

Family Business: An Intimate History of John Lewis & The Partnership

By Victoria Glendinning

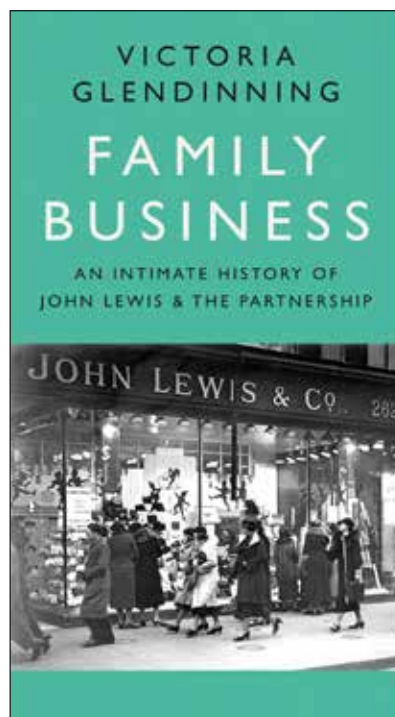
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John Lewis is frequently described as the nation's 'favourite retailer', and regularly heads surveys for outstanding customer service. This is linked to its distinctive structure – partnership and profit-sharing – which is widely admired. Indeed, during his stint as Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg aspired to see the UK becoming a John Lewis-style economy¹.

Because the firm bears some similarity with those established by benevolent Nonconformist entrepreneurs like George Cadbury, who showed great concern for their workforce, many mistakenly assume that the Lewises came from the same Christian stock. But this is far from the truth. Neither John Lewis, the founder, nor Spedan and Oswald Lewis, his two sons, were people of faith. Victoria Glendinning describes John as a 'militant atheist', and though Spedan and Oswald (by the arrangement of their mother) were baptised and confirmed as children, they remained indifferent to Christian faith throughout their lives. Nevertheless, their story is a fascinating one, and I thoroughly commend this 'intimate history', which is superbly written by an award-winning biographer and novelist.

John Lewis came from humble stock in the Somerset town of Shepton Mallet. Working as a teenager in a draper's shop, he moved to London at the age of 20 in 1856 and served at Peter Robinson's store on Oxford Circus for eight years as a buyer of silks. He then opened his own shop, and while having significant limitations as a businessman, which included paying scant attention to the shop's appearance, he prospered

through his adherence to three key principles: probity (no deceit or trickery and paying suppliers on time), value



(cheap goods for ready money) and assortment (having a wide choice of goods). But John Lewis was not a generous employer; he banked the profits for himself and built up a considerable fortune, living the life of an upper-middle-class gentleman.

Lewis married Ellie Baker in 1884, and their two tall, handsome sons were groomed to take over the family business. The younger one, Oswald showed no great aptitude for business and spent much of his career in politics, serving as a Conservative MP for Colchester and aspiring unsuccessfully for a seat in the House of Lords. The elder one,

Spedan, showed flair and enthusiasm for business from his early 20s. In personality terms he was very similar to his father. Both had what their respective wives called 'excitable brains'. They were volatile and irascible; they had frequent rows, sometimes violent ones, with each other. John reluctantly allowed Spedan to cut his teeth running the store Peter Jones which was acquired in 1906. It was a few years later, during a period of convalescence following a horse-riding accident, that Spedan developed his own distinctive business ideas. He determined on an Experiment in Industrial Democracy (the capitals are his). Glendinning sums this up well:

By his own account, it began with his realisation that the Lewis family were taking annually more out of the business for themselves than the combined wages of the whole workforce of three hundred or so. This was textbook capitalism. Employers took the profits. Why else were they in business? They paid labour at the going rate, or as little as they could get away with. That was how Mr John Lewis operated.

It was not only the intrinsic unfairness of this which exercised Spedan. He was not a Marxist, nor any kind of a Christian. He saw that the gross economic inequality between the boss and what he always called the 'Rank and File' must ultimately result in unrest, strikes, maybe riots, and commercial catastrophe. The trade union movement was on the case already. He was a pragmatist as much as he was an idealist (pp.128-129).



Brownsea Island
Brownsea Castle is a holiday home for John Lewis employees
Photo: National Trust

So Spedan, with his newly married wife Beatrice, developed the idea of all employees becoming partners and sharing in the company's profits. The John Lewis Constitution which enshrined these ideas was adopted in 1928. Glendinning has surprisingly little detail on this, and also on the ideal of excellent customer service which has surely been so fundamental to John Lewis's ongoing popularity.

Community was a central plank of Spedan's vision, and this was nurtured in the leisure facilities and holiday homes which were made available to the workforce. Despite the economic difficulties of the inter-war years, the Partnership flourished. Spedan made some shrewd acquisitions, notably that of Waitrose (1937), which gave him a foothold in the food sector, and made some excellent appointments to roles of senior manager. The flagship store in Oxford Street was badly damaged by German bombers in 1940, but by now there were lots of other stores and the business bounced back from this.


