

Unethical Business:

A critically theological, pastoral and practical framework for understanding and acting within a profit-driven, unjust or environmentally impacting business.

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1 Introduction

Within the Christian community, there remains a “long-standing dualistic assumption”¹ that the world of business (and our life conducted within it), and the spiritual world, are disconnected. However, when we view both worlds through a biblical lens, is that what the Bible describes? How does the biblical narrative of creation and redemption guide us in our understanding of the world? How does that then help us build a framework to serve God, honouring his purpose for our lives?

This essay will explore the issue of business ethics within a profit-driven working environment with questionable ethical or environmental practices. These issues will be considered from a theological, practical and pastoral perspective. We will attempt to root ourselves theologically in our understanding of the world, and humanity’s role within it. Then we will address some of the core issues when it comes to serving God within western capitalist society; before reviewing some of the questions and conflicts that arise from serving God in the workplace.

1.1 Defining Ethics

Serving God requires deciding to align ourselves with His will. To understand and enact His will, we need an ethical framework. Other words such as ‘values’ or ‘morals’ are often interchanged with the word ‘ethics’. Anthony Thicke defined values as the “worth or merit we place upon a particular thing or action”; morals as the principles we adopt in how we view right and wrong; and ethics, therefore, as a “system for applying the various moral principles of my life to given situations.”²

Thielicke justifies the need for ethics based on the effect our decisions and our actions can have on other people. In the case where this effect is detrimental, the Apostle Paul refers to it as an offence (Rom. 14:13 (ESV), 16:17, 2 Cor. 6:3). How we approach the formation of this frameworks differs, even within Christian traditions.

¹ James M. Childs, *Ethics in Business: Faith at Work* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 8.

² W.E. Diehl, *The Monday Connection: On Being an Authentic Christian in a Monday-Friday World*, reprint. (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 89.

2 Theological Framework

2.1 Creation and Vocation

“In the beginning” (Gen. 1:1, John 1:1) the opening words of the Old Testament and John’s gospel, God created a home: a place of “order, goodness and beauty”.³ At the end of the seven days of creation, God looked at what he had made, both as individual parts and an integrated whole,⁴ and declared it all “very good” (Gen. 1:31). Creation, in its original design, resonates with the *shalom* of God where the “full flourishing of human life in all aspects, [is] as God intended it to be”.⁵

What is the role of humanity in creation? Genesis confirms that we were made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27, Col. 3:10); this does not make us the centre of all creation.⁶ God has given us a vocation, a role, a purpose, within God’s broader creational narrative (Gen. 1:28, Gen. 2:15). According to John Paul II, this is a vocation that will “never cease to be relevant”.⁷ N. T. Wright asserts that when we review the creation story, we do not see a “static scene” with a beginning, and an end.⁸ Instead, creation has a purpose: it was designed to extend and expand across the face of the earth. John Goldingay agrees that creation is not “a completed project”.⁹ The Creator assigned that role, to propagate change across the earth, to humanity. Rooted in the words of Genesis 1 and 2, we see the role of humanity not just to be a ruling authority over the rest of creation, but also to be “priestly”.¹⁰ A role that points “the loyalty and praise of.. creation” towards the creator himself, in “love, speech and conscious obedience”.¹¹

Thus, our vocation as humanity consists of “stand[ing] at the interface between God and his creation, bringing, God’s wise and generous order to the world and giving articulate voice to creation’s glad and grateful praise to its maker”.¹² This mandate includes the management of the world’s resources, which we see manifested in one way through business.¹³

Our role within the world, in the form of work, brings together three essential dimensions for us as human beings:¹⁴ it provides us with an avenue for self-expression; an opportunity to build and

³ J. Goldingay, *Biblical Theology: The God of the Christian Scriptures* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 135.

⁴ J.R. Schneider, *The Good of Affluence: Seeking God in a Culture of Wealth* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 45.

⁵ C. Plantinga, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1995), 10.

⁶ Goldingay, *Biblical Theology*, 150.

⁷ John Paul II, “Laborem Exercens - Encyclical Letter on Human Work,” *Laborem Exercens* (1981): 5–6.

⁸ T. Wright, *Virtue Reborn* (London: SPCK Publishing, 2010), 65.

⁹ Goldingay, *Biblical Theology*, 135.

¹⁰ Wright, *Virtue Reborn*, 70.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 70–71.

¹³ J.C. Buxton, *Celebrating Life: Beyond the Sacred-Secular Divide*, Faith in an emerging culture (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), 147–148.

