

The Development of a Christian Leadership and Ethics in Business Course

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ABSTRACT: In Christian higher education, business programs often lack a specific Gospel-centered class on Christian leadership that prepares students well to integrate their Christian faith into their workplace while leading for Jesus Christ. This article addresses the need for a Christian leadership and ethics in business course, the importance of having a biblical worldview of work, the impact leading through humility can have on coworkers, and one specific pathway for developing a course like this.

INTRODUCTION

The Apostle Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 2:1-2 (ESV), “You then my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.” The beauty of God’s grace is that it not only saves men and women in Christ Jesus, it changes and sanctifies and has the power to change hearts, lives, and work focus. Christians are called by God to share these wonderful truths of the Gospel with others. Thus, in light of this text, Christians and Christian educators can see the need to teach others about the beauty, freedom, and truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ so that present and future generations can be impacted for God’s Kingdom and glory. When this is lived out, Christian leadership is on display to others, and every intention and action has Kingdom impact. These are beautiful truths of the Gospel, and as Keller (2012) pointed out so well, God cares about everything that is done, including work, relationships, leadership, and mentoring of others.

Harvard Business Essentials (2004) defined mentoring as something that develops one’s career and psychosocial functions. It is not just narrowly developing skills sets but rather the whole person and his or her career. Ewen et al. (2013) saw this mentoring as either serving as a transformational leader (helping others reach a new place or position) or transactional leader (helping others accomplish something tangible). As a Christian educator though (even

beyond mentoring for positioning or accomplishment), one would believe that helping someone develop in mind, body, soul, and spirit would be the best thing if it is done for God’s glory and for the advancement of his Kingdom. In fact, Jesus spoke of this God-focused total growth and devotion when he said in Matthew 22:37-39 (ESV), “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Thus, mentoring is one aspect of leadership that God calls Christians to engage in as he provides opportunities, and this act of intentional love towards others in the name of Jesus is part of the role that God graciously allows his children to play as his adopted sons and daughters.

Consequently, Christian leadership, when done unto the Lord, is not just mentoring (although that is part of it); rather it is freely seeking to serve and love others because Christians have everything they need already in the person and work of Jesus Christ. This reality echoes the words of the Apostle Paul in Galatians Chapter 5, verse 13 (ESV) when he wrote, “For you were called to freedom brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love, serve one another.” Giglio (2017) highlighted this life of Gospel freedom and leadership of others when he wrote how a life of freedom radiates God’s glory and impacts one’s work and relationships. Keller (2013) expanded on this life of freedom and servant

leadership when he wrote, "In the Gospel... we can serve others not for what they bring us, but for who they are in themselves." Servant leadership then, when grounded in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, can point others to the only source of truth, sustained life and hope, and living water that quenches aching thirst, Jesus Christ (Sauls, 2017).

This article builds upon the Gospel call of 2 Timothy 2:2 to first address the need for a Gospel-centered Christian leadership and ethics business course in Christian colleges and schools of business. The purpose of a course like this is to teach students why and how Christians lead (specifically in business vocations) and how their work is used by God to impact others for Jesus Christ. Second, this article attempts to lay out one possible path of curriculum development for a course of this focus and intention based on the creation of a Christian leadership and ethics in sport business course that was created in the fall of 2014 at a southeastern Christian university and has been taught every spring semester since 2015 at this same university.

WHAT IS CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP?

