

EDITOR'S PERSPECTIVE: The Fusion of Religion and Business

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What if we thought about business and religion as being *fused* as one at their deepest level rather than as two things that are essentially different in kind, two things that we have to find ways (perhaps with some struggle) to bring together? How might we approach our work differently?

For example, when I consider the biblical idea often translated into English as the word “truth,” I think that religion and business are one of a kind, not two disparate things that need us to use mental or spiritual gymnastics to wire them together. A common Hebrew word used for this idea is **emeth**. Another word used is **aman**. In the writings of Moses we see the root ideas of *emeth* and *aman* taking shape (Genesis 24:27, 48; Deuteronomy 7:9). Leaders chosen to assist Moses needed to be people of *emeth* (Exodus 18:21). In his leadership Moses was *aman* (Numbers 12:7). As the psalmist King David considered the experience of ancient Israelites, he concluded that they were not *aman* (Psalm 78:37), i.e., not faithful to their covenant commitment. Other Bible writers, notably David and the Prophets, expand on these ideas or apply them in different ways to their context.

New Testament writers assume these ideas are valid. In the New Testament, Greek words used for the same cluster of ideas are **aletheia** and **pistos**. One can argue that New Testament writers see Jesus Christ as the full embodiment of what *emeth* means (John 1:17; Revelation 1:5). Just as the Messiah is called the Prince of *Shalom* (Isaiah 9:6), so also he is the best expression of the Divine faithfulness in action called, in English, Truth (John 1:14). As Bible writers employ this idea in different times and places, it becomes one of the big biblical themes that flows from Genesis to Revelation.

Focusing briefly just on *emeth*, let's see how this plays out in terms of my opening question and the idea of fusion. There are opportunities for Christian scholars to begin unpacking *emeth* in terms of business just as some have done with the concept of *shalom*. *Emeth* is one of

those ideas, like the concept of *shalom*, that is difficult to place its full meaning into just one English word. It deserves deeper study for in this concept, and in the cluster of ideas that it carries, we find something very interesting that applies to both religion and business at the deepest level.

What does *emeth* have to do with religion? The answer might be obvious once the concept is understood. According to Bible scholars, *emeth* is an action-oriented idea that refers to the faithfulness of a person or a group. *Emeth* is more than telling the truth and not deceiving others, though it includes this. *Emeth* also means being faithful to one's promises and commitments, being reliable, firm in commitment and then acting on that commitment when you are tested by time and circumstance.

Emeth is a central attribute of God (Genesis 24:27; Exodus 34:6; Psalm 54:7; 71:22). God's faithfulness is one of God's chief messengers (Psalm 57:4; 89:14). His faithfulness in action is protection (Psalm 91:4). We know that a person is *emeth* only in retrospect, *after* they have acted. *Emeth* starts in the heart but comes out in actions (Psalm 51:6). People can say what they want, but the key question is: What is the *reality* of their actions? Actions reveal who they really are. Are their actions consistent with how they represent themselves, and are these actions based on fundamental moral principles, or is the reality of their actions disconnected from morality and from the image they try to project? What is real?

Emeth is fundamental to a vibrant personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Our faith is centered on the One who is Faithful (capital “F”) to his promises. In fact the biggest Promise (capital “P”) by God has been faithfully fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ who is the embodiment of Truth (capital “T”). The fact that God sent Jesus Christ shows one of the central characteristics of God, that he is *emeth*. Likewise, in God's gift of faith to us, faith that we place in him, he wants us to learn his ways of faithfulness seen in action in our commitments to him

and to each other. We are called to imitate his faithfulness in our sphere of human experience just as he is faithful in his sphere. Belief in the heart is an important dimension of truth. But, *emeth* becomes reality in faithful behaviors, not only in what we intend to do or think about doing or what we might be motivated to do. Faithfulness is the sincerity of our faith seen in action. One way we show the sincerity of our faith is by telling the truth, by not lying or deceiving others. Another way is in how we make promises to others, and more importantly, how we keep our promises even when keeping a promise costs us something. See Psalm 15:2-4 where David talks about the person who “swears,” i.e., makes a promise, to his own hurt. This is the person whom God welcomes into the temple.

Solomon encourages us to “buy *emeth* and do not sell it” (Proverbs 23:23; see also Proverbs 3:3). It is interesting to me that he uses a metaphor from the marketplace to emphasize the value of *emeth*. *Emeth* is a treasure that we should actively try to hoard. We might “sell” other things in order to purchase *emeth*; but we should never try to get something else by giving up *emeth*. Apparently, the more of *emeth* we acquire and use and the longer we use it in our life experience, over time the more valuable it becomes in the community. Here is a real investment opportunity. This is the net present value of *emeth* (faithfulness).

