



# Witnessing at Work: When It's Taboo to Talk about Religion

## A GUIDE TO WITNESSING AT WORK USING THE LANGUAGE OF BUSINESS MICHAEL CAFFERKY

**“And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus...”**

(Col. 3:17 NAS)

### ABSTRACT

This article explores an alternative to traditional approaches to evangelism in the workplace. It presents an approach based on using the language of business alone in conversations with coworkers, suppliers, and customers. While it is often taboo in secular organizations to talk about religion, opportunities exist for believers to be not just silent witnesses but rather explicit *verbal witnesses* to Jesus. Business conversations naturally give rise to opportunities where Christians can verbally champion the theological identity and character traits of Jesus Christ. When we advocate for the common principles of business success during business conversations, we can be telling about Jesus Christ just as surely as when we mention him by name. Strategic management provides an illustration of such opportunities. Some of the benefits and objections to this approach are also discussed.

### ▶ INTRODUCTION

In the manufacturing plant at the edge of the city, operational managers scratch their heads in search of ways to build teamwork and streamline work processes in order to improve productivity. They search their minds for better ways to foster employee engagement or to break down barriers that exist between the organizational silos. Marketing staff members gather to discuss ways to maintain the credibility of the brand. They debate a number of issues, such as their assumptions regarding customer behaviors. The public relations team considers how best to enhance a two-way relationship with important stakeholders that the organization serves.

Meanwhile, across town at its quarterly Board meeting, the Board of Directors of the manufacturing firm considers Wall Street's mixed reactions to the corporation's most recent quarterly report. Before lunch, the Board debates

the ins and outs of acquiring a particular target company in order to diversify and thereby achieve economies of scope. Senior management presents two proposals regarding a strategic partner with which to form a long-term alliance. The strategic planning team discusses recent developments among external opportunities for co-branding. Top of everyone's mind is the question of how to respond to the threat of archrival competitors.

Conversations are the currency of business activities. What we talk about the most reveals what is important to us. However, what we most likely will not hear in many secular business organizations is a conversation between a Christian and a coworker regarding personal religious experience. You likely won't hear a Christian quoting Scripture to a supplier on the telephone. Rarely will you hear a faithful believer giving a Bible study on the topic of how to know God's will or defend the authority of Scripture.

Here's the hitch: Christians feel motivated to verbally share our religious faith. We understand the mandate.<sup>1</sup> We get it that we are all called to be salt and light to the world.<sup>2</sup> We are all verbal ambassadors for Christ. We all are called to represent God in our actions.<sup>3</sup> Then we enter the so-called "secular" workplace. Suddenly, the context causes us to pause before we speak openly to others about anything religious or theological. We wonder whether the silent witness of our nonverbal actions is doing enough to glorify God.

This article explores an alternative to the traditional approaches to personal evangelism that have received attention over the decades; approaches that, for good reason, Christians hesitate to deploy at work. The alternative explored here is one that employs the language of *business* to glorify God rather than the language of religion, which is often recommended in traditional witnessing training materials. This is in addition to being a *silent* witness through nonverbal behaviors.

To accomplish this, the article first will present examples of current thinking regarding the taboo nature of religious conversations at work. It will recommend that the context of work must be considered when feeling the urge to share religious faith. It will advocate a different approach, namely, to use the language of business to draw attention to the character of God. It will then give an example from strategic management conversations on how this approach may work. Finally, it will consider some of the benefits and concerns of this approach.

## ▶ RELIGION: TABOO IN WORKPLACE CONVERSATIONS

In a recent *Forbes* magazine article online titled "Ten Things Never, Ever to Say at Work," Liz Ryan counsels readers to never talk about their negative opinions of other employees and managers, their sex life, their unhappiness with their current job, their relationship dramas, or their illegal activities.<sup>4</sup> Included in the list is "religious beliefs." Religion is the first topic on the list that Dawn McKay gives regarding what should be avoided at work. She counsels that "bringing up these topics could make your coworkers uncomfortable or influence their opinions of you and your ability to do your job."<sup>5</sup> Conversations about religion pour a barrel of unnecessary awkwardness and discomfort into the room. The reasons she gives for each of the items on her list: These are personal things. People are sensitive about religion. She concludes her advice by saying that the employee should never try to convert a fellow worker.

Jon Hyman categorically agrees when he says, "If you're thinking of holding a prayer meeting, conducting spiritual discussions or rituals, or doing anything else remotely related to religion at your company, don't. Religion has no place at work."<sup>6</sup> In her book, *We Can't Talk About That at Work!* Mary-Frances Winters lumps religion in with race and politics as three of the most polarizing topics of workplace conversations, topics that result in strong emotions – topics that can be dangerous.<sup>7</sup> If not handled wisely, conversations on these topics easily become divisive and have an unsavory impact on productivity, loyalty, employees' sense of safety at work, and teamwork. In spite of the academic research and advocacy works that focus on the issue, religion at work is still one of the worst things to talk about and is on many advice lists for the workplace.<sup>8</sup>

Ironically, although religion is not generally accepted as a business conversation topic, more people are thinking about how to bring their religion to work. Religion is part of a person's identity. Expressing that identity might contribute to job satisfaction.<sup>9</sup> Spirituality at work has become a popular topic both in academic circles as well as at the job site. Unfortunately, typical Christian share-your-faith approaches depend heavily upon religious language to help move a conversation toward faith in Christ. And it is the *religious* language that is a problem in many organizations.

