The Role of Christian Faculty in Restoring Accounting Professionalism

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ABSTRACT: In light of decreasing public perception, The Pathways Commission of the American Accounting Association currently drew increased attention to the study of ethics in the accounting curriculum. In spite of decades of implementation and research, accounting education has struggled to define effective objectives and delivery methods of ethics education. Further, there is evidence accounting professors are reticent to teach ethics courses. This paper explores the unique voice of faculty at faith-based institutions in this discussion. Given the unique incentive structures, familiarity with integration, and freedom to be more student-centered, Christian faculty have much to contribute to accounting ethics, research, and pedagogy. This paper ends with suggestions of integration techniques and research studying the impact of accounting ethics education at faith-based institutions.

INTRODUCTION

Academia is increasingly culpable in the lack of professionalism that is infesting the accounting profession. For too long, accounting education has been focused on producing technicians who are able to pass the CPA exam, and not professionals who deeply understand the accountant's public role. As articulated by the recent Pathways Commission, "a profession begins with the commitment to provide a benefit to the public" (American Accounting Association, 2012). This social contract between accountants and the public is not an amoral contract. Rather, "the relationship between (a) profession(s) and the general society is inherently ethical at its core" (Colby & Sullivan, 2008). Therefore, the study and integration of ethics is critical to the restoration of the profession. In fact, the ethical standards and social roles of accounting should be the integrating force across the entire accounting curriculum (Colby & Sullivan, 2008). However, what should be a natural epistemological marriage between accounting and ethics has become a weakly defined and poorly practiced relationship.

Faith-based institutions are in the business of transformation. Their objective is more than content mastery; it also includes discovering the connection between the mind and the heart. On its surface, it would appear that faith-based institutions are uniquely positioned to make significant contributions to the research and practice of teaching accounting ethics. This paper seeks to identify the crucial contributions faith-based institutions could bring to the growing field of research and teaching of accounting ethics. To do so, this paper will first recount why accounting is in jeopardy of losing its status as a profession. Next it will review the attempts of academia to address the lack of professionalism and its efforts to reintroduce ethics in the curriculum. Finally, it will discuss how faith-based institutions are uniquely situated to contribute to the discussion of professionalism and accounting ethics.

THE ACCOUNTING PROFESSION

As has been noted by Wyatt, the accounting profession was at the peak of their public perception in the middle part of the twentieth century (Wyatt, 2004). Then times changed and public accounting became front-page news. Advertising of professional services became an acceptable practice, consulting services began to weaken the lines of auditor independence, education had an increasing focus on memorizing rules, and then the large scandals came. Public perception changed dramatically, and accounting's status as a profession was in jeopardy.

Professionalism

The lack of professionalism is not a recent trend. In 1980, at the annual business meeting of the AICPA, outgoing board chairman Gregory made the following remarks:

> It seems that the effects of the phenomenal growth in the profession and competitive pressures have created in some CPAs attitudes that are intensely commercial and nearly devoid of the high-principled conduct that we have come to expect of a true professional. It is sad that we seem to have become a breed of highly skilled technicians and businessmen but have subordinated courtesy, mutual respect, self-restraint, and fairness for a quest for firm growth and a preoccupation with the bottom line (Gregory, 1980).

Over the past thirty years, competitive pressures began to squeeze out the responsibility to the public. All the while, accountants insisted they were analogous to other professions, like law and medicine. However, the term "professional" is more than a self-professed title; it is also an earned status bestowed by a confident society.

The term "professional" is reserved for the select few who can broaden public confidence and exert self-discipline in fulfilling their social contract. Most would agree that professionals can be found in fields such as medicine, law, engineering and clergy. Just in the past century has accounting entered the discussion. Even though these professions have significant differences, common threads are observable. According to the Carnegie Foundation's Preparation for the Professions Program (PPP), being a professional requires; 1) a deep responsibility to the people the profession serves, 2) a specialized body of knowledge and skill, 3) "procedures through which the professional community provides oversight of entry into the profession and, 4) quality in both practice and professional training" (Colby & Sullivan, 2008).