In 1948 Spedan wrote *Partnership for All*, his account of the firm's experiment in industrial democracy. Again Glendinning's insightful comment is worth quoting. The book 'is in its way phenomenal. If Spedan Lewis had been born a century earlier, and if evangelical

Christianity not industrial democracy had become his religion, he would have been one of those charismatic popular preachers, celebrities of their time, attracting huge crowds held transfixed by sermons which went on for several hours' (p.246). But she also comments on the paradox that, had it not been for the family fortune first established by John Lewis, the Partnership might never have got off the ground.

Spedan retired at the age of 70 in 1955, but his final years (he died eight years later) were among his least happy. He found letting go difficult, and launched angry tirades about the practice of the Partnership under his chosen successor Bernard Miller. (This is for reasons that are rather unclear, as John Lewis continued to thrive under Miller.) His brother Oswald, with whom he maintained cordial if not close relations, made an astute comparison in a letter to him: 'Father, when he should have retired, could not bear to see you managing the business which he had created. You, when you have retired, cannot bear to see Miller managing the Partnership which you have created. Is there a curse on the concern?' (p.279).

Glendinning's account focuses on the main family members: the father, the two sons, their wives and children. Spedan and Beatrice had three children

who proved rather a disappointment to them; it was Oswald's son Peter who became Director of Trading and succeeded Miller as Chairman in 1972. The book has an Epilogue covering the story of the company over the last 60 years, and commenting on the challenges it has recently faced from online retailing and during the pandemic. Personally, I would like to have seen this period discussed in more detail.

I think that most readers would agree that Spedan Lewis's business vision – notably his concern for employees and customers – was admirable, even if he was, like his father, in many respects a difficult man. This raises the question whether that vision would have been enhanced or different if he had been a Christian. I believe we have to be honest at this point and say not necessarily. People of other faiths and none have fine ideals; Christians too can be eccentric and they have their blind spots. Where I think Christian faith could have made a difference is in giving Spedan a greater serenity in his later life. Seeing his life in the context of eternity might have given him a sense of peace and perspective that appears to have been lacking. Nevertheless, there is much we can valuably learn from this absorbing account in which he becomes the central character. 

1. Nick Clegg publicly expressed support for the practice of workers owning shares in their companies, aka John Lewis. See <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2012/jan/15/nick-clegg-john-lewis-economy>.



Richard Higginson was Director of Faith in Business at Ridley Hall from 1989 until his retirement in 2018. He has recently stepped down as Chair of Faith in Business. He is a founder-editor of FiBQ and the author of several books, including Faith, Hope & the Global Economy and (with Kina Robertshaw) A Voice to be Heard.

Towards a more just use of money

Sarah Edwards describes what JustMoney Movement is doing to connect people's faith with their values and ethics, so as to impact their own and their church's use of money. She explains how they make the connections: the Creation story gives us responsibility for the stewardship of all God's resources, the Fall includes the misuse of money, and Redemption enables us to put right financial injustices. Sarah then goes on to give examples of how this theology is being put into practice.

Money makes the world go round, so the old song goes. But as Christians and churches we don't actually like talking about, or even thinking about, money very much. *JustMoney Movement* wants to change that – money is so connected to our daily lives, the way our economy works, and the problems and challenges facing our world, so we must do some serious thinking and ultimately start acting differently with regard to money.

JustMoney Movement is an ecumenical education and campaigning charity. We work with individuals and churches across the UK equipping them to connect their faith, values and financial choices. We advocate for a just use of money by banks, businesses and in the tax system. Our vision is one where money is used to shape a fairer, greener future. Money is a means of exchange and a store

of value. It can be used to resource much that is good in the world. And yet money as used within our current financial and economic systems has created distortions – indeed these systems have contributed to many of the interconnected crises we see around us: crises in extremes of economic inequality and in our natural world, for example, most pressing in our climate.



**Liza Minnelli and Joel Grey singing
Money makes the world go round
in “Cabaret” (1972)**

Image: Warner Bros.



Rembrandt
Parable of the Rich Fool (1627)
Gemäldegalerie, Berlin

Building a movement

Our approach to this crisis-ridden context is to help build a movement of people working together for change. Movements of committed citizens, including faith communities, are powerful catalysts for social change, with examples from the civil rights and anti-apartheid movements through to the Jubilee 2000 debt campaign. Such movements can create the political space for transformative change – a level of change now required on the climate crisis and inequality – whether by banks, businesses, governments, or in people’s ways of thinking and behaving. We encourage people to learn about the financial system and wider economy, explore how to act justly with their own money and their churches’ money, and to speak out for change, all as part of this movement towards a greener, fairer future.