For decades, Christian writers and Christian business coalitions have been thinking about the challenge of sharing your faith at work. Recognizing that there is variety in biblical ministries,<sup>10</sup> several authors have promoted evangelism as a valid activity in the marketplace.<sup>11</sup> Some organizations, like Christian Business Men's Connection (CBMC), have been around for generations encouraging and inspiring Christians to become more effective ambassadors for Jesus in the marketplace.<sup>12</sup> In addition, new organizations have emerged with the sole purpose of helping business professionals to be effective in personal evangelism in the marketplace. Many of these can be found on the Internet. Christian congregations also are starting marketplace ministries to encourage and equip congregation members to be more effective in sharing their faith in the marketplace. In spite of the problems that the faithful Christian encounters in a secular organization, the recent emphasis on marketplace ministry is encouraging us to consider the context of work as a place for witnessing.

## ▶ THE CONTEXT OF WORK

**W**ithout detracting from all the good that traditional personal witnessing tools offer, it is fair to say that most lay-ministry witnessing programs are designed to help the Christian explicitly share religious faith or engage others in explicit conversations about the Bible's messages. In short, traditional approaches employ the language of *religion*. Yet Christians who attempt to use the traditional approaches to share their faith at the workplace face high cultural, psychological, and legal barriers. In order to be an effective Christian verbal witness *at work*, in many organizations, we have to get *away from work* in order to have a religious conversation. Business is conducted in a secular culture that is apathetic toward religion.<sup>13</sup>

Most traditional approaches to witnessing will often do more harm than good at the workplace, as co-workers feel awkward, uncertain, embarrassed, patronized, pressured, offended, intimidated, devalued, and harassed when they are witnessed to. They and their managers worry that they will be pulled into a divisive conflict. Bringing up religion as a topic of conversation under the pressure of getting work done is not seen as conducive to productivity.

The typical religious "conversation starters," recommended by witnessing training programs, are often

artificial and awkward when used in the office or meetings. For example:<sup>14</sup>

- What does spirituality mean to you?
- If Jesus Christ is who he claimed to be, how would you live your life differently?
- What is the most important thing in your life?
- What do you think about the Bible?

Other contexts might be appropriate for deploying the traditional approaches to personal discipleship, but at work, it just doesn't seem to work much of the time. Talking about religion in a business privately owned by a Christian may seem like a more favorable situation for witnessing. But even here, one must be careful to avoid the perception of abuse of power or creating a hostile work environment. Compared with private companies, the public corporation may represent a far more challenging context for sharing religious faith.

## ▶ AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

**C**onsider an alternative approach where, instead of employing *religious* language, the language of *business* – the backbone of natural workplace conversations, is engaged. This approach is designed to help the Christian identify the business conversations that naturally occur, where the believer has the opportunity to openly champion the central character traits of Jesus Christ that are also the generally accepted principles of business success. When we advocate for these principles in the context of business conversations and when we integrate them into our own work habits, we are telling about Jesus Christ just as surely as when we mention him by name.

Christians in business can learn to be explicit champions of Christ by openly talking about some fundamental, sound principles of business success. At their deepest levels, these are based on the theological identity and character traits of Jesus Christ. By continually being a vocal leader for these fundamental ideas, the Christian in business shows how Christianity can be a positive influence in everyday life. This is more than being a silent, nonverbal witness for God through personal conducts. Continually being a vocal champion opens the door to the possibility of deeper conversations about personal religious experience when coworkers are ready to

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talk about that. More specifically, this approach involves the following:

- 1 Immersing in the broader biblical message about Jesus Christ's identity and work;
- 2 Understanding how the biblical message about Jesus Christ also represents fundamental principles of business; and
- 3 Participating in culturally appropriate conversations at work based on principles that point to Christ using the language of business and supporting them by offering business reasons for particular courses of action.

The approach advocated here is not intended to replace the broader view of witnessing at work. It is one part of an on-going larger process. For example, if we take the biblical model of agriculture involving sowing seed, nurturing the seed for growth, and then harvest, the approach discussed here is relevant to all three phases.<sup>15</sup> It shows others at work the practical dimensions of faith without referring to religion.

### Immersing in the Broader Biblical Message

Many witnessing manuals use a similar starting point, attempting to show the great need for salvation and then presenting Jesus Christ as the only way to satisfy this need. The usual emphasis is on how to explain to a non-Christian the New Testament message of the gospel of Jesus.

