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The Bible, the Economy, and the Poor

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15. Business in the Service of the Common Good

A Christian Perspective

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Introduction

The life of money-making is one undertaken under compulsion, and wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking; for it is merely useful and for the sake of something else (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I, 5).

The relationship between the Bible, the economy, and the poor is the focus of this supplementary volume of the *Journal of Religion & Society*. I am interested in this topic from both an academic and a personal angle. My degree is in philosophy, and I spent four years in a philosophy department before coming to Creighton's Business School. I often tell people that I am a philosopher trapped in a business faculty member's body, but the fact is, I feel that our discussions of the good life in my business ethics class have the potential to impact the future in substantial ways. Going from a philosophy department to a business college, my new opportunity is now to impact the thinking and worldview – the business-philosophy approach, if you will – of

business students at a Jesuit Catholic University. This has been very exciting for me as a Christian philosopher. Business is the most powerful institution in society today, and so it is essential to do what we can to direct it towards the common good of society.

Since I teach Business Ethics at a Jesuit University, and by the fact that I am a Christian, the biblical worldview and principles are a backdrop for me, and many of my students. For example, the issue of business' effect on the poor comes up regularly. We do not study passages from Amos or other prophets who condemn the exploitation of the poor in our business practices – and this has obvious application to issues such as fair wages, sweatshops, worker rights, and executive pay. Nevertheless, when we discuss whistle-blowing, I bring up the principle of confrontation from Matthew 18, where Christians are told to confront a wrongdoer in private first, then with a witness, then before the group. The Bible clearly points us to the dignity of human beings who are made in the image of God, and that in turn should prompt us to treat workers and coworkers with dignity, and turn us away from sexual harassment and racism in the workplace. The Bible is clear in its condemnation of lying and dishonesty (1 Peter 3:10-12; Proverbs 6:16; 12:22; Hebrews 13:18), which has direct application to accounting, financial transparency, and integrity. It has lately been well argued that the Bible directs us towards care for creation and the environment (Liederbach and Bible; Bouma-Prediger). Recent works like those of Wong and Rae have pointed out biblical principles undergirding a view of how business should serve the common good.

A central theme of my class is that business is the most powerful institution in society today; its power to transform culture and society is second to none and, therefore, people in business have responsibility. Business constructs much of our physical daily living spaces and directs most of our resources and resource use. Its marketing shapes and molds our desires and invests our hopes with product placements and consumer life-goals. My business students, who will tend to be leaders in business, have an outstanding opportunity to change the world for better or for worse through their actions – and they could have a powerful impact on the poor. If philosophy that seeks the good life and a biblical worldview of justice and fairness can influence this powerful force of business towards the common good, then we can not only seek the intellectual knowledge of the good life, but also make the good life happen in concrete daily life as we live it. Business can help establish the biblical vision incarnate in and upon the world, insofar as our business practices are informed and directed by the Bible and Christian principles. We practice business with an understanding that business has a role in the function of our lives, but is not the goal in and of itself. As we know from the Bible, “What does it profit a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?” (Mark 8:36).

The Purpose of Business in Practice

Personally, and as a Christian, I have an interest in what the Bible says and a concern for how business can make life better for those in need. The very issue of how business can and should improve society is controversial. It seems that there are basically three models of how someone in business may view their relationship to society. First, some argue that those in business can grow fortunes and then give away some of that fortune through philanthropy. Second, others argue that there is no need for philanthropy, as business does enough good of its own by providing jobs, goods, and services. Third, some – like the present author – argue that business should aim to bring about more good in society not only through

philanthropy and though creating jobs, goods, and services, but by aiming towards contributing to the common good as one does one's business. Business on this view is a means to a greater end.

When I came to Omaha, I bought a house, then an apartment, then another, and now, with the help of others, I have 18 houses and apartments. Most of these are buildings I have redeemed and restored, and renovated for moderate priced housing. I often work with people who lose their job to help them stay in their house or apartment, and employ a number of alcoholics who live on the edge of society – one was living in his truck when we first met. I see my work on these buildings in my neighborhood and my relationship with my “guys” as a faith commitment to redeem and restore, and I have hope in people and buildings in which others have lost faith. I have to make enough to pay the bank mortgages on these places, but once that is satisfied, my main concern is not amassing money. Doing business is a necessary part of this neighborhood transformation project – I have relationships with the hardware store guys, plumbers, electricians, guys who do maintenance, bankers, my tenants, and prospective tenants. I have to get money from some people to pay other people what I owe them. But making money is not the only or even primary goal. Transforming the community and the great interactions with people are my primary motivations.

