

Book Review

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Just Business: Christian Ethics for the Marketplace, Alex Hill. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997).

It was the summer of 1997, and I had just moved to a new teaching position at a Christian college in the southern U.S. I had been wanting to teach business ethics for a number of years, particularly Christian ethics because I couldn't see how ethics could be taught any other way. I had been doing my best at the state university where I was employed, but frankly, teaching Christian ethics was against the law there. So, I was especially excited about my new freedom of religion.

I knew little to nothing about Christian textbooks for higher education at the time, nor did I know if there was such a thing. I began searching through publishers' advertisements and finally came across a book that absolutely looked too good to be true. It was Hill's (1997) newly published book, the subject of this review. I quickly ordered a desk copy because time was getting short.

When I received the book, I liked it so much, I called the author to thank him for providing such a fine text. His reaction was kind and appreciative.

The book is an excellent reading or primary text for a senior level business ethics course. Among its many strengths are 1) it has an organizing model of Christian ethics that all the chapters revolve around — a stool; 2) it integrates Scripture heavily into the work as the *only* foundation for ethical principles; and 3) it provides a Scripture-based outline complete with great end-of-chapter questions and short case studies throughout the book. In short, I loved using the text and I believe you will, too, if you haven't used the book for teaching yet.

One of the stronger aspects of the book is the short vignette at the beginning of each chapter. Each contains a short case study or ethical dilemma that provokes thought and serves as an example of what is to come. Vignettes throughout the book work well in the classroom because they are short, to-the-point, and easily used to evoke discussion before going into the chapter.

The first chapter introduces the stool metaphor illustrating that God's character has a foundation of proportionate love, justice, and holiness. I had never really thought of it that way, but it works in the classroom. Hill sees ethics as triangular instead of bipolar. There are legitimate shades of grey, according to Hill. The chapter makes clear that ethics are usually neither black nor white, but dynamic. He underscores the point that we live in a fallen world, and many decisions are imperfect yet still ethical. He states, for example, that we need "... to line up the three lenses of holiness, justice, and love so that they align *as much as possible*" (p. 19, italics mine). He sees that decisions often are not perfect, but have to be worked out creatively, we assume, with his ethical model in the forefront. This approach is intellectually stimulating, God-honoring, and realistic in today's cynical business world.

Chapter 2 is the first chapter to specifically examine one of the three stool legs — holiness. Hill first defines and discusses the various characteristics of holiness, which he identifies as "zeal," "purity," "accountability," and "humility" (pp. 23-28). The part I like best, however, is where

Hill talks about the "potential abuses of holiness," to use his terminology. According to Hill, these misuses of holiness are suggested by an attitude of inflexibility and self-righteousness. I was gratified to see that Hill addressed the issue of situational ethics here. So much of leadership, or ethics, as the case may be, focuses on this theory, and I find it very slippery. Situational ethics suggests to me that one can easily slip into chameleonship, changing colors from situation to situation, losing credibility along the way. But Hill resolves this when he notes that extreme holiness is not fruitful. Fruitful holiness, Hill suggests, is able to bend somewhat to accommodate changing conditions. Hill addresses situational ethics based on biblical instead of relative interpretations. Frankly, I got a lot out of that important distinction, and it is an excellent message to students.

We hear so much about "social justice" nowadays I sometimes wonder if the world has gone completely mad. Individual justice under the rule of law is what Hill teaches, not social justice, and I found this to be a refreshing change from the continual Marxist drumbeat we

endure from the popular press. Chapter 3 teaches that it is not “rights” that we need. We gave those up at the cross as followers of Jesus. Hill suggests that we need more responsibility as a counterbalance to rights. Hill covers all the traditional, ethical concepts in this chapter, including “procedural” and “substantive rights,” “equal protection,” “merit,” and “contractual and compensatory justice,” integrating a biblical foundation within each one in turn. What I find to be especially helpful is at the end of each chapter, where he discusses the “potential abuses” of each primary concept. For example, Hill believes that a misuse of justice occurs when justice lacks compassion. A radical justice without consideration of the intervening circumstances would be unjust. Again, we see Hill’s emphasis on balance as an integral part of ethics.

