

CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND BUSINESS

BY

BUNMI ONI

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I am grateful for the opportunity to share a few thoughts with you today at the quarterly lecture of the Realmen's Fellowship which you have tagged *Issues Of Our Time Lecture Series*. I understand that the Realmen's Fellowship is a gathering of men who are willing to be counted in our generation. Men who are real men must boldly make their presence felt in the Church and in society. I congratulate you for taking such a firm position in the context of the Nigeria of today where much of the values that make for a decent society have been compromised. Such is the decadence that many people have begun to truly believe that Nigerians are different from other nationalities, or that there is something patently wrong with our genetic fabric. This view has in no small way helped to destroy our sense of nationhood, and the essence of our pride. Many have lost every identity with any values, and we know that if you stand for nothing you will stand for anything. But I must quickly add that when you choose to stand up for something, you thereby carry considerable responsibility not only to communicate what you stand for, but also to ensure that you live by it. When you take a stand for Christian values, you are literally stepping against the tide, and the onus is on you to clarify your principles for others to see. This is because people will believe you for what you do, not for what you say.

I have often heard it said or suggested that Christian Ethics and Business do not belong together; and that you cannot do business successfully if you wish to maintain your Christian commitment. Such a position affirms one or both of two things:

- a) That Christian ethics is too pure and heavenward to get involved with the material world in any way.
- b) That business has certain dimensions that make it intrinsically incompatible with Christian ethics. Therefore, an attempt to put them together is fatal.

Both positions represent only a partial truth, and it is this lack of balance that creates the problem more than the concepts themselves. I believe it is this perception that leads to the frequent reference to a secular life and a ministry life as separate compartments of life. My premise is that these two parts of us cannot and must not be separated.

I maintain that I have one life and it is one ministry life. We get into trouble if we believe that in the so called secular circumstances we are required to reflect one set of behaviour pattern different from the behaviour demanded in ministry undertakings. My ministry starts from my family and extends to the company I work for where I go every day of the week, to the mission field and the church. The one purpose of life is that I may reflect the beauty of Christ and conduct my life in such a manner as to help bring more people into the Kingdom of God. The object is people, and the reason is the Kingdom. That means I must focus on this assignment in whatever capacity I interact with people. Once we can clarify this principle, the discussion of our subject is made a lot easier, so I will dwell on it a little more, and to do this we must go back to the beginning. But before then, let us compare the object of business with that of Christian ethics.

The cardinal object of business is value creation. Multiplying existing resources to generate more resources. Put differently, the use of resources to improve the quality of life around us. It has to be so because that is the only way to cater for the increase in population on earth. It seems also that this was God's original design, because He personally directed man to replenish the earth from the raw materials He provided. For the same reason, He only left us raw materials for most things in the material realm – He put cotton balls in a plant and we are expected to fetch it and make shirts and blouses for ourselves. The wool for our jackets was laid on the back of sheep. We also receive confirmation in Deuteronomy 8:18. “And you shall remember the Lord your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth”. In Haggai 2:8, God reminds us that “The silver is Mine, and the gold is Mine ...”, but we also know that God does not need or use gold. He owns them but they are for our use. So then we establish that God is the author of business.

On the other hand, the object of Christian ethics is that we are in the world though not of the world. Philippians 2:15 says we must be “blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world.” From the experience of Israel when they were returning the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem we learn that the glory of God is to be borne by men and not by carts drawn by horses. Finally, the object of Christian ethics is that we may be witnesses unto Him who called us, and that we may so shine that we draw people into the Kingdom.

We must conclude from this comparison of business and Christian ethics that God is the originator of all things, including the principle of resource management and multiplication, and that the purpose of it all is His glory and His Kingdom.

I noted earlier that we needed to go back to the beginning in order to clarify the principle that in all we do the single objective is to draw people in to the Kingdom. In Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus said; “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations and surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age”. This mandate rests upon the promise in Genesis 12:2-3 when God said to Abraham: “I will make you a great nation and I will bless you ... and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you”. The mandate looks forward to Rev 7:9 when it is fulfilled: “After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb ...”. This mandate is a command of God that must be obeyed. It is also a promise of God that must and will be fulfilled. The things that we seek in doing business including personal gains are already an integral part of the blessing of God which He has preserved down through the ages. God’s will and purpose has always been to bless. It is in the nature of God to bless, just as it is in our nature to seek blessing. Unfortunately we often look in the wrong places for blessing.

