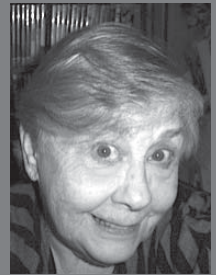


Jesus' Teachings on Governance and Their Implications for Modern Business

by Clive and Cara Beed

Jesus gives a great deal of instruction about the qualities of personal behaviour and of inter-personal relationship he sought within the community he was forming. Jesus' teachings in these areas also have implications for how the lines of authority and governance in his community were to be constructed. The focus in this article is on the organisational implications of Jesus' teaching. Section 2 examines a selection of Jesus' sayings on this matter, as interpreted by biblical exegetes. The assumption is made that Jesus' teachings are meant to guide organisations beyond the church, in wider arenas of life, including contemporary business. Section 3 discusses how Jesus' governance teaching could relate to modern business.



Jesus gives much instruction about how his disciples should relate to each other within the community he was forming. His teaching also sets out how decision-making and leadership should be exercised within the community that has implications for how it should be organised and governed. Some of these sayings, interpreted by biblical exegetes, are examined in Section 2; they are summarised by the term, 'Jesus' governance teachings'. Because of space limitations, only texts from Matthew are discussed. The aim is to discern Jesus' intentions on governance for the community he was forming. Further, the assumption will be made that Christians should apply Jesus' instructions on these issues to the government of all organisations, not just to the contemporary church. This is in keeping with the view that God intends his teachings to affect all areas of life and all people, believers and non-believers alike. Jesus' expression of the Lord's Prayer in Mt. 6:10 provides the key, 'Your will be done, on earth

as it is in heaven'. Examples of how these propositions might relate to the world of contemporary business are specified in Section 3.

Jesus' Teachings on the Governance and Organisation of his Community

In the texts below, Jesus explains how he calls his disciples to relate to each other within his community, the qualities of interpersonal and intersocial relationship he sought, and how his community should be structured. In response to the disciples asking Jesus 'who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' (Mt. 18:1-5), he answers by calling a child into their midst. The disciples were told to 'change and become like children', for 'whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven'. What did Jesus mean by this instruction? 'Humble' is defined in dictionaries as meek, without pride, low in station, grade or importance; to be of



▶▶ modest pretension, and have a low estimate of one's own importance. Jesus' followers are called to change their personal behaviour in order to acquire these qualities. People working within organisations seeking to be based on Christ's teachings should attempt to emulate these personal characteristics, allowing themselves to be changed by God. However, is that the end of the matter? Is only personal change required?

Probably not, for being able to practise the desired qualities of personal behaviour would partly depend on the organisational structures in which people worked. Mutual interaction exists between structures and the practice of such qualities. Exegetes note this point. For Luz, the 'text refers both to the external condition and to the internal attitude', or as Smith puts it, 'how is life in a really new community to be ordered?'¹ Are there structures that would foster the desired personal qualities? What is their 'external condition?' How 'is life in a really new community to be ordered?'

The changes required by Jesus for people to achieve the desired internal attitudes are not likely to be enhanced in organisations depending on hierarchical structures. Hierarchy means a system of persons in a graded order, in which there are those of higher position and rank, and those of lower. Hierarchy usually goes with top-down authoritarian decision-making, uni-directional authority flowing from the higher to the lower ranks, almost exclusively characterised by power and domination. Instead, Jesus' aim is to have his disciples relate to each other from a position of low station, without superiors, 'disregarding social status'. A desire or ability to exercise authority over others is prohibited, where authority means the right to control, determine, and enforce obedience. Instead, they are to become like children who are 'small, insignificant, and without power', thereby turning 'the world's standards upside down'. They are to 'abandon human thoughts of personal status and to

accept or even seek a place at the bottom of the pecking order'.² Any hierarchy of authority and decision-making among them dissolves. Jesus' disciples are to subvert those very structural mechanisms. To meet Jesus' standards, it is not sufficient to change personal behaviour while leaving organisational structures unchanged. A radical inversion of behaviour *and* structures is necessary.