Pastor, teacher, and author Randy Pope (2017) wrote how every human desires happiness, certainty, and wisdom, but all men and women experience the hard and often crushing reality that no one is perfectly happy, certain, or wise. These concepts are often counterintuitive to mainstream cultural thinking, communicating, and advertising given that messaging often conveys perfect wisdom and happiness is attainable if people either do certain things, or look inside of themselves for the answers. Christian leadership, grounded in God's Word, starts with graciously but directly stating the opposite, that sinful men and women (which is everyone) need to look to Jesus as the only true, unfailing, and certain source of wisdom, happiness, and salvation. Thus, men and women are leading for Jesus Christ when they are pointing people away from themselves (and any other thing smaller than Jesus) and to Jesus and his work through his perfect life, death, and resurrection. In addition, men and women are leading for Jesus Christ when they see their leadership positions as service opportunities that allow their work, words, and actions to be used by God through humility and kindness to impact other hearts and lives for God's Kingdom advancement (Bosch, 2017; Sauls, 2015).

Undergraduate and graduate students at Evangelical colleges and universities often hear these Gospel realities in varied ways, but in the absence of a focused class on Christian leadership, these truths can often be drowned out by competing voices from culture and even other avenues of

academia and scholarly pursuits. Christian leadership is not meant to be taught as an "add on" to other evangelical or academic content; rather any Christian needs to be taught their words, attitude, relationships, and work all either point people to or away from Jesus. This reality is not pressure-filled since the Bible is clear in Romans 3:23 that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Thus no human or business person can lead in these ways perfectly. Rather, this reality provides rich opportunity for the Christian to be changed on the heart level through intentional and focused Gospel content that points to leading for Jesus Christ as a privileged, love-based opportunity every day (Tibbetts & Leeper, 2016).

CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP IN BUSINESS

The freedom Christians have in Jesus Christ to lead for things other than self, possessions, prestige, worldly acceptance, etc. may not be any more important than in the multifaceted areas of business. The business world can often be defined by revenue generation, "success" or "failure," corporate ladder ascension, and occupational title or position. All of these things, in the providential hand of God are used for his glory and people's good, but sin and this world's lies can also distort these areas of business in people's hearts and elevate them all to unhealthy or even idolatrous levels. Undergraduate and graduate students within Christian higher educational schools and colleges of business must see how the Gospel of Jesus Christ connects to their vocations in business and meets the aforementioned areas of business head-on in a way that is tangible, meaningful, and heart and life-changing.

Literature has shown that principles of transformational leadership (leading that seeks to help someone achieve a new place, position, or opportunity) can lead to improved employee performance and better workplace behavior (Dust, Resick, & Mawritz, 2013). In addition, employees who work for "moral" leaders tend to follow workplace rules more and see workplace deviance as morally wrong (Resick, Hargis, Ping, & Dust, 2013). However, both of these examples (transformational leadership and moral/ethical leadership) of business and workplace leadership can lead to positive behavior modification in the office setting, but void of being grounded in the Word of God, can have no effect on someone's heart (which is what is needed to produce salvation and life change). Christian college and university business programs must not just be teaching head knowledge and behavior modification; rather these higher education institutions have the privilege and calling to go so much deeper, pressing into the Gospel of Jesus Christ so

that one's Christian faith and vocation are integrated into a wholeness that cannot be fragmented or pulled apart by the world (Dulaney et al., 2015). As Liang (2018) put it, students in Christian college and university business programs need to see a biblical worldview in action, modeled, taught, and articulated by Christian business faculty so their students can develop a deeper dependency on God's Word and a desire to live for him in their workplace.

Cassell and Merkel (2018) articulated these sentiments well when they wrote of how Christian higher education should be set apart from other institutions in that all curriculum (including business programs) should be academically rigorous and relevant, yet infused with salt and light. In other words, Christian colleges and universities should not reduce academic rigor while integrating God's Word; rather Gospel-centered programs should be teaching excellent professionalism, work ethic, content, and purpose because Christians see that all work has dignity and Kingdom worth unto the Lord (Keller, 2010). In addition, as Keller (2010) stated well, it is the Christian's responsibility to bring the Gospel into all areas of their lives, including the workplace. Since academic business programs exist largely to teach practical, work-based skills, content, and leadership principles, the need for a Christian leadership and ethics course in the Christian higher education arena of business seems to be crucial for a student's emotional, vocational, and spiritual growth as a future part of the economic workforce.