When this definition is applied to the accounting profession, one could argue that two (of four) requirements are sufficiently met. The Financial Accounting Standards Board (FASB), Public Company Accounting Oversight Board (PCAOB), and the emerging International Accounting Standards Board (IASB) provide an exhaustive body of knowledge for the professional to understand. Additionally, the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA) and state boards of accountancy have provided detailed oversight in defining requirements for taking the CPA exam, administering the exam, and defining and enforcing continuing professional education (CPE) requirements. However, the two issues that seem to haunt the accounting profession are the oversight of quality in practice and the commitment to the people they ultimately serve.

Self-Regulation and Enforcement

Since its formal, public beginnings, the accounting profession was largely self-regulated. Through three different standard-setting boards (Committee on Accounting Principles, Accounting Principles Board, and FASB), the profession created an extensive body of knowledge. Though the process for creating new concepts and rules is largely a public, self-regulated process, the enforcement of those rules and professional standards has consistently been a point of public debate.

Enforcement is a primary function of auditing. As has been well-documented, though, enforcement took a backseat to revenue growth and the relationships between auditors and clients became increasingly cozy (Wyatt, 2004). This led to the scandals of Enron and WorldCom, with the investing public bearing the burden of financial damage. Because the auditors lost sight of who they were ultimately serving, the ability to self-regulate was called into question. The public outcry was too loud to ignore and the profession was forced to accept greater governmental oversight in the form of the PCAOB.

In addition to the cozy auditor/client relationships, the ability to self-regulate has also been questioned because of the shifting expectations of an audit. With the rise of class action lawsuits and increasing legal liability of securities fraud, auditors have sought ways to mitigate their liability (maybe at the expense of their social contract) by continuing to claim their role is not intended to identify all fraud. This shift in the auditor's job description created an expectation gap with the investing public. While investors expected auditors to identify fraud and perform a heavy public watchdog function, auditors were unwilling to accept this additional risk. Not until Congress intervened through the passage of Sarbanes-Oxley was the profession forced to reconsider their stance.

Both of these shortcomings have called into question the ability of the accounting profession to self-regulate. As Turner states, the "less-than-rigorous oversight…contributed to the problems the accounting profession and capital markets (face)" (Turner, 2006). It is interesting to note that when the accounting profession is meeting the informational demands of the investing public, their ability to self-regulate has been less of an issue. However, as the profession has compromised its self-regulatory function, its relationship with the investing public has become more contentious. Self-discipline is evidence of a profession.

The Public and the Client

To restore professionalism, the accounting professionals also need a clear understanding of who they ultimately serve. Other professions can solidly claim their first allegiance is to their paying clients and patients. By focusing on these constituencies, these professions can claim to have fulfilled their social contract in a broader sense. Accounting is different. In the AICPA's Code of Conduct, Principle II states, "Members should accept the obligation to act in a way that will serve the public interest, honor the public trust, and demonstrate commitment to professionalism" (Duska, Duska, & Ragatz, 2011). Though public accountants have paying clients they audit, their first allegiance is to the investing public. As Duska, Duska, and Ragatz (2011) explain this allegiance to the public is vital to the proper functioning of capital markets and commerce. Further, "fulfilling (this) responsibility to the public best serves the accountant's clients and employers" (Duska, Duska, & Ragatz, 2011). Though all professions have a public duty, the terms of this social contract are different for accountants. By their action, public accountants have attempted to minimize, or in some cases dodge, this critical ethical responsibility.

To be fair, many have suggested this shift away from the public interest towards the interest of paying clients was a natural outcome of the incentive structure in the industry. As has been well-documented, it began with public accounting firms having the ability to market their services, which added competitive pressures to auditing. Where once an auditor may have disagreed with a client and taken an offensive position, now the auditors focused on client retention, which may have compromised auditing standards. Further, as consulting services rose to prominence in the 1970s, audits became more commoditized, with financial incentives and promotions going to those who could procure lucrative consulting projects. As the fees for consulting services eclipsed those of audit services, all the incentives were in place for CPA firms to compromise their independence and shirk their responsibilities to the investing public. No one can serve two masters. Though the Code of Conduct remained the same, the actions of practitioners suggested a change of masters.