Part One of Hill’s book culminates in his presentation and discussion of the third leg of the stool — love. His basic premise, as I interpret it, is that love helps balance the other two ethics, justice and holiness. Without love as the counterbalance, the other two ethics would become unruly in their harshness, as I understand Hill’s work. Hill says that the

potential problem with love, however, is that love itself can become imbalanced, sliding into permissiveness, which is no love at all. Love seems to be the most important or linking concept among the three for Hill. If love is not firm, the other two legs become unstable. This is illustrated well in Hill’s Figure 4.1 (p. 56), which summarizes the interaction of the three concepts. To me, this is one of the very high points of his book. Here we see, for example, that Hill combines love with justice to produce “tough love,” while love without holiness produces “altruistic sinning.” In other words, this illustrates how the three interdependent concepts function together dynamically just like in real life. No other ethics text, to my knowledge, has produced such an insightful analysis into the inter-workings of ethics as has Hill’s work.

The book continues an excellent level of insight and instruction through Part Two. I’m not sure which part I liked best because in Part Two we see Hill explore the thorny problem in our culture today — relativism. Hill’s discussion about “dual morality” in Chapter 5 is fascinating in its own right and deserves exposure above and

beyond the realm of ethics per se, because as I see it, this is the central problem in unethical business conduct. If there is no absolute truth (relativism), then it's impossible to have genuine ethics. Some would disagree. The related concept of "compartmentalization" is one that I focused on a lot in classes. Employees who persist in a pattern of unethical behavior, as Hill explains, have implicit mental compartments whose doors are shut, perhaps even locked, so there is no informational exchange between the two, perhaps not even a conscious awareness of the different rooms. Without awareness, each mental room makes decisions devoid of any ethical appraisal from any other room — call it psychotic or call it a soul hollowed-out from habitual sinning. This part of the book is very instructive to students, showing them a key dynamic working against ethical business decisions.

Chapter 6 focuses on the foundation of secular ethics — relativism. Hill courageously examines positivism to illustrate the connection of relativism to pernicious government regulations. I say this is courageous because logical

positivism is almost an idol in the scientific community. It underlies the realm of science, and our secular culture values scientific inquiry greatly. Hill's work suggests that the positivist's view of law has resulted in excessive government regulations which, in turn, require even more government regulations to justify previous regulations, eventually ending up in a vicious cycle and downward spiral of society. Positivism is beneficial and appropriate for science, but when used as a societal worldview, it is deadly because it requires the adoption of relative, scientific atheism. Of course, Hill has the answer, which is to promote divine wisdom at all levels of society, which, of course, would include Christianity in government. Hill's implication in this chapter is that we should trust in God, not government. This is certainly a free market argument and a good one at that.

Chapter 7 of Hill's book deals with what he calls the problem of "agency." According to Hill, agency is the dilemma in which the employee's values differ from that of the employer (p. 90). This addresses the question of whether Christians have to check their Christianity at the front door. It addresses the issue, for example,

of whether we are professors who happen to be Christians or whether we are Christians who happen to be professors. The same is also true for all who work as employees. Hill says we often take one of two approaches in this dilemma. One is to invoke the “Submissive Model,” which means that employees will do whatever the organization tells them to do, even if it is unethical or illegal. For Hill, this is unacceptable. The other approach is to be absolutely above reproach in every instance, adopting the “Purest Model.” According to this model, employees would never bend to unreasonable employer demands, even if it meant he or she had to terminate employment to avoid this. This is an age-old problem for all employees, especially Christians, since it forces one to choose even when one would rather avoid this choice. Hill’s answer, again, is that excessive purism is unacceptable because it causes an imbalance of love, justice, and holiness. Instead, he suggests we should view our employer as our “neighbor” and act accordingly by being “accommodating purists” (pp. 99-100) (Acts 16:3). That means flexible employees work with employers gracefully as much as possible, taking

ethical challenges as greater opportunities to serve than would otherwise be the case.