Previous literature showed that students from Christian colleges and universities rarely understand how to connect the Gospel of Jesus Christ to their vocation (Herrity, 2015). Wrenn and Cafferky (2015) commented on this reality when they wrote of how often many students enrolled at Christian colleges and universities (and in business programs) have very low biblical literacy, theological training, or biblical knowledge that would enable them to make Gospel connections with their vocational pursuits. Herrity (2015) wrote of this sad reality when Barna Group research from 2007 to 2011 revealed that less than 20% of graduating students in Christian higher education could make any kind of connection between their Christian faith and the job opportunities they pursued. To put this reality another way, only 1 out of every 5 students on a Christian college or university campus understands with some sort of confidence how their personal relationship with Jesus Christ directly affects their corporate lives as well, especially their work lives (since this is where most of the workforce spend the majority of their time each week). In addition, McMahon, Locke, and Roller (2015) pointed out that 84 percent of Christian young adults between the ages of 18-29 do not know how the Bible applies to their career or profession.

Christian higher education can do better in this criti-

cally important area. Christian academic business programs and faculty can continue to see this challenge as a wonderful opportunity from the Lord to create classes that teach all kinds of Gospel-centered principles, grounded in the Word of God and aimed at reaching the hearts of business students so their workplaces and coworkers can be changed eternally as God works and leads. As the Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 10: 14-15 (ESV):

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!"

This beautiful reminder from the Apostle Paul should spur Christian business faculty on to remember that students cannot give what they do not have. And they cannot possess Gospel-centered leadership, professionalism, and work skills unless they are modeled, taught, and ultimately rooted in God's Word for his glory. A Christian leadership and ethics in business course does not accomplish all of these things perfectly or at only one snapshot in time, but certainly this type of course can be crucial in the development of business students' understanding that God wants to use Christians in business (and all vocational areas) to advance his Kingdom work while impacting the hearts and lives of others around (McMahon, Locke, & Roller, 2015). God cares about everything his children do, including how work is done, customers are served, products are created, and revenue is generated (Keller, 2012). Business students at Christian colleges and universities must hear these truths from the administration, staff, and specifically the faculty whom they interact with every day. This type of Gospel-centered, Christian leadership curriculum development for some might feel risky or "outside of their training," but as Wick (2018) reminded Christian business educators, grounding our teaching in God's Word will never return empty (Isaiah 55:11) and is a risk worth making for the Kingdom.

THE PATHWAY FOR CREATING A CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP AND ETHICS IN BUSINESS COURSE

As stated previously, this specific pathway for creating a Christian leadership and ethics in business course is one path (not the only path), but this specific one has been very helpful and fruitful at a Christian university in the southeast. In fact, more than 125 undergraduate students

have gone through this type of course at this specific university since the spring of 2015. This pathway was used for a Christian leadership and ethics course in sport business, but the exact textbooks, methods, and implementation strategies could apply to any general or focused business program within Christian higher education.

The premise for this specific course had two major components, and the first component starts with these foundational thoughts: no one can lead others well for God's Kingdom until they understand why they are called by God to the work they are doing. In addition, no one can lead others well for God's Kingdom until they see that their work is inherently valuable to God, designed by God, and deemed to be good before the fall in Genesis 3. These two aspects of the first component of the course seem to be missed by so many Christians in the workplace and business world yet are utterly foundational to providing spiritual and purposeful meaning to work in business and all vocations. If Christian business faculty do not understand how to connect their vocation (regardless of being in Christian higher education or not) to God's Kingdom work, then their students will find it difficult to see, hear, or absorb these crucial and wonderful truths in their classrooms, seminar rooms, offices, etc.

