

## Dialogue I

### **Out of the Comfort Zone: Responding to VanderVeen's Radical, Reformed Christian Rejoinder**

Richard J. Martinez  
Baylor University

I very much appreciate Steve VanderVeen's willingness and enthusiasm in taking the time to expand the discussion of how we bring God's Truth into the business classroom (2004, pp. 7-13). By laying out a relatively radical viewpoint in which the Reformed framework of redeeming a fallen creation takes center stage, VanderVeen leads us to either move out of our economic comfort zones or to figure out why we might not want to. I would like simply in this response to point out some of the areas of discomfort we might encounter when considering this perspective and how things might "play" in the Christian classroom.

First, VanderVeen places on the table for discussion the elevation of "calling" to higher levels of analysis, as it pertains to institutions and corporations. This is a critical concept to consider, both for ourselves and for our students. Does God call

institutions to certain things, or does He call people to use institutions for His will? Is there a difference? I tend to agree with VanderVeen that businesses, corporations, and other institutions may have a specific role in the fulfillment of a collective calling. Scripture is filled with examples of God calling Israel collectively to various tasks and purposes. Further, in Revelation 2 and 3, the various churches are held accountable as collectives, even as the individuals within them are also held accountable. However, it seems to me that although the "call" must be to the individual or to a group of individuals at the collective level, the corporation or the firm remains the instrument through which the calling is to be fulfilled. This may seem to be a small distinction, but I believe it is one that will be important for our students to consider.

In VanderVeen’s admittedly “radical” ideas, he also places much emphasis on social justice and the role of firms in the pursuit of this end. As we confront social justice issues in the Christian classroom, we must be careful to not present this one perspective in such a way that it appears morally superior to all other possible organizational models. That is, while there is indeed a market for socially conscious business enterprises, there is also a legitimate place for Christians to operate in the competitive world of business. In other words, while VanderVeen rightly notes that “Christian” firms (or those people who build and operate such enterprises) may be called to certain market niches that are underrepresented (e.g., fulfilling substantive rights and subsistence needs), I believe we need to develop in our students an appreciation for pursuing holiness, justice, and love in market environments characterized by global name-brands, hypercompetition, and even tremendous profits. In recent years I have come to believe that we, as scholars and teachers of business and economics, do not yet have a full comprehension of

markets as an ingenious (inspired) means of ordering billions of transactions to be something more than the chaotic, brutal mess they would be absent market mechanisms. While building Christian-led enterprises that accomplish social justice ends is an exciting calling, we must also learn (and teach) more about the wonder and beauty of more traditional market mechanisms as a legitimate means of glorifying God, even if we do so in competition with the godless hoards.

Frequently in his essay, VanderVeen reminds us of our obligations to care for and love our neighbors. It seems to me that one of our great challenges is to help our students understand who our neighbors are. This, of course, is a classic Christian issue, but it takes on new meaning in the context of business.

The use of finite organizational assets to care for others is one issue we can explore with students. VanderVeen brings up Friedman’s classic essay (1970, pp. 122-126) on social responsibility, and we can see from Friedman that, in general, many people would suggest that

the corporation should *not* be used to care for “neighbors,” however defined. The resources, in Friedman’s argument, do not belong to the managers and are not theirs to distribute. In the case of firms owned and operated by Christians, we may still have difficulty agreeing on which stakeholders represent neighbors who ought to be served in a discriminatory fashion.

VanderVeen also suggests that we can use businesses to ensure the fulfillment of subsistence needs, or the basic necessities of life. While this may be true (in the radical model), we will need to address with students the difficulty in assessing exactly what these needs are. We will encounter vastly varying perspectives on what constitutes the basic necessities of life. Is it simply food and shelter? In the U.S., we seem to be concerned that everyone (poor and rich alike) has access to the Internet. One recent presidential campaign speech suggested that all 290 million Americans needed to have access to cable-based or other high-speed Internet. Surely these are not the biggest concerns of those living beneath the world’s misery index. So, what are the basic necessities of life?

The radical Reformed view as presented in VanderVeen’s essay also calls for the transformation of certain industries by establishing a presence in those markets most in need of transformation. This indeed is a bold idea, and we would want to consider with students whether it is possible to transform the supply side of the market without first working to transform the demand side, as in the desires of individuals within the culture.

Ultimately, VanderVeen concludes that the choice facing Christian managers is whether to “compete in competitive markets over satisfying spiritual needs” or to “seek non-competitive markets where subsistence needs are not being met” (2004, p. 11). Interestingly, this dilemma transforms the traditional economic rationale from getting a piece of the pie (competitive markets) to providing cake (as in “let them eat cake”). I hope that we will find both kinds of students in our classrooms.

While VanderVeen gives us a bold interpretation of the potential uses of the corporation pursuing a godly calling, such a bold vision requires us to dig deeper into our definitional repertoires. This is a great exercise, and I applaud

VanderVeen for challenging us in this way. Without the occasional “radical” viewpoint, we talk in circles.

**Richard J. Martinez**  
Dept. of Management  
Hankamer School of Business  
Baylor University  
Box 98006  
Waco, TX 76798-8006  
254-710-6184  
rick\_martinez@baylor.edu

## REFERENCES

Friedman, M. (1970, Sept. 13). The social responsibility of business is to increase its profits. *New York Times Magazine*, pp. 122-126.

VanderVeen, S. (2004, Fall). A radical, Reformed Christian rejoinder to Martinez’s “Teaching strategic management from a Christian perspective.” *The Journal of Biblical Integration in Business*, 7-13.

