

Can Business Be Christian?

A report on a Ridley Hall Foundation conference

by Richard Higginson

The conference *Can Business Be Christian?* certainly goes down as one of the most stimulating and enjoyable in the history of the Ridley Hall Foundation. As with all such conferences, it is difficult to do justice to the event in a brief report. The agreeable ambience of Ridley Hall; the warm mid-summer weather, the conversations over meals or down the local pub at the end of the day; the bonds of friendship which develop as delegates discovered common interests or contacts; the quality of the final act of worship... it is impossible to chronicle such factors, but they make a huge contribution to how an event feels and how it is remembered.

So although I shall limit myself to outlining some of the key ideas communicated by the main speakers at the conference, it should not be imagined that this in any way expresses the totality of what went on. There were several notable shorter contributions as well. What was of value to each delegate, that which impressed itself most forcibly upon them as they went away from the conference, will have varied greatly from person to person. My own account is necessarily subjective and selective.

Paul Stevens – Business as a Calling

Paul Stevens is Professor of Marketplace Theology and Leadership at Regent College Vancouver. His talk was, in essence,



a masterly condensation of his book *The Abolition of the Laity* (reviewed in *Faith in Business* 5:1, and published on the other side of the Atlantic as *The Other Six Days*). It is sub-titled 'Vocation, Work and Ministry in a Biblical Perspective'. Paul began by identifying three common misunderstandings of vocation:

- calling equals occupation (vocational choice is an oxymoron)



- calling equals your station in life (the emphasis of some of the Reformers)
- calling is reserved for those with a professional Christian service career (the assumption of many Christian communities, notably local churches).

Agreeing with Os Guinness in his book *The Call*, he noted how in Christian history there has been both a typical Catholic and a typical Protestant distortion of calling. The Catholic distortion is a dualistic understanding of the sacred and the secular, often described as the upper and lower ways of life, equated with the way of contemplation (*vita contempliva*) and the active life (*vita activa*). The Protestant distortion is a secularisation of calling and a reduction of vocation to occupation. Here there is a loss of the primary call (by God, to God, for God) and its separation from the secondary call (to everyone, in everything and everywhere).

What then is calling? Paul Stevens said that

'Calling means that our lives are so lived as a summons to Christ that the expression of our personalities, the exercise of our gifts (natural and supernatural) are given direction and dynamic power because they are not done for ourselves, families or businesses, but done to the Lord who will hold us accountable for what he has given us.'

This might seem rather a mouthful, but actually establishes three crucial points:

- For there to be a callee there must be a caller – no less than God
- Before we are called to do something we are called to be something – a disciple of Jesus Christ
- The call of God is comprehensive – it embraces the whole of life.

God’s call certainly includes, for many people, a call to be active in business. But it is important not to try to establish this biblically in too direct a way. There is no single unambiguous example in the New Testament of a person being called to a societal occupation. What the Bible does provide is a clear theological framework (summed up in the fourfold theme of creation, fall, redemption and eschatology) into which business fits. It also provides ample evidence of God leading people into work through which he works his purposes out. Put those two together, and you have a possible calling to business.

Paul had many wise words to say about vocational discernment. He calls it:

- one of the most neglected ministries of the church
- never a merely individual self-assessment, but involving others ‘in the body’
- entailing self-knowledge, listening to the voice of God and discerning the leading of the Spirit
- a process that lasts a lifetime – God calls us on to new things.

Good questions to ask include:

- Where do I have a burden (not ‘Where is the greatest need?’)
- What are the strengths, gifts and talents God has given me?
- Where do I see the brokenness of the world?
- What are the desires of my heart?

When we are clear about our calling and fully embracing it, calling brings innumerable benefits. It tells us who we are and whose we are; what we are here for; where we are going; and that we are morally and spiritually accountable for how we walk and work. That all adds up to a purposeful life!

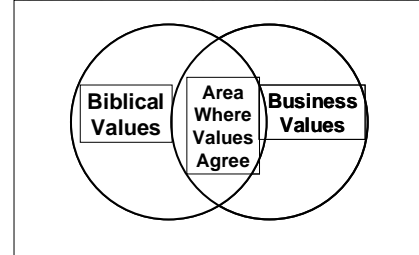


Stuart Anderson – Comparing Business Values with Christian Principles

Stuart is a project manager with consulting engineers Mott McDonald. In preparation for his talk he reported on a survey he had carried out among his Christian friends and contacts. When asked about the compatibility in their experience of business values and biblical values, replies fell into a number of different groups. Stuart helpfully used diagrams to distinguish between these.

