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Faith & Business: Beyond Add-On Models

By Kenman Wong

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One Comment

With the ability to captivate our hearts, awaken imaginations and paint pictures of what it means to be a good person, stories help form (and malform) character and influence behavior.¹ In our work as educators, we must take great care in both choosing the stories we tell and in being aware of those we unwittingly convey.

Taking this to heart, I spent 3 years (2016-19) leading a documentary film project called **Faith & Co** aimed at telling stories of Christians who are faithfully living out their callings in business.² Finding good narratives that would take viewers on emotional journeys and convey the theological perspectives we hoped was a huge effort. Well before any cameras and lights were mounted, the rest of the team and I spent months probing, reading, listening (to podcasts and conference talks) and casting a wide net to friends and acquaintances. After vetting hundreds of leads, conducting detailed interviews with promising ones, we invited the best fits to be featured.

We discovered and were privileged to help tell some truly amazing stories, but I want to share some approaches to connecting faith and business that we frequently encountered, but ultimately came to see as inadequate. To be very clear, these attempts are laudable, but as singular emphases, are insufficient and may even undermine a redemptive vision of business:

The Evangelism Approach

(“Business is a mission field”). While true that we may be “the only Bible some of our co-workers will ever read,” this approach tends to truncate the Gospel to concerns about “saving souls.” In so

doing it can neglect the actual work business people and organizations do (e.g., designing, making, serving, managing, allocating), and why and how they go about it.

The Giving Approach

Whether backpacks filled with school supplies, paid volunteer hours or support of para church organizations, many business people give generously from their proceeds. While something to be encouraged, business can be reduced to only *supporting* “God’s real work” and not a part of God’s mission its own right. Moreover, it can leave core business operations untouched by the Gospel. Can any amount of giving “redeem” harmful products, poor value to customers or mistreated employees?

The God Rewards Faithfulness Approach

We encountered several stories like the following: We could only make next month’s payroll by breaking a promise to a customer. Choosing to honor God, we kept our word at great financial cost. But then, a miracle happened and a large client decided to sign on, not only saving the company but propelling it to record levels of

financial growth. The humility and moral courage displayed are exemplary. However, miracles are exceptions. Moreover, the assumption that God rewards faithfulness in material (\$) ways reflects a key tenet of the prosperity gospel. It can also imply that those who are not “successful” lack faith and that suffering is something to be avoided.

The Ethics is Good Business Approach

Many people shared instances in which doing the right thing wound up being *more* profitable in the end. Honesty and respect can indeed lead to better financial outcomes. However, the motives can be flawed (instrumentalizing the Bible for profit) and one wonders how long the practices will last if earnings dip. Furthermore, it seems clear that in a fallen world, we should often *expect* to pay a price for adhering to Christian ethics.

I've only highlighted what I believe to be inadequate ways of connecting faith and business, but what *should* the relationship look like? I think it's best to resist identifying a narrow, definitive model, but I believe most of those who became subjects of our films (and some that didn't because of scheduling conflicts or

thematic redundancy) serve as representatives of the kinds of stories we should tell our students.

Here are just a few stories from Faith & Co that stand out:

- A technology company (Dayspring Technologies) that intentionally moved its headquarters to and participates in the life of an underserved neighborhood, makes redemptive products, and encourages employee sabbath practice: <https://faithandco.spu.edu/film-detail/monastery-dayspring/>
- A Denver based company (L&R Pallet Services) that makes a not very exciting product, but sees itself as in the people business, investing heavily in the spiritual, economic and emotional lives of its mostly immigrant workforce. <https://faithandco.spu.edu/film-detail/in-the-people-business/>
- Citing concerns about justice, an auto retailing business headquartered in North Carolina (Flow Companies, Inc.) offers transparent pricing, limits on financing charges, and a 100k mile warranty on *used* The company also provides college tuition benefits to children of employees and seeks to improve communities where it has dealerships. <https://faithandco.spu.edu/film-detail/driving-trust-flow/>

Summed up, I believe business people who have a more holistic understanding of the Gospel aspire to:

- . care about the life to come, but also about how people fare in *this* one;
- . give generously, but also carefully consider how profits are earned in the first place;
- . point heavenward for success *and* embrace failure as necessary for spiritual maturity; and
- . attend to matters of personal integrity *and* the need to repair broken systems and structures.

Stories that embody these kinds of aspirations are ones that will help direct our student's hearts and actions toward a kingdom vision for business.

You can view many more good stories at www.faithand.co

For more by Kenman Wong in CSR see <https://christianscholars.com/reimagining-business-education-as-character-formation/>

This post was originally posted on November 11, 2020.

Footnotes

- . For a recent and thoughtful account of how character is formed consciously and unconsciously, see James KA Smith's Cultural Liturgies books series: *Imaging the Kingdom*, *Desiring the Kingdom*, and *Awaiting the King*.

. A generous supporter of the university where I teach had a life-changing encounter with vocational theology in mid-life and wanted to inspire others to consider how faith might change why and how they worked. He understood the power of narrative, so he funded the production of a series of short films and asked us to bring his vision to life. I have since returned to my faculty role, but several of my colleagues have carried the work forward with excellence.



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