

**THE DEFAULT POSITION –
KEEPING A PLACE AT THE TABLE**

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A. Introduction

For Christians in business, their work is an arena of service and ministry. Such work has both intrinsic and instrumental value in the furthering of God’s kingdom purposes on Earth. That being the case, we should be encouraging graduating business students to be involved courageously in multiple and varying types of business, and to view themselves as ministers in those businesses. When ethical dilemmas present themselves in the workplace, as they inevitably will, we should encourage graduating business students and business people to neither timidly remain on the sidelines nor resign and run. Instead, we should encourage them to engage the culture and maintain a place at the table of influence where they can be forces for change as they provide much needed salt and light in darkness. This engagement model should be their default position.

B. The Purpose of Business

In his book, *Why Business Matters to God* (2010), Jeff Van Duzer sets forth an excellent definition of the purpose of business:

(Business) enables individuals to express aspects of their God-given identities by affording them the opportunity to participate in meaningful and creative work. In short, the Christian in business is in the business of rendering service that will enable humanity to flourish (p. 48).

For Christian men and women in business, their work is an arena of ministry. The word “ministry” comes from the Greek word *diakonos*, meaning “servant” or “to serve.” At its core, business provides service – to clients, consumers, the community, and its own

employees. Business should be considered “ministry” when its central purpose is service, and accordingly fits within the Van Duzer (2010) definition set forth above.

It is often stated that the business work *itself* has *intrinsic value*. In my experience, many of our students at Biola University, and the Christian population in general, understand the concept of the *instrumental* value of business – that a person in business can use that societal position to conduct an at-work Bible study, or use the compensation from work to fund the local church or foreign missions. The problem is that many believe this to be the *sole* value of business. However, the concept of business having intrinsic value means that the work *itself* has value to God. It is clear from the in-class discussions which I have led that many of our students do not understand this. I have found that, when asked what they do in “ministry” at their place of business, most Christians will describe things they do *when not doing their job*, such as leading a Bible study or evangelizing over lunch. As they get older, many people I have known in business, for what they believe to be the first time in their careers, look to gain some perceived significance by “doing ministry.”

When we do not understand that business itself has intrinsic value, we separate ministry from business, and thus support the idea that business only has *instrumental* value. This can lead to thinking of business only as the funding source for “real ministry” such as giving to the local church or supporting missionaries. We hear statements like the high school pastor I once heard, who told the church on a Sunday morning that he was “leaving the ministry to go into business.” The idea is present in culture, and unfortunately among our students, that if we are in business, we’re not “in ministry.” Before these issues are flushed out and discussed in the classes I teach, I often ask the classrooms of students how many of them are in “full time ministry.” I usually

only see a couple of students raise their hands. Significantly, these are juniors and seniors. We need to emphasize to the students that this is an incorrect view of ministry and business. They need to be confident that they are *all* in full time ministry, and the only time they can regard themselves as being out of “full time ministry” is if they renounce their faith. Otherwise, they and we are all full time ministers. This helps them understand that, in business, they are all in “full time ministry” as well. Although many of our students do not understand this initially, in my experience they respond positively and enthusiastically when made aware of it.

C. Places of Influence

Accordingly, we should be encouraging our students to be involved in a wide array of businesses, and to view themselves as ministers in those businesses. We should encourage them to *engage the culture* and find a *place at the table of influence* where they can be much needed salt and light in darkness. This engagement model should be their *default position*. We should, of course, discourage them from engaging in businesses that are inherently evil. However, there are very few businesses whose central business purpose is to promote evil; the pornography industry and organized crime would be examples. Most businesses have a legal and proper central purpose, but have issues arise within them that reflect the fallen society in which we all must live and function. The proper perspective for graduating business students should be to engage the culture and allow themselves to be *forces for change*.

Graduating business students and Christian business people inevitably will encounter ethical dilemmas in their workplaces. This is not surprising in a fallen world. When they do so, they should not withdraw, but should proceed to resolve such dilemmas courageously. Examples in the Bible illustrate this. In Joshua 2, we learn that the

prostitute Rahab hid two spies sent by Joshua, and when the king of Jericho sent her a message asking her to “bring them out,” she instead lied to the king and told him the spies had already left. Rahab had faced an ethical dilemma in which the value of truth telling and obeying the king collided with the value of protecting innocent life and keeping the spies hidden. She could not do both, but instead had to choose. Similarly, Exodus 2 describes the ethical dilemma faced by Pharaoh’s daughter when she discovered the baby Moses in a papyrus basket among the reeds along the bank of the Nile. She faced a situation in which the value of truth telling and informing her father that a Hebrew child had been found collided with the value of protecting innocent life and keeping Moses hidden. Like Rahab, she had to choose and could not have it both ways. Neither of these women withdrew from the dilemma, but both courageously moved forward to resolve it.

In Hebrews 11:31, Rahab is listed as one of the faith champions in that chapter. This indicates that God expects us to make such courageous choices in our business lives, and will consider it the morally right course of action when we do so. Accordingly, we should be encouraging business students and business people to do the same. They should engage culture, and when faced with ethical dilemmas, stand for moral decisions that are dictated by the circumstances of a fallen world. They should not withdraw and stand apart in the hope that someone else will act.

Jesus Himself demonstrated the same assertive model of engagement with culture. Louke Van Wensveen Siker (1989) takes the position that Christ’s model was one of engaging culture rather than abandoning it. Jesus did not stand on the sidelines and waggle a finger of criticism. He spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well, he ate at the tax collector’s home, and he spoke with the woman caught in adultery. In doing so, he

did not become complicit in their sin. This author went on to refer to Jesus as a transformer of business.