Accounting must embrace its ethical roots and take seriously its relationship with the investing public. As many have suggested, if the profession is to change it must start with the tone at the top. The AICPA and state boards of accountancy took this challenge seriously by requiring more ethics education for practitioners. As early as the late 1980s most states did not require any ethics training as a condition for CPA license renewal (Fisher, Swanson, & Schmidt, 2007). Now, though, at least 34 states require varying levels of ethics training as a condition for CPA license renewal. By comparison, Fisher et al. point out that during the mid-1980s, over one-half of AACSB accredited business schools in the United States required ethics courses. However, by 2007, the percentage had dropped significantly to around 30 percent. Additionally, only four states currently require ethics education for students pursuing public accounting. While practitioners are attempting to address this crisis of confidence, it appears academics are moving in the opposite direction. Professionalism and ethics need to be integrated across the accounting curriculum if long-term change is to be realized.

ACCOUNTING ETHICS EDUCATION

> When people need a doctor, or a lawyer, or a certified public accountant, they seek someone whom they can trust to do a good job – not for himself, but for them. They have to trust him, since they cannot appraise the quality of his service. They must take it on faith that he is competent and that his primary motivation is to help them. That is why professions are distinguished from businesses and why professional men enjoy special prestige.
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> A professional attitude must be learned. It is not a natural gift. It is natural to be selfish – to place personal gain ahead of service. That is precisely why the people as a whole honor the relatively few – professional men and other true public servants – who have disciplined themselves to follow the harder course. Professional recognition comes from the public's reaction to what members of the profession do – not to what they say about themselves. To maintain and broaden public confidence, they must act like professional men – they must maintain a professional attitude (Carey & Doherty, 1968).

History

Looking at the history of higher education in the United States, one could argue that its early attempts to educate clergy, doctors, and legal scholars were attempts at educating professionals. Even though higher education claims the same outcomes today, the pedagogies have changed significantly. What was once a broad-based, liberal arts-type education has become a much narrower field of study focused on technical training. With this increased focus on technique came a concurrent decrease in ethics education. Nowhere has this been more observable than in the education of accountants. Turning a mirror on his own discipline, Demski suggested that accounting was losing its status as a true academic discipline when he described it as a "tribe-based, self-protect(ed) [industry, with] an overemphasis on rules, regulations, and…first-job training" (Demski, 2007).

Every decade brings a new clarion call for ethics to assume a larger role in the accounting curriculum. First came the COSO report whose goal was to provide thought leadership in a number of areas, including the deterrence of fraudulent reporting ((COSO), 1987). One of the recommendations coming from this commission was, "business and accounting curricula should emphasize ethical values by integrating their development with the acquisition of knowledge and skills to help prevent, detect, and deter fraudulent financial reporting" ((COSO), 1987). At about the same time, the Bedford Report was released, which was followed by the Accounting Education Change Commission in the 1990s and the newly released Pathways Commission Report in 2012. Each one has called for a reemphasis on ethics in the classroom (AECC - Accounting Education Change Commission, 1990) (American Accounting Association, 2012).

In their report, the Pathways Commission underscored this necessity by referring to the *Preparation for the Professions Program* (*PPP*) sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. In addition to defining a profession, the PPP also identified three apprenticeships crucial to the education of professionals. First, emerging professionals must be trained in the intellectual foundations of the profession to acquire the capacity to think like practicing professionals. Second, student training must be skill-based to acquire expert know-how. The third and most crucial apprenticeship is to introduce students to the ethical standards, social roles, and responsibilities of the profession (Colby & Sullivan, 2008). The PPP report further cautions academics that it would be "*a mistake..to think of the third apprenticeship as separable from the other two. In fact, it is the third apprenticeship that serves as the driving force for integration of professional understanding, craft and purpose.*"

Though time has not changed the message, accounting professors have encountered difficulty in fulfilling this goal. Since it was first proposed, academics have debated the objectives and delivery of ethics education. Further, they have communicated their reticence in teaching ethics.

