

Dialogue I

A Response to Brian E. Porter's "The Compatibility of Christianity and Business"

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Brian's topic is an extremely broad and complex issue and hence it is not surprising that his paper deals with only one facet of the topic. His two premises that 1) "one who is a Christian should...integrate one's faith in all areas of life including business," and 2) "virtually everyone participates in business...either directly or indirectly" are supported fairly well. However, these two premises demonstrate in Brian's words "that Christianity and business are inseparable" rather than that they are compatible. Compatibility requires more than existing or operating together—it requires that this togetherness be *harmonious*, capable of forming a *homogenous* mixture or *union*. This standard raises the question of how Christians function in a fallen world—what it means to be "in the world, but not of the world." I suspect this more stringent standard could hardly be defended in a short paper, and I

certainly am not going to deal definitively with the subject in my shorter response. However, I will attempt to put forth some suggestions for further analysis to advance the discussion.

First of all, I strongly recommend that the topic be subdivided into two fundamental questions:

1. Is the system of political economy compatible with Christianity?
2. Is it possible for the practice of business within a particular system to be compatible with Christian ideals?

Brian has addressed both in a somewhat limited manner. His quote from Trappenberg represents an attack on capitalism, not the way business is practiced, and several of the concerns supporting incompatibility such as inequality of income, the evils of restructuring, and low market

wages in third world countries are inherent in the free market system as opposed to optional practices. On the other hand, deceitful advertising, production and sale of harmful products, the role of virtue in business, the discussion of bluffing and of Christ's transforming power all address the compatibility of Christianity and business practice.

Tiemstra, in his 1993 review of the literature dealing with Christianity and economics,¹ found little American evangelical support for centralist approaches to economy. Rather he contended that there seems to be a consensus that a modest defense of capitalism is appropriate for Christians even though democratic capitalism is not the kingdom of God. The Oxford Conference on Christian Faith and Economics in January 1990 echoed similar themes, although both Tiemstra and the Oxford Conference call for commitment to certain biblical principles of justice and love which suggest a moderating role for government and lives of compassion on the part of Christians who eschew consumerism and materialism. If Tiemstra is right, then perhaps the first question has been dealt with satisfactorily in the affirmative. This author apparently feels the

dialogue needs to continue, as I have recently presented a paper entitled "Is God a Free Market Economist?" which attempts to argue in the affirmative from the theodicy (the problem of a good, omnipotent God and the reality of moral and natural evil) in the manner of Malthus, Sumner, and Paley.

Assuming a context of democratic capitalism, let me suggest that discussion of the second question might well focus upon the *exchange* as the central issue for compatibility. (In centralist economies the compatibility issue for Christians might rather be *stewardship*.) The exchange is central to all business relationships in market-based economy, and its compatibility with Christianity should be critical to the discussion. Ellul² argues that the exchange is incompatible with Christianity, saying, for example:

The selling of Jesus, first foreshadowed by the story of Joseph sold by his brothers, then by Amos (2:6), shows the constancy of the selling relationship and carries its meaning to the absolute. This sale defines all selling. They sold the righteous. This act, which is our act, is reflected in each selling

relationship. Now all money affairs are characterized by the fact that Jesus became the object of a money relationship. And because the Son of God was thus turned into merchandise, all subordination of humankind to money is intolerable. This subordination is not necessarily restricted to the sale of slaves or the labor force. It occurs in each selling transaction, which inevitably sets up a destructive, competitive relationship even when the sale is of an ordinary object. In every case, one person is trying to establish superiority over another (79).

Now the issue is joined. If the exchange is fundamentally exploitive then it is impossible to practice business in a manner compatible to Christianity. However, if it is possible for Christians to “transform” the exchange into “win-win” transactions, then we have a way to practice business which is compatible with Christian principles. I personally see no inherent barriers in market-based economy to “win-win” exchanges, and I see a commitment to practice such exchanges as the core issue of integration of Christian faith and business. In a fallen world, this deontological commitment to

virtuous business practice is more likely to be rewarded when exchanges are marked by ongoing relationships (repeat business and referral possibilities) rather than when they are marked by one-time encounters. Hence, Christians may have to choose their venues carefully. Whereas Brian urges us to be expansive in the spectrum of businesses where Christians have the opportunity to demonstrate the transforming power of Christ, I would probably be more restrictive. David M. Holley’s classic 1987 article in the *Business and Professional Ethics Journal* on the exchange, “A Moral Evaluation of Sales Practices” offers three conditions for ethical exchanges which are applicable to this discussion. My shortened, paraphrased version follows:

1. Both parties must have access to all information required to make an informed decision.
2. The exchange must be free of any coercion or constraints on the ability to choose.
3. Both parties must be in a position to make rational judgments.³

The exchange is not limited to marketing issues, but rather has broad application to integration in

all business transactions, including employee/employer relationships.

ENDNOTES

¹Tiemstra, John P. “Christianity and Economics: A Review of the Recent Literature,” *Christian Scholar’s Review*. XXII: 3:227-247.

²Ellul, Jacques. *Money & Power*. Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 1984.

³Shaw, William H. and Barry, Vincent. *Moral Issues in Business*, 7th Ed., Wadsworth, 1998: 496-509.

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