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Career in the marketplace: Is it appropriate for a Christian?

by Michael E. Cafferky

All settings where productive and legitimate service can be provided are valued in the Bible so long as each endeavor is pursued in a manner that honors God.

A generation ago, working for the church became synonymous with serving God through one's career. Some Christians even believed that a career in a for-profit business was in contradiction with the Bible. Others viewed it in full agreement with biblical principles.

How should the Christian view a career of service in the commercial sector? Is working in a for-profit company something we should encourage the Christian to do? In this article we will address these two questions by exploring the biblical perspective on work in the marketplace. We begin with Creation.

Creation and Sabbath

Even though the central theme of Scripture is our relationship with God, the material side of life has a respectable place in the Bible. Work that brings enjoyment of God-given material blessings is a legitimate pursuit; however, the material dimension of life cannot be separated from spirituality, as shown in God's work of Creation and the Sabbath.

Creation provides a foundation for how to think about wealth, regardless of whether we work in the for-profit, nonprofit, or government sectors. At Creation, God made all the wealth-building materials. He created human beings to be interdependent with each other and with the created environment. He asked humans to both sub-

due the earth and care for the earth as loyal servants (Genesis 1:26-28; 2:15). The reason: God is the owner of all things material and has commissioned humans to work on His behalf on this earth. How we treat these resources and the people who share them is done before the One to whom we owe everything.

God pronounced this material world "very good" (Genesis 1:31). God's original plan included humans working in the material world (Genesis 2:15). Yet, the greater aim of work, as paradoxical as it sounds, was not to accumulate economic value earned from the production and sale of material possessions but rather to enter into rest with God. The weekly Sabbath, a foreshadowing of God's covenant of grace, is inseparable from the commission to work. In the Sabbath rest, we demonstrate our loyalty to God by resting from our pursuit of material goods. The Sabbath was designed, in part, as a barrier to materialism, but sin marred the human experience with work and with Sabbath. Work became burdensome toil. Workers needed rest not only from the weariness of toil but also from the brutal battle for survival. More than this, humans need the constant Sabbath reminder that that confidence in our work should never replace trust in God.

Covenant, shalom, and blessings

In His wisdom, God knew the

impact of sin. God's covenant of grace – offered immediately after sin (Genesis 3:15) and then repeated throughout Scripture – is a covenant that addresses all dimensions of life: spiritual, physical, social, political, economic, etc. Under the power of sin, the natural human tendency is to turn something good into something selfish. Just as work became toilsome, so also work from the desire to accumulate wealth became a source of weariness (Proverbs 23:4-5). When God stated the covenant to Moses, He reminded us of the importance of Sabbath (Exodus 20:8). Humans saw the work of their own hands and, forgetting the import of the Sabbath, began trusting their own power to earn economic wealth.

Giving the power to build wealth is described in covenantal terms: "But you shall remember the Lord your God, for it is He who is giving you power to make wealth, that He may confirm His covenant which He swore to your fathers" (Deuteronomy 8:18). The covenant was not just a promise of economic prosperity, but it was also a promise of a full covenantal relationship with God, with family, with the community, and with all nations, based on spiritual abundance. The meaning of this full, abundant life was captured in the concept of "shalom" (peace). Under God's covenant, the whole world would be blessed in every dimension of shalom, including economic prosperity;

however, economic prosperity generated apart from a covenantal relationship with God is the kind of prosperity which takes a person in the opposite direction from God's plan.

Business principles in the Bible

The Bible is full of counsel on business. In Proverbs, Solomon counsels specifically that we should watch over our wealth-building assets, because our economic future is uncertain (Proverbs 27:24-27). Pruning fruit-bearing plants results in higher production (Leviticus 25:3, 4; John 15:1, 2). In grain farming, certain factors increase yield (Genesis 26:12; Matthew 13:8, 13:23; Mark 4:8, 4:20; 2 Corinthians 9:6). The clear implication is that higher yield is more highly valued than lower yield. Therefore, it is unwise to use technology that is inefficient or useless. Using technology must be done in a wise manner so that the full purpose of the technology can be achieved, so long as doing so honors God (Proverbs 1:17, 24:27; Ecclesiastes 10:9,10)

