

Bridging Christian Ethics and Economic Life: Where Pastors and Laity Disconnect

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Are traditional models of ministry adequate to support Christians struggling with ethical challenges in today's workplaces? This is a question academic researchers and church leaders alike are asking with greater urgency as they seek a better understanding of the gap that often seems to separate faith and economic life.

In a national study conducted over the last two years by students in Columbia Theological Seminary's Doctor of Ministry program, more than 100 personal interviews with church members yielded two notable conclusions. First, Christians in a wide range of secular occupations have little difficulty naming ethical challenges encountered in their work lives. More than 70 distinct issues were cited including financial fraud, product safety, race discrimination, conflicts of interest, employee dismissals, bankruptcy, tax evasion, privacy violations, fair pricing, debt collection, resume fraud and sex harassment, among others. Second, they rarely, if ever, seek pastoral counsel when struggling with issues at work. Their principal reasons for not doing so are a perception that pastors lack business insight and knowledge; a belief that the church is indifferent to the business sphere of life; a lack of confidence in the church's management of its own business affairs; and a perception that in many congregations the culture discourages members from bringing work-related concerns to church.

Background and Method

Most students in Columbia's Doctor of Ministry program are pastors seeking to enrich their ministries in the parish or other settings. Over a two-year period, a geographically and theologically diverse group of these students enrolled in an elective course on "Ministry with Business People."¹ As a pre-course assignment, each conducted individual interviews with at least five people who were members of churches and employed in business, professional, government or secular not-for-profit occupations.² The following questions were asked:

1. Can you describe at least one moral or ethical concern that has affected you personally in your career or work life? (If no answer, go to question 3)
2. Was the church helpful to you in addressing the concern(s)? If so, how? If not, what might have been helpful?
3. Can you recall specific sermons, classes or other ways that the church has offered practical guidance or help in your business or professional life?
4. Have you ever sought advice or counsel from a pastor regarding a business- or career-related concern? If so, was it helpful? If you have not done so, what considerations might help you determine whether to seek pastoral counsel about a business matter?
5. On the whole, do you think the church does enough to help members integrate their faith with their lives at work? If not, how might we do better?

Interviews were completed with 102 individual respondents, including executives, managers and employees of large corporations, small businesses, medical providers, government agencies, professional firms, and other employment contexts. Approximately one-third of the respondents were members of the students' own congregations. They ranged in age from early twenties to late sixties; about 40 percent were female.

Ethical Issues at Work

A significant finding was the ease with which respondents could recall ethical issues they had encountered at work. They named and described an astounding variety of matters involving relationships with co-workers, employers, subordinates, customers, suppliers, partners, and others. Following are a few typical examples:

An employee of a small business discovered that his boss, the owner, was increasing the amount of an insurance claim for water damage by adding undamaged, obsolete inventory to the list of goods that were legitimately damaged.

A sales representative was asked to sell advertising to sponsor cable television programming with content that he considered immoral.

An executive in a family business became estranged from a family member after a confrontation in which the executive accused the family member of failing to do his share of the work.

A store manager was told by her corporate office to reduce the number of full-time workers at her location, making it her responsibility to decide which employees would lose their jobs.

An investment adviser faced daily temptations to boost his commission income by recommending unnecessary transactions to his clients.

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, a hospital administrator tried to quell employee and community hostility toward the Arab-Americans who comprised approximately 25 percent of the hospital's medical staff.

Pastoral Counsel

For most respondents, these situations and others like them were accompanied by significant psychological stress. Many also found such issues *spiritually* challenging, as they sought to apply Christian values and teachings in practical ways. One confessed, "Looking back, I made the wrong decision, which makes me wonder how deep is my faith?" And an architect, who filed a lawsuit to collect a past-due debt, recalled, "I hated the way the decision was making me feel, and I wondered if God wouldn't want me to simply walk away so I could feel clean again. 'Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.' Was I supposed to take that literally?"

Despite a widely shared belief that one's faith should inform ethical decision-making at work, only 18 respondents had ever consulted a pastor for advice about such a matter.³ Of these, six were dissatisfied with the experience, including an entrepreneur who angrily moved his church membership after a pastor made light of his concern that his product might be seen as exploiting children. More revealing were the perspectives of those who had never sought pastoral counsel regarding a business- or career-related

issue.⁴ These respondents cited four primary reasons for not seeking such advice, the first being a general perception that pastors lack the business insight and knowledge to be of any assistance:

"I think preachers spend a lot of time, and rightly so, thinking about ancient problems. And while I'm sure people in Bible times wrestled with tough problems, our world is very different from theirs, so I doubt that my pastor would be very much help."

