

Business as Blessing

 TRANSFORMING BUSINESS

by Peter Heslam and Eric Wood

Good straplines encapsulate what an organisation is about. They express its vision. The Center for Christian Business Ethics Today (CFCBET), based in Philadelphia, has used the strapline ‘In God’s world, business done right, is a blessing’. In this article, Peter Heslam and Eric Wood reflect on it from the background of the Bible and contemporary business.

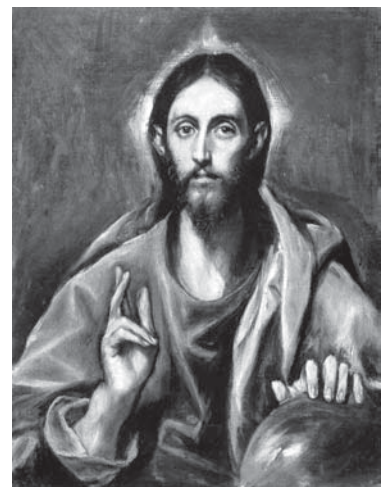
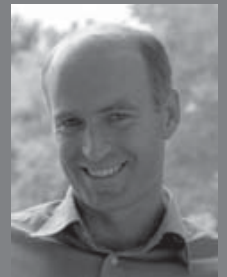
The CFCBET has selected its words with care. The phrase ‘business done right’ was chosen over ‘doing business right’ to emphasise that *business*, not just proper behaviour, is a blessing. While the centre maintains that business cannot be ‘done right’ without ethics, the strapline reflects a broader agenda than ethics. It includes such ways that business can be a blessing as the provision of goods and services.

This approach to business has practical and theological grounding. The blessing associated with work – whether or not that work is connected to commerce – goes back to the origin of our species. There the first thing God does after making human beings ‘in our likeness’ is to ‘bless’ them with the words, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea...’ (Gen 1.28). While careless readings of the creation story suggest that work is a curse, it is actually portrayed as first among the blessings God gives to humans.

CFCBET’s theology draws explicitly on Reformed theology – the tradition that inspired the so-called Protestant Work Ethic. But much Catholic theology also reflects an understanding that the ‘secular’ work of ordinary Christians can be a vehicle of God’s blessing. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it, “every baptized person is called to be a ‘blessing’, and to bless”.

Whichever ecclesial glasses are used to read them, the scriptures make clear that God’s blessing of Israel was for the ‘blessing of the nations’ and that this was not to be received passively but as a mandate – reflected in God’s command to Abraham to leave his country (Gen 12.1-4). If Christ’s followers are the inheritors of the Abrahamic blessing, as the New Testament suggests, it is of the essence of the church not merely to receive God’s blessings but to share them with society as a whole.

The vision of business as a blessing to wider society permeates the set of around 65 case studies of Christian entrepreneurs in developing and emerging economies we have collected as part of our *Belief in Enterprise* initiative. For many of them, this vision encapsulates the overall purpose of their companies. The blessings they’ve received from God – including the thriving companies they direct – are not primarily for their own benefit but for the benefit of other stakeholders including customers, employees, and in many cases the communities in which they operate. ▶▶



Blessing

El Salvador (1610-1614)

El Greco

Madrid, Museo del Prado

▶▶ Mining Han, for instance, is the founder-CEO of a number of enterprises, including China Folk Culture Village (Huaxia Minsu Cun), a resort providing recreation, catering, and tourism services. As its name suggests, a key part of its mission is to promote traditional Chinese culture. But for Han this enterprise of 350 employees is intimately tied up with her Christian faith and the impetus this gives her to develop human character and conscience.



China Folk Culture Village

‘Our motto’, she says, is to “establish an enterprise, bless a local area’. We hope that our enterprises will become a carrier of ‘God’s blessing to the local people’. This goes further than the creation of jobs and livelihoods. ‘Achievement comes less from one’s capacities than one’s character. We therefore put a strong emphasis on character training.’ Each employee is encouraged to take practical steps to put the interests of customers, colleagues, and local community members before their own. She hopes, in doing so, that her companies will bless China by helping to build its conscience.

Committed to the belief that Christian faith serves as a spiritual and practical spur to this form of blessing, Han is open about her faith amongst her peers and employees. She provides them with space for bible study groups, spiritual growth seminars and worship, while making it clear that no employee will face discrimination if they fail to share her faith.

Han also seeks to embody in her enterprise the teaching of ‘all the law and the prophets’: to love God and neighbour (Mt 22.37-40). Rejecting the charge that entrepreneurs are motivated primarily by greed, she takes the command to love as a viable business principle: ‘our enterprise operation, employee training, public relations and customer service all revolve around the core value of Christian

love.’ Seeing the practical impact of this strengthens her resolve that her ventures ‘testify to God’s love in China’.

Her overall aim, however, is to bring glory to God. In this she resembles her forebears in the Protestant faith, who maintained that the chief end of human beings is ‘to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever’, as some of their catechisms put it. For Han, holiness is not about one’s occupation but about the goal with which that occupation is pursued: ‘Christian entrepreneurs can glorify God with the skills God has blessed us with.’

While this gives no guarantee of commercial success, Han does find that the Christian identity and ethos of the Huaxia resort help build trust and loyalty amongst staff and customers. ‘The catering business is highly competitive in China [but] we have much less staff turnover than many catering businesses. Most employees have worked with us for more than 10 years. They’ve anchored their heart in the company.’

Although the spiritual origins of modern capitalism that lie in the blessings given to Adam and Eve, and to Abraham and Sarah, are largely ignored or denied, increasing numbers of people worldwide are finding that, in God’s world, business done right is a blessing. ■

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