That concludes the most important parts of Hill’s work, in my opinion. Chapters 8 through 15 in Part Three examine various topics of interest covering “Honesty and Deception” (Chapters 8 and 9), the question of the difference between “Concealment” and “Disclosure” (Chapter 10), “Employer-Employee Relations” (Chapter 11), “Employee Rights in Termination” (Chapter 12), “Discrimination and Affirmative Action” (Chapter 13), “The Environment” (Chapter 14), and “Property” (Chapter 15). Of these last chapters, I especially liked the chapters on affirmative action (Chapter 13) and the environment (Chapter 14), because I think they provide the most striking contrast to what we are told so frequently by our secular culture, so I will end with a review and comment on these two chapters.

In Chapter 13, Hill explains the meaning of affirmative action and then proceeds to rebuke the common practice of quota-setting as unethical. He cites Psalm 69:4, which states, “I am forced to restore what I did not steal” (p. 180) to illustrate that “Equal opportunity, not equal results, is

the underlying principle of justice” (p. 178) in this case. He elaborates that compensation to “victims” of prior assumed historical injustice (i.e, social justice) simply because of group membership status is unethical because 1) any assumed victim is no longer alive, so there is no “victim” if there ever was one; 2) a specific injury is therefore not evident; and 3) a specific wrongdoer is no longer alive; if there ever was one, it is unknown under the necessity of evidentiary weight of compensatory justice the system requires. Because of these *necessary* (italics mine) preconditions, Hill argues, certain ethnic groups who argue for compensation for assumed historical mistreatment by others, none of whom are currently alive, are unethical in their lawsuits because the law does not extend to these circumstances. To me, and to my surprised students, Hill’s treatment of affirmative action has been a breath of fresh air and a good dose of reality instead of the usual utopian fantasies.

Chapter 14 is also revealing and inspiring. Actually, this chapter was probably the most revealing, since Hill exposes environmentalists as Earth worshipers. Hill sees what he

calls the “Biocentric Ethic” to be at the heart of radical environmentalism. Hill implies that the problem again is excessiveness. He says that the environmentalist ideology evokes a worldview of radical egalitarianism where nature is equal, if not superior, to humans. According to Hill, instead of humans dominating nature, as many *incorrectly* believe is the Christian worldview, environmentalism, with its egalitarian assumptions, purports that nature should dominate mankind as the universal priority. Other worldviews, according to Hill, such as Hinduism, Animism, and Pantheism all contribute to make nature (God’s creation) the focus of worship instead of focusing on the Creator. Hill cites Romans 1:25 (“They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator ...”, p. 190) to support his argument. Seems pretty clear to me! Obviously, Hill believes that radical environmentalism is an unfair, unethical influence on free-market business. Again, this view is surprising to many students, and, I would say, is a striking contrast to the typical utopian fantasy publicized in the popular press and in public

schools all over the country. It is a fascinating chapter that deserves more attention in higher education. Hill sets the record straight with the proper conclusion that mankind is the “steward” of nature (p. 196), not subservient or dominant. Hill calls this godly view the “Theocentric Ethic” (p. 191). Hill firmly rejects the Biocentric Ethic in preference for the Theocentric Ethic captured by the Scripture: “... the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants” (Lev. 25:23, p. 192).

In conclusion, Hill’s book is a fine one whether it is used as a textbook or a nonfiction supplement. I have used it as the primary text, and it has more than enough to keep students awake and interested. Hill’s book is an exceptionally well-done piece that should be the standard for all Christian ethics texts in higher education. I recommend a good look at this book!

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