

The First Word on Business

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Abstract: This paper argues that the first commandment “You shall have no other gods before me,” has four important implications for our work and business lives: First God must be the Lord and Sovereign over every aspect of our lives including our work. Second, the structure of the Decalogue teaches us that the God identified by the first command both motivates and specifies the content of the following nine; this moral architecture is the proper structure for any sound organizational ethics. Third, the content of God’s character as Creator and Redeemer teaches us that any sound and effective ethics must tap into those two themes. Fourth, exclusivity is the first law of love both for God and for those made in his image and likeness.

What are the top ten ethical issues and challenges facing Christian businesspeople today? We sometimes like to start our business ethics courses and seminars with this question when we are in a Christian context. Answers: honesty, corruption and bribery, fair wages for workers, executive compensation, debt, product quality, sales tactics, unfair hiring and promotion practices, dangerous or unhealthy products or services, employee gossip . . . you can imagine the list.

Now what do you think would happen if we could hand God a piece of paper and ask *him* to write down what he thinks are the top ten ethical issues in business today? Would his list look like ours? And this is where we love to make the point that God already has written the list: the Ten Commandments. On God’s list, the first issue is always Who is going to be God here? The text makes this plain: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.” The reach of this command goes far beyond business, of course. In every arena of life, having the true God on the throne is *the* decisive question, the point of departure.

In this essay we want to explore and unpack four rich and powerful lessons the First Commandment provides to Christian business managers and leaders. We believe that non-Christians will also usually resonate with these lessons because they bear the imprint of God’s image and likeness and because the law of God is written on their hearts and consciences.

Before looking at our four specific lessons, let us review the basics of the command.¹ If we think of the first commandment as a sort of itinerary and guide for life’s moral journey, where does it take us? One answer is that this first itinerary guides us straight to the highest place on the landscape, a vantage point from which every other itinerary can be seen. If the first day’s itinerary in the famous Michelin guide to Paris took you to the Eiffel Tower, that would be something like what we are saying. When you are in Paris, you can get re-oriented fairly quickly just by spotting the Eiffel Tower, no matter where you are. From the top of the tower, you can see the layout of the whole magnificent city. The first commandment plays that kind of role in relation to the nine that follow it. It takes us straight to the Lord God, the source and center of everything.

The first commandment is stated as a simple, straightforward prohibition: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex 20:3; Deut 5:7). Jewish tradition views this as the *second* “word” with the earlier statement “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, the land of slavery” as the first. For both Jewish and Catholic/Lutheran traditions, “no other gods” is combined with “no images” into one commandment (second on the Jewish list, first on the Catholic/Lutheran list). We will follow the Reformed tradition and hold off discussion of “no images or idols,” viewing that as the topic of the second commandment. But we want to affirm that what Jewish tradition regards as the first Word, “I am the Lord

your God who brought you out of Egypt, the land of slavery” is really the precise “Gospel” counterpart to the “Law” prohibiting “any other gods before me.” This is the wholeness of the first word. “Yes” to the true Lord God; “No” to all rivals. “I am the Lord your God and nobody else gets to have my place.”

Some other possible ways of translating this prohibition include “there shall be for you no other gods,” “over against me,” “before my face,” “between me and you” and “beside me.” This message is repeated over and over through Scripture:

You shall worship no other god, because the LORD . . . is a jealous God. (Ex 34:14)

Take care that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. The LORD your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear. Do not follow other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who are all around you, because the LORD your God, who is present with you, is a jealous God. (Deut 6:12-15)

The LORD your God you shall follow, him alone you shall fear, his commandments you shall keep, his voice you shall obey, him you shall serve, and to him you shall hold fast. (Deut 13:4)

There shall be no strange god among you; you shall not bow down to a foreign god. (Ps 81:9)

Jesus warned that we cannot serve two masters. We cannot worship God and Mammon, for example (Mt 6:24). He refuted Satan’s temptation by citing Deuteronomy 6:13: “Worship the LORD your God, and serve only him” (Mt 4:10). In a great passage (1 Cor 8:4-6), Paul writes,

We know that “no idol in the world really exists,” and that “there is no God but one.”

Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

The first commandment guides us to say to the Lord, “You are my Lord and God. I want nobody but you on the throne of my life. You alone, you uniquely, will have this exclusive place in my life. This is not merely a commandment to *flee from* other gods; it is an invitation to *run to* the God of the universe, the Creator and Redeemer. “I will be your God,” promises the Lord, “and you will be my people” (e.g., Lev 26:12; Jer 7:23; 2 Cor 6:16). “The LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron-smelter, out of Egypt, to become a people of his very own possession, as you are now” (Deut 4:20). “Seek the LORD your God, and you will find him if you search after him with all your heart and soul. . . . He will neither abandon you nor destroy you; he will not forget the covenant” (Deut 4:29, 31).