I believe that is the right way for a Christian to consider business – as a means to a socially beneficial end. Business is a tool, the value and virtue of which can be determined by its end in most cases. In what follows I first discuss the notion of the common good in the western philosophical tradition. Second, I will discuss three ways business contributes to the common good: philanthropy, unintentional positive externalities, and intentional positive externalities. Then I would like to draw some conclusions about key elements of a Christian vision of business as a transformative tool for cultural change, highlighting some possible research directions, with reference to *Caritas en Veritate*.

The Demise of the Common Good

In my ethics classes, we discuss the utilitarian view of ethics – that the right act is the one that brings about the greatest good for the most. My better students raise the very real question of how, in a postmodern pluralist society, we should expect even to see such a unified view of things? In short, since my “good” and your “good” likely come into conflict, how can a command to pursue the “common good” make any sense? Indeed, the question is a great postmodern and contemporary question. Thinkers from MacIntyre to Hollenbach to Novak have wrestled with the question of whether or not the notion of a “common good” has outlived its usefulness.

The very notion of a common good is far from uncontroversial, at least among sociologists, philosophers, and literary critics. While much of society seems to have eschewed the notion of common good, Christians continue to depend on the concept. This is because Christians hold to a unified history of the cosmos, with the central event of the coming to earth of God-incarnate in Jesus Christ to bring about salvation to all of humanity. God is transcendent to the world, Jesus is a transcendent means of bringing good to humanity, and there is a common path of right living, and a common means of forgiveness in Christ. Most Christians are not Rortians, and so it is especially Christians who still work with and towards a common good – something transcendent that guides and motivates our activities. Maritain, MacIntyre, Hollenbach, and Bellah, among others,

have wrestled with how to resurrect or reconstruct a vision of the common good. For many it will be found only in a shared community, such as the Church, as we live out the Gospel.

A primary example of this Christian focus is found in *Caritas in Veritate*, where Benedict XVI points out that striving to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbors is to love our neighbor. “Besides the good of the individual, there is a good that is linked to living in society: the common good. It is the good of ‘all of us,’ made up of individuals, families and intermediate groups who together constitute society! It is a good that is sought not for its own sake, but for the people who belong to the social community and who can only really and effectively pursue their good within it” (4). He further states, “every Christian is called to practice this charity, in a manner corresponding to his vocation and according to the degree of influence he wields in the polis”(7). Scripture clearly teaches that all believers are part of one body with a common aim and goal: “So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another” (Romans 12:5). Not only is there a common purpose of Christians, but there is one common purpose and goal for all of creation. This common good may be supported through business, as we will now see. Then we will further consider Benedict’s work.

Business and the Common Good

One could say that business is torn between two competing views of how the market works. Both are supposedly progeny of Adam Smith, who, as Sen, Werhane, and others point out, had his students read *Wealth of Nations* and learn about the “invisible hand” of market forces and the benefits of the division of labor only after they had spent a semester investigating what he considered to be his more important work, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Smith knew the market could not function properly without basic ethical rules of justice, fairness, and honesty. According to Smith, and assuming this moral foundation, the market works better left on its own with minimal interference; things will work out for the greater good as everyone seeks their own good. This is enlightenment optimism applied to economics. The idea that trust, justice, and fairness are essential to business dealings is clearly supported in scripture (see Proverbs 1:3; 20:23; 31:9).

The second more jaded version of Smith might be best summed up in the character of Gordon Gekko of the movie “Wall Street” (Stone). Here we have a “Wall Street Darwinism” where its everyone for themselves, and may the strongest survive. Some will fail, but the market will be stronger for not sponsoring weak inferior parties and letting the most efficient to thrive unrestrained. This is a view of business not unlike those the prophet Amos speaks to ancient Israel:

Hear this, you who trample the needy,
and do away with the poor of the land,
saying, “When will the new moon be over
so that we may sell grain;
and the Sabbath,
so that we may offer wheat for sale?
We will make the ephah small and the shekel great,
and practice deceit with false balances,
buying the poor for silver

and the needy for a pair of sandals,
and selling the sweepings of the wheat (Amos 8:4-6).