The Bible also speaks disapprovingly about unproductive resources (see Deuteronomy 29:23; 2 Kings 2:19; Proverbs 26:7; Ezekiel 15:3-5; Luke 13:6, 7, 14:35; Hebrews 6:8). When a resource becomes unproductive, the owner of the resource should correct the problem by using the resource in a better way or, lacking that, get rid of the unproductive resource and replace it with something that produces. The principle of destroying unproductive assets and replacing them with productive assets may be the rationale behind Solomon's wisdom that there is a time to plant and a time to uproot that which is planted when the asset cannot be salvaged and becomes irreversibly unproductive (Ecclesiastes 3:2. See also Matthew 3:10; Luke 3:9; 13:6, 7). These business principles highlight the spiritual norm that it is God who owns all wealth-building assets; humans are coworkers with God in using these resources. The land – and by extension all that it contains, including technol-

ogy that is used in commerce – is to be holy, set aside for service to God.

Business technology

The Bible mentions hundreds of technologies used in business endeavors. Nowhere does the Bible criticize these technologies or the pursuits they represent. God is interested in business technology. In Bible times, the technology crucial to earning a profit was the technology of a trader who bought and sold goods. This was the system of weights and measures used to calculate the price of buying and selling. Those who engage in business are to consider their business technology and currency used in trade as belonging to God, not merely because He is the owner of all things material (1 Chronicles 29:11; Psalm 50:10; 104:24; Proverbs 16:11; Haggai 2:8), but also because the business transactions in the market that involve the use of His assets for the good of His creatures must be carried out in a way that honors Him and watches out for the interests of His community (Leviticus 19:35, 36; Deuteronomy 25:13-15; Proverbs 11:1; 20:10, 23; Ezekiel 45:10-12; Hosea 12:7; Micah 6:11). Thus, any work that humans do with technology to advance their economic welfare is a work for and with God. As humans devise inventions that are useful for promoting justice, they are also advancing God's work on earth. By the same token, it is an abomination to wrong others under the charade of using technology.

Jesus and the market

Jesus criticized the rich, money-loving Pharisees for their greed and unethical practices that made them wealthy, but not for their wealth per se. He accepted dinner invitations from the rich and received resources provided by others (Matthew 23:25; Luke 11:39; 16:14.) Still, He warned others to be on guard against all kinds of greed (Luke 12:13-15). He counseled a wealthy manager to sell all that he pos-

sessed and give to the poor, but He did not make this a general principle that everyone should follow (Luke 18:18-30). For example, when Zaccheus, the wealthy chief tax collector, accepted Jesus, he gave half of his goods to the poor. Jesus did not command him to give away the rest (Luke 19:1-10).

Jesus helped His disciples in their trade (John 21: 6-11). He used wealth, wealth-building resources, and wealth-building work as illustrations of great spiritual truths. He never questioned the right to own property. Many of His healing miracles resulted in helping the sick and the disabled to become well, not only in body and spirit but also in their ability to provide for themselves economically. An important tension exists here. Prosperity is born through diligence and the wisdom that comes from God through our experience and the experience of trusted, God-fearing members of the community to whom we should listen (Deuteronomy 8:10-20; 1 Chronicles 29:12; 2 Chronicles 1:11,12; Proverbs 3:13-20). The problem is that when prosperity is obtained, people can easily begin to trust in their wealth, ungratefully taking themselves away from God who has provided the ability and resources to build that wealth with the resources He created (Proverbs 11:28).

Occupations in the Bible

The Bible describes hundreds of occupations related to all three sectors of the economy: for-profit, nonprofit, and government. The Bible considers all these pursuits legitimate. The assets by which a person could build wealth in biblical times included land, precious metals, jewels, animals, equipment, and the harvest that was dependent on the sun and the rain. Trade was expected and even encouraged. Employment of workers was expected to increase production (Deuteronomy 24:14, 15; Mark 1:20; Matthew 20:14, 15). Not all humans intend to bring God honor from their wealth-building activities. Some acquire wealth with integrity,

others with dishonesty. But both the righteous and the unrighteous should expect to obtain wealth (Psalm 17:4; 37:16; 49:5, 6; 52:7; 73:3; 73:12; 92:7; 109:8; 123:4; Matthew 5:44, 45).

