

## BUSINESS FOR THE GLORY OF GOD: THE BIBLE'S TEACHING ON THE MORAL GOODNESS OF BUSINESS

By Wayne Grudem, Crossway Books, 2003, \$15.99

*Reviewed by Stephen E. Whiting,  
Bethel University*



### **Recommended for discerning readers only.**

In *Business for the Glory of God* (2003, Crossway), Grudem seeks to show the moral goodness of business; that many aspects of business are morally good in themselves and bring glory to God. Grudem asserts that business people imitate the character of God by representing God on earth through a variety of business activities. Grudem identifies how God is glorified by the following topics, with a chapter devoted to each: Ownership, Productivity, Employment, Commercial Transactions, Profit, Money, Inequality of Possessions, Competition, and Borrowing and Lending. He concludes with two chapters on Attitudes of Heart and Effects on World Poverty.

The first time reading *Business for the Glory of God* I found myself really liking the book and agreeing with most of what Grudem had to say. Still, some ideas just didn't seem right. It wasn't until rereading the book and comparing what he had to say, along with his supporting scriptures, that I learned the reasons for the discontent. Overall this book has some valid contributions to the faith and business arena but it also contains some glaring flaws. Each of the chapters contained material that was helpful in one way or another. Many of the non-biblical illustrations Grudem provided were useful. There were also numerous places where he appropriately support-

ed his ideas from the Bible. However, numerous chapters contained material that I disagreed with. Most disturbing is that Grudem seemed to occasionally take scripture out of context. Grudem also conflated terms. For example, his concept of business seemed to be almost exclusively limited to a for-profit company in a western market system. Specific examples follow.

In chapter two, Grudem discusses work; he calls it productivity. The chapter begins,

“We know that producing goods from the earth is fundamentally good in itself because it is part of the purpose for which God put us on the earth. Before there was sin in the world, God put Adam in the Garden of Eden to ‘work it and keep it’ (Gen 2:15)” (p. 25).

I appreciate that Grudem clearly identifies the value of work and that work was created before the Fall but here is a case where Grudem takes an extra step that is not warranted from the text. Since God commanded Adam to ‘work’ it is appropriate to say that ‘work’ is fundamentally good. It is not appropriate to say that producing goods from the earth is fundamentally good. Producing goods from the earth is one way of performing work. However, it is very easy to consider many ways that humanity can produce things

from the earth that are destructive to ourselves, the planet, and the glory of God. Another positive is Grudem's explanation of the Hebrew word translated "subdue" having a fuller meaning of "make the resources of the earth useful" (p. 25). Grudem goes on to say that not only do we have to produce; we have to increase production (p. 26). He cites no verses to support this other than a mention of Genesis 3. The concept of sustainability and refraining from overproduction seem missing from the discussion.

In chapter 4, Grudem extols the value of buying and selling but he takes this too far when he states,

"through the mechanism of buying and selling we can all obtain a much higher standard of living, and thereby fulfill God's purpose that we enjoy the resources of the earth with thanksgiving (1 Tim 4:3-5; 6:17) while we 'eat' and 'drink' and 'do all to the glory of God' (1 Cor 10:31)" (p. 36).

The verses from Timothy don't support his claim but point to the goodness of what God has created and that our trust should be in God. When reading 1 Cor 10 it seems clear from the context that verse 31 should not be taken individualistically. After this, Grudem presents a useful example of how "voluntary commercial transactions benefit both parties" (p. 36). Grudem then creates a correlation between buying and selling and loving our neighbor as ourselves. He indicates that a farmer would have to love the auto mechanic if he wants his car fixed and that love is facilitated as a result of the commercial transactions. Isn't God's command to love our neighbor enough? Grudem goes on to say that buying and selling "reflect the interdependence and interpersonal love among the members of the Trinity... for those who have eyes to see it..." (p. 38). Though Grudem's point of connecting the Trinity to our everyday lives is commendable, I would assert that this connection is arguable at best.

In the chapter on profit Grudem describes a number of the reasons why making a profit on a

product or service is warranted. He gives arguments for the valid nature of profit based on materials, effort, risk, time, and skill (p. 43). Grudem emphasizes the idea of risk astutely. He balances the goodness of profit with a short, but helpful, discussion on wrongful profit. However, the tone almost leads the reader to believe that profit equals goodness such that more profit equates to more goodness. This is most noticeable when he says, "I continue to glorify God by enlarging the possessions over which I am 'sovereign'" (p. 45). Where does this leave not-for-profit businesses, educational institutions, and churches?

Grudem indicates that God intended competition by giving different people different gifts and different levels of gifts (p. 65). That is an interesting interpretation on the use of spiritual gifts. Gifts have traditionally been understood as provided for the benefit of the body, the community; for the church to work together as one body. God's original plan for excellence in our work should be based on doing it for God, as unto the Lord (Col 3:23-24). Our excellence shouldn't be based on one-upmanship. The spiritual gifts of the New Testament would be horrendous if the gifts were intended for competition. Competition by its very nature has extreme temptations founded in pride, which is disastrous to our relationship with God and with others. Grudem again fails to convince in his use of Scripture. He cites Ecc 4:4a to support that envy and competition are okay. This totally misses the entire point of the verse when taken out of context. The entire verse says, "And I saw that all labor and all achievement spring from man's envy of his neighbor. **This too is meaningless** [emphasis added], a chasing after the wind." Grudem goes on to cite Exodus 20:17, "You shall not covet" but then indicates that coveting is good because "people see what someone else has, and they decide to work harder themselves" (p.64). What is the point of toiling and work that is based on envy of our neighbor? He also misuses 1 Tim 3:10 concerning the testing of a man to see if he is to be a deacon. This measurement is not norm referenced as in

competition to others, but is criteria referenced as measured against God's holiness and His Word. The testing was against God's standard, not competition against other would-be elders.

While I cannot recommend this book for everyone, I do recommend it for the discerning reader<sup>1</sup>. The overall message of how we can glorify God through business is refreshing when many still believe the highest calling is to serve God as a pastor or missionary. *Business for the Glory of God* could be a useful book in a course, or read in a small group, as long as care is provided to help show how scripture can be misapplied when not considered in context and why readers must "ex-

amine the scriptures" (Acts 17:11) even when reading books from respected biblical authors.

---

1. The lessons to learn from this book are many: (1) Be sure to do proper exegesis; this includes being sure to read verses in context. (2) Be cautious when using concordances and tools like biblegateway.com to find verses related to a topic or word. (3) Do not take extra interpretive steps. (4) Illustrations and examples can be very helpful. However, be sure to support your claims from the Bible as well as the illustrations. (5) Be careful with terms outside your discipline. Talk to people in that discipline to be sure to use them appropriately. Working collaboratively with an expert in that area is good advice in general. (6) Conflating Biblical concepts with practical categories should be done with care. (7) Be sure to do proper exegesis; this includes being sure to read verses in context (repeated purposely).