

The Pedagogical Power of Holistic Biography

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ABSTRACT: This issue carries impactful biographical sketches of two business leaders who exemplified important Christian principles—Brian Porter’s story of Charles Feeney and Kent Saunders’s reflections on the life and writings of William Pollard. Biography can be a powerful tool for instruction and edification, but the more complete biography is more valuable to the reader as it provides both the advocated norms and the cautionary tale to help guide the student toward the shore and away from the rocks that can dash the boat. Pollard and Feeney’s lives both offer amazing ideals, but teaching how to navigate the treacherous waters that our students and other business leaders will encounter in business must be the goal.

INTRODUCTION

Two important biographical sketches of business leaders whose lives and works exemplified important Christian principles are featured. Bill Pollard is well known to most readers as the leader of the ServiceMaster businesses and advocate for a business model infused with Christian principles. A more enigmatic figure, Charles “Chuck” Feeney, co-founder of Duty-Free Shoppers, eventually became known for his radical generosity and secretive philanthropy. During the majority of his life, his extreme giving was entirely in secret, only being revealed later in life. As John Healy, chief executive of Feeney’s Atlantic Philanthropies noted, the “secrecy was well motivated but ultimately became impossible to maintain. When you become famous for being anonymous you know the game is up” (Collins, 2023, para. 23 & 24).

PEDAGOGICAL USE OF STORYTELLING

The authors of these two papers both do honor to their subjects and bring out the most powerful and positive characteristics of each, bringing much needed light to their great examples. In “Honoring God in a Publicly Traded Corporation,” Kent Saunders searches the writings of ServiceMaster CEO Bill Pollard for insights into his thought process, business model, and integration of Christian principles into that business. In “Charles Feeney: An Example of Biblical Giving and Living,” Brian Porter seeks to introduce the life of a business leader whose example of giving and living frugally might inspire others. There is significant evidence

to warrant the use of stories like these as examples for use in business pedagogy to advance the Kingdom, as Porter aptly suggests. One model for the use of story to enhance teaching is applying Freytag’s story framework to illustrate the impact of biblical biographies like Adam and Eve or Abram (Quesenberry, 2019). Biography is a specific form of storytelling that can illustrate desirable traits or characteristics that brings value to the organization (Hayes, 2012). Porter and Saunders both use the biographies to enlighten the reader and to enhance understanding of key values that might be valuable to Christian business faculty and business leaders.

BIOGRAPHY AS A TEACHING TOOL

The use of biography in pedagogy is, of course, not restricted to the teaching of business nor to Christian insights. Indeed, we see it across the curriculum in both secular and religious instruction. However, biographers of historical figures have long been prone to provide sanitized versions of their subjects’ life stories. Yet biblical narratives are far less generous in their telling. In viewing biblical characters, we see the full spectrum of their strengths and weaknesses. We know that King David was an adulterer who sent his target’s husband to his death. We know of Moses’s wrath and manslaughter. We know of Peter’s weakness and betrayal. Yet each of these men are heroes who lived exemplary lives, despite their serious moral failings. Their humanity did not detract from God’s plan for their lives, nor their use as models for us to consider. Indeed, the deeply flawed humanity illustrated in the pages of the Bible provides us with examples

that we may have the courage to emulate. Seeing these examples with all their flaws makes them not into idols but instead provides clear pictures of humanity, complete with the good and bad that can spring from it—from us.

Completeness of the telling is essential for our complete learning. The classic reading of history has been one of idealism, where the bad is hidden and the narrative only focuses on the good. But that approach tends to lead rather to idolization of “great men” rather than deep understanding and insight. Today’s approach to history is one of critical theory, where everything is called into question, and the goal seems to be to tear down great figures. That approach can lead to nihilism, and no real learning. A biblical model seems to prescribe a more circumspect reading, recognizing that flawed creatures can, indeed, partake in greatness when they recognize their place in creation as *imago dei*, but that human frailty remains and can detract from the great work. Our ability to learn from historical figures, both in business and in the broader scope of creation, depends on the completeness of the story told, so that we can not only see ourselves in the flawed human characters God provides us as imperfect models but also be motivated to strive for greatness, in the image of God. Fourie and Hohne (2017) propose that the unrealistic concept of the infallible leader leads to an inhibition of learning and a disabling of the transformations that true leadership should provide. They identify a “heroic bias in transformational leadership theory” that is at odds with real human experience, and that limits the opportunity of improvement. Indeed, while the entrepreneurship literature is increasingly supportive of the idea of “failing fast,” there are still many stuck in the old “great man theory” as articulated by Thomas Carlyle and Sigmund Freud, a theory which cannot adapt to the reality of imperfections. While most leadership theorists reject this approach, it seems to subconsciously show itself in the ideas of many. It is this compulsion toward authority figures (Spector, 2015) that causes us to misdirect our attention from God’s instruction and instead focus our attention on the human characters as ideals. This misdirection can lead to a kind of hero worship instead of the learning that God intends. We are taught in I Corinthians 10:14 to “flee from idolatry” of all kinds, not the least of which involves setting a man up on a pedestal. Indeed, celebrity-worship is a prevalent idol of our age. As we seek to learn from those who have great lessons to teach, we must simultaneously be reminded that these great men and women are, indeed, mere humans, subject to human frailties.