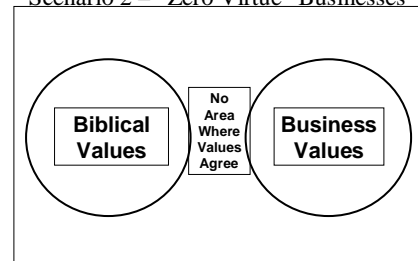
First, there were those who saw a fair degree of *overlap* between biblical values and business values:

Scenario 1 – Values in Most Businesses



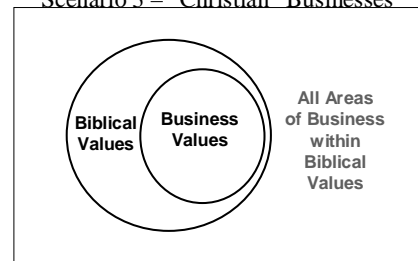
Second, there were those who saw biblical values and business values as completely *divergent* – there was no overlap at all:

Scenario 2 – “Zero Virtue” Businesses



Third, there were those who felt there was *convergence* between the two - interestingly, a third of the people in Stuart’s survey found no conflict. But many saw business values as being *contained* within a much larger entity which they saw as biblical values:

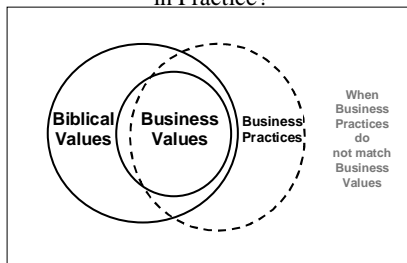
Scenario 3 – “Christian” Businesses



Fourth, there were those who expressed the third view but went a stage further. The stated business

values (as articulated, say, in a company mission statement or code of ethics) were consistent with biblical values, but the actual practice of business values did not match this. Most companies *deviate* to some extent from their stated values (the same could, I guess, be said about most churches!). Diagrammatically, this is expressed:

Scenario 4 – Most Businesses in Practice?



The murmur of recognition round the conference hall suggested that many delegates' experience coincided with this fourth viewpoint.

Stuart's survey also asked respondents to identify the challenges they faced as Christians in the workplace. He collected their answers into four categories:

- The Temptation to Dualism – the challenge of believing God is genuinely interested in workplace issues
- Time Management – the busyness of life both at work and home, the pressure to work extremely long hours, etc
- Being an Effective Influence (summed up by Stuart in terms of Jesus' image of Salt) – consistency, witnessing through lifestyle and conversation, etc
- Ethical Conflicts – being thoroughly honest with clients, keeping promises about delivery, avoiding bribery and corruption in overseas projects, etc



Jeremy Bentham – Mixing and Matching in a Multi-National

Jeremy Bentham is Chief Executive of Shell Hydrogen. He has worked for Shell for just over 20 years, and became a Christian in 1990, an event which had a dramatic effect on his life. As he has moved up the rungs of the corporate ladder since then - holding jobs in research, refining, supply marketing, corporate strategy and professional services - he has grappled with the implications of what it means to work as a Christian in a major multi-national company. He spoke with refreshing honesty: 'I find it easy in my company to be a decent dim light. I would like to be an inspiring bright light.'

Jeremy recognises that multinationals suffer from an unfavourable public image, typified by the picture of a wide-mouthed shark set to gobble up a little fish. In 1995 Shell had been taken back by the hostile publicity it received in the wake of its involvement in Brent Spar and Nigeria. The felt response was: how could people believe such bad things about the company - about people like us? A genuine process of corporate self-examination and

renewal had followed. Jeremy saw similarities between what had happened in Shell and what also happens within individuals:

Patterns in Problems

- Denial
- Loss of realism
- Self-centredness
- Closed Mind
- Contempt for Others
- Arrogance
- Relationship Breakdown

Patterns in Renewal

- End the denial
- Repent
- Return to Source, Truth
- Listening, Engagement with Others
- Discovery
- Direction Building, Vision
- Ongoing Review & Accountability
- Mutual Respect and Renewal in Relationship

Jeremy believes that multinational companies can play a major role for good in the world. He reminded delegates of the origins of Shell: its focus was literally to bring light and dispel darkness by providing the fuel for the kerosene lamp. He has his own version of corporate objectives in which the word 'fruitfulness' replaces 'growth' and 'stewardship' is substituted for 'return on capital', which helps maintain a broader perspective on his accountability. He posed the question: is there a Kingdom-building purpose for some of these organisations? When asked the question in turn: 'Can Shell be Christian?' he answered: 'It can realise virtuous goals, ones which Christians would consider good. It also has the potential to be a context

in which Christians can thrive.’