In Matthew 20:25-28, Jesus again instructs his community on governance. The context is James and John's mother requesting her sons to sit at Jesus' right and left hands in his kingdom. Jesus responds again by teaching how the disciples are to relate to each other, in which the well-known verses are 26 and 27, 'whoever wishes to be great among you



The mother of the sons of Zebedee said to him, 'Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.'
Paolo Veronese, *Christ meeting the wife and the sons of Zebedee* c. 1565. Oil on canvas, Musée de Grenoble, France

must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave'. The next verse shows Jesus as the model server. Nowhere is Jesus called leader nor does he so describe himself. Jesus castigates the high officials of the Gentiles who 'exercise authority' over their subjects (Mt. 20:25 *NIV*). Jesus requires voluntary obedience among members of his community whose only function is to serve the needs of others. Here we have leaders without authority — better called servers — who do not require submission from others. 'Leadership in Jesus' ▶▶

▶▶ community means service to others' but not to exercise control. No-one is to enforce obedience, meaning that everyone can act as a leader. Yet, even as server, and somebody without status, Jesus clearly demonstrates qualities we would conventionally ascribe to leaders. He is accessible to his followers and people at large, he demonstrates empathy to them, but still has the capacity to challenge them³. Jesus goes before and shows the way, he guides people in the right direction, but still describes himself as a server. Even after he is crucified, Jesus provides these qualities to people, but it is people themselves in cooperation with the risen Jesus and each other who play principal roles in spreading Christ's word.

In the thinking of Matthew 20:25-28, all Christians have an equal role in the task, none is to exercise authority over the other, and each is to emulate Christ by being a server. Luz puts it that 'every authority structure in the church' is to be abandoned. This approach can be compared with secular business organisational models. In these, greatness or success is often measured by the size of the staff a person commands, 'if their name sits atop the organization chart, if many people report to them or take their orders'.⁴ In contradistinction, 'Jesus' entire thrust is on enabling and empowering others rather than wielding power for oneself'. The operational conception within Christian-based organisations is 'doing things for other people rather than for oneself', 'the ambition to serve others'. In these ways, 'Jesus lays down an alternative agenda' compared 'with the world's social conventions', one that 'is foreign to the world and to human nature'.⁵

Matthew 23:8-12 again presents Jesus' teaching on governance, with v. 11 explaining

that 'the greatest among you will be your servant'. For Luz, the meaning of these texts for today is to proclaim 'a church of equals', 'without higher and lower members'. In this church, no hierarchy is permitted, and 'every designation should be eliminated in the church that in any way distinguishes between "leader" and subordinate persons'. There is only one hierarchical authority in the church, God and Christ, so that all church members 'are equal' and in solidarity with each other, a 'total reversal of all human authority and power relationships'. The exercise of domination and authority by one member over another is proscribed. In Senior's words, 'relationships of status and power within a community are supplanted by a vision of equality before God', it is to be 'a community of equals', the 'equals

bound together by mutual affection and respect'.⁶ Jesus' egalitarianism 'frees his disciples to live in a community where humble reciprocal service rules', with this new community representing 'a radical departure from the values and priorities of the world'.⁷

One inference the exegetes draw out from the three Matthean texts above is Jesus wanting to establish an egalitarian community in which no member had authority over the other, in which each served the other humbly. Harrington summarises it as 'resistance to hierarchically structured roles and emphasis on equality'. The term 'democratic decision

making' is avoided, for this could connote the will of the majority being enforced on the minority. Something different is at hand here, including the Quaker idea of standing aside. This means a consensus where no voting takes place; instead, if consensus is hard to achieve, Friends in disagreement with the consensus decide to 'stand aside' if they believe the decision is not against God's will, so that consensus can be achieved. Harrington also



Hierarchy

The ones at the bottom of the pile don't look too happy



►► notes that ‘Matthew’s model of egalitarian communal leadership has been largely ignored by Church communities’.⁸ If Jesus’ model has been ignored by the church, it is not functioning as the light to the world’s organisational structures, whether in business, government or the non-profit sector.

