



# MAKING SENSE OF THE JOURNEY: The Christian Business Leader as Pilgrim

By: Corné J. Bekker

**B**usiness leaders, more than ever before, are questioning the wisdom of the single-minded pursuit of wealth (Taylor, 2011). In the midst of seemingly ever-increasing tales of the moral and corporate failures of leaders in commerce, many are reconsidering the nature and direction of the vocational path they have chosen. Where do Christians in business turn for guidance and direction? The ancient picture of the leader as pilgrim might provide a way to make sense of this journey.

The metaphor of pilgrimage is one that has been used in Scripture (Psalm 84:5 and Hebrews 11:9) and in the history of Christianity to describe the call to the spiritual life. The early Church taught that life is like a journey, that this world is not our ultimate destination, and that we are all on our way back to God who is our truest home (see Hebrews 11:13). Michael and Maria Ruiz Scaperlanda (2004) in their book, *The Journey: A Guide for the Modern Pilgrim*, describe a pilgrimage as, "the journey of those who, deliberately seek answers to the questions of meaning, purpose, and eternity. Instead of seeking fulfillment in things that will never satisfy, the sacred pilgrim sets out to find that which the heart truly desires: God's very presence." This erudite description of a "sacred pilgrim" could easily be used to consider the mission of the Christian business leader as those who intend to seek diligently "answers to the questions of meaning, purpose, and eternity" in their quest to understand business as mission. If Christian business leaders are then indeed pilgrims on the way to understand and practice truth, what are the tools they carry with them on this adventure of (re) discovery?

There is a story told (Arnold & Fry, 1988) about the twentieth-century

missionary and author, William McElwee Miller, that might help us to think clearly about the travel necessities required in our journey of truth-seeking: "While travelling along the border of Iran and Afghanistan, Dr. Miller had encountered a Muslim sage. Together, the missionary and the mullah rode along the narrow path. In the course of their conversion, the Persian asked the Presbyterian, 'What is Christianity?' Dr. Miller said, 'It is like a journey. For that trip I need four things – bread, for

One of the most important, yet often forgotten, tools of the Christian business leader is the discipline of faithfully reading and interpreting the inspired text of the Bible in his or her own context. Exegesis, the technical term used for this pivotal discipline, is the interpretative process of finding, seeing and hearing God in the Sacred Scriptures (Deist, 1992), the collective history of those faithful pilgrims that have come before us in the journey, and applying those truths in our own world. Christian business leaders

bring their own expertise, context and vocational concerns particular to their field of influence to the reading of these texts. One of the most disastrous mistakes of modernity was the introduction of the idea that the discipline of reading and interpreting the Bible was the sole duty of the theologian locked in what often can become ivory towers of the academe. The business leader brings a particular and much-needed lens of interpretation to the reading of the Bible. M.D. Chenu (Holmberg, 1990), a sociologist and Biblical scholar, comments how the critical thinking skills of a variety of experts assist us in discovering the "revealing" of God in our history and thus by application in

our contemporary world, even the world of commerce: "When God reveals Himself to humans, He does not reveal Himself according to His own knowledge, but according to the human spirit, beginning with the simple rules of grammar and language. When this Divine communication is realized in a community that calls itself the Church, it follows in its humanization the laws and rules of collective knowledge, that any sociologist (or linguist, or for that matter any literate person) can observe in human societies." The particular literacy of the business leader can become a clear window through which we can once again observe this "Divine communication" in our world, and in particular the world of business.



nourishment; water, for refreshment; a book, for direction; and opportunity, for service. These are my pilgrim fare. Jesus provided me with these things. I trust Him on my way. That is Christianity." This book that we have been given on our journey for direction is a collection of sacred Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, the Bible; through which we are invited to respond to the reality of our Creator and omnipresent God with a love and devotion that includes not only our body and heart, but also our critical faculties (see Jesus' use of the great "Shema" of Deuteronomy 6:5 in Matthew 22:37) and the context in which we serve our broader

c o m m u n i t i e s .



Richard Foster (2008), in his recent book on reading the Bible for spiritual formation, proposes four steps in reading the Scriptures that are helpful for the Christian business leader's quest for authentic Biblical integration and practice in commerce:

- a. Read the Scriptures literally: The Christian business leader uses all the tools of linguistic, rhetorical and communication analyses to enter into the words and worlds of these sacred texts. The context of business is not a hindrance to this process, but an asset. Much of the original context of scripture relates to business. The fact that most of the sermons and parables of Jesus in the Gospels use business terminology and examples serves to underscore this truth.
- b. Read the Scriptures in its historic and social contexts: The Christian business leader avoids anachronistic and ethnocentric readings of the sacred texts by utilizing the disciplines of history, sociology, business and anthropology to enter into the world of the people of the Bible. Many of the authors and characters of the narratives in Scripture were involved in some way in business and commerce. There is much to be gained from understanding their journey and quest to find God in their world.
- c. Read the Scriptures in conversation with itself: The Christian business leader allows Scripture to interpret Scripture

and forms conclusions and interpretations based on a constant reading and application of the principles found in the text. The Bible is replete with principle after principle of what Godly wisdom looks like for the business leader (the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are good examples of such texts).

