

Dialogue III

A Comment to “Justice and Christian Management”

Brian E. Porter
Calvin College

Beverluis contends in his essay, *Justice and Christian Management*, that “...love needs to be informed by justice” and that “...justice requires formal structure (such as rules, procedures, explicit contracts, explicit due process policies, and written criteria of performance appeal procedures)” (Beverluis, p. 8). That is, though practicing love should assure justice within Christian organizations, it does not. Thus, a formal structure is necessary to help achieve, though not guarantee, justice (Beverluis, p. 12). The essay is compelling, and, given that virtually all organizations (profit and non-profit) implement some type of formal structure, few people (Christian or non-Christian) would contest its general premise.

A few of the specific points of the essay are debatable. For example, Beverluis writes that “...none may be treated merely as a means to another end, whether that end be the community’s good or the good of some other person” (Beverluis, p. 8). Though, in

concept, this is a commendable proposition, it is not entirely accurate. In many instances, one (even one’s life) is a means to another end (e.g., Allied soldiers sacrificed on the beaches of Normandy in World War II). Further, it could be argued that every Christian’s life is a means to a greater end, which, in essence, is the definition of the cost of discipleship (Matthew 10:24-42). Even Christ’s life was a means to a greater end, as so powerfully seen when Christ prays that the cup be taken from Him (Matthew 26:39).

However, overall I strongly concur with Beverluis’ general postulate. Therefore, rather than taking further issue with unique points of Beverluis’ essay, this comment has a twofold objective. First, it will attempt to strengthen Beverluis’ position, addressing the difficulty of consistently acting in love. Second, it will suggest that extending the postulate to implementation (i.e., creating a formal structure of rules, regulations, and policies

that promote justice), though necessary, is troublesome. Some balance of subjective love and objective structure is probably ideal. However, determining and implementing the proper balance is extremely difficult.

Inability To Consistently Love

Early in his essay, Beverluis cites Chewning et al. in an attempt to describe love in the workplace. “Loving our coworker, our peer, and our superior means focusing on their long-term best interests...” (Chewning, et al., p. 93-94). Though Beverluis rightfully acknowledges that even a strict adherence to this definition of love does not assure justice, his optimism is evident when he implies that Christians are resolute in applying the principle of love.

Christians strive to reflect the love of God in their everyday lives (Beverluis, p. 2).

Christians and Christian organizations will seek to apply the principle of love when they need to decide whether to lay off an employee or give a professor tenure (Beverluis, p. 2).

Unfortunately, though Christians may wish to act always

in love, we are fallen and unable to do so consistently. At best, we are similar to Paul in his great lament of desiring to do good, but being unable to carry it out (Romans 7:14-24). Consequently, though Christians strive to reflect the love of God, there are times of fatigue, selfishness, or other weakness, when love is subordinated and injustice occurs.

A perspective more pessimistic (or realistic) than Beverluis’ is that Christians and Christian organizations will often seek to apply the principle of love when they need to decide whether to lay off an employee or give a professor tenure, *but the lure of motives other than love may prove more enticing*. In a moment of weakness, one may be like the high priest Caiaphas who advocated a utilitarian perspective when arguing that one man should die rather than a whole nation perish (John 11:49-50). Similarly, a manager (college administrator) might lay off an employee (argue against tenure) based on ulterior motives other than love. If a salesperson is completely honest (an attribute that should be rewarded, not punished), sales may decrease (Porter and Vander Veen), possibly decreasing the employee’s likelihood of

surviving a layoff. If wealthy alumni disagree with an assistant professor's legitimate but controversial teachings or research, it may harm the professor's possibility for tenure.

Possible Injustice of Other's Best Interest

Another fundamental difficulty of achieving justice, based on the definition of love provided by Chewning et al., is the concept of *focusing on the other's long-term best interest*. Though this may seem to have merit, it is possibly subject to great abuse. Not only is it often difficult to know what is in another's long-term best interest, it is also too easy to use this as a justification for injustice. When Upton Sinclair (social activist and author of *The Jungle*) challenged Frederick Taylor (father of scientific management) to pay his employees a higher wage, Taylor rationalized that this would not be in the best interest of his employees.

...many of them will work irregularly and tend to become more or less shiftless, extravagant, and dissipated...for their own best interest it does not do for most men to get rich too fast (Sower, Motwani, and Savoie, p. 426).

Further, acting in another's long-term best interests is not always correct. Arguably, it is in one's long-term best interest (and biblical) to exercise daily for 30 minutes, to not eat at McDonald's (honors the body, I Corinthians 6:19-20), and to purchase only minimal material possessions and give the remainder away (stores treasures in heaven rather than earth, Matthew 6:19-21). However, most people would question the justness of an employer that requires employees to eat only low fat foods, exercise daily, and give 50% of their gross salary to charity. Ironically, focusing on the other's long-term best interest may sometimes achieve injustice rather than justice. This point may be relevant to Christian organizations that regulate employees' lifestyles (e.g., prohibiting the use of alcohol, dancing, or public schooling for the employee's children).

Implementation: A Balance of Love and Regulations

Though the essay *Justice and Christian Management* convincingly argues that formal structures of justice are needed in addition to love, the essay does not provide specific guidelines for creating a structure that

encourages justice, nor does the essay suggest the proper balance between *formal structure* and *love*. A strong argument can be made, and Beversluis would probably agree, that though formal structures are a necessity, there are occasions when rules should be subordinated to an act of love. Jesus often subordinated the law to love, including when He ate on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:1-8), healed on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:10-13), associated with a Samaritan (John 4:9), and prevented a lawful execution (John 8:2-11). However, for the most part, Jesus did not disdain the law, but regularly adhered to the law, such as when he paid taxes (Matthew 17:24-27) and observed the Passover (Matthew 26:17-19). In fact, Jesus even taught that the law needed to be strengthened in many areas, such as adultery (Matthew 5:27-28), divorce (Matthew 5:31-32), and retaliation (Matthew 5:38-42).

As Christians, we believe that Jesus lived a life that was just and sinless. We see from Scripture that He accomplished this while advocating a formal structure (e.g., rules), yet subordinating the formal structure to love, when necessary, to achieve justice. How we can achieve this balance, as did Jesus, needs further

discussion. Though Beversluis' essay lays a fine foundation for advocating the need for formal structure, in addition to love, many questions remain unanswered. What warrants formal rules (e.g., should daily exercise be required)? How should formal rules be determined and implemented? What is the proper balance between rules and love? On what basis should a rule be waived (i.e., subordinated to love) in order to achieve justice? These and other topics may serve as rich areas for extending Beversluis' seminal research.

REFERENCES

- Beversluis, E.H., "Justice and Christian Management." *Journal of Biblical Integration in Business*. Fall 1998.
- Chewning, R.C., Eby, J.W., and Roels, S.J., *Business Through the Eyes of Faith*, Harper and Row, 1990.
- Porter, B., and Vander Veen, S., "Does Being Honest Pay? An Empirical Study." To appear in *Christian Scholar's Review*.
- Sower, V.E., Motwani, J., and Savoie, M.J., *Classic Readings In Operations Management*. The Dryden Press, 1995.

JBIB