¹⁴ As defined in: D. Soelle and S.A. Cloyes, *To Work and to Love: A Theology of Creation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984), 83.

foster community or “social relatedness” as Dorothy Soelle describes. Finally, it gives us the opportunity for “reconciliation with nature”, where we fulfil our roles as stewards of creation on behalf of the creator. Adam “stood at the beginning of his ‘career’”.¹⁵

2.2 The Fall

In the advanced formulation of our ethical responses, there is a dependency on the concept of natural law. Natural law “picture[s] the world as an orderly construct, permeated by eternal norms laid down at creation”.¹⁶ We see this picture in the Garden at the start of creation; then, through the fall, we see sin enter the world and distort God’s original creation. Adam and Eve stepped over the boundary line defined by God.¹⁷

The fall introduced social and metaphysical separation.¹⁸ All our human relationships “(God-human, human-human, human-creation, human-work) have become disrupted”.¹⁹ Our relationship with creation is also fragmented. Instead of having dominion over nature (Gen. 1:26-29), nature has become an adversary. Creation “groans like a woman in labour” awaiting the day when it will be liberated from its “bondage to decay”.²⁰ Work becomes hard. The Hebrew word translated as ‘pain’ in Genesis 3:17 conveys both physical and emotional stress concerning Adam’s toiling in the field.²¹

However, the level of disruption caused by the fall to these relationships (post-resurrection) is contested. In Catholic theology, “sin only violates creation in a peripheral way”. In Reformed evangelical theology this is not the case. Reformers view creation as permeated by sin; it no longer follows, necessarily, the original “orders of creation”.²² Within the reformed view, Helmut Thielicke argues, difficult decisions are only possible within a legalistic framework where the person becomes an agent of the decision rather than the acting subject, making a choice.²³ In both views, the very nature of having to use a framework in all situations removes the need for the Holy Spirit: which enables us to speak from the perspective of our renewed self.²⁴

2.3 Redemption

As a result of the fall, Paul, in his letter to the Romans, affirms the sinful nature of all men (Rom. 3:23); a sentiment also identified by social scientists, “human beings have an unlimited

capacity for self-deception and denial about their ethical behaviour”.²⁵ It is because of that sinful nature that we are all in need of salvation. The law reveals our sinfulness and the Holy Spirit continues to convict us of the sin present in our lives (Rom. 7:7, John 16:13).

For us, as sinful as we were, God sent his one and only Son (John 3:16). His Son took on the nature of humanity and lived the life of obedience that Adam, and the rest of humanity, had continuously failed to do.²⁶ In the climax of our disobedience, the human race nailed the Son of God to a tree and left him for dead. As Karl Barth explains, it was in this act, that the people of Israel “behaved and proved themselves as the representatives... of all nations”.²⁷

Death was conquered, not through evasion, as Adam and Eve tried to do, but through embrace.²⁸ As Sandra M. Schneiders recognises, it is “[with]in the outstretched arms of God’s love on the cross, [that] death is finally slain”.²⁹ It is in the conquering of death, through the resurrection, that we are justified, pardoned from sin, and accepted by God.³⁰

Together with our right-standing, God has also placed his Spirit within us (Romans 8:9). According to Volker Rabens, regarding ethical decision making, this works in two ways. The first is the concept of the Spirit empowering believers to live a “religious-ethical” life, empowering us not to sin (1 John 3:9).³¹ The second is in the sanctifying work of the Spirit as He transforms our hearts (1 Thes. 4:7-8, 2 Cor. 3:3), guiding and directing us in our vocational calling as co-workers with Christ (1 Cor. 3:9, 2 Cor. 6:1 (NIV)).³² As Darrell Cosden explains, “ordinary work in this world is a joint project between the master and his apprentices”.³³

Our eschatology influences how we choose to live and conduct our lives. Do we believe in the restoration of the planet? Alternatively, the annihilation and replacement of our current world? The view of inaugurated eschatology³⁴ is that the kingdom of God is here, realised, but at the

²⁵ K.L. Wong and S.B. Rae, *Business for the Common Good: A Christian Vision for the Marketplace*, Christian Worldview Integration Series (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 167.

²⁶ Goldingay, *Biblical Theology*, 303.

²⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936), 62.

²⁸ Sandra M. Schneiders, “The Lamb of God and the Forgiveness of Sin(s) in the Fourth Gospel,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 73, no. no.1 (2011): 7–8.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ A. Koberle and J.C. Mattes, *The Quest for Holiness: A Biblical, Historical and Systematic Investigation*, reprint. (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publ, 2004), 58.

³¹ V. Rabens, *The Holy Spirit and Ethics in Paul: Transformation and Empowering for Religious-Ethical Life*, 2nd Edition, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament. Zweite Reihe (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 142.

³² Ibid.

³³ D. Cosden, *The Heavenly Good of Earthly Work* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2006), 98–99.

³⁴ The different eschatological views and their merits are not the subject of this essay. Proponents of this view include G. K. Beale and N. T. Wright. Further reading: B.L. Gladd and M.S. Harmon, *Making All Things New: Inaugurated Eschatology for the Life of the Church* (Ada: Baker Publishing Group, 2016). N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (London: HarperCollins, 2018)..

¹⁵ H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, ed. J. Bolt, trans. J. Vriend, vol. 2, Reformed Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2004), 564.

¹⁶ Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics: Foundations*, trans. William H. Lazareth, Reprint, February 1984, vol. 1, Theological Ethics (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1966), 648.

¹⁷ Goldingay, *Biblical Theology*, 198.

¹⁸ Andrew S. Kulikovskiy, *Creation, Fall, Restoration: A Biblical Theology of Creation* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2009), 202.