Nevertheless, Jeremy was realistic about the problems and difficulties which stubbornly get in the way of this. Deeply embedded habits in a culture are hard to break. For instance, however much a company may talk about wider corporate objectives and the importance of every stakeholder, the idea that the one which *really* matters is the financial bottom line is sometimes difficult to shift. In the area of personal development, Christians may be inspired by a high view of the individual as made in the image of God, but companies easily take a more instrumentalist view. However, the problems can also lie with us as individuals. Jeremy highlighted the issues of:

- Self-absorption – it’s easy to conform to a culture of careerism where an expected promotion that doesn’t materialise causes personal devastation
- Work-life integration – to help with this, Jeremy formulated a personal mission statement and a ‘balanced scorecard’ to which his wife holds him publicly accountable!
- Relationship quality – loneliness, partly by dint of senior position and partly through lots of intercontinental travel, can be a real problem
- *Genuinely* trusting God, as opposed to going through the motions of doing so

Jeremy sees great value in developing an ‘accountability’ group of friends with whom one shares at a deep level. Through this and indeed faith-work initiatives like the conference (and *Faith in Business!*) ‘we can share and extend our knowledge of good approaches to support each other and achieve

practical, positive transformation’. His final words about working in a multinational were: ‘It can be a struggle. But it may be that some of us are called to be in that struggle’.



Beverley Shepherd – Being Disciples and Making Disciples

Beverley Shepherd is an experienced trainer, mentor and facilitator; she is also a member of the Christian Consultants Group which meets regularly at Ridley Hall. Unconsciously echoing the language of Paul Stevens, she talked about Christians’ primary and secondary vocations. The primary vocation is to be God’s beloved son or daughter, to be a disciple of Jesus. As such we are also called to be channels of blessings to others, though that doesn’t mean we will be universally appreciated; Jesus warned his disciples they would actually be hated. The secondary calling is where we seek to express our giftedness: not just the workplace, but that is likely to be a prominent part of it. Central to our primary calling is the commission to ‘make disciples’ - this is the agenda that Jesus left us with and the ‘mission statement’ that

overrides all personal mission statements. The question then becomes: how do I express my primary calling in the context of my secondary calling? Beverley has a fourfold answer, all memorably beginning with the letter ‘m’:

Model

‘Every time you walk into your place of work, you are on a catwalk’. The audience is critically assessing our designer outfit, and asking ‘Does it fit?’, ‘Is it worth what it cost you?’, ‘Would it suit me?’ Beverley suggested that Christians are actually called to create envy in others! If we *are* God’s beloved sons and daughters, then we should model this – through lives of hope, trust, purpose and direction. She told a vivid story of where she came to see that her preferred, instinctive way of negotiating with a potential client was actually at odds with how God wanted her to proceed, and obedience to God led to a favourable outcome.

Minister

This relates to the way we do our work. ‘I am blessed by those who faithfully return my phone calls, complete work when they say they will, and whom I can rely on to do a good job’. It also means being sensitive to people’s problems, a ‘listening ear’ ready to open up to a hurting and sinful world.

Mover and Shaker

Movers and shakers are called to change the world, or part of it at least. They play their part in ‘setting captives free’ by changing systems, codes of practice, laws or attitudes. Beverley cited William Wilberforce as a prime example. It is a long-term task, it may entail many frustrations and produce a sense of wasted effort, but for some people, that is what God has called them to be.

Mouthpiece

The word of our testimony (Rev.12:11) is important. Christian witness usually involves speaking. It is easy to shy away from this, out of fear of getting it wrong, not being liked, or loss of status. Beverley mentioned Esther as a biblical example of someone who overcame her natural fears and recognised the God-given nature of the position into which she had come. Her experience is that, as she has prayed and asked others to pray for her, opportunities to speak about her faith do occur.