EVERY GOOD ENDEAVOR

In the fall of 2014, when this type of class was created, one book clearly stood above other resources as the main source for helping faculty and students flesh out the deep and life-giving connections between their Christian faith and vocations: *Every Good Endeavor* by pastor, teacher, and author Tim Keller out of New York City. This book was used by the original faculty member who developed the Christian leadership and ethics in sport business course and has been the bedrock of this class ever since. Specifically, this book does a wonderful job of first addressing how God worked in creating the earth and filling it (Genesis 1), how God asked Adam to work in Genesis 2:15, and how work was good and God's idea before sin ever entered into our world (Genesis 1:31).

Second, this book clarifies well that God cares about all the work we do, and that all work done unto the Lord has Kingdom value and is used by God to accomplish his perfect plans for creation (Keller, 2012). Keller (2012) articulates this well when he writes, "The Gospel reminds us that God cares about the products we make, the companies we work for, and the customers we serve." It is so crucial for undergraduate and graduate students at Christian higher

educational institutions to hear and understand that work is not bad or a "punishment" for sin entering the world (Keller, 2012). Work is not just something we do to earn a paycheck or to make it to the weekend. Quite the opposite. Work was God's idea, was done by God, and was around before sin ever entered our world and broke our relationship with God. Thus, work was and is part of God's plan for his people so that all areas of this world (art, business, sports, politics, film making, comedy, music, cooking, law enforcement, education, etc.) can be brought under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and be redeemed as part of God's salvation plan for his people. Business students (and all students) in Christian higher education need to hear these wonderful and freeing Gospel realities as it relates to their work so they can better understand why they have been called to certain professions and how these specific professions in business (and any other area of the workforce) can be used by God to build his Kingdom, redeem culture, and share and show the love of Jesus Christ. When students understand why they are called by God to specific business positions (or any vocation) and how that work is used by God for his Kingdom purposes, then they are more likely to also understand better how to lead their coworkers and colleagues since they see every conversation, interaction, project, collaboration, etc. as something divinely appointed by God and used by him to impact others around. This is the beauty and essence of Christian leadership, and this type of leadership in business can help lead others to not only know and love Jesus Christ but flourish in their respective jobs as well. Keller (2012) highlights this type of leadership on page xix when he wrote:

The Gospel gives meaning to our work as leaders. We're to create an environment in which people can flourish and use their God-given gifts to contribute to society. We're to embody grace, truth, hope, and love in the organizations we create.

Finally, *Every Good Endeavor* has helped students understand that leading for Jesus Christ means not looking to any other coworker, colleague, or boss for approval or identity. Rather, as Keller (2012) pointed out, Jesus is the only boss that will not drive you to exhaustion or audience that does not need you to perform for approval, a bonus, a promotion, etc. Instead, Jesus' finished work on behalf of any Christian frees men and women to work unto God's glory instead of man's approval, which in turn directly impacts the leadership of others because the time can be spent giving instead of taking. Students in Christian schools and colleges of business need to hear that if they know and follow Jesus, they are free to give their lives away instead of taking from others, and they are free to work and lead for Jesus Christ's glory and almighty name knowing they are

working for a Kingdom to come while a culture is being redeemed right now.

FROM WEAKNESS TO STRENGTH

The second major component of curriculum development for a Christian leadership and ethics in business course centered around the ideas of leading through weakness, humility, and transparency. In other words, Christian leadership is not leading from a position of superiority or the idea that anybody has it perfectly together; rather Christian leadership (in business or any other vocation) leads with the reality of sin and brokenness in all mankind yet the understanding of one's identity in the sufficiency of Jesus Christ. This second component is so crucial for business students (and all people) to understand because it allows God to shape hearts and minds around the truth that people are more deeply impacted not by people's achievements, accomplishments, salaries, job titles, and accolades but through transparent and vulnerable strength that points people away from man and towards the one perfectly strong leader, Jesus Christ. Jesus is the only source of truth, hope, life, wisdom, and accomplishment that eternally matters, and business students in Christian higher education need to hear, read, and understand these Gospel truths so they can engage the business world as salt and light for Jesus Christ (Cassell & Merkel, 2018).