¹⁹ J. Van Duzer, *Why Business Matters to God: (And What Still Needs to Be Fixed)* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 136.

²⁰ Kulikovskiy, *Creation, Fall, Restoration*, 215.

²¹ Ibid., 219.

²² Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, 1:648.

²³ Ibid. Essentially, you are carrying out a decision that has already been made, rather than making the decision yourself.

²⁴ Ibid.

same time, not yet here.³⁵ We have glimpses of the “superlative glories and goodness”³⁶ of God; however, the full realisation of the kingdom has not yet come.

3 Practical Framework

The diversity that comes from bringing theology and academics alongside business enables us to uncover new perspectives which, in isolation, may never have been explored. The combination becomes a mutually enriching exchange across multiple disciplines.³⁷ As Christians in business we are faced with a challenge: as Alasdair MacIntyre explains, “the enlightenment project to build a moral and just world order on the foundations of reason has failed”.³⁸ Instead, it has opened the door to emotivism: where moral decisions are made based on emotions and feelings.³⁹ This is the environment we are called to work within.

3.1 Approaching Culture

There are many defined approaches on how Christians should engage with culture, together with those explicitly looking at culture through the lens of business. These approaches includes those of Laura Nash, Helen Alford and Michael Naughton, David Miller and Andy Crouch.⁴⁰ One of the most well-known and established is that of Richard Niebuhr's Christ and Culture model.⁴¹ In recent years Niebuhr's approach has been criticised for his bias towards his opinion and his disregard of the power dynamic in his approach to culture.⁴² Louke van Wensvenn Silker built upon Niebuhr's work contextualising it to business, and Craig A. Carter addressed some of the criticism brought against Niebuhr's approach.⁴³

The response required at any given time will differ based on the individual circumstances presented.⁴⁴ Within Niebuhr's model, the specific drive to stay within the current working environment could align with the posture⁴⁵ of “Christ Transforming Culture”, or as Silker

ascribed “Christ Transforming Business”.⁴⁶ Within this example, there is recognition of the corrupt nature of business and intent to transform it for the better, through the application of Christian values. This could also suggest an aspiration to challenge some of the motives and practices of the company, through the empowering of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁷ Complete transformation may never be achieved, at least before the new heavens and the new earth usher in complete transformation, but transformation is possible and it should be pursued. John Calvin, and the broader principles of the Reformation, strongly supported this view.⁴⁸

Precisely what this transformation looks like differs significantly based on your position on the political spectrum, but each shares the universal desire to “align the economy in general, and business in particular with God's values”.⁴⁹ We, as the people of God, carry the responsibility to transform the fallen world as we prepare for Christ's second coming. How we make decisions, and what influences those decisions, is central to how we transform and model Christocentric cultural transformation.

3.2 Situation Ethics

When it comes to ethics, there will always be situations where the response is black and white, where there is plainly a right and a wrong answer. However, the ethics we derive from scripture will never cover all the unique situations we find ourselves in (both in and outside of business).⁵⁰ If Jesus' first and greatest commandments are to form the basis of our ethical decision making within these grey areas (as Fletcher, Thielicke and Diehl all propose), how does that help us act within these situations?

Different ethicists describe situational ethics in different ways; the circumstances where they can be used again differ between proponents. For Fletcher, situationism proceeds from a single law, the law of *agape* (love) from Jesus' first and greatest commandment (Matt. 22:37, Luke 10:27). Second to that, comes *sophia* (wisdom) from the church, scripture and culture. Finally comes the *kairós* (a moment of decision); where the agent determines whether *sophia* serves the primary principles of love best in that given moment, or not.⁵¹

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, “the question of the good is posed and is decided in the midst of each definite, yet un-concluded, unique and transient situation of our lives, in the mist of our living relationships with men, things, institutions and powers, in other words in the midst of our historical existence”.⁵²

³⁵ D.A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008), 53.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

³⁷ Childs, *Ethics in Business*, 12.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴⁰ L.L. Nash, *Believers in Business* (Nashville: T. Nelson, 1994). H.J. Alford and M. Naughton, *Managing as If Faith Mattered: Christian Social Principles in the Modern Organization*, Catholic Social Tradition Series (University of Notre Dame Press, 2001). D.W. Miller, *God at Work: The History and Promise of the Faith at Work Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2007). A. Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Sydney: ReadHowYouWant.com, 2009).

⁴¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, Reprint. (New York: Harper San Francisco, 2002).

⁴² For more detail see Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*. Or G.H. Stassen, D.M. Yeager, and J.H. Yoder, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

⁴³ Louke van Wensvenn Siker, “Christ and Business: A Typology for Christian Business Ethics,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 8, no. 11, Christ and Business (1989): 883–888. C.A. Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective* (Ada: Baker Publishing Group, 2006).

⁴⁴ Van Duzer, *Why Business Matters to God*, 134.

⁴⁵ A posture is a “learned but unconscious default position” (Crouch, *Culture Making*, 90). Duzer defines three questions around common grace and eschatology that assist in determining your default posture (Van Duzer, *Why Business Matters to God*, 135.)