Connecting faith

We start from a faith perspective: connecting people’s faith, their ways of understanding God, with their values and ethics, so as to impact their own and their church’s use of money and their advocacy towards the wider financial system and economy. We know that

many people don’t feel they understand finance and economics, and don’t connect these issues to the Christian faith. And yet surely how we see money and how we use it – including how that shapes the economy around us – should be part of a holistic expression of faith, a whole-life way of living and bearing witness to the God of love in the world.

To start with, the fact that we don’t want to talk about money with our friends or neighbours, and we don’t want to hear it preached about from the pulpit, is problematic. Money is central to our lives, and if we look at Christian ethics, at Scripture, at the life and words of Jesus, money is talked about a lot! Our first aim then is to start the conversation and see where it leads us.

Many of Jesus’ parables and encounters reflect teaching about money – including its dangers, the problems of wealth, and the possibilities of living differently⁴. There are huge amounts to unpack in even one of these passages. Often, especially in the Global North, Christians have been taught a ‘spiritualised’ version of these teachings, or that they aren’t really as radical as they sound and are more about our attitudes. Whichever way we

interpret these passages – let alone all the teaching in the Old Testament and the rest of the New – it’s clear that money, poverty and economics are absolutely central to Christian teaching, which is why we encourage Christians and churches to talk about money, to connect it to our faith. This will enable us to see what it might mean for how we live individually and corporately and how we speak out prophetically to the world around us.

There are some helpful frameworks we can use in reflecting on money from a faith perspective.

1. Money and creation

Throughout the Bible we are reminded that everything we receive comes ultimately from God. For example Psalm 24 tells us ‘the earth is the Lord’s and everything in it.’ God created everything and in absolute terms, we own nothing – neither money nor possessions. But we are given a role in caring for the world that God has made. In Genesis 2:15, we are told that ‘the Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it’. From this flows the theological concept of stewardship. We have special responsibility, within creation, for its

wellbeing. So when it comes to money, if we are being 'good stewards,' what might God's priorities be for how we think about and use money, and how might we use it in ways that care for the world God has made?

As part of the created order, God makes us – all humanity – in his image. So how we use money should also reflect the human dignity of each of us – we are not merely economic units, we are created for worship, for relationship, and in the pattern of Sabbath, for rest.

2. Money in a fallen world

Secondly, we can frame our thinking about money in terms of living in a fallen world. Money is part of a system that is in rebellion against God, and it can have a dehumanising effect. This is drawn out in the words of the Old Testament prophets like Amos, Isaiah, Micah and Jeremiah who focus our attention on the injustices of the wealthy and the elites who ignore the plight of the poor, exploit them or practise corruption (e.g. Amos 5:11-12) and in similar teaching in the New Testament book of James (e.g. James 5:1-6).

Jesus talks about not being able to serve both God and money or 'Mammon' (Matthew 6:24) – a characterisation of money as a character with power over us, deceiving us into wrong attitudes and actions. And Paul says in 1 Timothy (6:10) that 'the love of money is the root of many kinds of evil.' This version of money, indeed the love or worship of money, can be seen played out in all kinds of ways in our world, wherever greed and corruption are allowed to flourish, where things have a price but are not valued. Just think of the ways in which we have treated the earth as a set of resources to extract, or exploited people across the world in pursuit of profit.

3. Money redeemed

Finally, money can be understood as part of a world that is being redeemed, where we seek to learn from Christian ethics, from scripture and from examples of church and kingdom, about redemptive and restorative patterns for our thinking and use of money – both individually and collectively.

The concepts of Sabbath and Jubilee in the Old Testament law are relevant here, giving the Israelite society a re-set for social, economic and environmental inequities and injustices that had built up, including the cancelling of debts and the restoration

'Money can be understood as part of a world that is being redeemed.'

of the land. This vision is surely in Jesus' mind when he gives his Nazareth Manifesto (Luke 4) proclaiming 'good news to the poor' and 'the year of the Lord's favour' – a reference to the Jubilee.

Jesus' teaching and encounters are full of redemptive understandings of money. Zaccheus the tax collector responds to Jesus with financial restitution: a holistic faith response. And Jesus tells us 'where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.' How then can we make sure our 'treasure' – our money and the wealth of our society – are put to use in ways that align with our 'heart' i.e. serving God, loving our neighbours, caring for the vulnerable and the created world?

The early church took these patterns and commands seriously in their approach to money and resources. This raises the question as to what might it look like to have a posture of radical sharing for the good of our communities, when it comes to how we use money today.

Putting it into practice

How then might we put these principles into practice, applying them to our own and our churches' money, and to speaking up for a just use of money in the world? Following our foundational

verse, Micah 6:8, how can we act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God, with regard to money?