Objectives

The objectives of ethics training have been difficult to define. At one end of the spectrum, some claim that ethics training should be nothing short of converting deviants into virtuous human beings. Though the goal is a worthy one, it places a heavy and unrealistic burden on professors. Others suggest more manageable approaches. As this discussion heated up in the 1980s, Karnes and Sterner found strong support that teaching ethics should merely focus on introducing students to the governing Code of Ethics (Karnes & Sterner, 1988). This finding was confirmed by Blanthorne, Kovar, and Fisher (2007) when they surveyed accounting faculty and found that a majority of professors believed ethical issues faced by the profession and codes of conduct should be the main sources of ethics education. However, this focus on rules was challenged as too limiting and others suggested a broader approach of focusing on moral obligation and the social contract acknowledged by CPAs. More recently, educators have focused on introducing students to ethical decision-making and increasing their ethical perception (Massey & Van Hise, 2009). Currently, there appears to be little consensus on the measurable objectives of accounting ethics training.

Beyond objectives, educators have also wrestled over the delivery of ethics training. In 2005, on the heels of the major accounting scandals, the National Association of State Boards of Accountancy (NASBA) proposed a college ethics requirement to sit for the CPA exam (Accountancy, 2005). This proposal included a triad of ethics instruction comprised of an ethics philosophy course, ethical coursework in the accounting curriculum, and a capstone ethics and professionalism course (Bean & Bernardi, 2007). Not wanting to be hemmed into more required classes, the proposal was met with fierce opposition by state boards of accountancy and academic institutions alike. However, two states (Texas and Maryland) accepted the challenge and now require a stand-alone college ethics courses to sit for the CPA exam (Rockness & Rockness, 2010). Since then New York and Nebraska have also passed similar measures.

This is not meant to suggest that institutions in other states are shirking their responsibilities to teach ethics, as there is evidence others are offering classes. However, the most practiced (and controversial) method of teaching ethics appears to be integration into existing curriculum.

Surveys have shown that business schools would much prefer an integration strategy of delivery rather than a stand-alone course (Madison & Schmidt, 2006; Woo, 2003). However, the integration approach has been challenged as insufficient, more difficult to assess, and does not signal to students the importance of ethics training (Swanson, 2005). This debate has caused some to suggest a both/and approach with stand-alone courses being a precursor to on-going integration. There is also little consensus on delivery.

Finally, there is evidence that accounting professors have reservations in teaching ethics courses due to incentive structures and uneasiness in teaching outside their discipline. As the Pathways Commission pointed out, traditional research-based institutions place a heavy emphasis on discipline-specific research and provide little incentive for qualitative, cross-disciplinary research that includes accounting ethics and student-centered activities, such as integrated teaching and mentoring (American Accounting Association, 2012). Because of these incentives, accounting professors are reticent to teach ethics courses as it might have a significant impact on traditional research agendas, allocations of limited time, and promotion.

After the Bedford report, two studies found evidence that accounting teachers felt qualified to teach ethics classes but were reticent to do so because of a lack of ethical training, major shifts in research agendas, and lack of departmental resources (McNair & Milam, 1993; Cohen & Pant, 1989). In contrast to these two studies, Blanthorne, Kovar, and Fisher (2007) found strong evidence that accounting educators viewed themselves as the most appropriate source of ethics education and indicated they would be very interested in teaching such courses. Hurtt and Thomas (2008) found that even though accounting faculty lacked formal training in ethics, they possessed high degrees of personal motivation and enthusiasm for teaching stand-alone ethics courses. In spite of their positive feelings, though, only 53 percent of required ethics courses were taught by accounting faculty (Hurtt & Thomas, 2008). These studies show accounting educators' positive feelings toward ethics instruction but a real hesitance to teach them. Though course objectives, delivery, and issues of who should teach accounting ethics are major concerns at large institutions, they may be competitive advantages for faith-based institutions.