Of course the first interpretation of Adam Smith seems hopelessly naïve, and the second is hopelessly inhuman, but neither of them are consistently followed, even by those who profess to believe them. Both proclaim an optimism in the free market, which is clearly not realistically followed. Business needs private property laws, many regulations, and government interventions and inventions to survive and operate. Even Wall Street Darwinists, by and large, supported big government bailouts when things got rough in 2007.

Despite all the Free Market Wall Street rhetoric, recent emphasis is clearly on “corporate social responsibility” (CSR), focusing on what companies are doing for their community and the greater good. There is pressure for companies to show that they take their stakeholders’ interests into account through environmental concern, community giving, support of local schools and clubs, and even on a global scale. Responsibility to give to the greater good has also been encouraged by some of the wealthiest living business people: Buffet’s “Giving Pledge,” which encourages billionaires to pledge “the majority of their wealth to philanthropy,” has been well subscribed and much lauded (see givingpledge.org). Many in the field of business today contend that businesses and those who make their money in business have a responsibility to society. Just how that should happen, though, has been a matter of much debate.

We can identify three strands of thought as to how business and those who benefit from business can and do give back to the common good: philanthropy, jobs and goods approach, and common good capitalism.

Philanthropy

Philanthropy is a means by which business, corporations, and individuals contribute to the common good. A long-time teacher of morals at a Jesuit High School told me recently, “our students really do get that once they make their money, they should probably give some back to charitable causes. What I struggle to help them understand is how they can actually do good through business – as they make their money.” Many business people see business as a tool for doing good – insofar as they can amass wealth to give to worthy causes. But sometimes there is a disconnect between this generosity and the means by which they attain their wealth. This disjunctive/schizophrenic model is what I call the “Carnegie Model” of charitable giving. Carnegie was known for running roughshod over his competitors, treating his workers badly, and generally not being an upstanding businessman during his early career. But then he seems to have had a conversion to charity, and – some might say in an attempt to atone for his bad deeds – was determined to do many good deeds later in life (Standiford).

Giving in ways that support others through charity or other common means is indeed one potential benefit to society or the common good that comes from business; and again we see a clear mandate in scripture to provide charity. In Leviticus we see the landowners commanded to leave some of the harvest in the fields for the needy (23:22), and the needy are to be supported financially (25:35). But beyond supporting the poor, generosity is just generally encouraged throughout the Bible (Deuteronomy 15:10; Psalm 37:21; Proverbs 22:9;

Romans 12:8; 2 Corinthians 9:11; 1 Timothy 6:18). Here in Omaha we have literally billions of dollars of public goods that have been funded by charitable donations, and Omaha has been recognized for its philanthropy (*Chronicle of Philanthropy*). Brick and mortar examples include the Holland Performing Arts Center, the Joslyn Museum, the Durham Museum, the Century Link Center, the Kroc Center, the TD Ameritrade baseball stadium, and, of course, funding of Creighton University, University of Nebraska – Omaha, University of Nebraska Medical Center, and many other schools whose campuses bear the names of their generous supporters. Business is behind much of that philanthropy. The Knights of Aksarben and, more recently, the Heritage Foundation, both made up of some of the most powerful business concerns in Omaha, have been absolutely pivotal in getting public goods projects and programs under way. Philosophy professors and math teachers, though they do contribute to the common good are not the primary philanthropists in our culture; businesspeople are: Rockefeller, Carnegie, Mellon, Buffet, Soros, Gates, Prince Karim Aga Khan IV, Li Ka-Shing. People who make their money in business are clearly the leading philanthropists. Business is the engine of philanthropic giving and funds common good projects across the nation, and such giving is in accord with the biblical value of generosity.

Jobs and Goods Approach: The Profit-Maximization Model

A second way business contributes to the common good is through jobs, goods, and services, which it gives to society in the course of “doing business.” Of course there are many public good outcomes from business – for example, jobs, taxes, products, buildings, and prestige. These are benefits that come from business, although they are not why business exists. According to this approach, to claim that business has additional obligations is to fail to realize the purpose of business, and the way that it already helps society, albeit inadvertently. Whatever business does to benefit the common good, it does simply as a means to profit, not as an end in itself. The purpose of business is to make money; social benefits are incidental and not obligatory. Milton Friedman’s stockholder theory is indicative of this approach:

It may well be in the long run interest of a corporation that is a major employer in a small community to devote resources to providing amenities to that community or to improving its government. That may make it easier to attract desirable employees, it may reduce the wage bill or lessen losses from pilferage and sabotage or have other worthwhile effects.