⁴⁶ Siker, “Christ and Business: A Typology for Christian Business Ethics,” 884.

⁴⁷ Van Duzer, *Why Business Matters to God*, 134.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ What these ethics are, is dependent on your model of interpretation. This subject won't be covered in this paper, but for further study please see: T.R. Schreiner and B.L. Merkle, *40 Questions about Christians and Biblical Law*, 40 Questions Series (Grandville: Kregel Academic, n.d.). W. Morrow, *An Introduction to Biblical Law* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017).

⁵¹ J.F. Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality*, Library of Theological Ethics (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1966), 33.

⁵² D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (London: Macmillan, 1965), 185.

In comparing Diehl, Thielicke and Fletcher's use of situational ethics, it almost appears as if they are the same. The difference is introduced only in how liberally they apply situational ethics. Diehl, situational ethics is rooted first in an "established body of moral principles and values".⁵³ These principles and values form the foundation of moral decision making. Thielicke agrees, citing only "borderline situations"; where the ethics of law is substituted by "situational ethics".⁵⁴ Each of those situations requires a new framework to be defined, reflecting the uniqueness of the decision that has to be made, in conjunction with the Holy Spirit.⁵⁵ Within the New Testament, we see a series of examples where Jesus doesn't directly follow the laws that have been established within the Jewish community. For example, the plucking of grain on the Sabbath (Mark 2:23-28); healing on the Sabbath (Mark 3:1-5); or the touching lepers (Matt. 8:2-3).⁵⁶

With Fletcher, we see it applied as a general principle; he is willing to "compromise or set aside" established Christian maxims in the name of love, "if love seems better served by doing so".⁵⁷ Alexander D. Hill criticises Fletcher's approach to ethics, as it provides limited guidance on how to manage ethically unclear situations. Many actions could be taken 'in the name of love' that would flout both holiness and justice.⁵⁸

3.2.1 Conscience and the Holy Spirit

Ignorance of our fallen nature can also lead to an overemphasis on our conscience in discerning right from wrong. N. T. Wright recognises that our conscience assesses the "moral worth of what has been done and, perhaps, what might yet be done".⁵⁹ The issues arise when we allow our conscience to become our moral standard. Wright attests that when we commit idolatry, our conscience is "pulled this way and that". Actions initially approved of, by the conscience, can, after conversion to Christ, become horrific.⁶⁰

Even if we seek to always operate under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we have to recognise our inability to hear and understand correctly. That is why we have God's revealed will in the form of scriptures and why grace, and our need for forgiveness is so vital in these situations. The tension created is the reality of living within the 'now but not yet' paradigm.⁶¹ In these

situations, Michael Rion's six questions⁶² or Laura Nash's situation specific questions⁶³ can be helpful in discerning the right action to move forward.

3.3 Application

Several issues will be examined within the following three main sections: profit and the capital market; sustainability and the environment; and poverty and exploitation.

3.3.1 Profit and the Capital Market

Capitalism for many people "conjures up images of exploitation, injustice, corporate greed, and the perennial offence to humanity, and to God, of the rich-poor divide".⁶⁴ Even though, according to Harper, capitalism would still be one of the more effective wealth creation systems even if the end goal was to give everything away.⁶⁵

Evidence shows that capitalism has improved the lives of many people.⁶⁶ When the US ceased importing clothing from Bangladesh, the country and the families suffered from the loss of incomes from fifty-thousand child-workers losing their jobs.⁶⁷ Child labour is wrong. In this case, it could be argued it was equally immoral to stop them working and cut-off that source of income.

The root of the problem is not the system in itself, but the way we as human beings (or those in control of the system), choose to exercise their influence.⁶⁸ This aligns very well with the Christian worldview, that our fundamental need as human beings is for the redemptive power of the cross. In our desire to save, or to rescue, capitalism (or business in general) for Christ, we are reflecting God's heart to save humanity from the sinful lives they choose to live. This desire also emphasises the importance of working as a Christian influence within the capitalist system in order to influence for the greater good. The Church's role is not to be pro or anti-capitalist; but to advocate for whatever systems increase opportunity, and to call to account systems (or people) that attempt to do the opposite.⁶⁹

⁶² M. Rion, *The Responsible Manager: Practical Strategies for Ethical Decision Making*, 2nd, reprint ed. (Amherst: Human Resource Development Press, 1996), 13–14.

1. Why is this bothering me? (Type of problem)
2. Who else matters?
3. Is it my problem? (Do I go beyond the moral minimum? What can I really do?)
4. Is this an ethical concern? (Can we identify the norms that apply and how they apply?)
5. What do others think? (What's going on?)
6. Am I being true to myself? (Check motives and consult conscience).

⁶³ L.L. Nash, *Good Intentions Aside: A Manager's Guide to Resolving Ethical Problems* (Brighton: Harvard Business School Press, 1990), 86, 130, 160.

⁶⁴ Buxton, *Celebrating Life*, 147.

⁶⁵ Ian Harper, "The Ethics of Capitalism," *Zadok Perspectives* (2003): 10.

