

Sharon Johnson: Master of Dialogue

MICHAEL E. CAFFERKY

I first had contact with Sharon Johnson when he was editor of the *Journal of Biblical Integration in Business*. He welcomed a submission from me, at the time an outsider to the Christian Business Faculty Association. Three years later, I studied business ethics under his leadership during my doctoral degree program at Anderson University.

Though I didn't realize it at the time, this classroom experience established the trajectory of my scholarship and teaching. Over the years since then, while I saw other professors spending time exploring exciting new hardware and software technology for their work, Johnson's remarkable ability always kept me focused on developing the timeless classroom "technology" of asking students good questions.

Like others, I have read his work. I have learned from his reviews of my papers. With empathy toward conference paper presenters, I have watched him baffle them with an imaginative question that led the respondent on a path toward integrity of thinking.

I have seen his face when he dished out his legendary humorous sarcasm, a well-deserved portion directed my way. Above all, Johnson's greatest personal impact on me is his exceptional ability to ask questions that can be answered only with great difficulty, if at all. So, I'll say up front, "It is a pleasure to honor you, Sharon. Thank you!"

AUTHOR, EDITOR, AND LEADER

Early in his career, Johnson wrote articles for *The Word in Life Study Bible* (Thomas Nelson Publishers). Over time he had his work published in the *Journal of Biblical Integration in Business*, *Christian Scholar's Review*, *Christian Business Academy Review*, *Baylor Business Review*, and other places. In 1988, he published a book titled *Values-Driven People: A Christian Approach to Management* (Probe Books). He wrote more than ten *JBIB* editorials that give voice to the developing concept of biblical integration. Showing his love of reading, he contributed more than a dozen book and media reviews for *JBIB*.

Later in his career, he leveraged his exceptional ability for classroom dialogue by co-authoring with me the *Instructor's Manual* for the peer-reviewed textbook *Management: A Faith-Based Perspective* (2012, Pearson Education). Because of his involvement in this project, students can still hear Sharon's voice in classrooms around the country through professors who see value in challenging them to think more carefully about nuanced management issues.

In my opinion, Johnson's legacy in the CBFA stems from two sources: his ongoing impact as founding editor of *JBIB* and his leadership on the CBFA Board of Directors. His influence continues to shape the direction of both. The nature of his volunteer efforts with CBFA can accurately be classified as leadership and not merely editorial. As founding editor of *JBIB*, Johnson developed the editorial guidelines for authors, which are still dominant today. Editors since him have depended upon his wisdom. I encourage the reader to go to the *JBIB* online archives and read his editorials. They are as valuable now as when first published. As a member of the board, his counsel regarding annual conferences and association policies has encouraged other leaders to keep the aspirations of the association in view.

MASTER OF CREATIVE DIALOGUE

Great educational power lies in the knowledge of how to craft a probing question that fuels curiosity. Johnson possesses such power. He recognized early the complexity of some business topics when we start the conversation with the Bible. For him, biblical faith grows best in the midst of the tension that is created when two or more Christians come together to dialogue about the Word of God for the market. He is at home in the world of tensions. But, more than this, through thoughtful Christian dialogue about the complex material world of business, Johnson becomes a worship leader, the class period becomes sacred time, and a classroom is transformed into sacred space.

He can present a situation that naturally draws students in to take a position on an issue more complex than they first realized. Then, regardless of which side of the issue a student takes, Johnson reveals the need for integrity by asking another question from an opposing point of view. This tends to highlight an excruciating tradeoff that would accrue if a simple answer is taken to its logical conclusion on a complicated issue.

In my experience, I have never seen anyone as skilled as Johnson in this regard. His legendary ability to improvise creative questions on the fly during classroom sessions reveals a mature reservoir of thinking that has grown in scope and depth during his career. The twinkle in his eye as he frames a question reveals, perhaps, his joy from anticipating that students will squirm for an elusive answer. He is willing to leave a question unanswered, letting students remain captive for a time at the crossroads of unanswerable questions that are at the same time intellectual and practical. This skill became a force driving my aspirations as a professor.

As his editorials show, Johnson has been fascinated by two unavoidable tensions:

- Living the role of scholar who critiques and contributes to the stream of scholarly dialogue and

the role of teacher who directs and interprets that stream to his students.