While recognizing that this is an essential emphasis for Christian personal witness at appropriate times and places, the approach recommended here takes a different tack. Instead of using the theological terms of sin and personal salvation, it assumes that the nonsectarian theological

concepts that are at the root of religious faith are also concepts fundamental to success in business. Furthermore, they can be spoken about openly at work without outright reference to religious teaching or theology.

Table 1 presents some of the central elements in the theological identity of Jesus Christ that also represent certain character traits of God. The Bible writers connect these same character traits with our behaviors. Interestingly, when seen at the level of their essence, these are also relevant to our business actions.

For example, the Bible writers explicitly state that Jesus *is* the Holy One. Holiness is part of his theological identity. Scripture also says that Jesus *is* God's wisdom. God's wisdom (one of his character traits) is embodied in Jesus Christ. Because of this, wisdom is part of the theological identity of Jesus. As Messiah, Jesus *is* the Prince of Shalom. Shalom is another part of his theological identity. Scripture tells us that God makes a covenant of shalom with us. God's interest in shalom is part of his character. God is the author of shalom. He is interested in fostering a flourishing life for all. Yet, when we consider the use of the word shalom (and the ideas of shalom when the word is not used), we find that it is broader than peacemaking or reconciliation (though it includes these elements). It involves multiple dimensions of fostering physical health, social harmony, international peace, general wellbeing, and economic prosperity.

The three examples above (holiness, wisdom, shalom) are also tied to business success. It seems prudent for the Christian in business to draw verbal attention to one or more of the central elements of the identity and character of Jesus Christ whenever opportunities arise. By highlighting in our workplace conversations what is central to Jesus, are we not, in fact, glorifying God even if we don't mention his name?

**TABLE 1**  
**CENTRAL ELEMENTS IN THE IDENTITY AND**  
**CHARACTER OF JESUS CHRIST**<sup>16</sup>

Concept	The Identity & Work of Jesus Christ; Elements of the Character of God that are Relevant to Business	Representative Scriptures
Holiness	Jesus is identified as the Holy one, the Holy servant. Following, and building upon the ideas in Leviticus 19, there are many opportunities to express holiness in the marketplace.	Luke 1:35; Acts 3:14; Acts 4:27; 1 John 3:5; John 17:11; Revelation 15:4 and other passages
Covenant	Jesus has the authority as the covenant Giver; he is the embodiment of covenant fulfillment. Covenant relationships are fundamental to business success.	Deuteronomy 4:13; Psalm 119:9; Matthew 5:17; John 17:2; Hebrews 12:24
Shalom (flourishing)	Jesus, the Messiah, is called the Prince of Shalom; the one who brings deep abiding flourishing. The deeper purpose of business is to contribute to flourishing in the community.	Isaiah 9:6-7; Isaiah 53:5; Luke 1:79; Luke 2:14; John 14:27; Romans 5:1; Romans 14:17
Truth (faithfulness)	Jesus is identified as the embodiment of Truth; he is the expression of God's faithfulness to divine promises. Truth connotes being interested in understanding the reality of a (business) situation and what that reality means.	John 1:14; John 14:6; Ephesians 4:21; 1 John 5:20. Many other passages are used to point to the faithfulness of God (often translated as "Truth")
Wisdom	Jesus is identified as the embodiment of God's wisdom. Wisdom is covenantal in nature. It is more than being smart about money. It means being smart about (business) relationships.	1 Corinthians 1:24, 30; Ephesians 3:8-11. Other passages point to or explain the essence of wisdom: Psalm 19:7; Psalm 104:20; Proverbs 22:30; Jeremiah 9:23-24
Loving Kindness (loyalty, compassion)	Jesus is the best expression of God's loyalty and compassion; he is God's grace; the love of God is in Christ. Loyalty and compassion is fundamental to personal relationships in the marketplace.	John 1:14; John 15:13; Romans 8:39; 1 John 4:10. Other passages that describe the loyalty and compassion of God: Psalm 33:5; Psalm 89:14; Psalm 119:77; Jeremiah 9:23-24
Justice	The work of Jesus Christ is a work of extending justice. Justice is fundamental to the personal relationships and the organizational relationships in the market.	Isaiah 9:6-7; Jeremiah 9:23-24; Jeremiah 23:5; Zechariah 9:9; Matthew 12:18-20;
Redemption	The overall purpose of Jesus Christ is redemption. Elements of redemption are appropriately found in many places in business.	Matthew 1:21; Mark 10:45; Romans 3:24; 1 Corinthians 1:30; Ephesians 1:7; and many other passages

Each character trait presented in Table 1 represents a rich cluster of ancient biblical ideas. The tendency for some believers is to oversimplify them. For example, holiness is often simplified to mean purity and otherness. While this is not incorrect, opportunities to consider the richness of the idea as expressed across the whole of Scripture, and therefore to manifest God in the complex world of business, could be lost.