⁶⁶ Richard Higginson, "A Christian Response to Global Capitalism," *Zadok*, no. S112 (2001): 10.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Buxton, *Celebrating Life*, 155.

⁶⁹ R.M. Blank and W. McGurn, *Is the Market Moral?: A Dialogue on Religion, Economics, and Justice*, Pew Forum Dialogues on Religion and Public Life (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), 53.

⁵³ Diehl, *The Monday Connection*, 106.

⁵⁴ Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, 1:650.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Diehl, *The Monday Connection*, 106–107.

⁵⁷ Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, 26.

⁵⁸ Alexander D. Hill, "Business Ethics," in *The Marketplace Ministry Handbook: A Manual for Work, Money and Business*, by R.J. Banks and R.P. Stevens (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2005), 32. Which combined with love, make up the trinity of values suggested by Hill for use in moral decision making (Ibid., 31.)

⁵⁹ Wright, *Virtue Reborn*, 140.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 141.

⁶¹ It is because we live in times where the kingdom is both revealed, and still to come that we continue to have these situations in the first place.

Within business, there are also circumstances where there is a need to prioritise one stakeholder over another (e.g. shareholders). This is not because they are more entitled or more deserving than other stakeholders, it's because the profitability of the business is essential for long term viability. Prioritising other areas in the short-term (such as jobs) may impact the long-term success of the business, and worst-case may cause the business to cease trading. This should not be used as an excuse for continuous prioritisation of shareholders (over employees or the environment), or over-compensation when circumstances don't call for it.⁷⁰ As we continue to anticipate and pursue the full realisation of God's kingdom, we must accept that often there won't be enough to go around.⁷¹

3.3.1.1 Practical steps – managing ourselves and others

As managers, we need to move away from the questions focusing on maximising our return on investment. Instead, we need to shift to questions that focus on stewardship of the gifts and resources God has given and placed around us. Using those resources, how can we best enable the community and our people to flourish?⁷²

Then we also need to examine how we steward our own lives: specifically in this case our own finances. In some situations, it may be more appropriate to turn down promotions or pay rises than to accept them.⁷³ In some cases where we have to work in situations where we feel morally compromised, you can look at removing the personal benefit you receive from the situation.⁷⁴ In each case, it allows us to remain firmly in the world, reflecting God's calling to reach and minister to all people, without becoming 'of the world' (John 17:14–19). Our role is to clearly represent Christ's values in the marketplace, despite the perceived personal cost associated with them.

3.3.2 Sustainability and the environment

Sustainability is about putting in place practices and policies that have in mind the long-term viability and flourishing of natural resources.⁷⁵ Sustainability embodies the self-giving nature of *agapē* love in its drive to set aside instant gratification for the long-term well-being of other people, resources and species.⁷⁶ Business who ignore the importance of sustainability could also be affecting their own or the industries long-term viability.⁷⁷

Van Duzer articulates that the foundational purpose of business is not the protection of the environment;⁷⁸ wholly sustainable business “remains to some extent an aspiration”.⁷⁹ That's not an excuse for neglecting the important job we have as Christian witnesses on behalf of the environment: encouraging the establishment of “ethical foundations for environmental responsibility”.⁸⁰ The Old Testament establishes clear sustainability practices with respect to creation, including both the land (Ex. 23:10–12) and animals (Deut. 22:6–7).

Eugene C. Hargrove maintains that good environmental ethics have to be grounded in a common belief in the “intrinsic value of natural objects and species”.⁸¹ This leads to an ethical framework based on the protection of natural things and species against economic exploitation. Within the Christian worldview, we have that grounding in our call in Genesis, to be stewards of all that God has created (Gen. 2:15). In the increasingly secular world, we have to ground these ethical beliefs within a worldview that others outside of the church can relate.

In the past, the secular world has more commonly reflected the views of ethicist Norman Bowie. Bowie argued that businesses have no obligation to protect the environment beyond the minimum dictated by law.⁸² W. Michael Hoffman heavily critiqued his view.⁸³

Philosopher Holmes Rolston III then, building upon the ideas of Hargrove, made a case for species and ecosystems on naturalistic, rational grounds. With this belief defined and justified within a more secular worldview, Rolston goes on to develop an ethical framework for a business' relationship to the environment.⁸⁴ Although this cannot be attributed directly to Rolston's work, recent trends are indicating more companies are linking sustainability with their mission, values or purpose than previously.⁸⁵

3.3.3 Poverty and Exploitation

The question of what moral standards a multinational should adopt when operating in a country outside its home is a complex one. If the standard of the host country is higher than that of the operating country, should the company increase the standard of operation to align with the host? Or decrease the standard to align with the operating countries practices?⁸⁶

⁷⁸ Van Duzer, *Why Business Matters to God*, 156.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 160.

⁸⁰ Childs, *Ethics in Business*, 110.

⁸¹ E.C. Hargrove, *Foundations of Environmental Ethics* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1989), 104.

⁸² Norman Bowie, “Morality, Money, and Motor Cars,” in *Business, Ethics, and the Global Environment*, ed. W. M. Hoffman, R. Frederick, and E. S. Petryr (Quosum Books, 1990), 89–97.