"Clergy are perceived solely as spiritual advisers; they are placed on a pedestal and not seen as advisors to businesspeople."

"To do this would presume that the minister had some specific knowledge of business, the issues involved in a particular situation, and of likely consequences for short- and long-term profits."

"[The] minister is not in tune with today's workplace and could not relate . . . so it would be better to talk with someone who would automatically understand without getting me frustrated."

"I just do not feel that pastors have the experience to address these issues."

A second frequently cited reason was a perception that the church itself is indifferent to the business sphere of life:

"I did not approach the church because ethical issues in business are not of interest to any preacher I know. There is more of an emphasis on your family and how you live your personal life."

"My pastor has no idea what I do for a living, and has never shown any interest in finding out by starting a conversation on the subject. He knows a great deal about my family though."

"The church rarely addresses these types of issues. It seems to be more directed toward individual relationships with Christ."

"I do not think it is an interest of the church to help one resolve work problems."

"Pastors are too busy taking care of the sick and dying to get involved in people's work whims and troubles."

"Church is a place to get spiritually centered. I'm not sure it wants a role in workplace matters."

A third reason for not seeking pastoral counsel was a lack of confidence in the church's management of its own business, a factor not unrelated to the first:

"How well does the church conduct its business affairs? Would any of their practices be relevant for the world?"

"The church is not a good example itself. Consequently, church officers burn out or become too attached to their responsibilities."

"The church's support comes from businesspeople, but we are not always confident the church manages that money responsibly."

"I see all the same problems in the church working environment."

The final often-mentioned reason was a perception that the culture of many congregations discourages members from bringing work-related concerns to church:

"I feel like my church has a norm that business doesn't belong in church. There is the occasional joy of a promotion, or a shared concern about unemployment, but never teaching or conversation about one's faith in the workplace."

"The church expects us to handle those situations personally."

"This [survey interview] is the first time a preacher has ever asked me anything about my career. Do we just have the idea we aren't supposed to talk much about this stuff at church?"

"I would like to see the church allow people to share their work experiences. It would be refreshing if there was an openness to suggestions on applying church life to work life."

"It would be important to feel the freedom to talk about work-related problems with my pastor, but for some reason it seems it wouldn't be appropriate."

"Many of us go to church as a respite from our weekday stress. Business isn't something people really want brought up at church."

Other barriers preventing respondents from seeking pastoral counsel included fear of judgmental responses, concerns about confidentiality, and a reluctance to bother ministers with matters that might be deemed trivial.

Preaching

It is significant that no respondent recalled a sermon specifically aimed at addressing business or workplace issues. However, several gave examples of sermons on more general topics (e.g., love, forgiveness, tolerance) that could apply in a variety of social situations. A corporate executive said her pastor's sermons "offer generally useful wisdom, but never any examples to connect it to the workplace." A grocery store manager echoed her sentiments, "The church teaches me to live as a Christian, but I have to apply those principles to my life and work on my own."

Implications for Christians in Secular Occupations

The doctoral students conducting these interviews were astonished that Christians, particularly friends and members of their own churches, routinely face ethical challenges in their workplaces, yet consider clergy to be of very little value as they wrestle with these concerns. For nearly all the pastors, these interviews were the first conversations they had ever initiated with lay people on the subject of ethics in business or occupational life. Likewise, the conversations were the first on this subject that most of the respondents ever had with a pastor. "Ethical and moral issues seem to abound within the business community, both profit and non-profit," noted one student, "and the overwhelming conclusion is that the church is not addressing these concerns. But the reason why is still a difficult question to answer."

It may be a difficult question, but it is not a new one for writers and scholars who have given it considerable attention in recent years. Edward R. Dayton observes, "Few churches appreciate their business people as a window on the world and fewer still

provide business people with opportunities to discuss in depth the integration of business and Christian values.”⁵ Doug Sherman and William Hendricks report a study with findings similar to our own. In their survey of 2,000 Christians who regularly attend church, 90 percent responded “no” to the question, “Have you ever in your life heard a sermon, read a book, listened to a tape, or been to a seminar that applied biblical principles to everyday work issues?” Their conclusion: “All of this suggests that the church has grown virtually silent on the subject of work.”⁶