James Featherby – Identity, Purpose and Meaning

James Featherby is a partner at a major City law firm. When he first started working in the City in 1981, there were no workplace ministries that he knew of. When he attended a Spring Harvest conference in the mid-1980s, he was bemused by the fact that there wasn't a single seminar on the subject of work (Spring Harvest have improved their act since!). In the late 1980s, he was disturbed to note that several big City scandals involved Christians who, at times of intense pressure, made the wrong decision. They also lacked the support they needed from understanding church leaders. James summed up the attitude he sensed

from such leaders at that time as a combination of:

- Business is tainted by the enemy
- The workplace is simply there to be survived
- Building the local church is what matters

The resulting dissatisfaction was such that, when the tide did turn and the church started showing interest in the workplace in the mid-1990s, many workers did not initially respond very positively. This reaction consisted of a mixture of suspicion (Why is the church now jumping on a bandwagon? Is it interested in businesspeople only for the sake of their connections and money?) and resistance (Why should I accept the simple answers they're telling me?). Likewise, church leaders expressed frustration at workers who could be patronising about local church or who appeared to have lost their heavenly perspective. In James' view, it was essential to recognise and overcome these mutual suspicions before moving forward.

James' answer to the question of identity (who am I?) was threefold: a child of God, part of God's family and appointed for a task. In particular, he has taken on board the mission statement Jesus accepted as his own in Luke 4:18-19. It might be thought unlikely that one would find the poor, persecuted, prisoners and oppressed working in the City, but James gave many examples of such people:

- those struggling with inadequate resources, the disappointed, people suffering a midlife crisis
- the objects of bullying, gossip and manipulation
- those who have lost touch with their feelings and can't apologise
- grumblers, people who drink too much, those who have no time for

their families or can't turn off their mobile phones, those who are driven by targets or their own egos

All these – in the words of Jesus, quoting Isaiah 61 – cry out for liberation. They are in need of 'God's favour'.

For James, working in a law firm is not just about being a lawyer but being a pastor to his team, the group of people with whom he is regular contact. This entails knowing what is going on in their lives, showing that he cares and praying for them. He has come to see that God is concerned about everyone, and God's blessings are not just reserved for Christians. He has started dreaming of the kingdom and of a City of London that looks more like the kingdom.

Some comments made by conference delegates in the plenary discussion:

- Have we accepted the Market way unchallenged? You don't have to accept the rules of the game the way most people play it.
- Maybe we should talk about Christ-like business rather than Christian business; Christian-led companies rather than Christian companies. The Christian ethos can be welcomed by those who don't actually share our faith.
- Being a Christian in business is not about being a nice person in a not quite so nice environment. It involves consistent, costly character choices. Transformation only takes place through the cross in one shape or another.
- Do Christians share a common brand? We should be known as good representatives of our brand. Sometimes failures are in terms of competence rather than integrity.

Conclusion

In preparation for the conference, I put together a display of cut-outs on a whiteboard. These included some typical images of business, and a considerable array of corporate logos, including most of the companies represented by the delegates. Prominently displayed around and among this plethora of images were five great paintings of the Resurrection: Piero della Francesca's *Resurrection*; Titian's *Noli me tangere*; Caravaggio's *Supper at Emmaus* and *Doubting Thomas*; El Greco's *Resurrection*. And in central place was Matthias Grunewald's great picture of the Crucifixion.

Why did I do this? To convey in as vivid a way as I could the conviction which I articulated in my closing sermon, that Christ is lord of all. My text was Colossians 1:15-20, that remarkable passage in which Paul describes Jesus not just as head of the church but as lord of the world, the one who created all things

and for whom all things were created. Moreover 'through him God was pleased to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross' (Col.1:20). Most of the time when the New Testament talks about Jesus' redeeming and reconciling work, it is individuals and communities that are in view – and that is very important. We thank God for his act of personal salvation. But it's fascinating that here Paul says God was pleased to reconcile to himself all *things* – presumably including the various 'powers and authorities' to which he alludes earlier. What are the powers and authorities of the present day? I suggested they included many of the things whose image appeared on the whiteboard: the global market economy; the power of advertising; the world wide web; huge multinational companies like Shell and BP; powerful international financial institutions like the World Bank and the IMF.

It is not easy to work out what 'reconciling' powers and authorities like these actually means. But I am convinced that we have to try. And we have to recognise that – as in Jesus' historical life – powers and authorities resist being reconciled; they resist being brought to that state of justice and harmony which God intends. What did it cost Jesus to reconcile the world? It cost him his life. We should not expect the outworkings of that reconciliation to be straightforward.

So the image of the risen Christ on the whiteboard expressed his claim to authority, even over the mighty business powers of this world. The image of the crucified Christ speaks of that readiness for service and sacrifice which lies at the heart of a Christian vision for business. And that – as someone at the conference said – is the best hope we know for a better world.

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