Discernment is a critical component of meaningful business education (Van Hise, 2013). Liang says, “Christ-centered business education aims to build Christ-honoring character in Christians engaging in the marketplace... (and) should incorporate the mission goals of competence, discernment, stewardship and community as borne out in Jesus’ commissioning of his disciples in Matthew 10” (p. 41). If we are to learn from others’ examples, we must observe not only their best traits and accomplishments, but also their struggles, challenges, and even failures. Students can learn from Christian business leaders who offer “teachable moments from his/her own career, including episodes of humiliating moral failures” (Liang, 2018, p. 42).

Case analysis writers know that the best cases discuss not only the right choices made by the protagonists but also those choices made that led down the wrong path or otherwise led to sub-par outcomes. The most teachable moments come when viewing the errors alongside the victories.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FULL STORY

All of this helps us see two important details about all exemplary lives. First, we recognize the imperfections of human nature, and see that they are human just like us. Therefore, instead of merely idolizing those who are great, whose shoes we may not think we are worthy to walk in, we are instead instructed to see these humans for what we all are—imperfect beings with flawed human nature. “Scriptures teach that we are both made in the image of God and fallen creatures” (Brooks & Wehner, 2010, para. 10).

This brings us to some important insights that are rarely emphasized enough for our students: First, each of us can be useful to God’s mission, just like the other flawed humans, and need not marginalize ourselves and defer to “the great ones.” Second, no human is without flaws, and therefore, even the best model for good must be viewed circumspectly, with discernment, and their actions must be sorted through critically. No human life is our ideal or our idol, and we must look only to Jesus for that perfect model. We can observe actions that individuals have taken and choose to emulate those, but we cannot and should not attempt to put other humans on a pedestal, no matter how great their performance might have been. Additionally, particularly in the business context, we can learn difficult lessons from those who have gone before as we strive to navigate rough waters. If we are followers of Christ, we, too, carry the *imago dei*,

and can be a blessing to others and bring glory to God. We all can participate in the creation as we struggle with our own humanity.

With Pollard and Feeney, as any other great figure, the verdict is no different. Bill Pollard's tenure at ServiceMaster was exemplary, indeed nothing short of amazing. Those of us who owned stock in the company in the 1980's and 1990's could sing his praises not only for exemplary business performance but also for maintaining a unique business structure that lifted up the individual, and honored team members, all to the glory of God. Yet in the midst of our veneration of a truly stellar leader who brought significant value to the world and significant insight into what it meant to be a Christian business leader, it would still be important to investigate what brought an end to the honored model. Many attribute it to the passage of leadership to a non-evangelical, who perhaps puts more emphasis on profitability than the principles that made the company great. Yet, there may be more to the story. Indeed, when the board went outside the company to hire Jonathan Ward, he was brought in specifically to turn around a struggling venture. The company was already on the ropes, and a critical analysis would ask what could have been done to prevent the decline that led to the abandonment of the cherished values. It does not take away from Pollard's amazing legacy to dig deeper into where things went astray, and Saunders does that here, addressing many of these questions and identifying multiple explanations for the company's ultimate decline. Indeed, it makes the story relevant to those who would follow in his footsteps to lead companies in a Christ-like way. It is always true that growth by acquisition is a challenge to corporate culture, as Saunders points out, but ServiceMaster had always succeeded in expanding its special culture through the companies it had acquired. Yet at this stage, both acquisitions and sales of pivotal business lines have been called into question. This conflict could make this story into a powerful case study for use in class. To do justice to the ServiceMaster story in such a format, it would be essential to examine these precursors to the company's demise in more detail. Some would have us believe that ServiceMaster's great story ended simply because Pollard's successors betrayed the vision. While that may be partly true, some of us who were shareholders during that time would say that the decline began before then, and one might wonder if some confusion about what was central to the mission may have led to the unfortunate demise. Saunders touches on some of these questions in his article, and other sources have

brought attention to these questions as well, in a healthy and respectful way. He also cites Pollard's assertion that the company was not "in the business of building this firm to last, but to serve." This quote may raise additional questions for students to untangle as they wrestle with the tension between serving well for a moment in time as it contrasts with providing longer-term service. If one's legacy is to serve God with honor, does it matter how long that legacy continues? Indeed, Chuck Feeney's case brings that question to the forefront as well.