UNIQUE CONTRIBUTIONS OF CHRISTIAN ACCOUNTING FACULTY

When the teaching of accounting and ethics are divorced, their natural connections are broken and they are separated into two worlds. Holmes (1975) would argue this is merely another form of Gnosticism that generates a "misguided fear of ... philosophy and human learning." It is exactly to this intersection that the faith-based institution is called. As Holmes goes on to say, students of a Christian college should always leave asking, "What can this stuff do to me?" and not so much "What can this stuff do for me?" (Holmes, 1975).

The idea of a faith-based institution is transformative not merely job-training. Much of accounting education might be classified as teaching for informational purposes. Self admittedly, it is easy to fall into this trap and requires much less thinking and interaction. However, true teaching is transformative. It helps students make connections between the information and their eventual role in the profession. It challenges them to think deeply about the material and connect the dots to the underlying world-view assumptions inherent in them. Most importantly, transformative teaching is not satisfied with good grades and high CPA exam pass rates. Rather, it delights in a student's character formation, in their understanding of God's gifts to them, and their eagerness to "live a life worthy of the calling" they have received.

This is not to suggest that technical training takes a backseat but rather it is brought into sharper focus by the concurrent transformation taking place. The recognition and embracement of this reality give accounting faculty at faith-based institutions a competitive advantage. There is evidence that Christian accounting faculty have a unique voice in the objectives and delivery of ethics education, while also having greater incentive to research and teach accounting ethics.

Objectives

The objectives of accounting ethics are quite similar to those of faith-based institutions. Faith-based institutions have always recognized the education of the whole person as part of their unique mission. Cardinal Newman (1899) stated that the special fruit of higher education is the development of values (such as freedom, equitableness, moderation and wisdom). Further, Holmes (1975) would suggest a goal of a Christian college is "to teach values as well as facts" and to see life "whole rather than fragmented." Therefore, the first objective of accounting ethics is helping students understand that no business decision is values-neutral. Though they may enter through the doors viewing accounting as an amoral exercise, they must not leave with this same thinking.

Secondly, students should leave understanding how their values affect their approach to a moral decision. In 1976, Kohlberg developed a model for moral development. By 1986, Rest developed an instrument (Defining Issues Test) to measure moral development and proposed a four-component model of individual ethical decision-making. Coming out of these theories Jones (1991) developed his Issue-Contingent model of ethical decision-making. Jones stated that not all moral decisions possess the same veracity. Instead, he posited six characteristics that increase/decrease the moral intensity of an ethical decision. While these theories have provided fertile ground for researchers to understand more of the ethical decision-making process, conspicuously missing from any of the models is the issue of values and worldview. Might Christian accounting faculty operationalize Cosgrove's characteristics of various worldviews (found in *Foundations of Christian Thought*) to study their effects on moral intensity? This would appear to be a fertile ground for research in accounting students and practitioners.

Using the development of moral intensity as an objective of ethics education might also achieve other significant outcomes. Jones stated that moral intensity is heightened when moral agents begin to understand the magnitude of consequences (societal effects and consequences to others) resulting from their decisions. This growing stream of research contains strong hints of social contract theory and sounds much like the truths found in the two greatest commandments. As we know, Christ commanded us to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength and love your neighbor as yourself." Christian accounting professors could reinforce ideas of moral intensity by focusing on loving God with our hearts (volition) through consciously choosing to consider others as better than ourselves. They could encourage students to love God with their minds by seeking to confront their own biases and look beyond first-glance intuitions and consider the examples set by other exemplars and Christ. Finally, professors could teach concepts of moral intensity by concurrently highlighting the teaching of Christ to "love your neighbor as yourself." This would be a rich area to discuss the idea of self-sacrifice, the reason for the incarnation of Jesus Christ, and the commands to strongly consider the needs of others in all aspects of life.

