

Special Millenium Section

A Modest Proposal for a Bold Initiative: Reflections from a Public University

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Abstract

This short essay begins with the suggestion that practitioners have a growing desire for an understanding of management and business from a (radical) Christian perspective. A scholarly literature that provides such a perspective remains woefully underdeveloped because: (1) we often (wrongly) assume that conventional views of management and business are already basically Christian; and (2) we lack the infrastructure to develop such a literature, either because in locations where there is a critical mass of scholars to develop it they are not given the time to do so (e.g., Christian liberal arts colleges) or because where there is time for such development there is a lack of a critical mass of scholars (e.g., in public universities). It concludes by describing an infrastructure which may be able to support the type of scholarly work the world is craving.

Introduction

More than ever, business people, both Christian and not, are seeking spiritual guidance for their everyday managerial lives. Business people are looking for alternative ways to think about management. They are tired of maximizing efficiency, focusing on the bottom line, cutthroat competition, and so on. Instead, they are seeking ways to manage that are humane, loving, community-building, just, uplifting, and kind. From the point of view of **JBIB** and the CBFA, this should be a time of much rejoicing and celebration. People should be beating a path to our doors. Unfortunately, I'm not sure that we have enough to offer those seeking radical alternatives to the status quo. In short, business scholars have failed to adequately develop a "theology of management" even though I believe that is embedded in Scripture.

I have no desire to berate the existing literature on management written from a Christian perspective. I know that there are exceptionally helpful, thoughtful, well-written books and articles available. But, for the most part, this literature fails to provide an alternative to the conventional paradigms. To overstate my case, they typically suggest that “enlightened” managers are “nicer” and that this may make them even more successful. Unfortunately, regardless of whether “enlightened” managers are more successful, that doesn’t challenge the more fundamental questions of how we measure “success” or how we define “management” or “business.” To get to my point, suffice it to say that the managers I know who hunger for spiritual guidance in their professional lives have not had their appetites filled at the academic trough.

There are at least two basic reasons as to why I think that we have failed in this task. First, as exemplified in Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, we often tend to assume that our market economy, and our society more generally, is based on Christian principles. To be more exact, although we tend to lament that we are moving

away from these ideals, there seems to be a basic assumption that up until 1950 or so America was largely a “Christian” society. As a result, there was little need to develop specifically Christian alternatives to the dominant paradigm because it was already grounded in Christian principles. (The perceptive reader will discern that the author does not embrace this commonplace assumption.)

Second, existing management scholars lack the infrastructure to engage in the difficult task of re-conceiving what it means to manage in the image of God. One might reasonably expect that such an infrastructure is available in a Christian liberal arts college. Unfortunately, from what I have observed, scholars in Christian post-secondary institutions are given very little research time. Quite simply, the teaching load is so onerous that little time is left for the type of deep, rigorous, thoughtful reflection required for such an undertaking. And so, even professors with the best of intentions and who have theologians next door to help them do not have the time to do what they know needs to be done. The situation facing scholars in public universities is slightly different. We are paid to spend 40

percent of our time doing research. However, until recently perhaps, doing research from an explicitly Christian perspective might be frowned upon, and, for the most part, we lack ready access to critical mass of like-minded scholars (e.g., theologians), which is required to facilitate the task.

The Proposal

The time is ripe to establish the infrastructure required to facilitate the scholarly research that is being demanded. I will describe how this might be done via setting up some sort of an “Institute of Faith-Life Integration for Management and Business” (IFLIMB—of course, we can probably think of a better name than this) in a Christian university that already has a fair number of business scholars and theologians. What I have in mind can make a *huge* impact with relatively modest resources (e.g., ranging from \$100,000 to \$500,000 per year). A lower-cost version of what I describe below could also be very effective. I will describe the activities of the Institute in terms of “start-up” and “on-going.”

Start-Up

The key start-up activity of the Institute would be to develop a foundational series of “theologies” of each of the core business disciplines (e.g., management, finance, accounting, marketing, and possibly others). For this task I would suggest assigning one scholar from each area for one year, coupled with the half-time services of a theologian. By the end of the year, each team should have produced the first draft of a “Theology of Marketing” (or whatever) manuscript. This manuscript could then be distributed to a handful of other scholars and practitioners for review (and possibly revision in a workshop setting). Then the original scholar would take reviewers’ comments in hand and, possibly together with a professional writer, develop a seeker-friendly book (or books) appropriate for practitioners and for use in the classroom. In this way each discipline, for a financial cost equivalent of about two years’ salary, would have a solid foundational theological treatise (for the purists in cost-recovery, these start-up costs might be recouped by revenues generated by book sales).

Armed with a solid series of rigorously-developed, undergirding “theologies” in hand, the next step would be to develop these for more specific topics such as might be found in upper-level courses. I would expect that the resources required to prepare such manuscripts (which might serve as a “companion text” to be used alongside conventional materials) to be less onerous once the foundational work has been completed. Here we might expect the equivalent of a half-year to be adequate for a business scholar (working alongside a quarter-time theologian) to develop an appropriate text. For example, a book looking at international management from a Christian perspective might involve a management scholar and a missiologist. Again, the book should be sent out for external review and written with the aid of a professional writer.

Coupled with these written materials should be the development of a “home page” on the Internet where readers can send their suggestions and also ask questions and build community with each other. This dialogue would serve to inform subsequent revisions of the book. In the spirit of

community discernment (and of continuous improvement), books should be rewritten every three years or so. Furthermore, it would be wonderful to develop video materials to supplement the notes, to provide students with real world “role models” and exemplars to learn from.

On-Going

As has already been hinted, ideally the materials generated by such an Institute should become “living documents.” This can be via the Internet page described above, via developing assignments where students’ efforts can be used to improve the text, and so on. Also, every three years the course for which a text has been written should be team-taught with a theologian and a business scholar.

Perhaps the most important on-going investment that the Institute can make is to provide a very user-friendly “visiting scholars” program to attract the best scholars available to spend their “research leaves” working and writing at the Institute. This would include office facilities, regular forums to exchange ideas with other scholars, appropriate “turn-key” housing opportunities, access to schools for children, and so on.

Ideally there would be facilities to house several scholars at a time. It would be difficult to overemphasize the importance of such an arrangement. The Institute could become a haven and focal point for scholars from Christian and public universities and facilitate the networking and linkages required to sustain on-going research in this area.

Conclusion

The proposal described above is not very expensive. But it probably could not be funded via our existing institutions. I expect that it would require the financial resources of businesspeople who share its vision. Within five years, this Institute could become the unrivaled world leader in Christian business education and thinking. It would be the destination of choice of leading scholars from both public and private schools. It would generate a more comprehensive and coherent set of biblically-grounded materials than is presently available. And, most importantly, it very well might change the way we do business.

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