Similarly, research by Laura Nash and Scotty McLennan found that many Christians are “looking for ways to live their Christian beliefs and values at work, as they do at home and at church.” But despite their best efforts, “even deeply faithful Christians in business tend to feel a strong disconnect between their experience of the church or private faith, and the spirit-challenging conditions of the workplace.”⁷ This feeling, expressed by many of our own interviewees, is itself spirit-challenging for businesspeople whose attempts to find coherence give rise to “significant psychological and moral uncertainty.”⁸ This disconnection of faith and work can be seen as a division of life into two distinct compartments, at times dynamically related to each other, at other times entirely separate. Writes David A. Krueger, “For some people religious life and business practice are integrally related in a creative tension. For others – both clergy and business professionals – the worlds of church and corporate life are galaxies apart, separated by ignorance, hostility, apathy, language, interests, values.”⁹

Pressures to Disconnect

Nash, as well, uses the term “creative tensions” in identifying seven paradoxes, or “oppositions,” that appear contradictory but cannot be ignored because they are “nonetheless true.”¹⁰ Examples of such tensions are people needs versus profit obligations, love versus competition, humility versus the ego of success.

Failure to confront the problem of the businessperson as Christian and the Christian as businessperson is damaging to the Christian executive. He or she may view success in business as alien to a Christian worldview, or may feel secretly guilty about work because it is a kind of secondary calling. In either case, the “real me” – the one who prays and communes with God and knows how this-world activities should be conducted – is the one that exists outside working hours. For a business leader, this is a very small part of his or her day.¹¹

It is widely recognized that tensions of this sort are commonly experienced in business life, with some theorists arguing that the solution lies not in confronting the problem or, as Krueger proposes, in forging “a proper connection between the church and the world of business . . . that is both prophetic and supportive, critical and constructive.”¹² Rather, they contend that business people and the church need to more clearly delineate the boundary separating the two spheres, accepting that they need not and cannot be reconciled. In a famous *Harvard Business Review* article, Albert Z. Carr offers this advice to the businessperson whose “conscience, perhaps spurred by religious idealism, troubles him”:¹³

That most businessmen are not indifferent to ethics in their private lives, everyone will agree. My point is that in their office lives they cease to be private citizens; they become game players who must be guided by a somewhat different set of ethical standards. . . .¹⁴

Carr's strategy assumes a willingness and ability on the part of the individual to accept the premise that one's moral commitments and responsibilities should be determined by, and may vary according to, the roles and contexts in which one finds oneself. For the Christian this is no easy task, since to proclaim "Christ as Lord of all is to suggest that God's kingdom penetrates all of life and that the moral demands of discipleship . . . reach into every system and institutional arrangement. To affirm such a universalism of faith requires us to denounce dichotomies like 'sacred and secular,' which can provide conceptual crutches for the artificial compartmentalization of faith and the various spheres of life."¹⁵ The theologian Helmut Thielicke is another who challenges efforts to limit God's influence to the inward, spiritual life by withdrawing the "lordship of God from the 'worldly' sphere, trying, as it were, to make this lordship private rather than public."¹⁶ He shows that the church has been at least as responsible as the laity for attempting to divide life into "two spheres of existence which have nothing to do with one another, spheres which are subject to very different laws and which divide the Christian person – through whom the dividing frontier passes – into two completely separate and isolated segments."¹⁷ The dangerous result, he warns, is the "establishment of a temporal sphere in which the radical commandments of the Sermon on the Mount do not seem to apply, a sphere which consequently cannot be called into question."¹⁸

If we conclude, then, that deliberate compartmentalization is neither a faithful nor satisfactory option, the alternative is for the church to actually support the businessperson in strengthening the vital connection between Christian faith and that portion of life that accounts for most of his or her waking hours and productive years. If we accept this as an imperative for ministry, what role should pastors play in providing such support? And how, if at all, might they be motivated and equipped for this task?

Implications for Clergy

Given the findings of our study, it is not surprising that respondents who did find work-related guidance at church were more likely to say it came from other lay people than from clergy. The most helpful resources cited by interviewees were lay-led small groups where study topics related to business and career concerns. A number of these groups were independent and ecumenical or were organized by parachurch organizations, indicating a willingness of businesspeople to look outside their local churches for resources to meet their needs.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to propose specific models of ministry to meet the needs of businesspeople; however, it should be noted that a number of important contributions to this effort are being made. Nash and McLennan have added greatly to the church's practical body of knowledge by analyzing the complexities of the problem and proposing a framework for future engagement. Krueger has proposed an equally valuable, if less comprehensive, six-point process based on his experience with a clergy education project aimed at enhancing clergy sensitivity to business and workplace realities.