Martin Luther says that this commandment “requires that man’s whole heart and confidence be placed in God alone, and in no one else. . . . We lay hold of him when our heart embraces him and clings to him.”²

John Calvin says, “The purport of the commandment is, that the Lord will have himself alone to be exalted in his people, and claims the entire possession of them as his own. . . . It is not enough to refrain from other gods. We must at the same time devote ourselves wholly to him.”³

Ancient Israel was located in a polytheistic culture, and many rival gods vied for the Israelites’ attention. In our era few are forsaking Yahweh or Jesus for Baal, Molech or Ishtar, but we should not be too quick to assert our freedom from ancient or primitive deities. Astrology, paganism, goddess worship, Satanism, witchcraft and shamanism are seeing a revival today. Limiting our attention only to such more-or-less self-declared alternative gods and religious experiences is, however, a serious and unwarranted error. *Jesus*, remember, was the one who said that Mammon (the god personifying money) was a rival to our worshiping God.

Sometimes the rival to God is our own limited view of God rather than some false substitute. We need to be careful here as well. We may limit God by confining him to our religious life, or mixing his attributes with other gods we may have. Our God is bigger than any characterization we can have of him. In our finiteness, we often struggle to get a picture of him that will allow us to “explain” him. But he bursts through any box we would seek to put him in. We need to recognize these “boxes” are themselves other gods rather than the true God.

Let’s probe just a little deeper and ask, *What is a “god”? What is the “god-place” in my life? How would I recognize a god in my life if there were one?* The clues come in the statements following the second commandment (and which refer back to both the first and second commandments): “You shall not bow down to them or worship them” (Ex 20:5 par. Deut 5:9). A god is not necessarily what we designate or call “god.” A god is *whatever we bow down to and worship*. It is best described in functional terms. The key attitudes and behaviors are *sacrificing* (giving valuable things or gifts to it), *fear* (revering or being in awe of it), *service* (working on behalf of it), *swearing by his name* (invoking its power and authority), *going after* (pursuing or giving time to it), *following and obeying* (doing what it wants) and *holding fast* (clinging to it in devotion). Luther got it right when he said, “That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your God.”⁴

Our gods are the things (or persons or ideas or powers) before which we *bow down* with our most sincere and profound respect. For what do we *sacrifice* time, money and effort? What is at the *center* of our lives, giving us *meaning, purpose* and *direction*? What truly *motivates, awes* and *inspires* us? What preoccupies us and focuses our attention? What defines our values and our philosophy of life? Where do we look for *salvation, healing* and *freedom*? What is it that we leap to defend if it is attacked, belittled or “profaned”? These questions help us identify the gods in our lives.

It is not the pantheon of primitive gods and goddesses who are the greatest rivals to the Creator/Redeemer at this moment in history but, rather, god-substitutes like Money or the Nation or Race or Gender.⁵ Luther warned against letting mammon (money and possessions) or “great learning, wisdom, power, prestige, family, and honor” rival the true God.⁶ Joy Davidman writes that “greatest among the false gods are these: Sex, the State, Science, and Society.”⁷

Jacques Ellul’s great little sociology of religion, *The New Demons*, argues that the major twin poles of today’s sacred are the nation-state and technology.⁸ It is to the government that we look for care, for solutions, for education in basic values and so on. It is in technology that we have faith and hope for medical cures, better food production, longer lives, more meaningful relationships and so on. People used to rely on God for healing or for rain. Today we rely on biotechnology and irrigation technologies (if we don’t just blame the government!).

Technology or sex can easily enough serve today as the unacknowledged “saviors, lords and gods” of our lives, as can power, beauty, health, careers and perhaps even our children and family. Celebrities and sports heroes of one kind or another receive the adoration and devotion once directed only to saints. Probably the greatest rival to God in our era is the self. The gospel of self-satisfaction, personal autonomy and self-determination is wowing and wooing thousands of converts today. Mammon and material possessions *look* a lot like gods today but these are often *means* to serve the self, rather than sacred *ends* in themselves. The bottom line is that we should be very cautious about awarding ourselves a pass on the first commandment just because we are not offering prayers and pinches of incense to some little pagan idols in our apartment. Rival gods can appear to be neutral or can appear even as angels of light.

The rivals to Yahweh make big promises to us, and we are suckers for their sales pitches. The serpent promised to Adam and Eve, “You will be like God” (Gen 3:5). Satan promised Jesus “all the kingdoms of the world” and their glory if he would just bow down and worship him (Mt 4:8-9; Lk 4:5-7). In an important sense, Satan could have delivered on that promise, but it would have come at a terrible price. All too often, however, these rival gods do not and cannot deliver what they promise (e.g., happiness for those who fall down and worship money or sex). Such are our vulnerabilities to rival gods—even though none of these competitors is in the same league as the true God we know in Jesus Christ.