The second book that was used in this type of Christian leadership and ethics in business course embodied these great Christian leadership realities and was implemented along with *Every Good Endeavor*. The second book was written by pastor, teacher, and author Scott Sauls out of Nashville, Tennessee, and is titled *From Weakness to Strength*. This book quickly became another foundational source of content, discussion, and heart change for many students largely because of the refreshing Gospel truths that this book points to. This is first illustrated in the fact that this book quickly points out how ambition, when not surrendered to the Lord, can lead to all kinds of idolatrous and even disastrous ends with the people who are being led as the carnage along the way. Sauls (2017) illustrated this well when he wrote how a Christian's life (and ambitions, occupational goals, career trajectory) is all under the providential care and plan of the Lord. Since men and women are God's creation, he can fashion lives, careers, work, and accomplishments in any way that he chooses and this will ultimately be the best for his glory and his people's good. This is so helpful for students to understand at the undergraduate and graduate level given that ambition, career goals, and

accomplishment can be viewed in business as idols that need to be served, cultivated, and grown instead of surrendered to the Lord with open hands and open palms. As Sauls (2017) wrote, "Ambition...can be godly and pure but can also be self-serving and corrupt" (p. 33). This book has helped and can help students (in all business education areas) see that ambition, drive, and motivation for success can be harnessed well by the Lord for good and Kingdom building but only when first surrendered to the Lord according to his will and plan. As the Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 9:20 (ESV) "But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me like this?'"

This type of surrender deeply impacts others in the workplace, office, and surrounding spheres of influence in that surrendered ambition does not try to outdo others competitively; rather it trusts that God is the one who is hiring, promoting, affirming, and parenting his children out of love and provision.

Second, this book has helped numerous students understand Christian leadership through the lens of humility, not pompous self-glorification. Sauls (2017) illustrated this well when he wrote, "God's most effective leaders don't rise to power in spite of their weakness; they lead with power because of their weakness" (p. 11). Students pursuing careers in business are often faced with the pressures (either outward or self-indulged) of having to always be right, competent, "on," having the right answer, never admitting weakness, and never showing fear. Sadly, none of these feelings or attributes are realistic on this side of heaven since everybody falls shorts of the glory of God (Romans 3:23) and all are sinful and imperfect. Thus, there is a deep need for undergraduate and graduate students in Christian schools and colleges of business to hear, read, and understand that actually their greatest impact on other people will come through humble, transparent, and even broken weaknesses rather than through their strengths and abilities. Yes, God equips all men and women with talents, gifts, abilities, passions etc. since all of mankind is made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), but there is something deeply and eternally profound when men and women lead in humility, talk about their brokenness and mistakes openly (and appropriately), and point others to the only person who will never let them down or disappoint them, Jesus Christ. As the Apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12:9 (ESV), "But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me."

Sauls (2017) followed up on this idea when he wrote: "God delights in handpicking people for leadership who

are either stumbling bumbling or simply weak and ill equipped” (p. 9). This is not to say that students are supposed to learn to be self-loathers or feel sorry for themselves because of their struggles; rather this content can be (and has been) taught from a Gospel-centered perspective where there is no guilt and shame in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1). Instead, students in business can be taught to lead others to Christ in their workplace well by admitting when they make mistakes, confessing when they say something they should not, and owning when they did lazy, half-hearted, or shortcut work. In addition, students in business can also lead others in Christ by continuing to humbly learn from their mistakes and recommit themselves to excellent (not perfect) work so that God can be glorified, people can be loved and served, and others can be deeply impacted for God’s Kingdom advancement.