Another example of over-simplifying aspects of the identity of Jesus Christ is with the concept of shalom. It is very difficult to pack into one English word the full richness of shalom as it is used across Scripture. The English word *peace*, the one often found in English translations of the Bible, does not by itself capture this full richness. Because of this, the essence of the word is often over-simplified to mean peacemaking or something akin to conflict resolution. As important as peacemaking and conflict resolution are in the marketplace, this is not the whole of shalom. This over-simplification would unnecessarily narrow the breadth of potential business conversations involving faith at work.

Biblical scholars, notably biblical theologians, have written about these ideas in recent decades. Because of the space limitations of this paper, a thorough review is not provided for each of the traits listed here that demonstrate the richness (and complexity) of God's character and the theological identity of Jesus Christ. An in-depth study of each of these and other ideas reveals that each is centered on Jesus Christ.<sup>17</sup> Each is a major theme of the entire Bible (being mentioned in groups explicitly by Bible writers over 550 times). Also, each theme is linked with scriptural guidance for *our* identity. When we begin unpacking them for application to the marketplace, each has something important to say about our activities.<sup>18</sup>

These concepts are intertwined and interrelated in a deep matrix that contains the essential message of the Bible relevant to our work in business. For example, redemption is forever linked with covenant, shalom, faithfulness, wisdom, lovingkindness, and justice. Shalom is inseparable from covenant, faithfulness, wisdom, justice, and redemption.

In spite of the taboo of verbal witnessing in religious language, Christians can still *be verbal witnesses to* Jesus by

employing fundamental business principles that are linked to Christ at the deepest level and, when appropriate, provide the *business* reasons for applying these principles. Thus, we provide a living example of what life can be like in the Kingdom of God.

## The Deeper Bible-Business Connection

At its core, each of the elements of the theological identity of Jesus Christ communicates a fundamental principle of business that generally leads to success.<sup>19</sup> We will use *Faithfulness* as an example here to illustrate the richness of this connection. Other concepts (see Table 1) might also be applied in strategic conversations at work.

More than one scholar has identified the importance of being faithful to promises in the marketplace.<sup>20</sup> Not only is the success of a particular organization at stake when promises are made, but the basic working of the market as a whole also depends upon faithfulness to promises

Faithfulness to promises (often translated from the Hebrew *emeth* into English as the word *truth*) is one of the central characteristics of God in Christ. Just as God has been

faithful in keeping his promises, through Christ, so we are called to be faithful in keeping our promises. The English word *truth* captures some, but not all, of the richness of this ancient Hebrew concept of *emeth*. Faithfulness in our actions is vital. It involves being honest and speaking truthfully.

In addition, being a *vocal* champion of faithfulness while encouraging others to be faithful is also vital since, in leading others to consider faithfulness, we are leading others to consider the practical implications of God's character without mentioning God explicitly. Keeping promises is one way Christians show their faith in Jesus (as a mental assent or belief). Another element of faithfulness that we see in Scripture is an emphasis on basing our actions on reality. This requires understanding the reality of a particular situation. Being faithful to the promises we make to others is also how we show our *faithfulness* to God as we live a life of faith.

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As there are good *business* reasons for keeping promises, we can and should talk about it at work.<sup>21</sup> Faithfulness to promises is at the foundation of brand reliability and strength. Trust is a glue that holds organizations together. It binds buyers and sellers. Break the trust and we put in jeopardy the most fundamental elements of any business relationship. Faithfulness is also at the foundation of all quality and operational performance improvement efforts. Trust is the foundation of corporate governance and oversight. Strategic alliances are built on trustworthiness to promises. Legal contracts are built to encourage faithfulness, which is central for conducting meaningful performance reviews and is the bedrock for accounting and control. The list could go on and on.

Because of its importance in all social relationships, Christians can openly champion faithfulness at work using non-religious, but rather business concepts, terms, and reasons. When faithfulness is complicated by the presence of multiple stakeholders (quite common in the business world), the Christian might engage the work community in discussions about what faithfulness might look like in practice when all stakeholders are involved. The point is that while Christians can and should show faithfulness in actions, and while such actions are a faithful silent witness to Christ, Christians can also take verbal leadership in encouraging others in the marketplace to be faithful.

The more a person verbally champions being faithful to promises and the more faithfulness is being integrated into the work habits of the faithful Christ witness, the more opportunities will open up for engaging in religious conversations when coworkers are ready. This is also true of other God character elements presented in Table 1.

## Participating in Culturally Appropriate Conversations

To further illustrate faithfulness in this approach, an example from strategic management is presented below. Strategy is a cluster of big commitments that an organization makes as it attempts to deploy its core competencies in order to serve those outside the firm. The strategic idea of commitments should signal potential opportunities to talk about faithfulness to promises!