This first great commandment is first of all a simple matter of *justice*. God *deserves* to be in the god place, on the sacred throne of our life. *God has a right* to be our only god, not to be demoted or replaced. The Lord God is our Creator and Maker and the Sustainer of all life. He is also our Redeemer, the one who went to the cross for us, reached out to us, liberated us from our bondage and slavery, forgave us our sins, healed us and welcomed us back into his family—some kind of right and privilege should follow all that. Then too, we made a deal, a covenant with God: he would be our God and we would be his people. God keeps his end of this commitment, he is always faithful; we ought also to be faithful and uphold our end of the covenant. To do otherwise is a treacherous betrayal of an agreement, a commitment, we made to him. God has a *right* to have a unique, exclusive place in our life as God. It is a matter of justice. “God desires to be all in all to his children, and claims an exclusive right to their love and obedience.”⁹

Yet even more than justice, the first commandment is an issue of love. Our relationship with God is not primarily about observing the rights and provisions of an agreement. God is love. We love him because he first loved us. We are called to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, soul and strength—just as he loved us to the point of laying down his life for us at Calvary. This commandment is about a love relationship. It is about guarding and nurturing fidelity and faithfulness, and it is about warding off infidelity and adultery.

Israel accepted God’s sovereignty at Sinai and, in return, was designated as his chosen nation. This intimate relationship resembles the bond of matrimony between a man and wife. A Jew who worships another god is like a spouse willfully engaging in adultery; the betrayed partner—God—is justified in his anger. . . . The prophets who admonished Israel for their sin of idol worship often compared the unfaithful nation to a harlot and an adulterous wife (Ez 16:32, 36, 38).¹⁰

Rabbi André Chouraqui writes that

one of the constants in the biblical ethic and aesthetic is the comparison of the covenant between Elohim and Israel to a marital covenant. This leitmotif leads to a presentation of idolatry as a violation of a conjugal link and shows a link between the second and the seventh command that is more than a figure of speech. . . . Conversely, the corollary of the affirmation of an exclusive love, as celebrated in the Song of Songs, is a privileged relationship with the Supreme Being. . . .

In sixteen uses of the word *na’af* [adultery] it describes the act of one prostituted. . . . In sixteen others, the adulteration is committed by Israel or other peoples who fill the earth with falsifications and betrayals in relation to their Creator. The prophets have treated at length the theme of the adulterous Israel, unfaithful spouse of Elohim, or the Church, adulterous spouse of Christ. The covenant of Adonai/Yahweh with his people is assimilated to a marriage of love which all infidelity dishonors.¹¹

In a marriage (or in any other intimate friendship) the biggest threat to happiness is always the appearance of a rival on the scene. (not merely the appearance of another person, per se, but the rise of a rival—someone who might come between the lover and the beloved or take the place of the beloved.)

The very first principle, the first and primary movement of love, is to establish a relationship in which the other occupies a unique and exclusive place. That is what spouses want and need from each other above all. Such examples from human life and relationships ring true because human beings are made in the image and likeness of God. This is a veritable law of the universe, a law of all life. The first and fundamental expression of love is exclusivity, the unique place of the other. The first thing God asks of us is to be our only God.

Jesus summarized the Law in terms of the double Love Commandment to (1) love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and (2) love our neighbor as our self. We have seen how the first command expresses love to God but how does it express love for our neighbor? Remember that Jesus and Paul said that the *whole* law—not just the “second half”—can be summed up in the statement “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” So often this point is lost. The first commandment represents the first and most important way of loving and benefiting your neighbor. How should we understand this?

It is actually great for our neighbor that we worship the God of Israel and Jesus Christ. This is the very best thing I can do for my neighbor because this commitment leverages everything else of importance in life. This is the God who created *everyone* in his own image and likeness. This is not a tribal, racial or national god. This is not an African, European or Asian God. This is the Palestinian/Jew *crossroads* God, the God in whose image both male and female have been fashioned. Any time *this* God is truly on life's throne, in obedience to the first commandment, my neighbor's dignity and value will be protected. If another god gets on the throne, look out neighbor!

This is the God who believes in justice and compassion, in truth and freedom. This is the God who delivers people out of bondage into freedom and who offers forgiveness. This is the God who demands respect for one's name; who rejects images; who protects life, property, relationships, truth and a pure heart. If this is truly my God, and no other gods are between me and him, then my neighbor benefits. This is the first way in which the first commandment preserves and nurtures neighbor-love. We will see that there are further impacts on our neighbor as we explore the business implications and lessons below.