Stockholder theory says that the purpose of business is to make profit – and to make the largest profit possible. Society benefits insofar as this allows a company to pay more taxes, or invest more in infrastructure, or to create more jobs, which, in turn, helps the local economy and provides a variety of indirect but tangible benefits to society (such as the income tax paid by workers, the residual support companies that benefit from workers’ income as they spend money in the support businesses, etc.). Friedman thinks business should not give money away, but should use it to make more profit to continue to benefit society. Social obligations are met through taxes and the net benefit the company brings through jobs. Stockholders are free to give some of their own profits to charity, if they are motivated to do so. From this view, business contributes to the common good unintentionally, through taxes, jobs, products, and so forth, which benefit society.

While obviously good comes from business indirectly, Friedman's stockholder model where profits are maximized is without good intent. The common good may happen to be supported by business, but there is no particular intent to bring about common good in Friedman's stockholder approach. While it may happen, it only happens as collateral effect of what Friedman would say is the true intent of business (on this view): namely, to make as much money as possible. Such a view is not immoral per se, but it is amoral. This approach is not contrary to the biblical vision, but neither is it supported by it. The Bible does not call us to live amoral lives but rather to live with intentional purpose, striving to love both God and our neighbor through our actions (Luke 10:27).

Common Good Capitalism: A Stakeholder Restrained-Profit Model

A third model of viewing businesses' contribution to the common good is the Common Good Capitalism approach, which is essentially a stakeholder model that intends positive benefit from business to all stakeholders and beyond. This model intentionally diverts some potential profits to reinvestments in the community, even if that subtracts from immediate profitability. It seems that this model is the most congruent with the Bible's call to live with a concern for the well being of fellow members of one's community, as well as the widow, poor, and alien (Exodus 22:22; Leviticus 25:14, 17; Deuteronomy 24:14). Business, insofar as it benefits from society, has some responsibility back to society, but giving to the common good also benefits the business in many cases. It is also thought that the stakeholder approach, which considers more than the maximum profit for stockholders, most adequately takes account of how business really works, and it appears to fit best with a biblical account of how we should conduct business.

This Common Good Capitalism is a better account of business, and is also more in line with biblical principles. To show how it is a better account of business, we need to show the problems inherent in Friedman's profit maximization model. Ken Arrow and Amartya Sen, both Noble Prize winning economists, have argued that the model that sees profit maximization as the sole goal of business is first of all not an accurate representation of reality, and, secondly, not a viable model historically.

Arrow points out that unrestrained profit maximization is not reality. Companies obviously restrain profit for various reasons – to obey the law, to fund research and development, to meet obligations of debt payments, to pay employees for work done, to fund infrastructure projects, to buy back stock. All of these restrain profit maximization, and all are considered reasonable limits on profit. So the first point here is that companies already purposefully restrain their profit in a myriad of ways.

Furthermore, Arrow shows that there are good reasons not to leave profit unrestrained. First, the unequal distribution that can arise in an unregulated unrestrained market is socially problematic. Consider Russian Barrons and African leaders like Mbutu of former Zaire; the social consequences of this radical distribution inequality are profound and serious. Our solutions to this are usually progressive income tax structures, welfare supports, price supports, subsidizations (such as tax increment financing for blighted areas), etc. Second, there is a huge social cost for negative externalities that are not accounted for by businesses that have no regulations. So we have Environmental Protection Agency regulations to control pollution, wheel taxes on vehicle use to pay for roads, and cigarette taxes to

discourage smoking and its related healthcare costs. Third, there are social costs when there is a huge knowledge differential. That is why we have Security Exchange Council regulations on financiers and planners who know much more than their customers, and strict regulations on doctors, lawyers, and mechanics, who are paid to know more than their clients, and are held legally liable to do right.

