

# Christian Distinctives in Business

## – A Response from Cal Bailey

I became a Christian aged 15, and spent the next 15 years trying to decide whether it was true, and – if so – what did God want me to do? I'd always wanted to be in business, but my two pastors during that time disparaged such work as selfish, disobedient and worthless.

Towards the end of this period, I was fortunate to attend the 1989 conference where James Allcock delivered the inspirational paper on Christian Distinctives in Business. It was wholly transformational for me. Not only did he give a clear Christian rationale for business as a God-ordained human activity, but he articulated my concerns about the motivations and behaviour I'd observed in my career to date. This was profoundly encouraging, and I re-read his paper dozens of times in the years to follow.

His challenge to generous service instead of private self-interest, to humility instead of vain-glory, to a detachment from the personal consequences of our work in order to focus on the best for our company and avoid seeking personal benefits – these were all just what I needed.

Most of all his paper had encouraged me to think and engage with the issue of purpose in business: what are we working for? His primary Christian distinctive is that profit isn't a good motive and leads to wealth-reducing behaviour; profit instead is a necessary discipline for survival. His second is that size in business, achieved by merger or acquisition, is more often about the pursuit of market power than either the common good or even profit, and should be eschewed by Christians.

The hardest challenge was that to be a Christian in a team of mostly non-

believers meant being persuasive about what I thought were good strategies. My emerging ideas were far from normal or acceptable to our family business. I wasn't a strong character. But he gave me the courage to articulate, to propose, to challenge and to demonstrate how they might work. It caused friction and anger, tears and even my own dismissal from the board. I wasn't always well-behaved or right. But most of the proposals have stuck, thrived and become central to our operations now.

Beyond the clarity of his thinking, James Allcock was personally generous and deeply encouraging. We enjoyed several fine lunches where challenges, prayer and disagreements were shared. His work then was buying gas in huge contracts – many and magnificent were the sweeteners he declined. His bosses trusted him deeply, even if the suppliers in Nigeria and Norway gave rise to excellent stories.

This brings me to my first disagreement with James. We are both economists by university training. But he remained firmly of the traditional view that economics is about the allocation of scarce resources to competing needs: whereas it seems to me that God is about abundance in everything that matters, and scarcity occurs where greed creates false need; and where selfishness results in destruction, or a poor distribution, of God's abundance.

I also think he was too timid (a surprising thing to say about James!) in speaking of the restraints that businesses should accept. One of my strategies was about sustainability, as a means of managing forgotten

energy costs, finding new markets for our services and behaving responsibly. Perhaps this idea was inimical to the UK's biggest buyer of gas? But to me it has become clear that responsibility is an essential virtue which Christian businessfolk should pursue, especially in the absence of clear and adequate laws. Consider today the power of social media: technology moves too fast for statute to keep up, so the application of values, and their detailed interpretation by those whose products might threaten them, becomes ever more necessary. We can't rely on government; business must discharge its duties more willingly.

The place of business in God's kingdom is a third disagreement. Business for James was a grubby backyard which needed cleaning up, whose relationships could be turned from dreadful to satisfactory, and whose purpose was – just, in God's great mercy – redeemable, for this life only. I see its potential to serve God as far more intrinsic to the creation and to God's whole purpose in redemption and eternity; indeed I believe there will be business in heaven, for how else will the Halls of Heaven be provided with accommodation, food, and all that is needed – unless we have become so spiritual that the earth isn't renewed but disappears? Our ambitions at work, as elsewhere, are only ever too small.

But these are festoons on the masterpiece. James' courage to challenge business to be good, his willingness to articulate our business vocations, his care for those who were falling by the business wayside: it is for these gifts to so many of us that we thank him. 🙏



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