Certainly it will be necessary to rid our lives of any false gods who have gotten onto the throne of our life. An important practice for those who follow the first commandment is to actively, deliberately profane any potential rival gods in our life.¹² How do we know when saying “no” (to a rival) really means “no”? *Profane* means to treat as ordinary or to desacralize. If money appears to be a potential object of worship, we can profane it by giving it away more recklessly than usual. If technology is treated with hushed tones of awe and reverence or with ecstatic praise, then let us criticize it and point out its weaknesses, let us refuse to depend on it or let it dominate our lives. If our gender is being sacralized, let us joke about it. Take the names of false rival gods “in vain” regularly! Mock them. Treat them as ordinary and common. Above all, we must do this with our own temptations. (Money? Nationalism?) If these suggested practices cause us to fear or be embarrassed, it may be time for some religious self-examination.

Profaning real or potential gods can hurt sometimes if we have already given our hearts away to these gods to some degree. This is when we must remember that a broken heart is best healed when we fall in love with someone else. Our strategy must be to dump the rivals --- and flee to the arms of God. We must also seek—with our intellect, our spirit and our emotions—the presence of God and cling to him. We can aggressively seek to “take every thought captive to obey Christ” and to “be transformed by the renewing of [our] minds” (2 Cor 10:5; Rom 12:2). We should not passively moan about what we gave up but instead actively glory and rejoice in what we have found: the true God.

Now we come to four specific implications for our workplace and business thinking and behavior. The commandments have relevance for all aspects of Christian doctrine and theology. They offer guidance for our politics, families, friendships, and church lives. But what we want to explore is how the first command speaks to our workplace and marketplace lives.

First: God Must Be God At All Times, Including in our Working Lives

Anytime we narrow our view of God, or confine him to particular out of the way corners of our lives, we are in effect “having other gods before us”. Every area of life comes under his authority. Jesus said, “If you love me you will keep my commandments.” This does not mean we will ever be able to serve God perfectly. We are fallen people and can only seek to please him through the power of the Holy Spirit. But our desire should be to grow in our understanding of him and what it means to please him in all areas of our lives.

One way we have other gods before us comes in how we set out priorities. Well-meaning Christians have often taught that our life priorities are, in order, (1) God, (2) Family, and (3) Work. This sounds pious and right, and is often the basis by which we might think we are “having no other gods before us.” But what does this mean in practice? That we spend more time in prayer, worship, and reading the Scripture than we spend with our family or at work? That our “religious” or “devotional” and “spiritual” disciplines and activities get more hours than anything else? For most people, this is just not possible. This cannot be what the first commandment requires.

Further, this way of setting out our life priorities suggests that family and work are areas where God is not directly present. We took care of God’s concerns first . . . now we move on to family and then to work. But God cares deeply about our families and our work, and everything else in our lives. Separating him from these areas is another way of having other gods before us, since we are not serving a God who is over all. We can’t really even modify it to say the priorities are (1) church, (2) family, and (3) work. What we really need to say, and what the first commandment teaches us is that the list of priorities is: (1) God.

God cares about our worship and our church life --- and he cares about our families -- and he cares about our work. He cares about every aspect of our lives. He is not a separate priority alongside others; he is the priority in every area of life. He is God at all times. All that we do should be under his authority, and in a way that honors him. It is not God vs. our families or God vs. our work, but God *in* our families and God *in* our work.

But aren’t our worship of God and study of the Bible more important than our families and our work? And isn’t our family more important than our work in God’s perspective? We believe the answer to these questions is a resounding “No!” If God has called us to be a teacher, a banker, a software developer, or a construction worker, then this is important work. We cannot trivialize it. When we create these hierarchies, we are acting as our own gods, and in this way we are having other gods before us. We are not saying that it is okay to sacrifice your marriage or family for your work --- or that your Bible study and prayer group are not of great and essential importance. What we are saying is that God is God all the time, in every area, and creating any kind of abstract hierarchy that appears to bracket God off from being the leader of all parts of our lives has to be wrong.

How then do we set these priorities? How do we achieve balance among the conflicting demands we face in our lives? The ultimate answer is that we don’t. Rather, we seek God’s guidance and authority in our lives; we ask him to help us with our day-to-day priorities and need for balance. We believe this works in two parts.