Strategic decision-makers also want to know the truth about the environment so that the strategy formulated (commitments they make) has a basis in reality. Strategic managers continually test their own assumptions about the

external environment. Strategy formulations must also take into consideration the reality of internal core competencies. What we *might* do, given the outside environment, is always constrained by what we *can* do, given the reality of the internal environment. Additionally, during strategic implementation, faithfulness to both the environment and to our commitments is crucial for success. Thus, at the fundamental level, strategic management is on the same foundation in the human sphere as God's faithfulness to his promises is in the Divine sphere.

When we look at the external opportunities and threats to achieving above-average returns on our investments, we look at industry forces, the actions of competitors, and the trends in our own industry as well as in other relevant industries. We consider the political-legal environment, demographic trends, global trends, and trends in technology. We try to get to a deep understanding of reality. This is the only way that our assumptions are validated. In asking how these outside forces and trends impact the economic return, are we not essentially asking how these forces affect our capability to be faithful to our commitments? When the conversation is about economics, it can also be about faithfulness to promises. For example, in a strategic planning session, one might have good reason to ask the following questions:

- *How do current trends outside our firm affect our capability to fulfill our commitments to customers and to suppliers or our commitments to strategic alliance partners?*
- *Which of the external opportunities will help our people experience the deepest joy from being faithful to their promises?*
- *Which industry forces currently are putting pressure on our capability to fulfill commitments?*
- *Which of the external threats will undermine our ability to be faithful? Isn't it worth addressing this threat as being primary to what we are all about?*
- *It is important to be concerned about achieving economic returns. But, aren't the values that are at the foundation for this achievement also worthy of our emphasis?*

Notice in these questions the emphasis is on something deeper than economic returns. It is on faithfulness.

When we consider the internal core competencies (resources and capabilities) of an organization, we might easily and quite naturally ask similar questions:

- *How do our current core competencies help us to be consistently faithful to our promises to each other and to others outside the firm?*
- *What core competencies do we need to strengthen, or create, in order for us to be better equipped to be faithful to our commitments in the market(s) we serve?*
- *What are our current strengths in terms of fulfilling promises?*
- *What are the chief weaknesses that we struggle with in terms of fulfilling promises and what can be done to address these weaknesses?*

Strategic commitments often require a decision which results in making a tradeoff. When considering the tradeoffs inherent in particular strategic commitments, the strategic management conversation naturally lends itself to asking,

- *What tradeoffs are we creating that make it more or less difficult to be faithful to our promises?*
- *What commitments are we not making that we might make which would help the organization to be faithful?*
- *If we make this set of commitments, as opposed to a different set of commitments, will we be more or less successful in being faithful?*

The front end of making promises is an opportunity to consider the contingencies that might impact our ability to do what we say we will do. Accordingly, two relevant questions might be the following:

- *What constraints should we place on all new promises that we make so that we are better able to fulfill what we say we will do?*
- *What contingencies should we address openly with stakeholders so that their expectations of our promises are closer in line with what we can reasonably be expected to fulfill?*

Strategic choices, either at the business level of specific products and markets or at the corporate level for diversification and international expansion, also have an impact on faithfulness. The faithful Christian participating in strategic conversations has a natural opportunity to keep the focus on faithfulness (not forgetting that there are economic realities that must be considered). Some sample questions that can be considered are:

- *When we decide to take this particular action in this particular*

*market (or implement this particular diversification strategy), what will this do to our faithfulness to existing promises?*

- *What will we need to do in order to maintain our faithfulness and to prevent this new commitment from undermining our faithfulness?*
- *If we take this action, where does our faithfulness need to be shored up or improved?*
- *In what way is this choice a good match for how we are equipped to be faithful to others?*
- *In looking at the organizational changes that we need to make in order to implement this strategy, how does our current structure help or hinder our people's ability to base their work on reality?*
- *What might need to change in the organization so that we are faithful to these new commitments we are about to make?*

In addition to asking questions that focus on deeper values, there will also be opportunities to put in writing an emphasis on faithfulness (or other identifying characteristics of Christ). Situation analysis white papers, strategic plans, emails to strategic alliance partners and to coworkers, the text of the published annual report, presentations to shareholders or community groups, diversification and merger plans, competitor analysis and reports, business plans with business model assumptions, or rationale for particular strategic commitments – these are all opportunities for participation in strategic management conversations at a deeper level as suggested here.

We know from the history of diversification, mergers & acquisitions, and joint ventures that these often produce short-term successes, if they succeed at all. Many of them fail, yet strategic managers continue to use these as a means to achieve strategic commitments. Could asking deeper questions that are relevant to the character of Christ but framed in the language of business improve the outcome of strategic decisions?

Sometimes it is appropriate to consider the basic economic issues of a particular strategic management situation. Other times it is appropriate to consider the deeper value issues present in the economic realities. The relationship between the deeper values and the economic realities could be ambiguous. More than front-line managers, strategic managers are paid handsomely to work in the world of ambiguity. The Christian strategic manager who desires to witness for Jesus Christ can sometimes face an additional

type of ambiguity: if there are multiple commitments to different stakeholders' groups, it isn't crystal clear how to be faithful to all the commitments that are made. This is an additional reason to lead the conversation toward the topic

of faithfulness. Others need to participate. Witnessing for Christ employing the approach described here is more like a *dialogue* than a *monologue*.