Our Money Makes Change programme has a suite of resources on our website, www.justmoney.org.uk, and we offer online and face-to-face workshops, webinars and trainings, for individuals, small groups and churches to look at how our thinking about money works out in terms of our decisions about banking, pensions, saving, investing, and spending.

We also have two 'high points' each year with Good Money Week and Good Money Sunday in October, and Fair Tax Week with Tax Justice Sunday, in June. These are key moments for churches to engage with these issues, start to talk about them, and construct prayers and teaching around them.

Banking

Billions of pounds move between bank accounts every day. Banks lend to businesses around the world and thus shape and sustain the way the economy works – or doesn't. Our big high street banks are not always 'good news' and often have poor ethical ratings. Just looking at the environmental side of this, in 2023 alone, the big five UK high street banks – Barclays, HSBC, Santander, and to a lesser extent NatWest and Lloyds – provided \$55bn to fossil fuel companies, helping drive climate change². While many banks have made commitments to change this, research shows that the vast majority of them are not on track to deliver the necessary ratio of green investments to fossil fuels³. *JustMoney Movement* believes that we urgently need banks to stop driving the climate crisis and instead to fund a just transition to clean energy and a climate-safe future.

We equip individuals and churches to find out about their own bank and its ethical stance, including its fossil fuel investments. They can choose to switch to a greener alternative – *JustMoney Movement* has a *Greener*,



In 2021 Church in Wales voted overwhelming to divest from fossil fuels

Image: Operation Noah

Church in Wales votes to divest!



*Fairer Banking Guide for Churches*⁴ while individuals can join our *Big Bank Switch* campaign, run jointly with Operation Noah and Just Love, amplifying their individual choice as part of a collective switching moment which helps us put pressure on the banks to change⁵.

Banks must become fairer too: 20.3 million people can now be considered ‘financially vulnerable’ in the UK⁶. The consequences of financial exclusion have significant negative impacts on wellbeing, mental health and the ability to participate fully in society. We champion and support the work of credit unions who offer fair, ethical loans and build financial resilience amongst their members, as well as not being invested in fossil fuels.

Pension power

Many of us contribute each month into a pension. We may not see ourselves as ‘investors’ but we are connected to investments through our pensions. This adds up to £3 trillion in pension funds in the UK alone⁷. Some of the big pension funds have committed to ethical action but there’s still a long way to go before the money in our pensions is protecting the world we love. If we haven’t made an active ethical choice, our money is probably

invested in things that may not align with our faith and values. We encourage people to find out if they can switch or what choices they have.

Ethical investing

What is ‘ethical’ investment? It might also be described as sustainable or responsible investment, with labels like ‘ESG’ (environmental, social and governance) referring to investment approaches that take these factors into account.

We support a three-pronged approach to thinking about your investments: you can avoid, engage, or embrace. You might choose to *avoid* investing in specific sectors, like gambling, fossil fuels, alcohol, tobacco and arms companies (often called negative screening). This might also include *divesting* (taking your money away) from things you no longer want to be invested in. For instance many churches and Christian institutions have divested from fossil fuels in the past few years.

You can use your voice as a shareholder to *engage* with companies for change (or encourage your fund manager or pension provider to do this). At *JustMoney Movement* we hold small amounts of shares specifically to

be able to do this. For example we attended HSBC and Lloyds’ AGMs this year to raise our concerns about their investments and how they are serving churches as customers.

Thirdly, *embracing* means investing positively in businesses that do good (often called impact investing) and there are increasing opportunities to do this even as individual small-scale investors, through crowdsourcing platforms or simply ethical stocks and shares (ISAs, for example).

Spending sustainably

When we shop we’re connecting to others, locally and globally, and to the Earth. So we encourage a questioning attitude: what values are at the heart of our spending choices? Do we buy what we want, or what we need? We can choose to care for creation through our spending. This might firstly mean buying less. It will mean reviewing spending, and following the three ‘R’s of repair, recycle and reuse. We also signpost to various labelling schemes, from Fair Trade to Soil Association to the Fair Tax Mark. And we highlight the choice to support businesses that have a positive impact on society, like social enterprises, B Corps and co-operatives. Our Ethical Buying Guide⁸

helps churches to develop an ethical purchasing policy, underpinned by their principles and values.

Speaking up for a just use of money

All of these choices with our own or our church's money equate to actions that contribute to our movement. As well as encouraging and equipping action with our money, we campaign and advocate for change. Proverbs 31:8 tells us to speak up for the rights of all who are destitute, speak up and judge fairly. And we are commanded from Genesis onwards to take care of creation. So we call on banks to stop investing in fossil fuels: we have recently produced a *Statement of concern* calling on banks to shift their investments out of fossil fuels. Churches and Christian institutions have signed the Statement to advocate for change from the banks, expressing their concern about their financing of fossil fuels. And we are part of a campaign for a new law, a *Fair Banking Act*, in the UK that would support stronger credit unions and other purpose-driven financial institutions, thereby tackling financial

exclusion and making the banking sector fairer.