- d. Read the Scriptures in conversation with the historic witness of the People of God: The Christian business leader joins the theological, philosophical and practical discussions of two thousand years in a continued quest to enter into the truths of the sacred texts and its implications for our world. Scores of Christian thinkers and authors have pondered what the "incarnated" Word might look like in the spheres of business and commerce (one can think of leaders such as Augustine of Hippo, Benedict of Nursia, Martin Luther, G.K. Chesterton, Dennis Bakker to name a few).

Some studies (Kniss & Campbell, 1997; and Turner, 1979) have argued that the discipline of faithfully reading and interpreting the Scriptures in the context of business can have a positive effect on economic development. There also seems to be clear evidence that communities in the early Church benefited economically from a conversion experience (Bekker, 2007). A vibrant faith experience includes the ability to reflect theologically. The discipline of reading and interpreting Scripture faithfully informs the ability to make sense of the call to business and to reflect theologically on that call. Christian theological reflective competency includes, at minimum, the following steps (Dulles, 1992): (a) interpreting the meaning of Christian faith, (b) correlating those interpretations with other

interpretations, and (c) assessing the adequacy of the interpretations and their correlations. Based on this premise, theological reflection on Christian perspectives on work and business assists the manager or business leader to interpret her deepest inner values and beliefs as they relate to the workplace, correlate those interpretations with the other information gathered through the tools of management and leading, and finally assess the adequacy of both the theological and business interpretations and correlations. These disciplines of reading, interpretation and reflection assist leaders to make sense of the journey.

Contemporary Christian theological understandings of work center around the firm belief that work is a divinely inspired vocation, a cooperative venture with God through the complete atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and for the benefit of fellow neighbors that can and should make a difference in the well-being of all. Christian theological reflection on work can assist in the formation of a healthy, integrated and holistic cognitive framework for managers and business leaders and in turn help them to identify and dismantle organizational biases that hinder economic development and growth. Christianity has the power to facilitate the interpretation of (T)ruth (including religious, societal and economic truths), empower managers and business leaders to correlate these interpretations within the scope of an increasingly global world and assist them to assess the adequacies of the interpretations and correlations to their own particular and unique contexts (Fields and Bekker, 2010).

This kind of cognitive reflection affects the attitudes of the heart and ultimately the actions of the hand. This process description of

conversion (head, heart and then hands) is reminiscent of the theology, spirituality and leadership praxis of the Medieval Christian leader, Francis of Assisi (1181-1226 AD). Franciscan theology on conversion is best summarized by a concluding prayer in a letter from Francis to his entire order (*Epistula Toti Ordini Missa*): "Inwardly cleansed, interiorly enlightened and inflamed by the fire of the Holy Spirit, may we be able to follow in the footsteps of your beloved Son." The intellectual conversion of the business leader is to experience a moral reformation/conformation into the image of God's Son – Francis' descriptions of being cleansed, enlightened and inflamed. Building on the contemporary insights of the Christian ethicist and leadership scholar, Louise Kretzschmar (2002, 2007), this process description of conversion might take the form of five distinct changes that occur within the business leader:

**Intellectual conversion:** Christian business leaders that submit the presence of the Spirit in the Word of God constantly rethink or evaluate their own and others' moral framework, and this involves the disciplines of self-awareness and critique in order to develop the virtue

of prudence (correct judgment) in both business models and praxis.

**Affective conversion:** Christian business leaders have a high regard for *othokardia* (right heartedness towards God). Empowered by the Spirit, they consider the ultimate location of their affections and adopt Biblical and ascetic disciplines in their work and service in the arena of commerce.

**Volitional conversion:** Christian business leaders, inspired by the Spirit, seek to have a redeemed human will that moves from willfulness (identified as arrogant self-sufficiency) to willingness (described as flexible receptivity) in their vocation to lead and work in business. They willingly seek to do the right thing.

**Relational conversion:** A Christian business leader's moral conscience is formed and challenged by the Spirit in the community of business. Christian leaders in commerce engage in moral relational power that brings personal and communal transformation to perceptions and applications of leadership in every sphere of business.

**Moral action:** The intellectual, affective, volitional, and relational conversions of Christian business leaders result in moral action that facilitates the wider conversion of the contexts in which these leaders operate: cleansed, enlightened and inflamed.

Christian business leaders are a pilgrim people on a sacred journey in a quest to "incarnate" God's truths in our world. They do not walk blindly. They have been given a book for their journey, a sacred book that is God-breathed and "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16); a book that provides direction for pilgrims on the way of truth. It is my growing conviction that a clearer understanding of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures holds the promise of a resurgence of moral and values-based approaches to leadership today, and especially in the field of business. Only when our understanding and practice of leadership is utterly informed and fueled by the Word of God will we have the kind of Christian leadership that will change our world.



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Dr. Bekker is an ordained minister and has traveled to Africa, Europe, the East and North America to present at churches, ministries, seminars and academic conferences on the subject of Christian spirituality and leadership formation.

## NOTES

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