

# Taking a Step Forward: Maslow and Christian Management

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Jim McCleskey and Larry Ruddell encourage their readers to “take a ‘step back’ and take a deeper look at what Maslow says and how Scripture contrasts with his ideas.” They rightly encourage Christians to think critically about one of the best known theories of motivation. Their basic conclusion is that Maslow’s ideas are incompatible with a biblical worldview. While this response generally agrees with their conclusions, it will also encourage readers to take a “step forward” in considering what aspects of Maslow’s ideas are redeemable as well as what a distinctly Christian view of motivation could look like.

## MASLOW’S THEORY OF MOTIVATION

McCleskey and Ruddell’s article discusses both Maslow’s theory of motivation and its relationship to Christianity, sometimes potentially conflating the two. With regard to the theory itself, a strength of their analysis is a return to the article (Maslow, 1943) and the books (Maslow 1954; Maslow, 1962) wherein Maslow originally presents his theory. A limitation of their analysis is not always acknowledging the impact of the time period when Maslow was writing, i.e. the 1940s-1960s. Some of their critiques can be explained by recognizing that Maslow, like everyone, is a product of his time. Although he is probably best known for his hierarchy of needs, Maslow’s biggest contribution was as one of the founders of humanistic psychology (Maslow, 1962). In the post-World War II optimism of the 1950s, Maslow sought an understanding of human behavior that transcended both Freud’s biological determinism and Skinner’s environmental determinism. This was the same era that produced two of the most influential books in the modern history of management thought, Douglas McGregor’s (1960) *The Human Side of Enterprise* and Chris Argyris’ (1957) *Personality and Organization*. Maslow, McGregor, and Argyris all shared a humanist belief in the inherent goodness of people and the possibility

of their perfection, or at least improvement, given the right conditions. Secular humanism was beginning to dominate intellectual thought at this time, so it is no surprise that Maslow embodies it. It is also no surprise that Maslow offers a new approach to science since the application of the scientific method to the social sciences was undergoing its own significant changes at this time. Despite some of these limitations, it is very helpful that McCleskey and Ruddell do not rely on secondary or more recent sources, but take us back to Maslow’s original thoughts.

Employee motivation is an ever-present issue for businesses and their managers. Maslow’s explication of human needs as the essence of motivation, while simplistic compared to contemporary theories of employee motivation (like equity and expectancy theory, among others), was and still is useful. That unfulfilled needs drive behavior is *per se notum*. When I am hungry, I am moved to find food. So even if much legitimate skepticism surrounds Maslow’s need theory, its fundamental idea is sound. Perhaps this is part of the reason it became, and remains, so popular even though most psychologists and management scholars today dismiss it as a weak and unsubstantiated theory. It ranks up there with the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers, 1987) as one of the most widely used yet scientifically rejected psychological theories (Pittenger, 1993). If only both would go away, or at least be replaced. Alderfer’s (1969) ERG theory provides a sounder and more empirically supported needs theory of motivation. McCleskey and Ruddell describe other needs theories that are potentially superior to Maslow’s. The Big Five personality model (Costa & McCrae, 2009) is vastly superior to the Myers-Briggs measure. Why Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator persist is a question for another article, one that surely would include insights from the world of marketing. McCleskey and Ruddell effectively discuss critiques of Maslow’s theory of motivation, since it surely deserves critique purely as a theory of motivation.

## MASLOW'S THEORY OF MOTIVATION AND CHRISTIANITY

Appropriately, and mostly effectively, McCleskey and Ruddell consider more than just Maslow's hierarchy of needs, also analyzing its relationship to Christianity. Their conclusion that it is incompatible with a Christian worldview is also *per se notum*. According to Maslow, self-actualization is the pinnacle of human development. Christianity in contrast was founded by a God-Man who denied himself and who calls his followers to self-denial. It was founded by a God-Man who sacrificed his life because, as McCleskey and Ruddell rightly note, people are inherently sinful. They do not possess, as Maslow claims, an inner nature that is good or neutral rather than bad or necessarily evil. So on several fundamental levels, Christianity cannot embrace Maslow's theory of motivation nor his overall psychology of being.

But this is not to say that Christians must reject all of Maslow's ideas just as they need not reject all secular ideas. To my knowledge, the person who created the computer I am using to type these words was not a Christian. Does that mean there is nothing of value for me in the tool he created? As a result of general revelation and common grace, believers are able to benefit from the ideas and works of unbelievers. Although Maslow's ideas are ultimately incompatible with Christianity, there are still aspects of his ideas that reflect biblical thinking. The Bible acknowledges that people have a variety of needs. Jesus regularly responded to people's physical needs for food and healing in addition to their spiritual needs. Of course, as Pascal (1670) observed, people's biggest need is to fill the God-shaped hole that has existed since the Fall and that only God himself can fill. The history of humanity can be captured in the myriad ways people have attempted to fill that hole with everything but God. But that the hole—the need—exists is an idea shared by both Christian theology and Maslow's philosophy.

So it is right and useful for Christian managers to consider their employees' needs when trying to motivate them. This is one of many "steps forward" believers can take as the beneficiaries of not just special revelation but also general revelation. When thinking of employees at work, Maslow's vision is also significantly closer to Christianity than that of Frederick Taylor (1911). Taylor's scientific management, while it contributed to advancements in human efficiency and productivity, did so at the expense of human dignity. Dehumanizing workers by treating them as mere machines is something

both Maslow and Christians find very distasteful. Readers interested in a Christian perspective on the history of management thought including Taylor and others are referred to Lee Hardy's (1990) *The Fabric of this World*, a book frequently referenced by *JBIB* writers.