When it comes to money as a store of value (i.e. wealth) and how it is distributed, *JustMoney Movement* is deeply concerned about growing levels of inequality, both in the UK and globally. Our faith challenges us to reflect with unease on a world where extreme poverty is on the rise for the first time in 25 years while extreme wealth has risen dramatically since the pandemic began. Domestically the wealthiest 1% hold more wealth than 70% of the UK's population⁹.

Our Church Action for Tax Justice campaign is calling for fairer taxes that could tackle inequality and raise revenue to tackle poverty and the climate crisis. Taxes need a conversation too – a shift in conversation we believe from being seen solely as a burden to being understood as a tool that can help to build a flourishing society. Paying taxes can be a way for us to show love for our neighbours, care for the vulnerable and protect our natural spaces, in a modern society.

We are campaigning for a wealth tax in the UK as well as reforms to existing taxes and clamp downs on tax havens and loopholes that reflect an unjust system. The Government's Autumn Budget was clearly a big tax and spend package. But while we did see some steps in the right direction on tax reform – like finally abolishing 'non-dom' status – the JustMoney Movement was disappointed in the lack of progress in taxing the ultra-wealthy¹⁰.

Join the conversation

In acting with our own and our churches' money, as well as rediscovering the church's prophetic voice in how money is used and shared, we hope we can build a movement of people creating space for transformation to happen – so we can realise our vision of a world where money shapes a fairer, greener future. Let's start talking about money today – in our families, our churches and our communities – and see where it leads us. You can find out more and sign up to hear from us regularly, so you too can join the conversation, at www.justmoney.org.uk. 

1. For example, the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30), the rich fool (Luke 12:13-21) and the unjust steward (Luke 16:1-13), and Jesus' encounters with the rich young man (Matthew 19:16-30) and with Zacchaeus the tax collector (Luke 19:1-10).
2. Make My Money Matter, <https://makemymoneymatter.co.uk/hiddenrelationship/> based on figures from *Banking On Climate Chaos: Fossil Fuel Finance Report 2024*, <https://www.bankingonclimatechaos.org/>
3. Research by ShareAction has found that that 18 out of 20 of Europe's largest banks, including HSBC and Barclays, are not on track to meet the \$10 to \$1 ratio of green investment to fossil fuels investment that the International Energy Agency says is needed by 2030, <https://shareaction.org/news/banks-low-ambition-and-incoherent-climate-targets-put-net-zero-goals-at-risk-new-shareaction-analysis>
4. Available to download from <https://justmoney.org.uk/resources/new-greener-fairer-banking-guide/>
5. You can join the Big Bank Switch campaign at <https://justmoney.org.uk/the-big-bank-switch/>
6. From Fair4AllFinance research, 2024, available in summary form at <https://fair4allfinance.org.uk/nearly-half-of-uk-adults-now-living-in-financially-vulnerable-circumstances/>
7. Pensions Policy Institute research, 2024, <https://www.pensionspolicyinstitute.org.uk/media/c00dra0k/20240909-ppi-pension-scheme-assets-main-report-final.pdf>
8. Available to download from <https://justmoney.org.uk/resources/ethical-buying-guide-for-churches/>
9. Oxfam, 2023, <https://www.oxfam.org.uk/media/press-releases/richest-1-grab-nearly-twice-as-much-new-wealth-as-rest-of-the-world-put-together/>
10. JustMoney Movement's full response to the Budget can be seen at <https://justmoney.org.uk/news/2024budgetreaction/>



Sarah Edwards is Executive Director of the JustMoney Movement, a campaigning and education charity which works with Christians and churches, seeking a greener, fairer future through a more just use of money. Sarah has worked in advocacy and campaigning for more than two decades, most recently at Tearfund where she led their Global Advocacy Team, focusing on the need to tackle the environmental crisis and global poverty together. She has previously led campaigns and advocacy both in the UK and internationally on a range of human rights and global justice issues, including debt relief, human trafficking, tax justice and access to medicines, and has carried out advocacy capacity building with groups across Asia and Africa.

Faith in an Industrial Age:

Locating Ethical Blind Spots

David Parish asks whether 19th Century factory owners who professed an active faith in God behaved or acted differently from their peers. Did faith matter in practice? He then considers three well-documented examples, and concludes that it did, but that there were 'blind spots'. Examples are the employment of child labour in dangerous conditions, unawareness of pollution and other health hazards to the workers, and disregard for the supply chain, where slavery and poor conditions were probably known.

Beginning around 1750, England went through a profound series of technological changes that triggered the Industrial Revolution. Prominent among these were the invention of the steam engine and the power loom. Smaller advances also had a major impact.