⁸³ W. Michael Hoffman, “Business and Environmental Ethics,” *Business Ethics Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (1991): 170–172.

⁸⁴ H. Rolston, *Environmental Ethics*, Ethics And Action (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), chap. 6.8.

⁸⁵ In McKinsey's 2017 Sustainability survey, the overall trend for companies increased from 30% (2012) to 46%. Dorothee Bové, Anne-Titia, Steven D'Herde, and Swartz, “Sustainability's Deepening Imprint,” *McKinsey Quarterly* (2017): 2, <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/sustainability-and-resource-productivity/our-insights>.

⁸⁶ Thomas Donaldson, “Multinational Decision Making,” in *Beyond Integrity: A Jewish-Christian Approach to Business Ethics*, by S.B. Rae and K.L. Wong (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 98.

⁷⁰ Van Duzer, *Why Business Matters to God*, 161.

⁷¹ Ibid., 160–161.

⁷² Ibid., 152.

⁷³ R.P. Stevens, A. Ung, and E.H. Peterson, *Taking Your Soul to Work: Overcoming the Nine Deadly Sins of the Workplace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 142.

⁷⁴ T. Keller, *Every Good Endeavour: Connecting Your Work to God's Plan for the World* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2012), 122.

⁷⁵ Childs, *Ethics in Business*, 116.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Overfishing is just one example, see: “SDG 14. Life below Water | Sustainable Development Goals | Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations,” accessed April 25, 2018, <http://www.fao.org/sustainable-development-goals/goals/goal-14/en/>.

In some sense, the word multinational is misleading. The majority of multinational companies are both chartered and owned in the country of origin: which means they are intrinsically linked with the laws and practices of the home country.⁸⁷ Thomas Donaldson cites the example of aligning tax practice with that of the operating nations custom.⁸⁸ In following the stricter tax law of the host country by not filing a false view of the company operations, the company consequently received a tax bill “many times higher” than competitors. The practice, although illegal in the host country, was considered “standard operating practice” within the operating country. The net result being the company was put at a competitive disadvantage.

In the example of wages, the question of fair or equal pay arises. With the minimum wage in the UK set at £7.83,⁸⁹ should UK multinationals be paying Indian workers £7.83 an hour? If not, should they be paying them an equal wage after cost of living adjustment? If the cost of living becomes identical with the UK; what incentive do multinationals have for employing workers in other countries, when the cost would be the same in the host country?

To help define moral responsibility when operating within different ethical or legal systems, Donaldson defines two different categories. The first, ‘minimal’ defines a “strict mandatory duty”, the second ‘enlightened’ is more of an optional, but praise-worthy, duty. In the category of minimal, Donaldson places two sets of rights, as defined by Henry Shue. The first being “basic rights” – needs which have to be satisfied to prevent serious harm to a person’s health.⁹⁰ The second, the liberal no-harm principle, that it is wrong to “inflict avoidable harm upon other people”.⁹¹ Donaldson goes on to define two ethical formulas to determine if a specific practice should be permissible.⁹² The first which evaluates whether the standards of the host country is influenced by the progress of economic development; the second where they are not.⁹³ By clearly categorising specific actions we can better evaluate if a company’s practices conflict with our minimal duties.

3.3.3.1 Practical steps - forming partnerships

To address issues of sustainability or exploitation, Van Duzer advocates building partnership with external organisations that align with the causes being advocated. Partnerships can be an efficient way to address injustice or unethical behaviour within a company.⁹⁴

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 98–99.

⁸⁹ “National Minimum Wage and National Living Wage Rates,” GOV.UK, accessed April 24, 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/national-minimum-wage-rates>.

⁹⁰ H. Shue, *Basic Rights: Subsistence, Affluence, and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 34.

⁹¹ Henry Shue, “Exporting Hazards,” *Ethics* 91, no. 4 (1981): 587.

⁹² He describes them in detail in his paper on Multinational Decision Making (Donaldson, “Multinational Decision Making.”)

⁹³ Ibid., 101.

⁹⁴ Unethical, but not illegal behaviour. Illegal behaviour should be addressed through engagement with the relevant HR department and local authorities.

A change in a company’s internal policy could give them a severe competitive disadvantage and could lead to the business becoming unprofitable or losing all their market share to competitors.⁹⁵ By working with an external partner to lobby the government, a positive change is made that has a more significant impact as the whole (industry is forced to meet the new regulations) and reduces the effect on the company because the sector is affected as a whole.⁹⁶

4 Pastoral Framework

How does what we know theologically, and what we understand practically influence how we translate and comprehend where we are pastorally?