Implications of Jesus’ Teaching for Business Governance Today

If the discussion above grasps Jesus’ teachings on organisational governance, what is their relevance for contemporary business organisation? Drawn from the exegetes, a summary of the qualities Jesus sought for the organisational structure and intra-organisational behaviour he proposed for his community (the church) is given

1. Work is to be performed in collaboration with God.
2. Regular individual and collective workplace prayer is necessary to achieve God’s cooperation and guidance.
3. Inter-personal behaviour must be exercised with maximum humility.
4. Hierarchy should be suppressed within the organisation.
5. Authority has to flow on a flat or even basis between members of the organisation; each is a leader.
6. An egalitarian structure exists within the organisation.
7. Decisions are to be made consensually.
8. Each person is given authority to undertake tasks.



Workplace prayer group in the City of London

below. The assumption is that these qualities are to be applied to organisations other than the church, such as business firms, that seek to function on a Christian basis. It is further assumed that Jesus desires all organisations to operate according to his values, qualities and principles. Some of Jesus’ requirements for work to proceed as he desires it are not covered in the texts above but in others, so they are asserted rather than demonstrated. For instance, it will be assumed that work should be done in collaboration with God, and that one means of pursuing this aim requires regular personal and collective workplace prayer. The list below suggests Jesus’ requirements with implications for business organisational structure:

9. Honorific titles within the organisation are to be avoided.
10. Server is a more appropriate title than leader.
11. Each worker in the firm is encouraged to serve her fellow-workers.
12. Cooperation between workers, not competition, is to be encouraged.

Application of these principles in business might seem utopian given the fallen nature of human beings. However, the task of Christian-led business is to show that the principles *can* be applied. The argument below suggests that that they are not idealistically unreal, and some of them do in fact operate even in various contemporary secular business organisations. Most of the examples below



▶▶ are not Christian-inspired, so that only elements of Jesus' preferences are followed.

Employee participative involvement and management is a component of business organisation having affinities with the Christian principles above, and all manner of its features occur today. For instance, the Finnish firm SOL Cleaning has its 3500 employees divided into teams of 50, mainly self-directed, but each led by a supervisor (although titles do not exist). In this relatively unskilled industry, job satisfaction is high, turnover low, and service standards high, with extensive on-the-job training offered. A comparable example is the Danish company, Oticon Holding A/S (150 workers making hearing aids), in which 'there are no organisation charts, no departments, no functions, no titles, and no permanent desks. All vestiges of an organisational hierarchy have disappeared'. Project leaders liaise with self-directed teams that pursue projects of their own design.⁹

Approaching more closely the principles on the Christian list, employees are the decision makers and work without any superordinate authority bearing on them. This type of organisation occurs 'at General Electric's aircraft-engine assembly facility in North Carolina' where 'the plant's 170 employees essentially manage themselves. Jet engines are produced by nine teams of people' whose only directive is the date for their engine completion. 'All other decisions are made within the teams'. Team organisation also produced the business success of Great Plains Software, at least until its purchase by Microsoft. Teams operated within a 'flat organisation structure with a minimal degree of hierarchy', similar to the arrangements at W. L. Gore.¹⁰ Not that all teams in business perform the same tasks, but such a structure has become popular.

Another sympathetic business model is promoted by Brazilian Ricardo Semler in the



Ricardo Semler

Semco Group that employs 3,000 people and makes industrial machinery etc. From 1983, when Semler was given control of the family firm, he fired his top managers, and eliminated most of the firm's bureaucratic structure and most job titles. Semler points out that 'Semco has no official structure. It has no organisational chart. There's no business plan or company strategy... There are no career plans, no job descriptions or

employee contracts... Supervision or monitoring of workers is rare indeed'.¹¹ According to Robbins *et al.*, 'in place of a hierarchical structure, he (Semler) basically turned the company over to his employees', who acquired all manner of responsibilities, such as letting them set 'their own salaries and work schedules'.¹² Workers choose managers by vote and evaluate them regularly. All company information is freely available and workers are encouraged to take courses within the company to enable them to understand the material. The outcome of all these processes has been overwhelmingly successful, even though Semler retains ownership of the company, something discussed further below.