As early as 900 AD there were thousands of waterwheels in England using wooden cogs and gear teeth but by 1784 John Smeaton had invented a way of casting iron gears.¹ The number and size of the mills then increased. At first used mainly for milling grain, other industrialists began to explore ways to use this power to produce woven cotton and woollen fabrics. Every town and even some villages that had a fast-running stream had one or more mills. The echoes of their

existence are still in street names like Mill Street or Millers Way. A few still survive as working mills, particularly in Wales and Scotland, but they are now powered by electric motors with the old iron gear preserved as a tourist attraction. Others are owned by heritage organisations and kept in working condition with staff trained to operate the machinery and according to Trip Advisor, nine are restaurants, with the millwheel and machinery often encased in glass as a feature.

Mechanisation of production, particularly in the cloth weaving industry, brought new challenges both to the owners and workers. Work that had been largely “out work”, done by families in their own cottage, now needed to be housed in large buildings by the water source. Now people began

to “go to work” and the relationships based on work and place started to erode rapidly. A gradual erosion of the concept of home and work being in the same place occurred. In contrast the Tudor merchant, as can be seen from surviving examples, lived literally above the workshop.

These changes required capital on a large scale to construct the mills and buy the machinery. The level of funding required was beyond the means even of a wealthy individual so extended partnerships and joint stock companies were used to supply the capital which, especially after joint stock companies were permitted limited liability in the mid-nineteenth century, resulted in ownership becoming increasingly remote from the workplace.² The owners and investors were then inclined



Tudor merchant House
Photo: English Heritage

to see the return on capital to them as the prime reason for the business. In the UK and USA company legislation still actively enshrines the principle that the primary duty of the directors of a company is the financial benefit of the shareholders.

Conditions in Industrial Britain

The result of industrialisation was that the workers had to seek work where they could, at the rates employers were willing to pay and with workplace conditions at the minimum safety level. One estimate was that by the early 1800s 81% of the industrial workforce was in the cotton mills of the North of England. Manchester gained the nickname Cottonopolis.³

Children between the ages of 11 and 14 comprised around 10% of the workforce. Note this eyewitness report from Robert Collyer, writing of his experience as a child in 1831:

It is told of the Younger Pitt that, in looking to meet the demands for more money the great statesman said, 'We must yoke up the children'. I cannot vouch for the story but between the age of 7 and 8 I found myself stood by a loom with many children of about my age and working five days a week.⁴

While conditions in nineteenth-century mills and factories were arduous, it would be wrong to assume that all employers of that era were hard-faced, exploitative and uncaring. The change in corporate legislation does not mean that they necessarily saw themselves as lacking responsibility to what we could call stakeholders – notably their employees and customers. Some owner-employers practised higher moral standards than others.

For a number of years I have been trying to establish if factory owners who professed an active faith in God behaved or acted differently from their peers. Did faith matter in practice? This is not easy to establish, as secular biographers rarely focus on the spiritual aspects of their subjects' life. However, thanks to the many heritage groups it is possible to visit the homes of the factory owners and look at their bookshelves and also see the historical records of their employment practices. The lives of several nineteenth-century Christian businessmen are also well documented.⁵

For this article I have taken a look at three businessmen from different backgrounds and trades. I shall describe various ways in which their faith had a positive impact and then suggest certain "blind spots".

Samuel Greg

Samuel Greg, the owner of a cotton weaving mill in Styal, a village near Manchester, was the son of a wealthy Belfast businessman and merchant and he was educated at Harrow School. With the help of his uncle, he built the Quarry Bank mill on the banks of the fast-flowing river Bollin in 1784. An overshot mill wheel like those at Quarry could deliver 120 hp which was almost as much as the later steam engines could deliver. Greg was raised in the Presbyterian church and became an active member in Manchester where he lived with his uncle before building the mill.

His marriage to Hannah Lightbody brought changes to his faith and fortune. She was also from a wealthy family and he used her dowry of £10,000 (worth about £2m today) to help build the mill. She was a Unitarian and Samuel adopted his wife's faith and became part of a wealthy network of Unitarian dissenting businessmen.⁶

Unitarianism was an expression of faith that was open to social reform. Hannah was particularly concerned about the way workers were treated, and her attitudes rubbed off on her husband. This was to be important for the mill as the site was then in a quite remote Cheshire valley, about 15 miles from Manchester with poor roads. Greg



"Cottonopolis"
Photo: Getty Images



Quarry Bank Mill
Photo: Knutsford.net

realised there was no local source of skilled machine operators, unlike the mills on the Irwell in central Manchester, and so decided to build a model village for the workers. He also built an apprentice house as he recruited about 30% of his workforce from poor families or orphanages. These were typically children between the ages of 7 and 13 who were used in cleaning the threads of cotton that fell under the spinning machines and looms. This was hard and dangerous work as the machines were running just above their bent bodies as they scrambled along the floor.⁷

Samuel Greg was well read theologically and had a good library which contained some of the classic works. Urged on by Hannah, he was – by the standards of the day – an enlightened and good employer. His faith and that of his wife ensured that the children were well fed and housed and had some limited schooling. Nevertheless, the work regime was demanding. There were strict rules about attendance on time and bad language was a dismissible offence. The apprentices were paid 9 old pence a week. The skilled male workers were paid 250 pence a week for a six-day week working 12 hours a day, which would be about £200 a week

today. In the cities house rents were around 100 pence a week so half their wage went on rent, whereas at Quarry Bank Mill, housing was provided for the workers and they retained more of their earnings.