If that is the case, then Christians have a responsibility to participate in this transformation of the business world. Author Steve Brinn (1999) writes:

...[W]e should thank God when we see a person of faith taking tough jobs in the marketplace, and we should hope for their courage, wisdom and perseverance, rather than thinking the worst and attacking like jackals (p. 6).

This author goes on to make the point that Christians should not leave the business world because of moral danger. Instead, Christians need to be in the forefront of business *because* moral tensions exist (Brinn, 1999).

If the engagement model above is sound, then we must be very careful before we conclude that an arena of business activity is off limits to Christians, or that one arena of service in business is “better” or “more moral” than another. We should encourage our students to think broadly instead. Authors Kenman Wong and Scott Rae (2011) note:

All legitimate work has great value to God, and no valid occupation has any more value to God than any other. There is no hierarchy of vocations in God’s economy. The work of the plumber, the child-care worker, the salesperson, the executive, the auto mechanic and the pastor are all of great value to God because in their work they are fulfilling the dominion mandate over creation and are reflecting the image of God (p. 54).

D. Consequences to Teaching

At the Crowell School of Business at Biola University, we utilize the engagement model in teaching both the undergraduate and MBA business ethics courses. The students discuss multiple in-class case studies, and write papers dealing with fact situations, in which a Christian must decide whether or not to be engaged in a business which is proceeding a certain way. Some examples of these case studies include:

1. A young Christian leasing agent has been given the invitation of a partner to be part of a lucrative deal in which an entire office building in Beverly Hills can be leased to a big company. However, the young believer finds out that the “big company” is one of the largest pornographers in California. Should he try to keep a place at the table of influence in the hope of bringing salt and light into darkness, or ask his employer to excuse him from the project?
2. A recent Christian graduate has made the decision to be involved in acting in Hollywood, in the hope of becoming someone of influence to advance God’s kingdom work. However, in his first big break, he is offered a continuing role in a nationally syndicated sit-com in which he will play the role of someone with whom the main female character has sex, and in regard to whom she speaks in other vulgar ways. Does he turn down the role, or recognize it as a chance to become influential in Hollywood, and accordingly accept?

In discussing and working through these and other case studies, the students learn how to navigate ethical dilemmas in the fallen world of business that awaits them. We address the topics of sweatshops, child labor in non-U.S. based companies, racism, and questionable claims made in product advertising. We specifically address unsafe working conditions, and the issue of employee privacy. In all these scenarios, we discuss the potential for the students to be *instruments to bring about change*. If there are unsafe working conditions, we discuss the potential to get a place of influence at the table and do something about it. If there are ethical issues in the students’ workplaces concerning violation of employee privacy, we encourage them to first examine the potential for getting places of influence to effect change, as opposed to leaving the company or standing on the sidelines.

In teaching the undergraduate course in human resource management, I have recently added a required textbook for the course (in addition to the standard subject related text). This book by author Timothy Keller (2012) brings the above discussion of the engagement model before the students. Also as part of the course, the class watches “*The Smartest Guys In The Room*” (2005), a documentary concerning the fall of Enron. They then are required to write a paper entitled “Why Enron,” applying the concepts of the purpose of work, and business as ministry. In this paper, they set forth what they can learn from the Enron collapse that will help them be influences for healthy and ethical environments in the businesses of which they will be a part.

Even with a default position of keeping one’s place at the table, there are times when a Christian must walk away from a business opportunity. One tool we provide in both the undergraduate and MBA business ethics courses is a short list entitled “How To Decide When To Stay or Walk Away.” It is by no means exhaustive, and remains a work in progress developed over the fifteen years Dr. Scott Rae and I have been teaching on this subject. So far, we have identified five factors:

1. Is the business intrinsically evil/beyond redemption? This would cover such businesses as pornography and organized crime.
2. Does remaining in the business seriously injure the ability of co-workers and others to take your faith seriously? This covers the close or gray areas, where an expansive definition of “business as ministry” could allow the student to participate in a particular business, but such participation could lead others to criticize the student for such participation and thus potentially tarnish God’s image.

3. Does remaining in the business put you in legal jeopardy? An example of this would be choosing to stay in a business performing some illegal activity (such as insider trading) in the hope of being an instrument for change, but subjecting yourself to legal jeopardy in the process.
4. If you choose to stay, how influential are you going to be? This requires a realistic assessment to determine, as a practical reality, the likelihood that a student actually will be able to have sufficient influence in an organization to become an instrument for change.
5. Is remaining in the business corrosive to your soul? This is the place where a student may have individual subjective reasons for not wanting to participate in an arena of business, but would not say that all persons would be morally required to make the same decision. An example of this could be someone who does not want to work in the tobacco industry because they lost a smoker parent to lung cancer. Another example could be an employee in an advertising agency who would not want to take on an assignment related to advertising clothing with pictures of college drinking games, when that person's sibling was killed by a drunk driver.

E. Conclusion

This is not a time for timidity. The world of business is in desperate need of courageous believers willing to engage culture and bring salt and light to their workplaces. In determining whether or not to engage in a particular business, project or opportunity, a Christian's first thoughts should not be ones of passivity or resignation. Instead, unless there are compelling and overarching reasons not to do so, the Christian's default position should be to keep a place at the table of influence, and be used by God as

an instrument for change. In this way, Christians can be meaningfully involved in a transformation of the business world.

We should be teaching our students accordingly, and we ourselves should be proceeding accordingly in the various arenas of service to business that God graciously provides.

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