4.1 Working across worldviews and cultures

Within a working environment, we aren’t just faced with cultural challenges of understanding that arise from different upbringings, but also those that stem from our conflicting worldviews. Ethics is a complicated area, with culture and history having such a key influence. What presents itself as a merely rational decision to someone in Britain might not seem so clear-cut to someone in China or Iraq. Even within our society, with the competing stories we have all developed, “the vaunted voice of reason is heard differently by people from different backgrounds with different makeups functioning in different institutional settings”.⁹⁷

Within modern/post-modern society, we are moving towards “the elimination of God from our account of life and reality” and the “making absolute what is only finite and conditional”.⁹⁸ The shift away from our Christian roots, as a nation, has eroded our vision for the end of humanity. Consequently, “our ethical precepts [as a society] have become void of all meaning and authority”.⁹⁹

In the workplace, the first step to opening an ethical dialogue is embracing the reality of our opposing Christian worldview and ethical framework. There is no “neutral language of rationality”¹⁰⁰ that everyone can use to dialogue together. “In our secular world the conviction lingers that objective reason can lead us to moral truth along a path of neutrality”.¹⁰¹ But with the rise in recognition of our own unconscious bias, how can we ever expect to walk the path of ‘neutrality’?¹⁰²

⁹⁵ Van Duzer, *Why Business Matters to God*, 166.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ E. Mount, *Professional Ethics in Context: Institutions, Images, and Empathy* (Louisville: Westminster/J. Knox Press, 1990), 54–55.

⁹⁸ P. Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, trans. J.L. Adams, Reprint, “The Protestant Era v. 577, p. 1948 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 166–167.

⁹⁹ A.C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 6–7.

¹⁰⁰ Childs, *Ethics in Business*, vii.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 6.

¹⁰² See for example <https://www.projectimplicit.net/about.html> which was started in 2011 by three scientists at Harvard University, University of Virginia and the University of Washington.

The legacy of the enlightenment is that we continue to resist anything that could be perceived as “sectarian influences” within business decision making.¹⁰³ This influences our choice of language and how we present conclusions or rationale behind moral decisions. Businesses have “an accepted language of reasoned argument”¹⁰⁴ that merely quoting the Bible at will not suffice.¹⁰⁵ We need to translate biblical-based moral insight into neutral vocabulary that can be understood and respected by everyone around the table.¹⁰⁶

The job of Christians in business is to translate our vision into “ethical insight and responsible action” and model it every day.¹⁰⁷ Not to criticise or dispense “arbitrary moral injunctions”,¹⁰⁸ but to answer the questions of purpose for business, as one of many “social relationships and activities”.¹⁰⁹

Tillich, in his book *The Protestant Principles*, reflects on the reality of the fallen world we live in as Christians and our complete dependence on the grace of God to live within it. He calls us to be the collective church to recognise that our existence is not grounded in being right but in being forgiven. Only then are we able to open the door for transparent and honest dialogue.¹¹⁰

4.2 Persisting in my vocation

We have a biblical vocational to be stewards of this world and the resources within them. Sometimes the circumstances or situations we face bring into question that vocation. Frederick Buechner emphasised, “the kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work that you need most to do and the world most needs to have done”.¹¹¹

We are called to work where the world needs us, and that’s often in the place where we most disagree with the world. The least Christian corporations (by values) that prioritise profits over people are the very place that most need a Christian voice: slowly, but surely, standing up for the dignity and value of all people, over exploitation, in the name of profit. God doesn’t always call us to comfortable places, where the definition of right and wrong are spelt out and accepted across the board.¹¹² It can be too easy to step out of challenging

situations, jobs, companies or industries; but God uses changing circumstances to build strength.¹¹³

In choosing to work in business, we are also fighting against the image of society and church. The heroes we place in front of our children or hold up in society are rarely business executives, Laura L. Nash observes. It’s difficult to hold up the corporate executive for “nobly making money”¹¹⁴ against the doctors and nurses of our NHS that are saving lives. Or, as Philip Caldwell (former Ford Chairman) complained, it’s too easy for people to relate participation in business with being “greedy and dishonest”.¹¹⁵ This was a view that has been challenged by some companies, most notably in the early days of Cadbury. George Cadbury invested his own money in building homes for workers to “alleviate the evils of modern... living conditions”.¹¹⁶

As Christians in business, we face opposition and misunderstanding from culture and church. It can be difficult for the church to relate to business. One executive remarked that churches tend to work in moral absolutes – X is right, so Y is wrong. Companies tend to work in the realm of compromise, where concession must be made daily.¹¹⁷

4.3 Getting it Wrong

No framework, or ethical decision-making process is infallible. Frameworks work well for supporting us in making “ethically sensitive and well-considered judgement[s]”¹¹⁸, but due to our fallen nature, they can’t stop us making the wrong decision.

As Christians, grace and forgiveness secures us from what Thielicke refers to as the “law of progressive ethical decline”.¹¹⁹ We can continue to accept the risk of making the wrong decision because our salvation, our approval, our relationship with God does not rest on those decisions, but on the divine grace of God (2 Cor. 3:17).¹²⁰

In each borderline situation, where there isn’t a clear answer or direction, we can make the decision that is best suited. As we are subject to no law, the choices we make every day will appear to the world to be inconsistent.¹²¹ Even when we do make the right decisions, we have to accept that other people won’t always approve. Nash cites the example of managers calculating economic purpose differently. From the outside, it looks the same. The result may even be the same, but the approach taken to come to that conclusion is rooted in two very different sets of values.¹²²

¹⁰³ Childs, *Ethics in Business*, 6.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁰⁵ Neither should we have an expectation for people to follow our moral code when they don’t share our beliefs.