The firms mentioned above operate according to some of the Christian principles. Since they are secular, the first two principles on the list are ignored. Principle 4 is usually operative, low hierarchy characterises the organisations above, and in some of them, authority flows on a relatively flat basis within the company.

Firms with explicitly Christian objectives, codes of conduct or mission statements have not been analysed extensively. Joseph Macariello has reported on the Christian-based U. S. public corporation, ServiceMaster, that has 50,000 employees in 39 countries, albeit via franchises. He notes that 'the organization is committed to honoring God in all it does', and that 'treating people with dignity and respect honors God's image in people and therefore honors God'. However, ▶▶

▶▶ further clarity is needed on how the mechanics of honouring God work out within ServiceMaster, because ‘executives, managers, and service partners (employees) may espouse a diversity of personal faiths or have no professed faiths’. If some of these people have no Christian faith, they may not even ask the question, ‘what is the God-honoring solution to this problem?’, let alone look for an answer to it. Indeed, Macariello’s descriptions of methods of selection of new employees, of their training, promotional opportunities, nature of their work, supervision and evaluation are not dissimilar from enlightened secular companies.¹³

Firm size and the complexity of operations within a company are sometimes presented as barriers against applying the Christian principles above (or even just their secular skeleton). The sceptical view is that this way of functioning can be extended only to a certain (unspecified) maximum personnel size. ‘Unspecified’ is the appropriate word to describe the hypothetical limit, for partnerships range from under ten to a few thousand partners. On the other hand, corporations might decide to limit the size of their individual plants within their federation of companies. Chaparral Steel, one of the world’s most efficient steel producers with low levels of hierarchy, holds its plants to less than 1000 workers ‘so that people can communicate easily’. Semco also limits its units to no more than a few hundred, again so that workers can know each other and reach their potential.¹⁴ If there were valid reasons why some partnerships/corporations have to be of giant size (something that could be debated), it is possible to envisage ways by which the Jesus-favoured family-style egalitarianism could operate.

One option would be to divide the corporation into discrete segments, each functioning with the sought qualities, and each cooperating with the other. As Semler puts it, ‘rather than seeing 40,000 employees, look at 4,000 groups of ten people each’. As business units expand at Semco, for example, to cater for growing demand, they are split into a 100/150 persons

limit, each called a manufacturing cell.¹⁵ Again, team production comes to the fore, with cases suggesting that assembly line tedium can be eliminated in this way. For instance, one of Eaton Corporation’s factories making hydraulic hose was changed in 1994 from assembly line to self-managed production teams. Workers in teams acquired responsibilities that were formerly the prerogative of management, such as setting their own schedules, and efficiency improved dramatically. Volvo also offers guidelines. One



Self-managed production at Eaton Corporation, Euclid, Ohio

vehicle model is produced by teams of eight to ten workers each, who appoint a spokesperson, each team producing around three cars per shift. ‘Each team is largely self-managed, handling scheduling, quality control, hiring and other duties normally performed by supervisors’. The tedium of conventional assembly line work is reduced, workers have more control over their jobs, and team members can increase their range of skills.¹⁶

Further pointers to the significance of the size limit can be derived from enterprises that seek to operate via explicit industrial democracy. For instance, one relevant firm organisation is the worker or producer cooperative and its variants, in which each worker-owner in theory has equal say in running the enterprise. The ‘in theory’ is important, for some cooperatives have found through trial and error that once they reach a few hundred worker-owners, they need to delegate authority to a hired manager. There is also ▶▶