Arrow's general point is that we do not actively support a completely unrestrained profit maximization model, and with good reason. The standard means we use to protect the common good from unrestrained profit maximization strategies are primarily institutional and legal: laws, regulations, taxes, legal liability, and ethical codes at the corporate and industry-wide level to help the common good.

Amartya Sen points out that Adam Smith's "invisible hand" and "free market" views are often distorted beyond recognition in popular discourse and are read as a sort of *carte blanche* for unrestrained profit maximization. But Sen reminds us that Smith always had students read his book on ethics before they investigated his book on economics. For Smith, only a moral market can be sustained. Without trust and fairness the market collapses, as we saw at the height of the 2007 mortgage meltdown crisis in the financial sector. When banks could not tell which other banks had toxic assets, they all refused to loan money to one another. When trust was gone, the market was incapacitated. Insofar as the market requires justice and fairness, it requires the restraints of ethical behavior in order to function. When ethics leaves, business failure is usually sure to eventually follow. When Arthur Anderson lost its credibility in the Enron failure, it went under, for its business depended on trust (Smith and Quirk).

Sen argues that insofar as business contributes to the society into which it is embedded, it contributes to its own value. A company that does not take care of its community will sit in its own filth. Its value is more than just the mere bottom line of revenues and income. I believe that the Mutual of Omaha Midtown crossings project in Omaha is a case in point. Mutual had some poorly used land next to their campus. Walmart and Home Depot wanted to buy it, but Mutual decided instead to spend 315 million dollars to build apartments, condos, and 250,000 square-feet of retail space – a great improvement to the midtown neighborhood. This is not philanthropy, but a decision to greatly improve the neighborhood. It was a positive externality instead of a negative externality. This exemplifies the spirit Sen envisions: "If economic sense includes the achievement of a good society in which one lives, then the distributional improvements can be counted in as parts of sensible outcomes even for business. Visionary industrialists and businesspersons have tended to encourage this line of reasoning" (52).

Edward Freeman is the Godfather of stakeholder theory. His work is the standard, and he has developed a model in contrast to stockholder theory. Rather than managing solely for the benefit of stockholders, stakeholder theory sees the manager's job as paying attention to the needs of all stakeholders.

A stakeholder approach is about creating as much value as possible for stakeholders, without resorting to tradeoffs. . . We believe that the task is more easily accomplished when a business has a sense of purpose (Freeman, Harrison, Wicks, Parmar, and de Colle: 28).

This caring will help the company prosper, but the stakeholders are valued for themselves, not merely as means to the end of profit. The dignity and rights of persons is maintained, and the connectedness and joint interests of the various groups involved in business interactions is accounted for more adequately in the stakeholder model. In addition, the virtues of efficiency, fairness, respect, integrity, and commitment-keeping seem to be better maintained on this model. This concern for the well being of all stakeholders is reminiscent of John Stuart Mill's writing regarding utilitarianism in society:

Not only does all strengthening of social ties, and all healthy growth of society, give to each individual a stronger personal interest in practically consulting the welfare of others; it also leads him to identify his feelings more and more with their good, or at least with an ever greater degree of practical consideration for it. He comes, as though instinctively, to be conscious of himself as a being who of course pays regard to others. The good of others becomes to him a thing naturally and necessarily to be attended to, like any of the physical conditions of our existence (3.10.32).

As we begin to experience happiness through others' happiness, and have purposes greater than just our own petty concerns, we find ourselves able to achieve higher levels and quality of pleasure. Mill says, "The deeply-rooted conception which every individual even now has of himself as a social being, tends to make him feel it one of his natural wants that there should be harmony between his feelings and aims and those of his fellow creatures" (3.10.32). He believes that the deficiencies we have in considering others as well as oneself can be overcome only through better education of our habits and sentiments. He says,

. . . this difficulty [selfishness] will always present itself, until . . . by the improvement of education the feeling of unity with our fellow creatures shall be (what it cannot be doubted that Christ intended it to be) as deeply rooted in our character, and to our own consciousness as completely a part of our nature, as the horror of crime is in an ordinarily well-brought up young person (3.10.32).

That education takes place in large part through poetry, literature, and the arts, as well as social mandates, and even governmental mandates such as compulsory education.

Businesses run on the stakeholder model direct resources to stakeholders, not merely to stockholders and their bottom line results. This is because they have a broader view of what constitutes the bottom line. As Sen put it, "economic sense includes the achievement of a good society in which one lives . . ." (52). With this understanding of "economic sense," good business (economically) necessarily considers the common good.

