

Dialogue II

God's Immutability: Business Implications and the Uncertainty of Scripture A Response to Richard Chewning's Paper

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A Fine Foundation

"Hermeneutics and Biblical Ethics: God's Immutability and Human Integrity" is precisely what we have come to expect of Richard Chewning—provocative writing that is biblically grounded and intellectually rigorous. Chewning implements his strength of tackling challenging issues with refreshing straightforwardness. In this endeavor, the topic courageously pioneered is God's unchanging character (i.e., immutability) and the implications thereof (e.g., prayer does not change God). Rather than making biblical integration in business the main thrust of his paper,¹ Chewning provides a fine seminal piece that others may debate further; others may also discuss the ramifications for Christians in business. Given that the issues Chewning explores are nebulous and his positions clear, there is ample opportunity for one to embrace,

extend, and contend what he writes. This brief response will, first, support and extend one of Chewning's postulates for Christian businesspeople. Second, it will argue that knowing God's will is not as easy as Chewning implies.

God Does Not Need Successful Businesspeople

For many of his positions, Chewning has chosen not to theorize on their ramifications when integrated with business. Though interesting discussions are possible for all of Chewning's assertions, one is particularly useful to contemplate as to its relevance for Christian businesspeople. Chewning writes that "God's children share in the work of God—not because God needs anybody, (He needs no one) ..." (Chewning, 2000). This point, though seemingly benign and uncontroversial, often seems forgotten in business.

Christian businesspeople, probably motivated by pride, sometimes behave as if God is limited and is in dire need of what a successful businessperson is able to provide. Visibility, power, and wealth, all at the disposal of a successful businessperson, can be used to God's supposed advantage!

Unfortunately, the inherent danger of the false paradigm "God needs our help" is that we frequently justify improper means to achieve a perceived righteous end (i.e., business success). For example, as Albert Carr persuasively argues in his timeless piece "Is Business Bluffing Ethical?," Christian businesspeople, though they refuse to accept the fact, tell half-truths, compromising their values to achieve business success. Though humbling to accept, we offer God nothing with our business success that God is not capable of achieving alone or via less significant vessels, such as an ass² or rock.³ Christian businesspeople who understand this are less apt to succumb to the compromise often necessary to achieve success (e.g., bluffing and telling half-truths). They realize that, frequently, business failure, rather than business success, is to be sought and

lauded. As Chewning astutely observes, "At the very core of integrity is the unfailing routine of keeping one's word even when doing so works to one's disadvantage—financial loss, personal inconvenience, or disappointment" (Chewning, 2000).

Bible Is Unclear

Chewning writes with such bold confidence that it induces apprehension in one who might offer a different interpretation of Scripture. Though certainly not intentional, Chewning's writing occasionally conveys to the reader that anyone who disagrees with him is ignorant, less of a Christian, or both.⁴ Chewning's concept of seeking the *whole counsel of God* when attempting to understand God and God's will is wise. For example, knowing that God epitomizes love should be foundational and shed light on any biblical interpretation. However, even with the whole counsel of God, the Bible remains a mystery on many issues. As evidence, there exist many denominations in the church, all equally legitimate, as well as contrasting interpretations of Scripture on various issues (e.g., wealth, baptism, giving, marriage).

Because the Bible is often unclear, trusting God is more complex than Chewning suggests, such as when he writes, "When God says He will do something, we trust Him to do it because He cannot lie" (Chewning, 2000). Even Chewning's example of trust is also an example of a godly person misinterpreting God's word. Chewning's illustration is of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac. However, by Chewning's own account (Chewning, 2000), Abraham misunderstood God, erroneously trusting God to resurrect Isaac from the dead, rather than provide a ram in lieu of his son (Genesis 22:13) for sacrifice.

Scripture is replete with examples of godly people who have found God's Word to be unclear, often with consequences more unfortunate than Abraham's. Today, fatalities occur when Christian Scientists turn to prayer alone, refusing medical attention for physical healing (I Peter 2:24, Acts 14:9-10, Matthew 17:20) or when churches in Appalachia confirm the Word of God by fondling rattlesnakes (Mark 16:18, Luke 10:19, Acts 28:3-6). Though it may be argued that the Bible is being misinterpreted (Ramrus, 2000), both are

examples of Christians trusting God subsequent to having sought the whole counsel of God. Albeit Chewning's article, "Hermeneutics and Biblical Ethics: God's Immutability and Human Integrity," is full of insight with supporting explanations, many of his conclusions are not obvious and can be countered. Because we see through a glass darkly (I Corinthians 13:12), and because the Bible is often an enigma, we must tread softly, acknowledging that differing interpretations of God's Word are possible and equally plausible, even when utilizing the *whole counsel of God*.

ENDNOTES

¹Near the end of his paper, Chewning suggests that because God is immutable, Christian businesspeople should be also. "God's Word is His bond, His guarantee. Our word ought to be our bond, our guarantee ... Those of us who identify with the name of Christ are to never break our word" (Chewning, 2000).

²Examples of God's chosen vessel being an ass include Numbers 22:28 and Matthew 21:2.

³Examples of God's chosen vessel being a rock include Exodus 17:6 and Luke 19:40.

⁴A few of Chewning's statements, written with bold certainty, are the following: "... the answer to every one of these questions *must be NO!*" "Scripture is plain ..." "The biblical conclusion that flows from the hermeneutic subscribing to the 'whole counsel of God,' however, is *obvious*."

REFERENCES

Carr, A. (1968, January-February). Is business bluffing ethical? *Harvard Business Review*, 143-153.

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Ramrus, A. (2000, June 7). Does spiritual bliss need to be venomous? *The Wall Street Journal*, p. A27.

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