Our field interviews confirmed and expanded upon what other researchers have learned: Most pastors are ill-prepared to assist parishioners in their efforts to connect their faith and work lives. This weakness emerges in sharp relief against the broad landscape of ethical challenges routinely encountered in the workplace, and it is significant for at least two reasons. First, it is when the Christian is in the teeth of an ethical dilemma that he or she is likely to feel the greatest tension between the claims of faith and demands of work. We suspect that when things are going smoothly, it is far easier for most people to tolerate a disconnection between these spheres of life. Second, times of ethical difficulty produce both a desire to turn to one's faith (and presumably one's church) for guidance, as well as a rich opportunity for the pastor to address work-related concerns in a manner that has practical value to the parishioner.

Our study found considerable agreement among church members in their perceptions of clergy, confirming an observation of Nash and McLennan: "Some businesspeople seeking to bring Christianity into their work lives actually welcome the input of clergy, but they can't find it."¹⁹ A consequence, they point out, is that lay people have begun to develop resources to meet this need on their own, often through parachurch initiatives, some of which more properly belong to the popular "spirituality-and-business movement" than to any sectarian tradition.²⁰ Like Krueger, they argue that today's clergy must radically change their attitudes and ways of relating to laity, learning to minister with businesspeople as willing listeners and mutual learners.

Conclusion

For preachers, several lessons emerge from our conversations with church members. While many working people struggle to make their faith relevant to the activity that involves most of their waking hours and productive years – a struggle that can involve intense spiritual strain when ethical issues are encountered – they may feel that the church and members of clergy are indifferent to their plight. This perception has deep roots in the history and culture of our churches; yet many preachers unwittingly reinforce it by failing to take an active interest in parishioners' work lives. Those who wish to make ministry more relevant to economic life might begin by asking two questions: How often – and how well – do I preach about the relationship of Christian faith to the sometimes harsh realities of today's workplaces? And, how much do I know – and care – about the weekday challenges and aspirations of the people with whom I minister on Sunday morning?

Notes

1. These denominations were Presbyterian Church (USA), Southern Baptist, United Methodist, United Church of Christ, African Methodist Episcopal, American Baptist and Anglican.
2. Other assignments in the course included required readings from a variety of theological and business texts, daily discussions of relevant questions, structured dialogues with diverse business guests, and a final paper envisioning models of ministry that might more effectively connect Christian ethics and economic life.
3. Another five reported that they had sought pastoral counsel about a contemplated career or job change.
4. For simplicity, the term *business* is often used herein to refer to the full range of remunerative, secular occupations. *Businessperson* is similarly used.
5. Edward R. Dayton, *Succeeding in Business Without Losing Your Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 123-24.
6. Doug Sherman and William Hendricks, *Your Work Matters to God, Your Work Matters to God*

(Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1987), 16. The authors have little expectation that this situation will change through the leadership of clergy; therefore, they devote a chapter to defining a role for lay people as the “new clergy” in establishing ministries with business people, including small groups.

7. Laura Nash and Scotty McClennan, *Church on Sunday, Work on Monday: The Challenge of Fusing Christian Values with Business Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 5.

8. *Ibid.*, 7.

9. David A. Krueger, “Connecting Ministry with the Corporate World,” in *On Moral Business*, ed. Max L. Stackhouse, et. al. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 882.

10. Laura L. Nash, *Believers in Business* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1994), 39.

11. *Ibid.*, 60; cf. Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, 7. The Christian is to be a “visible sign” of the gospel as “salt, light and sheep,” not succumbing to the temptation to dissociate the spiritual situation from the material one, despising the material situation, denying that it has any meaning, declaring that it is neutral and does not concern eternal life. This is exactly what Jesus Christ calls hypocrisy.”

12. Krueger, 882.

13. Albert Z. Carr, “Is Business Bluffing Ethical?” *Harvard Business Review* (January-February 1968), 143.

14. *Ibid.*, 144.

15. Krueger, 882;

cf. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (Chicago: Willett, Clark, 1937), 39. Church and society are “both subject to a common constitution, the will of God declared in Scripture and nature.”

16. Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics, Vol. I*, 8.

17. *Ibid.*, 362-63.

18. *Ibid.*, 364.

19. Nash and McLennan, 213.

20. *Ibid.*, 239.