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Editor's Perspective: The sacredness of the marketplace

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EDITOR'S PERSPECTIVE:

The Sacredness of the Marketplace

MICHAEL E. CAFFERKY

Police respond to a call from a business where an angry customer has allegedly destroyed computer monitors, destroyed glass product cases, and physically attacked the cashier even after the employee offered to refund the customer's money and replace the product at no charge. In another incident in a different city, a customer allegedly calls a cashier a profanity and the cashier allegedly retaliates by grabbing the customer by the hair and beating the person on the head. Other people come to the aid of the cashier. Other national news is created when customers are physically dragged off airplanes that have been overbooked. No shortage of examples exists.

From some of these behaviors that we see reported in the news and posted on social media, a person might naturally think that the marketplace is not a sacred place. But I think it is. The history of business is replete with examples of customers taking advantage of each other, buyers bilking sellers, sellers taking advantage of customers or of each other. Each vulnerable to the other. Some choosing to take advantage of vulnerability for personal gain. But in spite of these unsavory behaviors, the marketplace is still a sacred place.

VULNERABILITY AND THE SACREDNESS OF THE MARKET

One of the issues that Scripture highlights that is as relevant today as it was then is that of marketplace vulnerability. The physical vulnerability that has been highlighted in the news is matched by economic vulnerability that has been occurring for centuries. Some people (and organizations) have less bargaining power than others. They might be more vulnerable to opportunistic behavior by the more powerful. Some have an unfair disadvantage in terms of asymmetry of information. Might their vulnerability be greater because of it?

Jacob was vulnerable to Laban. However, years later, Laban was vulnerable to Jacob. Joseph was vulnerable to his brothers, in part because of what he had done. Esau was vulnerable to his brother Jacob; later Jacob was vulnerable to Esau. Much later, after Joseph had ascended to a place of power in Egypt, his brothers were vulnerable to him. These stories can be found in the second half of the book of Genesis.

The Bible mentions aliens, sojourners, strangers, orphans, and widows as categories of people who are especially vulnerable economically. The Bible references for these are too numerous to list here. The fewer the substitutes available to these types of people, the higher the risk that those with more economic power will take advantage of those who are vulnerable.

There are other people who are vulnerable in the market, also. Borrowers are vulnerable (slaves) to lenders (Proverbs 22:7). (But aren't lenders also vulnerable to borrowers?) Wage earners are vulnerable to oppressive landowners. (But aren't principals also vulnerable to their agents?) Isn't anyone in a structured social relationship somewhat vulnerable to others? Doesn't vulnerability occur in a social space that is sacred? Just as God Himself considered the vulnerable position of the earth and its inhabitants and in so considering them, he acted on behalf of the earth, so we are called to mimic him in our sphere by demonstrating how we deal with vulnerability.

The Apostle Peter, quoting from and then apparently alluding to some of the ideas present in the book of Leviticus, tells us that we are called to be holy in *all* our conduct (1 Peter 1:14-16; 2 Peter 3:11). He doesn't say that our conduct should be holy only when we are in church or only when we sing praise songs or only when we are volunteering for a nonprofit organization or only when we kneel down at family worship or only when we are in personal devotion (the settings we normally think of as traditional "religious" behaviors). It is *all* our conduct where holiness applies.

Moses had the same idea in mind as he interpreted the Ten Commandments (see Leviticus 19). There are some things in Leviticus difficult to understand in our contemporary life; however, the items that refer to marketplace behaviors are pretty clear and have contemporary applications. If all our conduct (including buying and selling) is to mimic the character of God in terms of holiness, it seems to me that the social setting of business itself should be considered in some way *sacred*. Thinking about this from the perspective of other Bible writers lends support to this idea as the following examples show.

Land. The land is called holy (Psalm 78:54). But, it was the land that was central to the economy. The seed planted and the harvest reaped were both holy (Leviticus 27:30). But agricultural activities were not only for private family benefit. Producing a yield provided the farmer family with the opportunity to trade grain for other resources. In other words, farming was linked with other economic activities.

