

POTENTIAL THREATS TO THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT: POWER AND PROFITS

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Dr. Trunfio discusses the consequences when organizations misuse power and overemphasize profits. He reminds us of the importance of nurturing human relationships by showing Christian love and trust and by honoring the diversity, dignity, and concerns of others.

For Christians, the greatest commandment is found in both the Old and New Testaments (Leviticus 19:18; Mark 12:29-31). This mandate of loving God and loving one's neighbor as oneself applies at all times, for all people, and in all areas of life. Christians are commanded to undertake this challenge with a sense of fervor and enthusiasm, even in the absence of reciprocity.

Just as it is important to be aware of the potential threats to one's physical health (smoking, overeating, etc.), it is also paramount to be reminded of the potential threats to one's spiritual health. Two such threats are power and profits. The misuse of power and the overemphasis on profits in organizational cultures has the potential to distract and discourage organizational members from exhibiting the virtue of agape love necessary for fulfilling the greatest commandment. Organizations in which power and profits are the ultimately prized values are often characterized as being impersonal and dehumanizing and thus destroy meaningful human relationships. The destruction of human relationships is antithetical to the essence of the greatest commandment.

POWER

Hoarding vs. Sharing. A key concern regarding power in organizations is the way it is perceived and allocated. In bureaucracies, power is often centralized at the top and decentralized as one moves down the organization. As a result, people view power as a limited commodity which can only be attained by forming politically strategic alliances. This political maneuvering and positioning has the potential of discouraging subordinates from questioning their loyalty to their power-possessing superiors. Subordinates may act uncharacteristically, including acting unethically, in an attempt to please or appease a superior.

All this tends to dehumanize individuals, who often bow to others and thus feel inferior, unequal, and less worthy. Feeling and acting that way, people are not motivated to act unselfishly. On the contrary, those involved tend to be self-interested, self-protective, and suspicious of others. A general air of mistrust reigns which does not allow a servanthood mentality to flourish.

Power can lead to idolatry. Those who taste it may be tempted to want more for themselves and to be insensitive to those who stand in their way. Some individuals attempt to obtain power by blaming others for mistakes and errors. Their quest for hoarding power comes at the expense of undermining the development of relationships and not fostering community spirit. Jesus makes reference to the "lording" of power over others and the negative impact this has regarding the development of a servanthood spirit (Matthew 20:25-28).

Possession of power also raises concerns for Christians regarding the issue of exploitation. The possession of power can lead to treating others simply as tools to achieve business goals. Serious consideration ought to be given to the relinquishment of power to allow for a more participatory style of management. Subordinates need to be encouraged to take part in the decision-making process. They need to be treated as if they have the competence and ability to contribute significantly to the vision and mission of the enterprise. This management style enhances responsibility and helps managers act in the interest of others rather than in their own interest. A participatory management style helps lessen tension and stress in the workplace. Within limits, workers are empowered and allowed to become managers. This participatory theme is evident in the ministry of Jesus. His desire and style was to equip His disciples so they could lead and in turn allow others to flourish as well.

Hierarchy. Christians in the workplace need to examine very carefully the power structure itself. This does not imply that they must disregard and be disrespectful of the hierarchical chain of command. But they must not compromise their moral values simply to please a superior and obtain a piece of the power pie. Chains of command can be respected, but goals, objectives, and even company policies can still be questioned or constructively criticized. That requires moral courage. The cost could result in career stagnation or even dismissal. But, if certain edicts are potentially harmful to stakeholders, voices ought to be raised and some dialog initiated in order to bring about a sense of integrity and justice.

Addressing some of these concerns require awareness of the potential dangers of how power is treated in organizations. But knowledge alone is not enough. Christians must act upon Christ's command to love by showing a spirit of trust. Trust must be exhibited even in the face of mistrust. It requires the exercise of a corollary virtue to love-the virtue of faith. Trust helps build community. It helps develop relationships with others so that they can flourish. Trust also helps break down the walls of mistrust and cynicism. For those who trust, there is risk-they can be taken advantage of. But doing otherwise can ultimately lead to taking advantage of others-a manifestation of disobedience to Christ's command to love.