Geoffrey Mander

Another interesting case study is Geoffrey Mander who took over his family's paint and varnish firm in the 1930s. From 1929–45 he was the MP for Wolverhampton East and a member of the Liberal Party. He was also an active member of the Congregational church, which was then more evangelical than most of its United Reformed Church successors today.

In Parliament he was a strong opponent of the appeasement of foreign dictators, and campaigned against the internment of German Jews and others who had fled from Hitler's persecution. He was a local philanthropist for various causes and nationally offered to buy the Red House, the home of William Morris, for the nation. He also donated his home Wightwick Hall in Wolverhampton to the National Trust.

The family firm Manders Paint had been founded in 1733 and operated

from several sites across Dudley and Wolverhampton. Between the wars Mander developed enlightened workplace practices such as having medical care on site and improved production safety. He made history by agreeing the first 40-hour work week with Ernest Bevin, the General Secretary of the Transport & General Workers' Union. He also introduced a works council that brought management and the union together.

George Cadbury

My third entrepreneur is better known. Chronologically he fits between Greg and Mander. George Cadbury took over the Birmingham family grocery business with his brother Richard in 1861. The company was already selling cocoa as a popular health drink in an age when alternatives to alcohol were sought by those promoting temperance.

The Cadburys were Quakers, who faced a dilemma in business, in that they had a philosophy of trade similar to the Moravian Brethren: this stipulated that those who chose business as a way of living should only provide products and services that benefited the public and caused no harm to the user. The Quakers became involved in transport, food

trades of all kinds and banking. Banking was an area that involved renting out money at interest which had been frowned upon by Luther but accepted by Calvin. Lloyds and Barclays were originally Quaker banks.

George Cadbury was very astute and noted the growing demand for bars of chocolate in Europe, where both the Dutch and the Swiss had introduced technology that took the bitterness out of the cocoa solids and improved the grinding of the cocoa paste to make it smoother. He met with Coenraad Van Houten in Amsterdam, licenced his process and acquired the technology used by Rudolf Lindt in Switzerland. This improved the smoothness of the chocolate and used emulsifiers to blend cream with the chocolate paste to give the smoothness of taste.

Cadbury was an astute businessman who embraced marketing and distribution techniques which are still used today. In addition, despite the Quaker rule of living at peace with all, he made sure his company competed with the other so-called Chocolate Quakers: Fry, Rowntree and Macintosh. But he was very concerned for his workforce. He once wrote in a letter to the Bishop of Birmingham that 'Nearly all my money is invested in businesses in which I can truly say the first thought is the welfare of the people employed'.⁸ He was

concerned that his workers lived well and acquired land outside Birmingham to build the model village of Bournville and a 'state of the art' factory. The factory, now owned by the international firm Mondelez, is still producing chocolate, while the Cadbury World Museum contains much fascinating information about life and work for George's employees.

Blind Spots

These examples indicate that Christian faith was a positive factor in leading some businessmen to act differently from their secular peers. That said, historical hindsight offers a critical perspective on some of their practice.

We have seen that Samuel Greg was a humane employer. He did however have a major blind spot. In 1790 when the mill began production, 80% of the cotton produced on slave plantations in America went to Manchester through Liverpool as part of the dreadful triangle trade of trade: goods shipped to Africa and sold to buy slaves who were then shipped to the Americas and cotton sent on the return trip.

Jonathan Aitken's biography of John Newton⁹ has a graphic description of the trade. Since Greg's family owned a sugar plantation in Dominica, which

used slave labour, he should have been well aware of the hardship of those workers. In addition he, like the medical profession at the time, did not understand the impact of working with machinery operating at noise levels of 80 decibels. When I was last at Quarry Bank one of the visitors had worked in the last operating mill in Manchester in her teens and now in her 70s had severe hearing loss. My own tinnitus probably stems from working beside running jet engines in the 1960s before legislation mandated the use of ear defenders.

Likewise Geoffrey Mander was a considerate and caring employer. However, pictures taken in the 1930s show workers near the paint vats with only limited protective equipment and in particular no face masks with particle filters.¹⁰

What is now known is that the volatile organic compounds in paint cause lung and kidney damage.