Here we have a view of business that is very much in line with a traditionally biblical perspective. We are good and wise stewards of what has been given to us (as the faithful wise servant of Matthew 25) and we are simultaneously concerned with the interests of many others whom our actions affect. The Christian is concerned not just with what he or she will gain, but also with how one's actions will have a net positive effect on the world to make it better.

Christians in Business for the Common Good

Albert Carr, quoting a company's chief executive, once wrote, "a sudden submission to Christian ethics by businessmen would bring about the greatest economic upheaval in history" (147). Whether or not Carr's executive was right, there is often a great disconnect between people's religious beliefs and their business beliefs and practices. "Christian business" may seem as much an oxymoronic phrase as "business ethics" or "rational faith" does to some critics. Despite this, there has been wide ranging literature written regarding Christian as well as other religious traditions' views on business (Herman).

But business is not to be a personal behavior unaffected by the claims of scripture or faith. As I have indicated above, I believe that Christians should hold to the Common Good Capitalism stakeholder model of management because it is intentionally concerned with the common good. Unintentional giving will happen on its own to a great extent through taxes, and the philanthropic can be incorporated into the stakeholder model. Business for the Christian should be a means to an end – a means to improve the common good. But the way in which business is done is important as well. Insofar as it can be done for the glory of God, business should be treated as a penultimate end – one that is very important, if not actually an end in itself.

As a professor of business ethics, my job is secure in large part because businesses that are blind to stakeholders and the common good continue to fail ethically, and these ethical failures lead to serious economic impacts, which then bring the public to be concerned once again about the impact of business upon the common good. From the savings and loan scandals of the 1980s through the Enron and Worldcom era of business implosions to the more recent subprime mortgage meltdown of 2008, businesses continue to give us examples of the results of failing to consider the common good.

Christians need to respond and give a more healthy vision of what business can be, and Pope Benedict did just that towards the end of his tenure in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*. Pope Benedict saw in the 2007 crisis of faith in the market an opportunity for Christians to step forward with a view of the common good as a vision for what can be: "The crisis thus becomes an opportunity for discernment, in which to shape a new vision for the future" (21). This encyclical in turn led to a document aimed at business leaders entitled "The Vocation of the Business Leader" (Turkson), which was the resulting document created after a conference on the encyclical. With bullet points and pictures, it has proven more suited for lay-readers in business, and I use it with my students in class at the graduate and undergraduate level. At the beginning of the document, the foundation of the business vocation is clearly stated:

In the Gospel, Jesus tells us: "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked" (Lk 12:48). Businesspeople have been given great resources and the Lord asks them to do great things. This is your vocation (Turkson).

The entire encyclical is rooted in a biblical view of creation, humanity, and our creative ventures in the world as businesspeople. For those of us in business, that is our means of

actively participating in the renewal of creation, and as finite beings we complete our finite projects as acts of worship to God. Our creative ventures are imitative of God's creative acts in the world, and our redemptive ventures are imitative of God's redeeming the world. Business is not an activity devoid of morality, much less spirituality, for whatever we do is to be done "as working for the Lord" (Colossians 3:23). And to think that business is somehow nothing personal is absolutely not Christian. Business is to be seen as a fully human venture, not devoid of humanity. Pope Benedict lays out a Christian vision of the market as a human institution:

The Church's social doctrine holds that authentically human social relationships of friendship, solidarity and reciprocity can also be conducted within economic activity, and not only outside it or "after" it. The economic sphere is neither ethically neutral, nor inherently inhuman and opposed to society. It is part and parcel of human activity and precisely because it is human, it must be structured and governed in an ethical manner (36).

Benedict is standing in the biblical tradition, where the prophet Amos railed against the wealthy who were oppressing the poor, treating them inhumanely as they (the wealthy) amassed fortunes for themselves:

They hate the one who reproves in the gate,
and they abhor the one who speaks the truth.
Therefore because you trample on the poor
and take from them levies of grain,
you have built houses of hewn stone,
but you shall not live in them;
you have planted pleasant vineyards,
but you shall not drink their wine.
For I know how many are your transgressions,
and how great are your sins –
you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe,
and push aside the needy in the gate (Amos 5:10-12).