Freudian thought is even more antithetical to Christianity than Maslow. To Freud (1927) religion is a neurosis, something that should be eliminated to achieve psychological health. Yet, thanks again to natural revelation, even Freud made observations consistent with Christianity. For him the keys to psychological health are to love and to work (Elms, 2005). The person whose life includes loving relationships and productive work is a long way toward being emotionally healthy. Interestingly, to love and to work are precisely what God put Adam and Eve in the Garden to do. That Freud misses the most important thing Adam and Eve were created to do—be in relation with their creator and worship him—does not negate his teleological insights of the centrality of love and work.

Likewise, Skinner's environmental determinism, while also fundamentally contrary to Christianity, nonetheless provides some accurate insights into human behavior and motivation. Skinner (1972) rejects free will and human dignity. He does not replace them with a Calvinistic predestination, but with a perverse form of empiricism and cultural engineering. His vision of a secular heaven on earth in the novel *Walden Two* (Skinner, 1968) is downright frightening. The nuclear family is replaced with the behavioral engineering of children to form a frictionless but also soulless society. Programming people using the principle of operant conditioning can produce, so Skinner claims, a utopian world without need of government, economics, or religion.

Christian managers must reject Skinner's worldview. Even so, they can and do benefit from his powerful theory of operant conditioning with its positive reinforcement and punishment as means to shaping employee behavior. And not only can they benefit from this theory, but they can see its roots in Scripture. Whether it is the Old Testament's explanation of blessings and curses associated with God's covenant with Israel or the New Testament's description of believers' crowns and church discipline, rewards and punishments existed long before Skinner quantified them, and they are consistent with God's moral order.

Thus the relationship between the secular worldviews of influential thinkers like Maslow, Freud, and Skinner and the worldview of Christians is more complex than

simply rejecting the secular because it is contrary to the biblical. McCleskey and Ruddell are correct in cautioning the Church to live in the world without adopting its secular beliefs. But not adopting secular beliefs does not mean ignoring them. It also does not mean not recognizing those parts of them that are compatible with the Bible and indeed were potentially inspired by God's general revelation whether their progenitors like Maslow understood their source in God or not. Indeed, there is more than a little irony in Maslow's "discovery" of needs or Skinner's "discovery" of rewards and punishments given the fact that these ideas were described in the Bible thousands of years before Maslow and Skinner were born.

### A DISTINCTLY CHRISTIAN VIEW OF MOTIVATION

There is another way Christian managers and management scholars can take a step forward beyond acknowledging the existence of some truth in secular ideas like Maslow's hierarchy of needs. They can also step forward by proposing their own distinctly Christian theory of motivation. McCleskey and Ruddell offer several useful ideas in this regard. It is beyond the scope of their article to expect them to have expanded those ideas into a fully formed Christian theory of motivation, but their article leaves the reader wondering what such a theory might look like. Since human motivation is a core dimension of the human experience, such a theory would need to begin in the book of Genesis with the creation of humanity and continue through to the book of Revelation and the motivators of humanity in the New Jerusalem. This theory would also need to incorporate Colossians 3:23-24 (ESV): "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ."

This verse captures much of what should motivate the Christian, whether in their life in general or in their life as an employee. The Christian is implored to work heartily. How motivated are we to be? Very! Half-hearted effort is not acceptable. This level of effort should be given to "whatever you do." So the boring parts of a Christian employee's job deserve as much effort as the exciting tasks. The key to the verse is whom we are working for, the Lord. We do not work primarily for our boss or our company or even our family. We work for God. If that is not a source of motivation, what could be? As many other

*JBIB* articles over the years have described (e.g., Fields & Bekker, 2011; Smith & Wheeler, 1999), our work is an act of worship. Working for God is a holy activity. This should energize and inspire us to do our very best. In comparison to knowing a boss or client will evaluate our work, realizing God is doing a performance appraisal should humble and stimulate us like nothing else. And we do not just work for the Lord, we "serve" him. A servant or slave (and this is to whom this passage was originally directed) has no choice over what their work will be. Their only choice is how much effort they will give and the attitude they will bring to the work. Colossians 3:22 (ESV) explains what that should be: "Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, or as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord."

Finally, Colossians 3:24 reminds workers that they will receive an inheritance as their reward. God understands the motivating potential of rewards, and he will give them equitably to those whose work is deserving. Furthermore, even a slave can receive an inheritance! Slaves are equal to free workers in their ability to receive rewards (cf. Eph. 6:7-8). If God can use rewards then surely Christian managers who seek to imitate him can use rewards with their employees. In summary, this passage in Colossians legitimizes both extrinsic (rewards) and intrinsic (working for the Lord simply because it is the right thing to do) motivation.

As it so often does, a biblical worldview turns secular thinking on its head. Contrary to Maslow's hierarchy, the highest forms of motivation are not focused on fulfilling the self, whether through self-esteem or self-actualization. Instead they involve denying the self in order to serve God through the service of people. Thus it is wise to take a step back to critically evaluate Maslow's views on motivation as McCleskey and Ruddell have done. But it is also wise to take a step forward to embrace those aspects of Maslow—and other secular thinkers—who do not contradict Scripture and to consider their relevance to a distinctly Christian theory of motivation.

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