As for Cadbury, like Greg there are questions about whether he showed sufficient awareness about or attention to his supply chain. As early as the 1900s, there were rumours of child labour and even slave labour by the cocoa growers in Africa. Allegations emerged that workers at the São Tomé plantation off Angola (then a Portuguese colony from which



Cotton plantation slaves
Image: Bettmann Archives/Getty Images

Cadbury's imported many of their cocoa beans) were effectively working as slaves. Eventually, in the face of damaging allegations in the London newspaper *The Standard*, Cadbury's stopped using São Tomé and started importing cocoa from West Africa.

Lessons for Today

These examples show that even Christian employers who strove hard to be ethical had their blind spots. They were caring in a paternalistic sort of way, but were insensitive to some of the deeper systemic issues involved in their business. What are today's lessons for managers in the workplace?

I think the main consideration is to try and take a helicopter view of the business. Seek an outside vantage-point and ask some of the bigger questions.

In manufacturing today, clothing retailers and major chocolate makers have to make significant efforts to control their supply chain and ensure that every producer complies with their ethical code. Abuses of labour can all too easily creep in.¹¹ The 19th century employers may not have regarded their supply chain as their responsibility, but today we do.

Where and what are the wider societal issues outside the legislative framework? What might any impact look like in 20 years' time? I was not

a fan of social media from the outset and remain a strong critic and have no profile on "the socials". While social media is used extensively in business, it brings a variety of issues in terms of negative impact on social relations and mental health, questionable information accuracy and spread of misinformation, and pushing undesirable content. I think that in five years' time social media will be much more strictly regulated. New legislation in Australia and India will bring in major controls on content and distribution, because by using algorithms the platform providers are in effect becoming editors of content.

Similarly, AI will bring immense benefits in terms of managing data and speeding processes up. The question that needs to be asked now is: what are the future risks? I have spent 40 years working in transport and I am still active in research. In the next five to ten years we will see the growth of the "dark warehouse" as the robots will do all the stacking and picking in almost total darkness. There will be a core technical staff operating the machinery and software. However, the question employers and government are not asking is: how do you replace 500,000 semi-skilled warehouse jobs with meaningful work in the same time span?

Another area of impact will be the general clerical worker. Roles like drafting legal documents are an ideal

area of work for AI processing. Here the numbers of workers are even higher. The insurance sector alone employs 300,000 people. Our improved communications should mean that we can engineer cooperation between industries shedding employees and new industries providing employment, the aim being that replacement of jobs takes place in the same locality.

Also low wages are not a thing of the past. The BBC have recently carried out an investigation into the fashion garment industry in Leicester and found sewing machine operators working for £3 an hour and employers issuing bogus pay role statements.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation report issued in January 2024 found that poverty levels are at a 20-year high. Another government study found that 17% of children and adults living poverty are in families where both adults work. They are often in poorly paid "zero hour" and casual pay jobs with high levels of wage insecurity.

As Christians we should be active in asking such hard questions of employers and government. It took a long time before Christian conscience promoted the Factory Acts and banned the slave trade. And if we ourselves are employers or in government, we need to be asking the hard questions of ourselves, and to be active in finding the solutions, as our forebears sought to be. 🇮🇪

1. See <https://new.millsarchive.org/2021/09/27/into-the-industrial-age-developments-in-wind-and-water-power-1750-1850/>.
2. In a process of gradual development, the Acts of 1844, 1856 and 1862 established joint stock companies and the principle of limited liability.
3. HM Boot, *Economic History Review* XLVIII, Issue 2, p289 ff.
4. Jane Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution*, CUP, Introduction.
5. See especially Ian Bradley, *Enlightened Entrepreneurs: Business Ethics in Victorian Britain*, Lion, 2007. He has chapters on Holloway, Salt, Morley, Palmer, Colman, Carnegie, Cadbury, Rowntree, Boot and Lever.
6. Unitarianism was regarded in the nineteenth century as one of the main Nonconformist Christian denominations, though it is – as its name suggests – non-trinitarian. It sees Jesus Christ as inspired by God and the saviour of humanity but not equal to God.
7. Clark Nardinelli, *Journal of Economic History*, Vol 40 Issue 4, p175.
8. Cited in James Walvin, *The Quakers: Money and Morals*, John Murray, 1997.
9. Jonathan Aitken, *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace*, Bloomsbury Continuum, 2023.
10. <http://www.historywebsite.co.uk/Museum/Manders/Memories/Manders.htm>
11. See <https://theconversation.com/child-slavery-in-west-africa-understanding-cocoa-farming-is-key-to-ending-the-practice-170315>.



David Parish is a retired BA manager. He is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport. He writes on the intersection of faith and work and is on the volunteer staff of the Kirby Laing Centre for Public Theology in Cambridge.