First, every task we do should be done under his authority and with his guidance. Whether this is on our job, in our family, or during worship, each task at that moment is carried out in sacred trust. Second, we also set our schedules under his authority. We acknowledge all that he has given us to do is “under God” and seek his help in laying out the schedule of our days. This doesn’t mean being paralyzed by fear over getting it wrong. He has entrusted the work for us to do and has given us gifts and abilities to carry it out. But it does mean that we should be open to his interruptions. We have a schedule but an event happens that requires us to do something else. We need discernment to assure this new task is from God, and then to do it willingly, even giving up what we may have thought was the priority. Al was recently on a long airplane trip and had a book he was eager to read. Settling into his seat, he heard a question from the person sitting next on the airplane. That question resulted in a five hour conversation across the country with a young agnostic software engineer. It seemed at first to be an interruption, but it was clearly God resetting his priorities. We need to be open to these kinds of “interruptions” and not treat them as problems but as opportunities.

Together the setting and carrying out of out the many tasks in our lives is a clear way we “have no other gods before us.” All is done according to his priority, and each task is done under his authority. We have broken our own hierarchies, and acknowledged God’s interests in every aspect of our lives. So the first step in “having no other gods before us” is to recognize God’s authority over all of our lives, not simply the spiritual domain. The God who we worship is one who made us in his image, who gave us our work to do, and who calls us to live our whole lives in relationship to him. The first lesson is that the God we worship is Lord of all, including our work. Simple yet so critical. When w fail to acknowledge this we are worshipping a different god.

Second: Understanding That Purpose Motivates and Specifies Ethics

Our second lesson from the Decalogue is that it is God (command #1) who determines what is good (commands #2 - #10). The Decalogue shows us a moral architecture where God, the ultimate purpose and End, *motivates* obedience to the laws that follow. We follow his ways out of love and duty to him. But the Decalogue also shows us a moral architecture where the very *content* of that ethical guidance flows from his character. Our understanding of what is right and good flows organically from God’s character and will. For example, we observe the Sabbath and work six days out of obedience and love for God; but we do this because God is himself the Creator for six days and the Sabbath rest-er for one day.

The great French Reformed pastor Alphonse Maillot has written that

this commandment is *the Commandment*, the commandment par excellence, of which all the others are only the consequences or commentaries. . . . Thus, in truth there are not ten commandments but *one plus nine*. *One* true, one great, one alone, and *nine* which develop it, explain it, and show its consequences. This is why I would repeat my reticence before a too strong distinction between two tables of the Law . . . just as in the same way it is erroneous to separate too much the two commandments of the Summary of the Law. It is fundamentally the same: “you shall love. . . .” God is the one who delivers and Israel is a people liberated in *all* of its existence. . . . Fundamentally there is only one table, that of the new life, that of freedom for Israel. . . . It is not only at worship, not only in my prayers, nor only when I read my Bible that I may not have other gods, but it is in *all* of my life. In my work, in my family, in my political actions, in my relations with my neighbor, there is no question that I could have another God, another reference, another criterion than the one who delivered me from Egypt out of all my slaveries.¹³

The nine commandments are merely elaborations of the first. They delineate nine direct implications of having Yahweh as our living God. If God is truly on the throne of our life, then, we will make no idols; use his name respectfully; remember his sabbath day; honor our parents; protect life, marriage, property and reputation; and avoid covetousness. There are nine implications of having this God in his unique place. As Luther put it, "Where the heart is right with God and this commandment is kept, fulfillment of all the others will follow of its own accord."¹⁴

This pattern or "architecture" of the Decalogue provides us with an important insight for our participation in organizational, institutional and business ethics. Learning from this model, Christians should work first at calling attention to the broader, deeper purposes of such organizations, perhaps questioning them and prodding them toward a richer and better content. If we can prod colleagues and organizations explicitly toward the justice, love and freedom of God, that's great. But even if our companies do not commit themselves immediately or explicitly to the service of God in their mission statements, our encouraging them to commit to larger, positive, godly purposes can help leverage better ethical performance in the details of daily work. Any time Christians can encourage others to address the broader questions of the meaning and purpose of life, work and business, they have contributed something significant.

Lacking an intimate connection to such an ultimate purpose, much of today's business ethics is reduced to little more than case-by-case "damage-control." Various moral crises, dilemmas, quandaries and problems spin out of control and beg for careful analysis and creative resolution. Unfortunately, at this damage-control level our responses tend to be narrow, negative, legalistic, and reactive. The best outcome is pretty much "get through this situation with as little damage as possible." That is hardly an inspiring motive to be ethical; and the very definitions of "ethical," "right," and "good," are at sea. What we need is an "ethics of mission control" rather than an ethics of "damage control."

What is the foundation of an ethical organization? Contrary to some common thinking, it is not the company code of ethics. Nor is the key step to hire an ethics officer, or to schedule some employee ethics training. The foundational step is not to create a list of common ethical infractions and start doing some case studies on them. None of the preceding steps will have much power to leverage or guide behavior unless they are intimately linked to a compelling overall organizational mission and vision. First get the mission and vision straight. That's where healthy organizational ethics begins. All moral guidelines with any power to actually lead us, point back to, and are dependent on, their connection to a compelling purpose and mission. If we don't buy the mission, we won't buy the principles and rules. The architecture of the Ten Commandments clearly displays this "mission control" pattern. If God's position is solid and unrivaled, then his agenda of justice, love and freedom will follow, and we will be formed by the other nine specific area principles.

