

Profit with a Higher Purpose:

A Christian Guide to Business Leadership

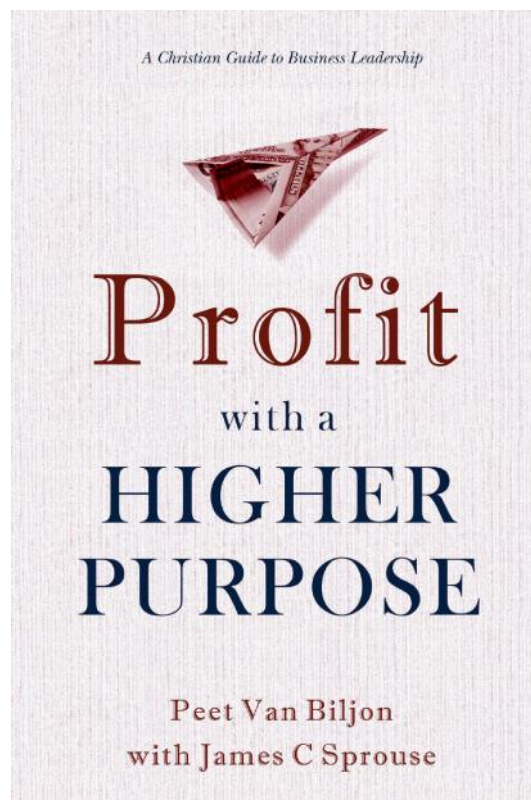
By Peet van Biljon with James Sprouse

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Many years ago, I was on a business trip to New York City but had failed to appreciate the impact that school holidays would have on the availability of those I wished to meet. Finding myself in mid-town Manhattan with no meetings on Ash Wednesday, I went to one of the large churches on Fifth Avenue to be ‘ashed’. That day, I had a revelation that has stayed with me: that the word “sin” is literally at the heart of “business”. Of course, all our human interactions and associations are tainted by our fallenness, but when we are about our daily business, contending for our livelihood, we are especially alert to opportunity and perhaps more vulnerable to temptation.

Innovation consultant Peet van Biljon and Methodist pastor James Sprouse have documented dozens of contexts, amply illustrated, in which these temptations are very real and present dangers to a business leader who is a professed follower of Jesus Christ. The book is at its most powerful when it challenges compartmentalised thinking – the easy failure to connect the moral teaching and example of Jesus with contemporary business practices and malpractices. From damaging management styles to unjust wages, long-hours working, sharp sales techniques, the protection of business reputation, brutal terminations, shareholder primacy

over other stakeholders, downright bribery and corruption, the authors draw out the inconsistencies in common behaviours with biblical teaching on Christian discipleship. The book nails some of the obvious – and not so obvious – contradictions



between what we claim to believe and the way we act when wearing our business hats.

In two key chapters, “The Big Time Crunch” and “The Many Sacrifices of the Ideal Worker”, the authors summarise a wealth of research on the destructive consequences of overwork and of oppressive working environments. Quoting the opening

verses of Genesis 11, comparisons are drawn between today’s super-workers and the ambition of the Babylonians to achieve the impossible by mere human effort. Jesus was plainly aware of the issues of sleep deprivation, burnout, collateral damage to family life and friendships arising from a culture of over-work and instead modelled withdrawal to quiet places and the importance of times of reflection, recuperation and prayerfulness.

Another significant section of the book addresses the decision to lay off workers, whether in the context of a business downturn or a strategic decision to offshore or downsize. The authors contrast the very different approaches taken in Germany versus the US and UK during the slump that followed the 2007-08 global financial crisis. In Germany, imaginative ways were found to retain the maximum number of employees in order to avoid the expense of redundancy and subsequent re-hiring. The authors acknowledge that work and workers will often

be relocated for justifiable reasons, but argue that companies should adopt a code of honour in such circumstances. Thinking of the way that God prepared Abram, Moses and Joseph for their respective journeys into the unknown, the authors suggest that companies should prepare departing workers better for their journeys, by equipping them with transferable skills, matching