So what does this have to do with business? A truckload. Business success depends to a great degree on finding the truth about reality in the marketplace. What is important in our relationship with Jesus Christ, namely our belief in his faithfulness, is also a fundamental building block of business success with employees, customers, and suppliers. Let me describe this in terms of some standard business functions by way of examples.

Business organizations, it might be argued, have the opportunity to lead the way in all of society by being interested in what is true and real. Exchanges of things that have value require the parties in the exchange to explore reality, to base their actions on what they believe reality to be, and to deliver on the reality promised in the exchange. When reality is not fully known in advance, the parties in the exchange place their trust in each other as representatives of reality. As a social institution, one important but seldom recognized role of business is that of encouraging faithfulness in all kinds of exchange relationships. At the moment, I cannot think of a better place to serve God than in being an active participant in this bigger social role to foster faithfulness.

Business is one of the ways that we attempt to structure faithfulness into the deals that we make. Perhaps this

is one reason why marketplace stakeholders get so upset when other stakeholders betray the trust of what is true. Here are a few of the ways that *emeth* is central to business.

The **governance** function in an organization is interested in knowing the reality about what is going on. They depend on financial statements and operational reports to reveal reality. Boards of directors incur the agency costs of finding evidence of faithfulness. The Board hires auditors to confirm or correct what is reported to them.

One of the fundamental principles in **financial accounting** is the search for and accurate representation of reality. Without information that accurately reflects reality, the effectiveness of managerial decision-making quickly declines. This is so important that we follow formal rules when we report financial reality to each other. Additionally, financial accounting is foundational for the organization acting in ways that deliver the reality of its promises to all the major stakeholder groups. Faithfulness compromised here means danger in the present and the future.

In **human resources** management we are constantly trying to identify the truth about prospective employees. Job applicants are on a quest to know the truth about the hiring organization. During annual performance reviews, managers counsel employees about the reality of their behaviors based on observable measurable facts. During the progressive discipline process, the reality of business behaviors (rather than the manager’s feelings about the employee) must be the basis of managerial action and employee corrective actions.

Strategic decision makers have an insatiable desire to know the truth about customers, employees, operational capabilities, suppliers, strategic partners, competitors, the changing dynamics of the market, and changes taking place in other relevant industries. When strategic planners lack specific knowledge about reality, they are left to make assumptions about what must be true today, or perhaps what they hope will be true tomorrow. Paradoxically, the validity of these assumptions must constantly be verified (because we are skeptical about the degree to which they represent reality) as well as relied upon (because at the moment we might have nothing better to base our decisions). Additionally, strategic commitments our organizations make, based on our understanding of reality, must be carried out with action in ways that consistently demonstrate our understanding of (or assumptions about) reality.

Marketing leaders try to understand the reality of consumer behaviors and what these behaviors might mean for an unknown future. Pricing decisions are based, in part, on beliefs regarding the truth about price

elasticity of demand (and of supply). Brand management is all about establishing the truth about the firm's promises to the market and then delivering on this truth day-in and day-out.

The future value of cash and the opportunity costs we incur when making these and other **investment** decisions also are dependent upon assumptions about reality. The effectiveness of **leaders** is dependent, to a large degree, upon their understanding of themselves if not their commitment to self-integrity. The closer they are to accepting the reality about themselves, and the more they come to bring *emeth* into their experience, the more effective they can be as leaders. Leading change in an organization will go nowhere unless the reality of the need for change is experienced in action by key people. **Process improvement** and quality improvement efforts in operational departments must be based on observable, measurable reality, not someone's biased private opinions. Just as in the other major business functions, process improvement effort is a constant quest for information about the truth of a situation. It is a search for truth upon which we can make decisions to make improvements. It implies that decisions will be made such that all key stakeholders and their needs are considered and that the alignment with reality is either strengthened or corrected.

You will think of your own examples. For me, the summary is that faithfulness in action—understanding reality around us, basing our actions on reality, being faithful to reality, establishing a faithful reality for others to experience, being faithful to our promises to others in the marketplace, being truthful, and other dimensions of this fundamental concept—are at the root of business success. One might even argue that faithfulness is one of the irreducible minimum elements that must be in place for any organization to operate successfully over the long run. When truth is in question or undermined, costs increase, profitability decreases and, on a larger scale, when what is represented as truth and becomes untrustworthy, people trade less and the marketplace as a whole suffers. More than one scholar has pointed out that faithfulness to promises is one of the inescapable building blocks of any working economy. Yes, some market players might hide reality in order to achieve gain at the expense of others. Some might try to deceive, but for the market as a whole to succeed over the long haul, truth about reality must be revealed. Accordingly, we see both buyers and sellers working to find the truth about a business situation.