Chuck Feeney's model of giving radically and generously is an extraordinary model of self-sacrifice and impact. His amazing legacy of giving generously and secretly is a model for all to consider. Yet, even with this great model of generosity, there have been questions raised about his discernment in some of his giving. As anyone who gives large amounts will note, it is difficult to parse out all the pros and cons of each organization and recipient. Giving well is a full-time job, and most of us will never fully understand the challenges of giving so much. Still, many question his gifts to Sinn Fein, the Irish political machine with erstwhile ties to the Irish Republican Army terrorist group. Yet, this gift came with strings attached, including a complete denouncement of "armed struggle." Others point out that his giving could have been far more Kingdom-focused. Indeed, according to Abbot Mark Patrick Hederman of the Glenstal Abbey in County Limerick, Feeney typically avoided giving to religious organizations, viewing religion as the source of conflict in the world (Collins, 2023). Indeed, while his model of giving is a powerful image of the Christian ideal, and while his upbringing was staunchly Catholic, Porter indicates that there is little evidence of a faith commitment.

Porter points out that Feeney used Andrew Carnegie (1889) as a model, giving credit to Carnegie's article "Wealth" as the model he tried to emulate. Himself an enigmatic figure, Carnegie advocated this type of radical generosity. Like Carnegie, Feeney was reputedly not an easy person to work with, prone to outbursts of anger. This may have contributed to the decline in his homelife, and Feeney eventually divorced his wife in favor of his secretary (Collins, 2023). He did provide for both families in his will, but these events are outside the ideals that may be expected of an exemplary figure.

None of this negates the great model of generosity he offers. But as with the biblical narrative of the life of David, we see that humans are not divine, and even our best models of action may not be perfect saints. We are left to parse out the good and the bad. This is part of the

educational process, and when we pass these models down to our students, they, too, must engage the challenges we all face. Indeed, it will soon fall upon them to lead, and they must have the tools not only to provide the positive influences but also to navigate the temptations that come with wealth and power. For even those who commit to giving away their wealth are clearly tempted by worldly temptations that lead astray from their higher calling. We are taught that God will provide us a way of escape from the temptations also, that we may be able to endure it (I Corinthians 10:13). Yet, it is clear that not everyone finds that path of escape.

GREAT LEADERS

Devotion to a great leader is understandable. Yet, when that devotion creates schisms in the body, like Paul dealt with in I Corinthians 3:1-9 when church members were prone to declare themselves as loyal to Paul or Apollos or Cephas or Christ, instead of the gospel, they become distractions. Similarly, we must not create schisms in the body over giving or stewardship policies. We are called each to “give as he has decided in his heart” (II Corinthians 9:7), recognizing that God will provide each of us with a model for giving that is essential for His purpose in each of our lives. We should not assume that the call to the rich, young ruler to give away all that he owned was a prescription for all believers. Indeed, if it were so, Christians would rarely have the opportunity to build or buy a business. Instead, our prescription is for each of us is to bind our hearts to Jesus and to let him lead each to giving that is first “in keeping with his income” (I Corinthians 16:2), and second, in line with the calling that He has given to each. God may call some to give all that they have and others to invest in dynamic Christian business leadership. His call to each of us reflects His intimate knowledge of each heart, and the idols we are tempted by. The rich young ruler’s idolatry of wealth and power led Christ to challenge him in a unique way. Even Feeney, the example of generosity, kept over \$2 million to support his family. Most of us are entrusted to act as stewards over some aspect of God’s creation— those resources he has entrusted us with. God puts us in the position of stewardship that He desires for us, and our challenge is to manage it for His glory until He returns. We are all charged to be cheerful givers, but few are asked to divest completely. The path of stewardship each of us is called to follow must be discerned through prayer and wisdom.

A sound business education can go a long way toward helping students to discover that wisdom. The way these cases, biographies, and other instructive stories are presented may help in this respect. Saunders provides deep insight into Bill Pollard’s way of thinking and the implementation of those ideals into a corporate management structure. This story could be built into a wonderful case study that students could struggle with as they ponder the trade-offs between the company designed for a point in time and a legacy left for the ages. He offers a powerful story of a great business leader who demonstrated tremendous Christian values, yet he does not shy away from the difficult questions, such as the acquisitions and sale of divisions, approaching them with grace. We should all recognize that decisions like these do not come with a clear biblical injunction, like “thou shalt not acquire,” and consider the challenges that business leaders face in the real world. Porter’s telling of Feeney’s story offers great promise as well, but to build it into a great case, he would need to offer some of the more challenging parts of the story for students to struggle with. Feeney’s life offers great inspiration, which Porter illustrates well, but students also need to grapple with the hard questions. We need to observe that even something “simple” like giving is hard and carries a number of challenges. Rather than merely an inspiring story, Feeney’s example can offer students both the call to generosity and also insight into the challenges and temptations that we face as we strive to fulfill God’s calling on our lives. Great exemplary lives such as these can yield tremendous instructional value to our students and to business practitioners, but the benefit that we may glean from these biographies is limited by the way the story is told. The sanitized, failure-free stories that biographers often provide will limit the enlightenment we can gain, yet harsh critiques without grace will neither be beneficial. Only through a grace-filled, holistic storytelling will spiritual growth and maturity ensue. Humanity must show through to be useful to humans, and human imperfections provide us with the means to see both truth and error, gain discernment, and apply the lessons to our own lives as we seek to engage the world for Christ.

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