►► consensual delegating of authority to specific members. All workers in a factory cannot make all decisions. This has been the experience of the Spanish Mondragon cooperatives, initially started within a Christian context (although by now having lost this explicit orientation). Nevertheless, with a second best structure of partial egalitarian operation, the 132 cooperatives with 50,000 worker-owners (averaging 379 each) have been able to attain levels of efficiency higher than most Spanish enterprises, including high tech activities like fuel cell development and robotics.¹⁷

Other promising models are the U. K. Daily Bread Cooperatives of Northampton and Cambridge (wholefoods' retailing). These have been run on explicitly Christian-based lines for over 30 and 20 years respectively, achieving high levels of efficiency. Their personnel limit is around 25 worker-owners each, experience having taught that greater numbers undermine workplace interrelationships. A half-hour collective prayer time starts the day, with Communion held once a fortnight. Because they have been so successful, pressure is on them to expand, something they have resisted. Instead, they assist other Christian groups to start mimic enterprises, with the help of soft loans.¹⁵

The structure of firm ownership is probably a factor influencing the extent to which the list of Christian principles above would be achievable. Application of the principles requires a hands-on approach by workers and owners (the same entity in the case of partnerships and workers' cooperatives). Presumably, no contradiction could occur from owners acting against their interests as workers. For other types of business ownership, the matter is more complicated. Consider Semco again. Ricardo Semler, who retains 60% ownership of Semco, has been the chief protagonist in constructing the structures he desired, finding a ready response from his workers, working in collaboration with each other. A strong nexus has been constructed and maintained between

ownership (Semler) and control/management (workers). Because Semco has been so successful (generating its own investment funds), it has 'been hounded' to become public, but such overtures have been rejected. As Semler sees it, the danger in becoming public is that the nexus between ownership and control would be weakened, even dissolved. Ownership could start to call the shots, and these may not include the sort of structure Semler wants. As he puts it, 'I don't want to be burdened with the 90-day mindset of stock market analysts. It would cost us our solidarity and force us to dance to a tune we



*Daily Bread Workers Cooperative,
Bedford Road, Northampton*

don't understand — the scoreboard of analysts constrained by pension funds, investment sharks and little old ladies in Oklahoma'. Closely-held companies, therefore, may be in a better position than joint stock companies to trend toward the Christian-type principles.¹⁹

Heightened worker self-management is sometimes assumed to be something that will occur 'naturally' with the shift to a services-based economy, to be a self-evident characteristic of modern professional IT jobs. However, these do not always involve stimulating work environments. For instance, Robbins *et al* report that if you were one of Microsoft's 39,000 workers, 'a substantial portion of your work involves days of boredom punctuated by hours of tedium. You basically spend your time in an isolated office' working 'horrendously long hours'. Of ►►

course, contrasting IT cases can be cited, such as SAS Institute Inc. (making statistical analysis software), having some of the best working conditions in the USA.²⁰ Contemporary Christian writing about corporate governance does not commonly explore the types of structural issues discussed above. Instead, the existing structure of enterprise is taken as given, and only then does the focus settle on how the servant-leadership model fits into this structure.

Conclusion

Biblical exegetes' interpretations of selected Jesus' teachings in Matthew suggest that Jesus wants to construct a community of his followers constituted by an absence of hierarchy, and by equality in decision making within the desired organisational structure. Humility in behaviour is sought via pursuing these structures. This mode is to function in the same way as the Trinity, in which God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit constitute an

egalitarian entity. Each member of Jesus' community is to have equal standing and voice with the other, so that decisions are made by mutual consensus. At the same time, behaviour toward each member of the organisation is not to be separated from love for and behaviour toward the triune God.

In these matters, Jesus' teaching on governance, authority and leadership was quite radical. It is not going too far to say that Jesus abolishes conventional understandings of authority and leadership on this earth prior to the Second Coming. The assumption was also made that Jesus' teachings in these areas are intended to apply to the wider world, including business corporations, not just to the church. Jesus' teachings on governance were summarised in 12 points with implications for how modern business should be organised. Aside from an explicit commitment to God, a number of the principles are found to be operative in business today. The principles are therefore practicable, and scope for their extension exists. ■

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