Finally, this book has been a great source of encouragement for students (and faculty) by helping people see that Jesus is the only true source of sustained contentment. The business world often promotes the messages of money, power, job, title, position, status, net worth, employer, etc. as sources of contentment, joy, and happiness; yet Jesus said these things will not quench thirsts. This is illustrated in John 4:12-14 when Jesus said, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” Sauls (2017) commented on this idea when he wrote, “Only Jesus, whose rule and whose peace shall never cease to increase (Isaiah 9:7), can sustain us. Only Jesus, whose resurrection assures us that he is—and forever will be—making all things new, can fulfill our deepest desires and give us a happily-ever-after conclusion” (p. 44).

This book has helped students see that their career pursuits, accomplishments, salaries, job perks, etc. are good and loving gifts from God that are used by him in people’s lives to bring him glory, build his Kingdom, and encourage those whom he blesses. However, these things are not the same as knowing and loving him through Jesus Christ. One believes this crucial, yet freeing, reality needs to be taught to business students in Christian higher education so that they can see that Jesus, not their career, will ultimately satisfy their hearts, minds, desires, needs, and longings. When these truths start to change students’ hearts, Christian leadership flourishes in and around their lives because Jesus Christ will be the dominant theme of their goals, plans, work, and career paths, and others will see and be impacted by this Gospel fruit as God works.

CONCLUSION

Students in Christian higher education are often lacking the tools, maturity, skills, and biblical understanding needed to connect their Christian faith with their vocation or workplace duties (Herrity, 2015; McMahon, Locke, & Roller, 2015; Wrenn & Cafferky, 2015). Thus, it’s clear that Christian higher education institutions in general, and business programs within these institutions in particular, can (by God’s grace) rise to this challenge and do better. There are many ways this improvement can be fashioned, but one helpful and potentially heart-changing avenue is to create and develop a Christian leadership and ethics in business course which is grounded in both God’s Word and content that points students back to his word. If the goal of Christian higher education is to ultimately impact a student’s heart first and mind second, all for Jesus’ glory, then how can business educators expect their students to lead in their workplaces boldly and winsomely for Jesus Christ without being trained specifically to do so (Tibbetts & Leeper, 2016)? This type of course can greatly help in this area and can expose students to the wonderful, Gospel-centered reality that their Christian faith is not something just for Sundays or Wednesdays, or Bible studies and small groups. Rather, knowing, loving, and serving Jesus is meant to change someone’s heart *and* life, especially in the area of their vocation since work was God’s idea, was inherently good, and was assigned to mankind by God (Genesis 1 and 2).

In addition, when this type of Christian leadership and ethics in business course is created and developed using the foundational books referenced in this article, business students are exposed to freeing Gospel truths that their work matters to God, is designed by God, and is used by God to build his Kingdom and point people to Jesus Christ (Keller, 2012). Through these two books, business students can be exposed to the fact that high quality work matters as well to the Lord, and Christians are actually loving, serving, and worshipping God through the quality of their work (Colossians 3:23). This Gospel-centered work and worship integration is used by God to be the aroma of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 2:15) in coworker and colleagues’ lives, thus leading to opportunities providentially appointed by God for the sharing of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Finally, this type of course and these two books (*Every Good Endeavor* and *From Weakness to Strength*) help business students see that leadership through humility, transparency, and weakness actually impact people the most, not their “goodness” and outwardly right exterior (Sauls, 2017). In this type of class, business students can learn (through immersion in the Word of God and aforementioned Gospel

content) that leading for Jesus actually follows the path of service, weakness, and even “death” so that others can “live” (John 15:13; 1 John 3:16). This laying down of one’s life for Jesus Christ every day in the workplace only happens as the Holy Spirit works in a changed heart and mind to see that the Gospel of Jesus Christ gives eternal meaning to work and leadership and is meant to help others flourish as they grow in or come to know Jesus Christ (Keller, 2012). This type of course, by God’s Grace, has had this kind of impact on many students’ lives and can have a much larger ripple effect for Jesus Christ and his Kingdom if implemented in other Christian higher education business programs.

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