It is encouraging that some of the best and most popular business books have promoted this sort of mission-control ethics. James Collins and Jerry Porras's best-selling study of great businesses, *Built to Last* (1995), argued that the best long-term companies first "preserve the core" and then "stimulate progress."¹⁵ The order is crucial, they say. The core mission and fundamental values must be the first priority. Collins and Porras define core purpose (what we're calling "mission") as "the set of fundamental reasons for a company's existence beyond just making money. Purpose is broad, fundamental, and enduring; a good purpose should serve to guide and inspire the organization for years, perhaps a century or more. A visionary company continually pursues but never fully achieves or completes its purpose---like chasing the earth's horizon." (p. 77). Collins and Porras argue that mission-driven, visionary companies have experienced greater business success, over longer periods of time, than companies that were not mission and vision focused. Max DePree's books, such as *Leadership Is an Art*, make the same point in

other language: the leader's chief responsibility is to tell the story that establishes the identity, mission and values of the company.¹⁶

Once the core purpose is clarified, the question becomes "what kind of value-embedded corporate culture and what kind of principle-guided practices are needed for the business to achieve its mission?" What guidelines will get us from here to there with excellence? Business writer Douglas Sherwin explained how ethical values relate to mission and purpose in a classic essay several years ago: "The values that govern the conduct of business must be conditioned by 'the why' of the business institution. They must flow from the purpose of business, carry out that purpose, and be constrained by it."¹⁷ Ethics is essential to fulfill the "why" of business. If the ethical guidelines are not integral to the company's purpose and mission, they will fail. When the purpose is clear, the guidelines are compelling, and the specific dilemmas and problems can best be resolved or managed. From mission to guidelines to problem-solving.

This moral architecture is demonstrated by the Decalogue and biblical ethics. But it is confirmed by common sense and broad human experience, by common grace and natural law. It is the stamp of the Creator's image on all people. It is the "law written on the heart and conscience." Think about an athletic team: only when a team is truly gripped by an intense, shared vision of winning a championship will they sacrifice and suffer through extra workouts. Only then will the players subordinate their individual egos to team interests. Only then will the players study the play book with total seriousness. Only then will they follow the exercise and nutritional guidelines for exceptional fitness. Only a compelling mission changes team behavior.

Think of how a person's bad habits and long-entrenched behavior sometimes change radically. This doesn't happen very often but when it does it is often because that person fell in love and wants so badly to please or win another person that they will change their ways. And think of how in an era of epidemic childhood obesity we see an impressive band of super-fit kid athletes (gymnasts, skaters, basketball players). What makes these kids behave so differently from their peers? A major factor is their vision of getting a gold medal at the Olympics or playing in the NBA. Mission and vision motivate and leverage behavioral change like nothing else.

Negative feedback can have some impact on human performance, of course. Threats of punishment, insults, and shaming can motivate some behavioral improvement in both sports and business. Such negativity, though, makes for a generally weak foundation for ethics (most sexual harassment employee training is of this negative type). Positive, shared vision is much more powerful over time (in raising children, coaching athletes, building nations, or leading organizations).

Toyota watcher and management expert Jeffrey K. Liker describes the first principle of the "Toyota Way": "Base your management decisions on a long-term philosophy . . . Have a philosophical sense of purpose that supersedes any short-term decision-making. Work, grow, and align the whole organization toward a common purpose that is bigger than making money." Liker goes on: "Throughout my visits to Toyota in Japan and the United States, in engineering, purchasing, and manufacturing, one theme stands out. Every person I have talked with has a sense of purpose greater than earning a paycheck. They feel a great sense of mission for the company and can distinguish right from wrong with regard to that mission. . . Toyota's strong sense of mission and commitment to its customers, employees, and society is *the foundation of all the other principles* and the missing ingredient in most companies trying to emulate Toyota."¹⁸ Costco is another great company that gets the priority and importance of mission. Here is how they articulate in the introduction to their Code of Ethics. "***Our Mission:*** *To continually provide our members with quality goods and services at the lowest possible prices. ***In order to achieve our mission****

we will conduct our business with the following Code of Ethics in mind. (emphasis added to highlight the dependence of the code on the mission).