The Christian religion and business are built on the same basic relational elements carried by the concept of

emeth. Faithfulness is the basis of trust in both spheres. Put another way, at least in terms of this one concept of *emeth*, there is no essential difference in kind between what contributes to a flourishing business (or economy) and what contributes to a flourishing relationship with God. And, put still one more way in its broadest possible terms, faithfulness in action when tested by time and circumstance is one of the fundamental governing dynamics of flourishing life in the universe. At a deep level, fostering faithfulness must be one of the essential purposes of business itself when seen from the biblical perspective. Faithfulness is how God designed us for relationships. God is faithful; he created us in his image. The blessings that come to the broader community from faithfulness to God and from faithfulness to each other in commerce are born of the same fundamental commitments and behaviors. This is why I say that at a deep level, when it comes to *emeth*, religion and business are fused. They are not two different things.

In This Volume of JBIB

I have long believed that the field of biblical theology offers opportunities for Christian business scholars to explore the scriptural foundations for business. One of the contributions of biblical theology is its emphasis on what some have called the **themes** of Scripture. These Bible themes, like the theme of faithfulness explored briefly above, cross denominational lines that often separate us. These themes are at the root of many Bible teachings that are held dear by Christians everywhere. These themes also cut across cultural lines.

Examples of the big biblical themes include the following: Covenant, redemption, creation, holiness, wisdom, loving kindness, shalom, justice, image of God, imitation of God, and so forth. These themes are intertwined, interdependent, and interrelated, which make them, at times, challenging to understand and at the same time offer to us a richness and depth that is inspiring. These themes are also practical to practitioners in business as well as business scholars who work in higher education. I believe that spending time immersing yourself in these themes in the terms that Scripture uses (sometimes explicitly but other times implicitly) will open up new ways of thinking about business practice. At a deeper level, the whole purpose of business in society can be seen through the lens of these themes.

Employing these themes as the lens through which to see our work in business is one way we can help each other, help students and help practicing business professionals to

build Bible literacy. How can we expect to experience *biblical integration* without spending time in the Bible? As one of the members of the CBFA correctly pointed out to me a few years ago (I forget who it was), there is a difference between a *biblical* view of business and a *Christian* view of business. If you are interested in deepening your understanding of the biblical view of business, a perspective that runs deeper than the particular Christian way of thinking that is prevalent in society, spend time studying and thinking about the grand biblical themes.

Accordingly, while I didn't plan on the themes from biblical theology playing such a prominent role in this volume of *JBIB*, I am thrilled that some of the authors in this issue have found value in key biblical theology themes. I am also glad that new voices have found a forum for their ideas in this volume. For years *JBIB* has been a place that has encouraged first-time authors to get experience.

The theme of the image of God (*Imago Dei*) has been taken up in the article on human resource management by **Laurie George Busuttill** and **Susan Van Weelden**. Theologically speaking, there is a close connection between the image of God, the elements of God's character, the identity and work of Jesus Christ, and human conduct. In my view, this theme is a rich vein waiting to be mined by scholars representing several business disciplines. Related to this is **Min-Dong Paul Lee's** article on compassion, modeling what we do in organizations after the compassion of God. It is interesting to me where the research regarding compassion and this grand theme of God's compassion intersect. **John Langenderfer** also explores the theme of God's loving kindness as he looks at how we treat foreign workers in our organizations. In his article, he proposes specific ways that Christian managers can help foreign employees to overcome the challenges they face in the workplace. **Mark Spence** and **Lee Brown** delve into the biblical theme of creation in their article on corporate environmental responsibility.

In his paper on biblical leadership **Andrew Babyak** studies Luke 9:57-62 proposing that a new theory of Christian leadership needs to be developed. In his paper, he contrasts his view of leadership with the popular perspectives on servant leadership. I appreciate that Babyak shows us that there are still more opportunities to explore the scriptural implications for business.

I appreciate that **Rustin Yerkes**, **Selina Schirmer**, and **J. Howard Finch** tackle the question of usury and personal debt in their article challenging financial advisors to promote financial literacy. **Teodor Mihai** explores the ethical teachings of Jesus recorded in the four Gospels in

terms of project management. He shows us some of the limitations of traditional approaches to ethics and encourages us to see the work of the project manager in terms of the model put forward by Jesus Christ.

Final Words

This is the last volume of the *Journal of Biblical Integration in Business* where I will serve as editor. It was an honor to be asked to serve in this capacity. But it is time to move on and allow another perspective to contribute to the journal. I am thrilled that Dr. Larry Locke has agreed to serve in this capacity, and I look forward to reading many more issues of the journal under his leadership. I acknowledge the support that Kent Saunders, director of publications, has provided to me during the last four years. I also appreciate the wisdom that Yvonne Smith, the previous editor, has shared with me. As some of you know, I have retired from full-time teaching. I have been doing some consulting on higher education curriculum, helping others see the value of biblical themes across all academic disciplines. In terms of writing, I have embarked upon a project that is turning out to take a much larger share of mind than I had anticipated. I am learning how to craft stories designed to be the capsules to carry a message about the scriptural foundation for business.