefs influence heavily what we choose to study, what we exclude, and our interpretations of our results. Meanings that we attach to our research are potentially very powerful, influencing how we apply our findings.

Historians have long recognized how one's worldview affects what one makes of historical facts. Japanese and American historians write differently about Hiroshima and Pearl Harbor. Beyond mere partisanship, these differing views stem from very different beliefs and values. It is also true that faith-informed perspectives on business may be quite at odds with a purely capitalistic approach. I would argue that many of the norms of American business have their origin in the values of a Judeo-Christian heritage even though not everyone may recognize this fact. Many humanistic values flow from this background. As Marsden puts it: "Christian morality has so influenced Western Civilization that it has taken on a life of its own divorced from its theological parentage" (p. 80).

Business faculty in secular universities may influence their students and colleagues in other disciplines to see all the good that well-run, ethical businesses do by way of providing security through employment, pension plans, health insurance, and many other ways. However, Christian faculty in a business program in a Christian university may have a special obligation to deal directly with the biblical teaching that it is "hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:23). This teaching of Jesus does not indicate that it is impossible, but rather difficult for wealthy individuals to enter the kingdom of heaven. Teaching students to see that good stewardship in the use of wealth is of the utmost importance is key if they want to function with Christian values in a business setting. Teaching students that profit maximization is not the only goal of a business and certainly not the most important one is also a component in dealing with this difficult challenge. Money is clearly not the root of all evil; however, the love of money is (I Timothy 6:10). Teaching students to put the pursuit of profits into a context that considers other values, even Christian ones, is another distinctive thing that Christian faculty can do. Helping colleagues outside the discipline of business to see the positive values in a business that is well-run is another task that Christian faculty can perform.

Thus far, I have identified quite a few distinctive characteristics of a Christian business program. In some ways we might think of these characteristics as themes that appear in various ways and places in a program — sometimes in the curriculum; sometimes in relationships; sometimes in events that are held. Perhaps every business program that is "faith-informed" would have its own unique themes. Without much development I would suggest several other emphases that might characterize these programs. These emphases may also be found in secular programs but the motivation for them in Christian programs should be stronger and deeper.

We live in a world that is almost obsessed with leadership yet pays very little attention to followership — a role that we often assume more than leadership and even one that leaders assume as well. At my university, we say we endeavor to strengthen lives for purpose, service, and leadership. I have often thought we should add followership to the list. Organizations need exemplary followers who demonstrate independent, critical thinking as active employees rather than being sheep followers, yes-people followers, pragmatist followers, or alienated followers.

Another theme that might be considered is social justice. Should we not get students to think about the plight of the poor and disadvantaged in society and how we can best address their needs in a capitalistic economy? Jesus certainly took an interest in the less fortunate; can we afford not to do so as well?

Should we also not deal with the meaning of success? It would be very easy for business students to get the idea that success in life is to be measured mainly by the amount of wealth one gains. Surely we should not solely depend upon the philosophy or humanities departments to address this important life issue. As faculty we can raise questions that cause students to focus on this important question. Wouldn't we want students to find their value more in who they are rather than what they have?

And then there is the matter of how one integrates his faith with his chosen vocation. We as faculty are struggling with this issue; should we not encourage our students to anticipate how they will develop themselves spiritually *vis-a-vis* their vocation?

I am sure there are many other themes worthy to be explored in our programs; I share these to be illustrative. I close by asking a question. Is the difference between the sacred and the secular business program one of degree or kind? Probably, it's some of both. Much of what is done in both settings is shared in common; yet, surely, some is indeed different in kind. One can ask, if there are no differences in motivation or goals between the two types of institutions, then what justifies the existence of a business program endeavoring to be Christian? I, for one, believe we have a unique contribution to make if we are up to the challenge.

CONCLUSION

Michael Naughton (2009) in an article entitled, "A Complex Mission: Integration of Catholic Social Tradition with Business Education," captures well my sentiment as he concludes his article by saying:

The actualization of this mission of Catholic business education is not only complex, but current problems of careerism, consumerism, secularization, religious indifferentism, relativism, postmodernism, specialization of disciplines, financial pressures, and distorted notions of pluralism, freedom, and work may make it impossible.... They isolate faith from work, separate virtue from technique, careerize vocation, and marginalize the social character of business. To think that Catholic business education is an easy task is naïve and dangerous. It will take boldness and courage as well as a sophistication and prudence.... (p. 44).

Unlike Roman Catholics who have a rich tradition of Catholic social thought, teaching, and practice, Protestants face individually the task of how to let their faith inform their business programs endeavoring to be known as Christian. This fact may make the Protestant challenge more difficult yet certainly not less important.

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