Another element of Jones' theory of moral intensity is social consensus. Jones posited if there is strong social consensus that a business decision is really a moral decision, then the moral agent often adopts the consensus and views the decision in the same way. Conversely, though, many truly moral decisions are viewed as amoral if social consensus is lacking. Thus, social consensus can also be a moderator of moral intensity (Sweeney & Costello, 2009). Here Christian accounting professors could espouse their unique views on work and worldly thinking by using a passages like Psalms 118:8-9, Isaiah 55:8, I Corinthians 4:3-4. Part of growing in the character of Christ is being courageous enough to go against the consensus and find refuge in God's acceptance rather than that of man. It is using the mind of Christ in the face of opposition. Christian accounting professors could mix Scripture with research to encourage holistic objectives of ethics education.

Holding to a values-infused objective determines the delivery of ethics education. Much of the debate over a stand-alone ethics class versus an integrated approach is answered by the objective. Values-based education naturally leads to integration being the connecting force across the entire accounting curriculum, and the practice of integration is nothing new to faith-based institutions. Thus, accounting professors at these institutions should be able to provide unique pedagogical techniques of integrating ethics into the existing curriculum. Holmes (1975) states that integration is "an evaluative process [that] can run through the structure of a course, in the selection of topics, in the assumptions stated at the outset, and in assigned readings and papers." Christian accounting professors might then research the effectiveness of integrated value-based pedagogies.

Incentives

The driving force of ethics education at faith-based institutions is the unique incentive structure. Where traditional university incentive structures created reticence by highly encouraging discipline-specific research, professors at faith-based institutions have a greater ability to engage in cross-disciplinary research. This provides them incentive to teach outside their discipline, viewing ethics and moral character as not only potential research agendas but also the foundation of their integrated, disciplinary studies. Thus, the shaping of student character becomes a necessary part of professional training.

Further, faculty at large institutions have been described as lacking student-centeredness (American Accounting Association, 2012). However, because of differing educational objectives, faculty at faith-based institutions are encouraged to engage students more frequently, given more freedom to do so, and do it as an active expression of their faith. These activities not only help professors instill and refine student values, they also provide fertile conversations for students to engage with moral exemplars. Because many faculty at faith-based institutions come from practitioner backgrounds, they were exposed to difficult ethical issues in the profession. Their first-hand knowledge and stories bring life into classroom discussions and give students the opportunity to witness faculty perform a healthy self-evaluation of their respective roles and decisions. Given these robust experiences, accounting faculty at faith-based institutions have a unique opportunity to provide much needed instructional resources in the form of case studies and books concerning ethics education.

CONCLUSION

The study of ethics can no longer be divorced from professional training. For too long, accounting education in the United States has placed excessive attention on learning the rules and not enough time on making professional, ethical judgments. Rather than being a sidebar discussion, ethics must be restored as the integrating force across all professional training.

The reintroduction of ethics training into the accounting curriculum is still in its adolescent stages. There is still much to be researched and discovered. It is time for the academy of Christian accountants to come out of the shadows because they have a unique voice to add to the discussion. As they align their passions and research agendas, it appears they are uniquely positioned to define impactful objectives, provide meaningful integration techniques into classroom ethics discussions, and author effective instructional resources for the larger academy.

When Scripture describes the process of growing in the character of Christ, it uses the analogy of iron sharpening iron, which is a process that takes considerable time, effort, and heat but has long-lasting results. Thus is the work of teaching ethics. The objective is nothing short of transformation, and by focusing on holistic integration and exposing students to moral exemplars and the power of Scripture in making wise decisions, the academy of Christian professors can make progress towards this goal. It will take the work of committed and passionate accounting professors to fulfill this goal. Only then will accounting begin to restore itself to its former status as a profession. Maybe, more importantly, students will grow into the character of Christ.

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