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob became wealthy as sheep farmers. Jesus Himself worked in what must surely have been considered a for-profit endeavor in the field of construction. Some of His disciples worked in the fishing industry. The apostle Paul was no stranger to business endeavors. Although all the details of his own work are not provided in the Bible, he appears to have operated a tent-making trade. He warned that the love of money is the root of evil (1 Timothy 6:9, 10). While some traders took advantage of others through dishonest practices, people like Lydia are mentioned in positive regard because of their association with the ministry of the growing church.

Service in the marketplace

Biblical service to others is a response to God's gifts placed as a divine loan during the limited days of our life and not as a means of obtaining God's favor. Peter admonished the early Christians to use their spiritual gifts to serve one another in a way that demonstrated stewardship of God's grace. The reason is that in all we do, regardless of the economic sector in which we work, we bring glory and joy to God (1 Peter 4:8-11). Paul would probably agree with Peter when he likewise counseled believers to work heartily as for and in the name of Jesus who is the Lord and not merely for human beings (Colossians 3:17-23).

Productivity and profit

The Scripture assumes that humans will attempt to be as productive as possible. Humans are expected to be useful, and when they are not they are considered to be destructive (Proverbs 18:9; Titus 3:14). Diligent, honest work produces honest gain, though such gain is not automatic. Some who are diligent may lack economic

plenty. In the Bible, both economic gain and economic loss are seen as gifts from God. However, humans do not go to all the work of planting seeds and tending crops without expecting that they will get something good in return, something more than what they put into the processes (Deuteronomy 20:6; Proverbs 27:18; 1 Corinthians 9:7). Thus, one measure of usefulness is the idea of comparing the value of what one owns before diligent work with the value after work – the idea of gain or profit (Proverbs 3:13, 14; 15:27; Ecclesiastes 3:9; Jeremiah 6:13; 12:13). Profit is one indicator that the business decision-makers are serving as good stewards of resources entrusted by and sometimes shared with society. So while not “loving” profits, the faithful business professional listens to what profits say about business operations.

While the idea of achieving gain is not criticized per se in the Bible, achieving gain unjustly or dishonestly comes under judgment. Bible prophets speak vigorously against the evil business practices where the rich were taking advantage of the poor. The Bible also condemns achieving prosperity by immoral and unjust actions. In this regard, the Bible's criticisms of leaders building their wealth unjustly are lodged against political and religious leaders just as much as against those whose primary work is in commerce. Apparently greed, fraud, and corruption are sins that beset those who work in nonprofit and government organizations and not just in commercial firms (Isaiah 1:23; Jeremiah 8:10; 22:17; Ezekiel 22:27, 28; Amos 5:11; Micah 3:11).

Conclusion

How should the Christian view a career of service in the commercial sector of the market? In short, a career in the for-profit sector is a career working for God while working to benefit others as good stewards of God's grace. Career life in the for-profit world must be balanced by a life of the Sabbath,

whereby we continually hold high the economic constraints of the Sabbath in honor of the God who owns all that we work with.

Is working for a for-profit firm something that we should encourage the Christian to do? Absolutely! We have responsibilities to be good stewards of community resources. Honest gain earned from hard work, managing development, and exchange of community resources should not be denigrated, but instead appreciated. Dishonest gain achieved from taking advantage of others must be avoided at all costs. Further, working in a legitimate occupation in the for-profit setting is an opportunity for the Christian to carry an influence for good, not only in terms of supporting productive work but also in terms of transforming the world of work, where necessary, by encouraging others to pursue periodic rest from the unrelenting compulsion to generate economic gain. This is one way that those in business can carry the Sabbath-rest with them Monday through Friday. Life, even work life, is greater than the material abundance which can be generated “for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions” (Luke 12:15). All settings where productive and legitimate service can be provided are valued in the Bible, so long as each endeavor is pursued in a manner that honors God.

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