## ▶ ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES

A few other examples are given in Table 2 to show where typical business conversations can also be opportunities to point toward the theological identity of Jesus Christ without using religious language.

### TABLE 1

Biblical Concept	Business Situation	Examples of Contribution to Business Conversations
Holiness	Discussing possible hiring of an employee who has autism (who normally would have a difficult time finding and keeping a job)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ What contribution to our community can we be making by hiring this person?</li> <li>■ Yes, it will require managers making adjustments. But think about the good it will do for this person and the person's family. Think about how we will improve as a management team.</li> </ul>
Covenant	Planning for a change in distribution channel arrangements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Let's look at what we are promising in this arrangement. What do we need to put on the table for all the players to cover the contingencies that might arise?</li> <li>■ How can we shape our commitments to each other taking into consideration some of the unknowns that might happen?</li> </ul>
Shalom (flourishing)	Statement in an annual report regarding the impact of the firm in the broader community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ One way our company contributes to flourishing in the broader community is by _____.</li> <li>■ In this way, the reason this company was founded is still true today: We are here to serve someone other than ourselves.</li> </ul>
Truth (faithfulness)	Introducing a new Performance Improvement project at a team meeting or reporting on the results of the project to upper management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ On the one hand, I see this proposed project as a way for us to improve our understanding of the harsh facts of reality that we face. On the other hand, it is also an excellent opportunity for us to get even better at doing what we claim to be doing for customers.</li> </ul>
Wisdom	Operational management conversation about a complicated issue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ If we were to get feedback from some of the other players in this situation, to hear from them what is most important, in what ways might this help us to craft a response?</li> </ul>

Loving Kindness (loyalty, compassion)	Discussing the possibility of making a change to employee benefit package	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Based on what we said a year ago, aren't employees expecting something in particular here?</li> <li>■ If we make this change, don't we owe it to our employees to give a transparent explanation for why we are making this change that many will see as unfavorable?</li> </ul>
Justice	Breaking down barriers between organizational silos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ What if we hire an outside company to gather responses from employees regarding what employees distrust because of past experiences?</li> <li>■ If we ensure that the outside company shields the personal identity of employees, will this be fair while recognizing at the same time it could help us better understand the barriers to communication that our employees experience?</li> </ul>
Redemption	A top-echelon meeting in the Human Resources department discussing changes that are needed in order to strengthen the organizational culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Don't we have to let employees know that we take responsibility for some of the weaknesses in our organizational culture?</li> <li>■ The burden of strengthening culture starts at the top and then involves every level of management. What will happen if we say to employees, "Look, we realize that we can do better in terms of the values that we share. And, change begins with us. We need you to hold us accountable."</li> <li>■ Culture flows downhill: If we don't take responsibility, how can we expect managers and rank and file employees to take responsibility for this particular value?</li> </ul>

## ▶ BENEFITS AND CONCERNS

Given that this approach is not the same as a Christian verbally sharing a religious experience of faith with a coworker or attempting to talk about what the Bible says regarding salvation, below we identify certain benefits and concerns.

### Benefits

- Emphasizes showing rather than persuading belief and debating doctrine.
- Avoids direct confrontation with atheists and skeptics regarding the difficult questions they have.

- Avoids the need to wait for a particular time when you think someone might be "open" to your faith witnessing.
- Gives nonbelievers an opportunity to test-drive Christian commitment before they hear about religion.
- Attempts to bridge the gap between Christian terms and concepts and the secular language of business.
- Gives real-life illustrations of deeper theological concepts.
- Helps strengthen the spiritual nerve to bring personal religion into the workplace with confidence.

- Celebrates the moments when God's character is honored at work.
- Emphasizes relating with others in a way that desires *their* good and wins their *confidence*.
- Encourages others to ask questions when they are ready rather than when the *Christian* is ready.
- It might be best considered as "pre-evangelism" or as the first step in the evangelism process. It is designed to open some doors for additional conversations.
- In some cases, verbalizing a fundamental character trait of Jesus Christ, even if given in the language of business, will reflect a deep human desire in the heart of coworkers who want something more from their work than monetizing every action.