PROFITS

Bottom-line Mentality. Another central issue which Christians must examine carefully has to do with money, materialism, and wealth. The Bible frequently warns about the potential dangers concerning the idolatry of money (I Timothy 6:10,17; Hebrews 13:5; Proverbs 23:4; Ecclesiastes 5:10). The Christian bottom line should never be just the financial bottom line. The term bottom line refers to concepts such as “what really matters” and “what one focuses on while other issues and concerns are ignored.”

Too often the predominant characteristic or most prized value inherent in organizational cultures is an overemphasis on economic concerns. This emphasis on the financial bottom line relates directly to how people are rewarded and affirmed and how their identity is formed in the organization. These factors contribute greatly toward shaping behavioral patterns within organizations.

Many individuals have noble intentions when they enter the workforce. They often feel confident that they will not cave in to the bottom-line mentality evident in economic institutions. But the

subtle yet constant exposure to a predominantly bottom-line culture can chip away and destroy the best intentions in people's hearts and minds. One of the greatest challenges for Christians is to adhere to the biblical doctrine of being in the world but not of the world. The bottom-line mentality is a formidable adversary of this biblical principle.

Oversimplification. One of the ways in which a bottom-line mentality hinders human relationships from flourishing in organizations stems from the notion of oversimplification. In the face of a multitude of values and consequences, a singular value is pursued. Ambiguity is not tolerated because time is a precious commodity. Corporate cultures establish a frantic pace where any time lost is equated with lost profits. But what is essential in developing people and relationships in general is the critical factor of allowing for time to discuss, debate, dialog, and discern the many ambiguous issues that arise day to day.

Quantification. Another issue related to oversimplification is the quest for quantification. This results in overemphasizing a cost/benefit approach to problem solving. That, in turn, produces attempts at placing a cost in dollar terms on values that can not and should not be thought of financially. Manufacturers holding back on safety devices on machinery to save money, airlines flying unsafe planes to maintain cost controls, and car makers lobbying against safer vehicle standards are just a few of the many examples of simply attempting to make decisions based on economic concerns. Cost/benefit analysis is a useful tool as part of the process of decision-making in the marketplace, but the process should factor in other criteria which address all of the concerns from all constituents.

Shortsightedness. The bottom-line mentality can also cause shortsightedness-overemphasis on immediate financial results. There are far too many examples of managers succumbing to the pressure of having to meet short-term goals so that their careers can flourish. With individual performance often based on being able to report favorable financial data each quarter, a manager may “milk” the segment of an organization for which he is responsible. This may hold down expenses in the short run. However, subsequent managers find themselves in a hole when they inherit facilities which need more employees or expensive safety and environmental equipment. Such situations demonstrate how shortsightedness negatively impacts a variety of stakeholders, including the workforce, the community, and, subsequently, the stockholders. Loving one's neighbor in the marketplace requires a long-term focus and vision.

I do not write to depict the marketplace as an environment Christians should avoid at all costs. On the contrary, Christians are desperately needed there as in other societal institutions such as government and education. All are gifts from God, integral parts of human existence.

The Book of Genesis states that any type of work has the potential for either good or bad. It can honor God and cooperate with His purposes, or it can involve rebellion against His will (Genesis 2,3; 31:6-11). The Apostle Peter's exhortation to his brothers and sisters in Christ provides much wisdom as to how love ought to be applied in the workplace (1 Peter 5:2-3). Building trust in relationships; developing and nurturing the careers of others; and honoring the diversity, dignity, and concerns of various stakeholders are ways Christians can manifest love. By the same token, succumbing to the potential moral and spiritual hazards inherent in the marketplace are signs of rebellion against God's will.

Christians in the marketplace can bring much glory to God. But upholding Christian ethics, doing God's will with one's whole heart, and loving one's neighbor as oneself have always been difficult in business. Committing to these standards has always brought rejection and sometimes ridicule and has always involved self-denial and sacrifice. It has always been the less comfortable way. And it has always been right!