Mission-control ethics also happens to be the standard way ethics has been understood, taught, and practiced for millennia. Aristotle began his *Nichomachean Ethics* with “The good is that at which everything aims.” Ethical/moral goodness is about “Ends,” and means to those ends. An Aristotelian approach asks “what makes for a *good* knife?” Well “what is the purpose of a knife?” Answer, “to cut things.” Therefore the virtues of a good knife are things like sharpness, safety, durability, etc. If the purpose of a knife was to be displayed in a museum, things like shininess and color might be among its core virtues; if the purpose is to cut, then sharpness tops the list. Identify the purpose first, then detail the characteristics necessary for excellence in carrying out or achieving that purpose.

So mission and purpose don’t just motivate ethical behavior, they specify the *content* itself of an effective ethics. By analyzing what it will take to achieve the mission and fulfill the vision, we can figure out the appropriate values and guidelines. The mission of “cutting things” logically leads us to conclude that the first virtue must be “sharpness.” After a business gets its mission and vision straight, it then (and only then) figures out the core values it must embed in its culture and the basic principles that must guide its practices in order to achieve success and excellence. This is, by the way, a common mistake made by many businesses and other organizations, i.e., separating and treating as independent the mission and vision, on the one hand, and their core values and ethical guidelines, on the other. This of course is an alert that the character of that purpose and mission is of decisive importance. If “moving money from your pocket to mine” or “building myself the biggest pile of money in the shortest amount of time” is our business purpose, watch out for the behavioral practices and cultural values that follow from that choice!

We should not be surprised if philosophers, management experts, or any other careful observers of life figure out that purpose and mission drive ethics, or that the End drives the Means. This is witness to common grace and the imprint of God’s image on people. But what is vaguely and intermittently seen in these common ways is explicitly and clearly seen in biblical revelation, and in the structure of the Decalogue and Commandment One in particular. When God is on his throne in our life, things happen.

William Barclay commented on the First Command that people

necessarily wish to be like the gods in whom they believe, and, therefore, the kind of gods they believe in will make all the difference to the kind of life which they live. . . . It is of the first necessity to get the idea of God right, for a man will quite inevitably become like the god he worships. . . . It is from here that ethics takes its start. A man’s god dictates a man’s conduct, consciously or unconsciously.¹⁹

Third: Seeing Creation & Redemption As Two Basic Aspects of Godly Purpose & Mission

Let’s take the analysis one step deeper by considering who this God is on the throne of our lives. There are many ways of describing God’s character and being and action. He is the Almighty One, the Prince of Peace, the Everlasting Father, and so much more. But if we are to focus on the two most basic descriptions, it would have to be Creator and Redeemer. In the Decalogue we are explicitly told that he is the Lord “who brought you out of Egypt, the land of slavery (Redeemer) and he is the one who created the world in six days (Creator). The focus on these two aspects of God is reinforced by the themes of the two great songs of eternity praising God as Creator (Revelation 4) and Redeemer (Revelation 5).

The God whom we serve is the Creator of good and beautiful things --- and he is the Redeemer of lost and broken things and people. He is the Innovator, Designer, and Builder par excellence. It is in his

character; he IS the Creator. And he is the compassionate Healer, Liberator, and Savior par excellence. It is in his character; he IS love, he IS the Redeemer. And every man, woman, and child today and throughout human history has been made in the image and likeness of this Creator and Redeemer. As broken and sinful and wounded as we are, we have some of that creator and redeemer “dna” in our character as well. The first commandment challenges us to be sure that it is precisely the Creator and Redeemer who are on the throne, inspiring and guiding our values and behavior in the workplace and everywhere.

If our company has a clear purpose but it is a bad or negative one, be prepared for negative ethical consequences. For example, if the mission is really all about maximizing short-term financial pay-offs (perhaps especially for a handful of executives), the characteristics that are generated may include ruthlessness, greed, selfishness, cunning, and willingness to step on others. The fall of Arthur Andersen (described in detail in *Final Accounting: Ambition, Greed, and the Fall of Arthur Andersen* by Barbara Ley Toffler) offers a clear case study of how a mission turned bad rapidly led to behavior turned bad and unethical.

Our mission cannot simply be to “relieve customers of their money.” There must be some basic product or service we are delivering in light of which people will part with their money. It is that essential product or service, that change that we leave behind in our customer’s life, that is our core mission. So, what is it? What does the company want to accomplish? What is the target out there? What is its business in the most basic sense? Only beggars and thieves can have “relieve you of your money” as a stand-alone mission. A successful, sustainable business depends fundamentally on delivering some product or service well enough to keep customer cash flow coming in. What, in a brief phrase or sentence, is that core product or service? What is the change your business makes in the lives of its customers that warrants their paying you?