Unjust gain through taking advantage of others is not biblical. Just measurements and fair practices are required in scripture. But this is just to say that in business you should not lie, cheat, or steal. But that is an absolute minimal ethic, and the Bible expects more. More than just that equal exchange is necessary to provide social cohesion:

In a climate of mutual trust, the *market* is the economic institution that permits encounter between persons, inasmuch as they are economic subjects who make use of contracts to regulate their relations as they exchange goods and services of equivalent value between them, in order to satisfy their needs and desires. ... if the market is governed solely by the principle of the equivalence in value of exchanged goods, it cannot produce the social cohesion that it requires in order to function well (35).

A focus simply and exclusively on fair and just markets in pursuit of profit maximization is not enough. Benedict writes, "Once profit becomes the exclusive goal, if it is produced by

improper means and without the common good as its ultimate end, it risks destroying wealth and creating poverty” (21). Again, there is a Biblical principle here that without a vision of some greater purpose beyond mere wealth accumulation – even if that wealth accumulation is done without malice or deceit – business ventures become pointless. The Bible speaks of justice, but it asks for more than mere justice; it asks that we seek something beyond wealth as our end goal. Exclusive and myopic pursuit of profit tends to be thoughtless towards others, and is in many cases destructive. We see this in a myriad of examples, from Enron and Worldcom to Countrywide and Bears Stearns and Lehman Brothers – where exclusive focus on profit eventually destroyed wealth. But we can see this perhaps more painfully in the lives of upstanding business people who live their lives making money honestly, but without doing anything of real lasting benefit for humanity or the Kingdom of God. We do not need to look at Enron to see pointless profit. We can look at the lives of many nondescript businesspeople who carry on their daily activities with virtually no concern for the common good or the purposes of God. As Jesus said, “What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?” (Matthew 16:26).

I know other people who purchase properties and rent them out for a profit. It usually seems very boring to me. Without the rehabilitation and redemption of buildings, the work with semi-homeless alcoholics, the opportunities to help people in need and to help transform communities for the better, this business of renting properties would seem fairly meaningless. It is important for us to find ways to serve others as we do our business, and to find goals and meaning truly transcendent to our business activities. We will do better with this vision, but so will society.

Benedict highlights the disconnect between the individual’s good and human nature from the culture and common good, and says that a vibrant view that seeing what we are doing as a calling and part of the common good and a fulfillment of human nature is essential to the meaningfulness of our lives collective, and without it, humanity faces a dire future: “What eclecticism and cultural leveling have in common is the separation of culture from human nature. Thus, cultures can no longer define themselves within a nature that transcends them and man ends up being reduced to a mere cultural statistic. When this happens, humanity runs new risks of enslavement and manipulation” (26). Today many of Christians do not live out our faith through their business goals and aims, but instead are self-focused and consumeristic in their desires. They are not really for others, they are for themselves and for more and more financial gain. They resemble those to whom Ezekiel’s words were addressed: “They come to you as people come, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear your words, but they will not obey them. For flattery is on their lips, but their heart is set on their gain” (33:31). This is a failure in the church to which Benedict’s encyclical is directed.

The loss of a transcendent vision beyond ourselves leads to the petty corruption that eventually can erupt in world-economic-catastrophes such as those that we have seen recently in the business world. Christians are called to something better. At the conclusion of *Caritas in Veritate*, Benedict writes of his vision for Christians:

Only if we are aware of our calling, as individuals and as a community, to be part of God’s family as his sons and daughters, will we be able to generate a

new vision and muster new energy in the service of a truly integral humanism. The greatest service to development, then, is a Christian humanism that enkindles charity and takes its lead from truth, accepting both as a lasting gift from God. Openness to God makes us open towards our brothers and sisters and towards an understanding of life as a joyful task to be accomplished in a spirit of solidarity (78).

Human relationships are usually required to transform individuals' lives, and so, society. Business is a human endeavor and we as humans each have the potential to transform culture and society through business investments, ventures, or income. As Christians in business, we must ask ourselves: what role can I, as one person, play in contributing to the common good of society through my business activities? When we think in this way, we can truly begin to see our work as a vocational calling, and a transformative work done in the service of God and something transcending mere profit, in line with the teachings of scripture and the Christian tradition.

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