At creation, God blessed man and woman (Gen 1:28), and the Sabbath (Gen 2:3). Only when Adam and Eve disobeyed and sinned against God that He pronounced a curse: first upon the serpent (Gen 3: 14-15) the woman (3.16) and man (3.17-19). But then, the curse was matched with a promise: “And I will put enmity between you (the serpent) and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will bruise your head, and you will strike his heel” (Gen 3:15). Even after the destruction of the world by flood, God renewed his blessing upon Noah. Through the covenant of the rainbow, God reaffirmed His love for the world.

Even after the Tower of Babel and the dispersion of the nations, God did not forget. He continued to work out His purpose to bless the world through one man Abraham (Gen 12:1-3). The test of Abraham at the sacrifice of Isaac provided ground for the renewal of God’s promise to bless the nations through Abraham. Gen 22:15-18: “through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me”.

The same promise was renewed to Jacob, unworthy though he was (Gen 28:13-15): “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. Finally, God used Joseph to preserve the family of Jacob through a devastating famine. “God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth...” (Gen 45:7-8). In this sweep through history in Genesis, we encounter the word BLESS over 85 times in this one book of beginnings. In Genesis, we see that:

- God had purposed to bless the world – from the beginning
- But the world chose to go its own way – repeatedly
- The world brought curse upon itself instead of blessing – unfortunately
- Nevertheless, God still works so that the world will be blessed – eventually.

God’s purpose is accomplished through His Son, Jesus Christ. In Acts 3: 25-26 we read “When God raised up His servant (Jesus), He sent Him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways”.

To bless is the act of declaring God’s favour and goodness upon others. The blessing is not only the good effect of words; it also has the power to bring them to pass. God blesses people by giving life, riches, fruitfulness or plenty. But His greatest blessing is turning us from evil (Acts 3: 25-26) and forgiving our sins (Rom 4:7-8). It is all rolled together in one, the spiritual and the material.

So we see that God has only one central agenda for His people – to bless them, so that they can be a blessing to others. We also see that from God’s eyes, business and Christianity are not the opposite ends of a pole. If this has been our connotation of business, then it is because we have attempted to operate God’s instrument of blessing in a twisted manner. There is no shortage of resources on God’s earth, and there is no shortage of money either. The problem comes when human greed manifests itself as it often does, and the resources are skewed in their distribution. When we understand this, we will also understand what our attitude should be towards business. We have a clearer view that business is a means of achieving God’s purpose to bless, and also a vehicle for carrying out the mandate to replenish the earth so that resources can be available in sufficient quantities to cater for the well being of mankind.

We need to clear a few misconceptions, which may have kept Christians from realizing their God-given blessing. Some of these misconceptions have long made some Christians believe that business is intrinsically evil. For example, the common parlance that heaven helps those who help themselves has caused people to shift their attention away from depending on God in ALL things. They suspend the Word of God momentarily in order to hustle the way they know how to. They even begin to believe that the statement is in the Bible, and they get robbed of the blessing that rightly belongs to them. Some erroneously quote the Bible as saying that money is the root of all evil, and therefore they have nothing to do with this mammon. The Bible does not say money is the root of all evil; it says the love of money is the root of all evil. We need to tune our mindsets to the wholesomeness of money and therefore business.

Let us come back then to business. We all know that civil society expects every business organization and person to exhibit certain attributes, including integrity, ethics, high moral standards, excellent character, accountability, fairness in dealings, and a consideration for others. We even speak of corporate social responsibility, which makes it incumbent on a commercial concern to preserve the environment and to share its success with the immediate society in which it operates, and to offer value to its consumers and customers. The laws of the land expect businesses to be good corporate citizens and obey the statutes in detail. These attributes represent very high standards of ethical practice in themselves. If these are the attributes that society expects from every business that operates in the country, why then do we speak of **Christian Ethics** as distinct from the normal expectation from everybody else? What makes Christian ethics different from normal ethics? Or is there a difference?

I believe the answer derives from the verse we saw earlier in Philippians 2: 15, where we are described as lights. The light shows the way. The light leads by its example. We are called upon to fill the position of leadership in shaping our society. We exercise this leadership within our circle of influence, which may be as small as the family, or as large as a nation. The study of leadership is as old as man, and our understanding of leadership has evolved over time. At a time in the past, leadership was described by **what** the leader does. In more recent times, we came to understand leadership as **who** the leader is, and we define leadership in terms of his character and competence.