## Concerns

- "This sounds nice, but it doesn't go far enough to share the gospel. By not openly, explicitly talking about your personal faith in Jesus, by not mentioning his name, you are leaving out the most important element in witnessing for Christ." Admittedly, this approach is not a way to explicitly share the gospel using traditional religious language. It is designed for a related purpose, namely, to point others to one or more elements of the theological identity of Jesus Christ that is applicable to our behavior in the world of business, using the language of business. How can this not be a means to bring glory to God?
- "Ignoring your responsibility to explicitly referring to Jesus Christ by his name hides your light under a basket." One might just as easily argue that instead of hiding a light, it is actually showing a light of how personal values (based in faith) and business are interwoven. This approach shines a different kind of light that others will not immediately find objectionable when presented in terms of generally accepted business language. Furthermore, this doesn't ignore the responsibility to share the theological terms of the gospel. Rather, it simply recognizes that there is a time and a place for talking about the Christian faith. When the time and place do not support in a natural way the use of religious language, the approach described here is an alternative.
- "It is in the name of the historical person and work of Jesus that people are saved. We are not saved by being

successful in business or even by following a set of ethereal, abstract principles." This is a point well made; however, the approach described here is not offering anything by way of so-called spiritual salvation even if the approach here contributes to human flourishing. Instead, it is offering a way to have natural business conversations that hold high the central elements of who Jesus is, the character traits of God, and what God has done in Christ. Furthermore, it highlights what he has called us to imitate in the marketplace.

- "Without an explicit verbal witness, this approach will help people become more successful in business, but, in so doing, it also might send them *away from* the Kingdom of God instead of encouraging them *toward* the Kingdom." If the conversation is managed carefully, the emphasis can still be on the deeper Kingdom values that are based on the identity and work of Jesus Christ even if these are expressed in business language.

Additionally, one might argue that focusing on the central character traits of God does lead a person toward the Kingdom by first showing the practical (not theological) dimension of religion. If the Christian becomes a constant verbal champion for God's character, then when an opportunity comes for verbal witnessing, the bridge to the religious terms and ideas has already been built.

## ▶ CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

One might say that in the post-modern world, Christians must earn the right to be heard, especially in an apathetic marketplace. But, hasn't this always been the case? Being the verbal champion for fundamental business ideas that are also morally grounded on the person and work of Jesus Christ does more. It goes beyond being a silent Christian witness (in actions) when faced with ethical dilemmas. Attempts to use open, business conversations as the context to bear witness to Jesus bring glory to God in an unexpected way.

For the Christian who becomes known in the organization as one who continually champions one or more of the fundamental ideas, such as faithfulness, covenantal relationships, covenantal wisdom, or redemption, it creates a natural opportunity for coworkers to express their curiosity.

It is a creative way to allow coworkers the chance to seek additional conversations when *they* are ready. No one is making coworkers uncomfortable or anxious or offended by bringing up debatable, divisive religious ideas. No one is hitting anyone over the head with the Bible or dropping unsolicited Christian religious literature in the employee lounge.

As suggested above, this approach is designed for typical business conversations. Because of this, it is *dialogical* by nature. The Christian does not have a monopoly on the business reasons for following Christ-centered business principles. Other people at work will make supporting contributions toward organizational goals also founded on fundamental principles. Others will think of valid business reasons for the basic ideas. Still others will see the situation differently and will disagree. But aren't conversations what we want?

Managerial life is filled with paradoxical tensions. What works in one situation may not be appropriate in another situation. Sometimes opposites are called for at the same time. We have to be able to *explore* new sources of value to offer customers while at the same time *exploit* efficiencies in the current values that we offer. But these require quite different management approaches.

Leaders need to share *top-down* the vision and strategic commitments that the organization is making. At the same time, *bottom-up* participation in the implementation of strategic commitments makes strategic management dialogical. In the same way, the approach described here is both an opportunity and a challenge when representing Christ in the marketplace. It suggests a way forward to explicitly bring deep values to the surface for explicit conversation. But doing so doesn't automatically answer how to manage the tensions. It encourages coworkers to voice their values and, through speaking, to test their values. It requires the Christian to work at crafting appropriate contributions to business conversations. This might be more difficult for some, compared with the difficulty of memorizing a pre-planned statement of the gospel or a two-minute statement of personal religious experience.

Like any skill, practice is required to improve effectiveness. Practice is needed for articulating the business reasons for following in the footsteps of Christ. The point being made here is that the conversations in business are the natural context for highlighting one or more elements of what Christ's work means for us.

Don't think that it is our job to reflect all dimensions of Christ's character equally well all by ourselves. Collectively, the Church is the body of Christ. Collectively, the Church can demonstrate the character of Christ in the marketplace. Individually, it is impossible to fully represent Christ. So choose the elements of Christ's character that you are drawn to, and then go about your work, letting other Christians focus on other elements.

If no one responds to your explicit verbal encouragement to consider a deeper value embedded in a particular business situation, don't take it personally. Avoid doing more harm than good by continuing to harp like a scratched compact disk, yet don't give up. Other opportunities to represent who Jesus is will come up in business conversations. If no one responds to your questions or comments, think about how you portrayed the point and how you might refine your statement and how you might support your contribution with legitimate business reasons for following a particular principle.

Becoming an expert at using the language of business to represent Jesus Christ will take time and hard work. It also takes time to find your voice, to develop the core competency of advocating on behalf of Christ-centered business principles, and expressing these through the language of business. Think of the potential impacts this might have on others and on the organization as a whole. Then leave it in the hands of God, trusting that the seeds we sow will mature at the right time.