Business technology. The primary technology used in trading was considered a possession of God. (Proverbs 16:11). God owns the scales that are used to establish value in a trade. If the business technology is owned by God, one can argue that this supports the notion that the marketplace is sacred space.

Decalogue. The Law of God is called holy (Romans 7:12), but the law was the basis for the hope of experiencing a flourishing life in all dimensions (shalom): physical, emotional, social, economic. If the principles of a flourishing life are holy, how can the marketplace not be called sacred? Speaking of the Law, when Moses restated the Ten Commandments (Deuteronomy 5), he told them that conversations about the Decalogue were to occur in private, with the family (in the house) and when the people walked “by the way” (Deuteronomy 6:6-9). The phrase “by the way” alludes to the imagery of taking a journey in a social context. Moses seems to be referring to social interactions including our marketplace interactions. The point here is that if the principles of a flourishing life are to be an active part of our conversations in the marketplace, isn’t the marketplace itself sacred?

Inheritance. The first-born male was considered holy to the Lord. But, it was the first-born male who was given the responsibility not only for the economic welfare gained by the family but also for the moral welfare lived by the family. Heads of households were spiritual and economic leaders. Here again, we see the connection between the spiritual and the economic. These are not separate things; they are fused, integrated, one.

Property. Moses suggested that a person could ask for the family dwelling to be consecrated (Leviticus 27:13). This was, in some cases, the place of trading. If the house is consecrated, then all the activities that go on in and around that house also are consecrated. It is sacred space.

If we limit our understanding of “sacred spaces” to the types of places where a person can separate oneself from the world of work and trade for the purpose of worship, what potential weaknesses in our understanding might this unintentionally foster?

If the market is sacred space, then what we do in the market in our conduct is important when we encounter situations where one or more parties is vulnerable to the other. Just being in a place where vulnerability exists to watch out for the needs of the vulnerable becomes a sacred duty. We are called to serve in the market, not to run from vulnerability, but to go toward it for the purpose of redemption. Accordingly, serving God in the market is incarnational. It demonstrates, in our sphere, what God chose to do in his sphere when we became ultimately vulnerable and he demonstrated his holiness toward us: He came to be with us but behaved in a way that was radically different from what we might have expected. He acted in a way that redeemed people at the point of their greatest vulnerability.

THE PURPOSE OF BUSINESS

When we see the kinds of things that go on in the marketplace, the implications of sacred thinking for business are radical, especially as we think about the purpose of business. Seen through the lens of imitating God’s particular divine character traits (such as holiness), the purpose of business must be something bigger than maximizing value for shareholders. It must be something bigger than just serving each other’s needs or helping the human race develop for the future, as important as these things are. In terms of holiness, the purpose of business is to allow people the chance to test drive a relationship with God in a context (the market) of vulnerability. The purpose of business must be to foster the restoration of God’s image in humans, not in church but in a particular place where some parties are economically vulnerable to others. In the context of vulnerability, we have the opportunity to demonstrate the sacredness of the marketplace. Marketplace behaviors become the carriers of faith. When we are in a situation of economic vulnerability, we are called to participate with a Christ-

centered approach, called to show the transformational power of God's character in action. We may encounter vulnerability while selling goods and services, making human resource policy, investing, leading, working with an international business, starting a business, or any number of other situations. Regardless of the situation, God calls us to contribute to the restoration of the image of God by how we deal with vulnerability around us, not as a way to gain favor with God, but in gratitude for the favor God has given us in Christ as he has redeemed us from our vulnerability.

THIS ISSUE OF *JBIB*

In Volume 20 of *JBIB*, we have some valuable contributions which help us think a little deeper regarding what it might mean to behave in a sacred space of the market. We have papers that address concerns in some of the major disciplines of business: marketing (sales), human resources, leadership, economics, ethics, entrepreneurship, and international business. To make room for these papers, I required some of their authors to condense their paper more than they might have preferred. As an author, I know what this is like. I appreciate their charity toward other authors by condensing their work and creating space for others. I hope you find as much value in their papers as the peer reviewers and I did. Enjoy!