Today leadership is being understood afresh as **whose** the leader is. Or whom he or she belongs to. This is the context in which we define Christian ethics. For the Christian who understands that he has been bought with a price in exchange for Godliness, ethical behaviour flows out of a consequence of having taken on the divine nature. In this status, we learn the principle of submission, which Jesus enunciated wonderfully at the occasion of the feeding of 5000. In that story, we see a little boy hand over his lunch comprising five loaves and two fish to the Master. Jesus did four things to the loaves and fish: he took it, he blessed it, he broke it and he used it in feeding the people. In our submission, we must be like the loaves and fish, and allow the Master to take us, bless us, break us so that we can be distributable, and use us to accomplish His purpose. His purpose is to bring men and women into the Kingdom. God knows that if we are going to provide for the needs of others, we must ourselves have the resources to give.

My point in this segment is that if our Christian commitment is important to us, then we must elevate it above everything else, knowing that therein lies our success in business and ministry.

Let me in closing now turn to some of the issues that potentially challenge our Christian commitment. For example, how do you deal with the issue of corruption? How do you handle the pressures that come on you to do what you know will violate your Christian commitment and values. Can you really do clean business in Nigeria? What is the right thing to do in each situation we find ourselves? How do I deal with the difficult boss who singles me out only because I profess to be a born-again Christian? How do I deal with the Purchasing Manger who demands gratification and instructs me to inflate the quote I have prepared?

Obviously it is not possible to answer every specific situation or circumstance in a forum like this. There isn't even a simple answer in some cases. What I shall attempt is to provide a few thoughts or principles on how we can deal with being in the world but not of the world, especially in the fierce world of business.

1. Declare you Christian commitment or your position early. It is important that you are able to communicate clearly and without offence what your persuasion is, not by a drab appearance but simply stating what principles you have chosen to govern your life by.

2. Remember that to serve your ultimate purpose of drawing people into the Kingdom, you need to present yourself as a true friend. You need to build relationships in order to be effective as a witness. Commitment is burning your bridges behind you, not in front of you. Christian character reflects attitudes of respect, empathy, being non-judgmental and trust.
3. Your personal life is your most effective witness. Christians need to understand the imperative to exhibit good character, keeping your promises and being generally trustworthy. Self-discipline is a powerful tool in communicating your value systems. Remember too that Jesus by His life attracted people to himself. Multitudes flocked to Him, and let us not spiritualize things by saying He got the following because He was the Son of God. His lifestyle did not put people off or drive them away.
4. Pursue diligence and be the best you can be. In too many cases, we almost expect others to accept a different standard from us when we should set standards for other people. The pursuit of excellence is the vital virtue that secures respect from others around us. Be as informed as anyone else can, and there is no short cut to personal study, reading, and learning. You need to invest in your own development. Too many times we are slothful.
5. When you share the Gospel, remember that:
 - a. We are to *announce* the good news; we are not at liberty to question or alter the news
 - b. The news is *good*; though it may be bad initially (you have sinned)
 - c. It is good *news*, not good advice
 - d. The news is to be communicated effectively and without offence.
6. If your business is offering service, be sure you are able to give distinctive service, and do so with integrity. Don't be shy to discuss your Christian commitment or your values, but share freely without offence. Soak every bit of your activity in prayer. God is interested in those details, and will make a convenient straight path for achieving your goals.
7. We must learn to dream, set ourselves significant goals, and pursue the dream with passion. God honours our vision if it honours Him; that is if the ultimate goal is the extension of the Kingdom. You can aspire to high positions, because the level of influence you have is

wider, and you can influence more lives for God. John Haggai says “Attempt something so great for God, it’s doomed to failure unless God be in it”. God says He is prepared to do things, which have not even entered into our imagination, so be careful what you call impossible.

I have concentrated in this short presentation on developing the premise that Christian ethics and business need not be adversarial. They should not be parallel lines that never meet. Indeed business is an effective platform on which to demonstrate our Christian commitment and ethics. It is often a question of how much our Christianity is worth to us. I have suggested that even the standards that we canvass as Christian ethics are many times the same as those that society will normally demand from any one. What makes the difference for us is **whose** we are, and therefore the empowerment we have to live right, provided we understand that our mandate to reflect the light of God is all-pervading. God respects our vision to achieve real success in business if the vision honours Him. We have one life, not two separate lives, and one ministry.

I hope these thoughts provide some material to have a good discussion, and I look forward to the learning opportunity that such a discussion will offer for me.

Thank you

Bunmi Oni
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