## ▶ NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:47-48; Acts 1:8.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 5:13-16.

<sup>3</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:20.

<sup>4</sup> Liz Ryan, (2018). "Ten things never, ever to say at work," 2018 at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lizryan/2018/01/13/ten-things-never-ever-to-say-at-work/#7a36383173d2>.

<sup>5</sup> Dawn Rosenberg McKay, "6 topics to avoid discussing at work," 2018 at <https://www.thebalancecareers.com/topics-to-avoid-discussing-at-work-526267>.

<sup>6</sup> Jon Hyman, "5.1 Million reasons to keep religion out of your workplace," May 2, 2018 at <https://www.workforce.com/2018/05/02/5-1-million-reasons-keep-religion-workplace/>.

<sup>7</sup> Mary-Frances Winters, *We Can't Talk About That at Work!* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2017).

<sup>8</sup>Arlin Cuncic, "Preparing for Small Talk: A List of the Best and Worst Topics" November 4, 2018 at <https://www.verywellmind.com/small-talk-topics-3024421>; Stephen Lacey, "11 topics you should never, ever talk about at work." February 23, 2017 at

<http://www.executivestyle.com.au/11-topics-you-should-never-ever-talk-about-at-work-guitqh>.

<sup>9</sup>Brent Lyons, Jennifer Wessel, Sonia Ghumman, Ann Marie Ryan and Sooyeol Kim, "Applying models of employee identity management across cultures: Christianity in the USA and South Korea," *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 35, no. 5 (2014), 678-704.

<sup>10</sup>1 Corinthians 12:5-7.

<sup>11</sup>For examples consider the following: Ed Silvano, *Anointed for Business: How Christians Can Use Their Influence in the Marketplace to Change the World* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2002); Paul Gazelka, *Marketplace Ministers: Awakening God's People in the Workplace to Their Ultimate Purpose* (Lake Mary, FL: Creation House, 2003); Alistair MacKenzie & Wayne Kirkland, *Where's God on Monday? Integrating Faith and Work Every Day of the Week*, (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2003); Regi Campbell, *About My Father's Business: Taking Your Faith to Work* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2005); Rich Marshall, *God @ Work: Developing Ministers in the Marketplace* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image Publishers, 2005); Shae Bynes and Antonina Geer, *The Firestarter Effect: Making Jesus Christ Known in the Marketplace* (Fort Lauderdale, FL: Kingdom Driven LLC, 2014).

<sup>12</sup>Christian Businessmen's Connection website, 2019 at <https://www.cbmc.com/ministryresources>.

<sup>13</sup>Craig M. Gay, *The Way of The (Modern) World: or, Why It's Tempting to Live as if God Doesn't Exist* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 13; Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Truth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 150.

<sup>14</sup>Chris Walker, "Evangelism Coach Website," (2013). <https://www.evangelismcoach.org/the-power-of-questions-in-conversational->

[evangelism/](https://www.evangelismcoach.org/the-power-of-questions-in-conversational-); Luke Cawley, "Why you should ask more questions in spiritual conversations," InterVarsity Evangelism website, 2019 at <https://evangelism.intervarsity.org/resource/why-you-should-ask-more-questions-spiritual-conversations>.

<sup>15</sup>Jesus refers to this agricultural model and the Apostle Paul alludes to it also. See Matthew 9:37-38; Matthew 13:3-9; Mark 4:26-29; 1 Corinthians 3:6-8. This model is employed by Bill Peel and Walt Larimore, *Workplace Grace: Becoming a Spiritual Influence at Work* (LeTourneau University, 2014).

<sup>16</sup>Other elements of the character of God might be mentioned here. These and other elements are seen by biblical theologians as major themes of Scripture running from Genesis to Revelation.

<sup>17</sup>Each of these and other Christ-centered themes deserve in depth study. The reason these particular ideas were chosen is defended in Michael E. Cafferky, *Business Ethics in Biblical Perspective: A Comprehensive Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015).

<sup>18</sup>The choice of themes to represent here is not arbitrary or random. These particular themes emerge, generally, from the field of inquiry known as "biblical theology" and have been discussed by many biblical theologians in recent decades. There are other major themes of the Bible not mentioned here.

<sup>19</sup>This doesn't mean that the principles are always simple to apply. Indeed, business involves managing ever-changing, multiple sets of complex relationships where it is not always obvious what is the best way to apply fundamental principles of business that also accurately reflect the character of God.

<sup>20</sup>See the discussion of this in Michael E. Cafferky, "The ethical-religious framework for shalom," *Journal of Religion and Business Ethics*, 3, no.1 (2014), Article 7.

<sup>21</sup>Michael E. Cafferky, "Editor's Perspective: The fusion of religion and business," *Journal of Biblical Integration in Business*, 21, no.1 (2018), 5-8.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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