¹⁰⁶ Childs, *Ethics in Business*, 7.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁰⁸ Jack Mahoney, “Christianity and Business Ethics,” in *The Ethics of Business in a Global Economy*, ed. Paul M. Minus (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1993), 115, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-015-8165-3_11.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ James M Childs Jr, “Religion and Politics: Tradition and the Post-Modern Agenda a Response to Professor Frederick Gedicks,” *Cap. UL Rev.* 20 (1991): 154–157, <http://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/capulr20&div=17&id=&page=>.

¹¹¹ F. Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, Revised, Expanded ed. edition. (New York: HarperOne, 1993), 398.

¹¹² Stevens, Ung, and Peterson, *Taking Your Soul to Work*, 114.

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¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Nash, *Good Intentions Aside*, 24.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ “Cadbury: How It Put Bournville on the Map, Literally,” *Bournville News*, October 28, 2012, accessed April 25, 2018, <http://bournvillevillage.com/old-bournville/cadbury-how-it-put-bournville-on-the-map-literally/>.

¹¹⁷ Childs, *Ethics in Business*, 10.

¹¹⁸ Rion, *The Responsible Manager: Practical Strategies for Ethical Decision Making*, 13.

¹¹⁹ Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, 1:606.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:613.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 1:607.

¹²² Nash, *Believers in Business*, 92–93.

4.4 Accepting “Just Enough”

When trying to ‘change the world’, we can often attempt and replace the God who changes the world, with the person God uses in changing the world. The idea of living within the lines that God has given us is something humanity has struggled with since the fall.¹²³ We are called to steward ourselves well, to not insist on carrying the burdens he gladly bore for us.¹²⁴

Within the spheres of influence that God places us within, we must pray and operate within the authority we have been given.¹²⁵ We need to be open to those small opportunities to influence within our circles. There are always opportunities for “service and sustainability” in each circle we have been placed in. We must make a habit of seek out any and all opportunities.¹²⁶

As we seek to be obedient to God and serve our companies well, often our circles of influence will grow, and our decision-making power will increase (Matt. 25:23). Influence comes from first being faithful with the little we are given, and being sensitive to the situations where we can, and should speak up.¹²⁷ Recognition must be given to the reality of the fallen world we live in: a Christian manager won’t always be able to “fully pursue God’s redemptive agenda”.¹²⁸ In some circumstances it would be wiser to hold back and continue increasing in influence for “such a time as this” (Esther 4:14).¹²⁹

We have to trust in God’s sovereignty over the place we are. When operating in challenging circumstances, it’s easy to become convinced that you are working on your own against an opposing principle. We must impact where and when we can, trusting that God will do his part.¹³⁰

We must also recognise that change is not instant. Even with the best intentions, change takes time. Diehl cites the example of the new chairmen at Bethlehem Steel. It took 15 years from setting the agenda against racism for the company to fully adopt that agenda.¹³¹

As Laura Nash and Howard Stevenson advocate; we need to measure success not by one or an infinite number of things, but by doing ‘just enough’ across the areas where it matters most.¹³²

¹²³ Adam and Eve were deceived by the snake because they wanted to “be like God” (Gen. 3:5).

¹²⁴ Hebrews 9:28, 1 Peter 2:24.

¹²⁵ Van Duzer, *Why Business Matters to God*, 193.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 195.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 193.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 141.

¹²⁹ This of course is not a licence to do nothing, or to ‘sin’, but a faithful seeking of God’s guidance in when to make a stand.

¹³⁰ Stevens, Ung, and Peterson, *Taking Your Soul to Work*, 146.

¹³¹ Diehl, *The Monday Connection*, 92.

¹³² L. Nash and H. Stevenson, *Just Enough: Tools for Creating Success in Your Work and Life* (London: Wiley, 2010).

5 Conclusion

According to the Edelman 2018 Trust Barometer, just over half the global population trust business as a sector.¹³³ By working through some of the relevant theological, practical and pastoral topics we have gained a better understanding of the purpose God has for humankind, and our role within that.

We have begun to unpack our culture and how to handle borderline ethical situations within a Christian framework. Finally, we looked at the specific issues applicable to some of the challenges faced when seeking to live this out in our everyday lives. Further research could be done to evaluate specific situations retrospectively, commenting on the effectiveness of the framework applied.

Our role in the world of work is to be working to restore trust in business through the implementation of Godly working practices and ethical decision making within the spheres we represent. There is no such thing as Christian business ethics. Instead, we have Christian ethics, which contribute insight towards business ethics. These then give expression to the faith they are rooted in.¹³⁴

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¹³³ 2018 Executive Summary: Edelman Trust Barometer (Edelman inc., 2018), 4, http://cms.edelman.com/sites/default/files/2018-02/2018_Edelman_TrustBarometer_Executive_Summary_Jan.pdf.

¹³⁴ Childs, *Ethics in Business*, 11.

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