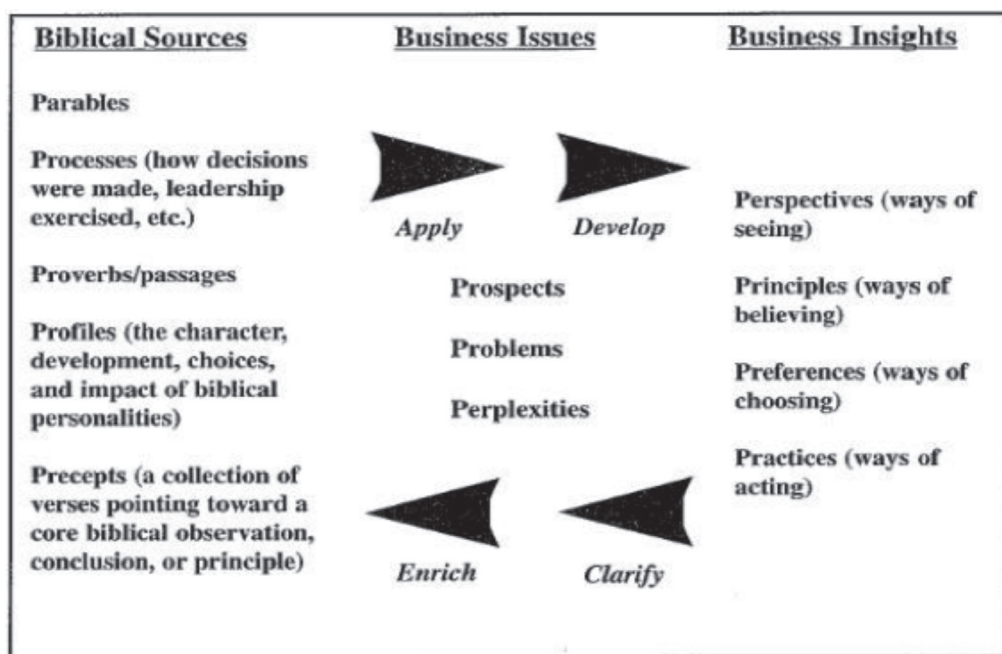
- Inviting his students to actively participate in the learning process and intruding on them when they lack interest in learning what he finds compelling.

For Johnson, I think, orchestrating dialogue in the two arenas of the classroom and the journal page is one way he manages his response to these tensions.

This ability to frame the structure of a difficult conversation translated directly into his work as editor of *JBIB*. As a manuscript reviewer, he helped authors sharpen their thinking by avoiding too simplistic of a position. In 1997, he instituted the “dialogue” section of *JBIB*, a feature which encourages conversation. Additionally, he shared his skill for managing conversations by giving readers samples of imaginative questions in his editorials and articles.

Years ago, Johnson confessed to us that biblical integration is neither obvious nor easy. I’ve always appreciated his integrity about this central pillar of the association and its publications. Although he has already said that his thinking on the subject isn’t the final word, Johnson’s (2005) *Model for Biblical Integration* continues to be a useful way to structure conversation about the concept (p.

Figure 1: Model for Biblical Integration



Johnson, S. G. (2005). The search for balance. *Journal of Biblical Integration in Business*, 11(1), 114-133.

118). Perhaps it is one of the contributions to readers of *JBIB* that is under-recognized for its value. The reciprocal nature of the biblical integration process is something I have considered important for several years. It deserves more attention now especially in the conversation regarding biblical exegesis vs eisegesis.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Michael Cafferky, DBA MDiv, has been a frequent contributor of peer-reviewed papers for CBFA Annual Conferences and publications since 2001. From 2003 to 2017, he served as professor at Southern Adventist University. He was appointed the

endowed Ruth McKee Chair for Entrepreneurship and Business Ethics, serving in this capacity until his retirement in July 2017. Michael is the author of several academic publications including two peer-reviewed university textbooks: *Management: A Faith-based Perspective* (Pearson Education, 2012) and *Business Ethics in Biblical Perspective: A Comprehensive Introduction* (InterVarsity Press, 2015). Michael has given presentations on the scriptural foundations of business in the United States, Canada, Russia, Ghana, South Africa, Australia, Lebanon, Mexico, France, Rwanda, Thailand, and the Philippines.