Not just customers but employees are affected by our mission. What kind of business mission and purpose will motivate people to want to get out of bed in the morning and bring their best self to work? We believe that an inspiring mission and purpose taps into one (or both) of the two basic theological themes: creation and redemption. All human beings are made in the image and likeness of the Creator and Redeemer, whether they know it or acknowledge it or not.

On the first theme: when a company challenges its people to innovate, create, and build in some way, it connects with something profoundly human, something God planted in human nature and which persists no matter how wounded by sin and ignorance. People are rarely inspired by jobs that have no space for creativity, that ask just for repetition, compliance, and maintenance. There are some classic psychological and anthropological studies of this human characteristic (Latin, *homo faber*, “man the maker”). But it is also common sense and personal experience: think about how good it feels to take on a challenge and have the freedom and responsibility to carry it out. Think of how good it feels to finish the project and be able to look back on it. Getting a book published, finishing a deck building project, running a marathon---completing an acquisition project at work, etc.: human beings are builders by nature.²⁰

Great companies tap into this creative “build something good” characteristic in their workforce. Toyota is a model: “Central to the Toyota Way is innovation . . . from the small workplace changes made by plant workers on the shop floor to fundamental breakthroughs in production technology and vehicle engineering.”²¹ Toyota’s development of both the Lexus and the Prius are expressions of creativity and innovation unleashed by a mission-driven organization. So here is the first way we motivate our people to want to get out of bed in the morning and bring their best self to work: we challenge and empower them to express their God-given creativity for something good, useful, or beautiful. Quench, ignore, or repress

that side of human personality and watch their lackluster, half-hearted, perhaps even negative performance on the job.

The second great theme is *redemption*. This refers in general to setting people free, healing their hurts, fixing their brokenness. The whole creation groans, waiting for this ultimate redemption. This is who God is, the Redeemer who is love and, in effect, can't help but reach out in love to the lost, hurting, broken, and rebellious. We know that every man, woman, and child has been created in the image and likeness of that Redeemer God. No matter how fallen, wounded, and selfish we have become, there remains something in us, most of us anyway, that responds positively to the opportunity to help somebody, fix some problem, comfort and heal someone hurting. People are inspired by organizational missions and visions that help those in need, heal the sick, liberate those in various kinds of bondage, and overcome hunger, ignorance, or oppression in some form.

Again, there are academic studies of this "herd instinct" and altruism but the evidence of common sense and observation is powerful enough by itself.²² Think about how people respond to disasters and human cries for help; there is something in us (most of us, most of the time) that makes us want to help others. When a tsunami, earthquake, hurricane, or terrorist assaults our neighbors, most of us join together to help. When a child falls down or an older person struggles to carry something, most of us step up quickly to help. It actually makes us feel good about ourselves to be able to help others. We dehumanize ourselves when we could help someone in need and we selfishly turn away (we never brag to our friends about these episodes of selfishness and stone-heartedness).

To summarize this point about working people being made in the image of the Creator and Redeemer just a little glibly, a viable, inspiring mission and purpose either helps people "fulfill their dreams" or it helps people "overcome their nightmares." Tapping into one or both of these themes is really about aligning the organizational mission with the best aspects of human nature, and more profoundly with the character of God on the throne.

The mission of Walt Disney has been a good example of the inspiring potential of the "create something beautiful" theme: *To bring happiness to millions*. While some recent events may give us pause, the broader Disney story has been one of mission-driven, ethical business success. Who wouldn't be inspired to work for a company whose mission is "to bring happiness to millions"? As might be expected, the great pharmaceutical companies have (in the past at least) tapped primarily into the "help somebody" theme. Johnson & Johnson's mission has been *To alleviate pain and disease*. Merck described its mission as *the business of preserving and improving human life*. As long as, and to the extent that, these phrases really focus the mission and purpose of these companies (assuming of course a reasonable financial success), employees find these companies inspiring places to be associated with.

Sony's older mission statement was an inspiring statement of creativity with a secondary "help somebody" theme: *To experience the sheer joy that comes from the advancement, application, and innovation of technology that benefits the general public*. Hewlett-Packard's "H-P Way" also picked up both the creativity/innovation and helpfulness themes. Some of its key elements: *To make technical contributions to fields in which we participate . . . To make a contribution to the community. . . . To provide affordable quality for customers. . . . To provide respect and opportunity for H-P people including opportunity to share in H-P success*.

How do we work all of this out in a setting where we don't have influence over the company's mission? In other words, what does this look like when the mission of our company doesn't appear to line up with God's mission for work, if it is not about creating good and beautiful things for people or fixing broken

things and healing hurting people? If we are to “have no other gods before us,” we must align our personal mission with God’s mission and this may create some dissonance. Here are three suggestions of how we might respond:

First, we can try to see the work God has given us in a missional light that may not be otherwise evident. The old story of two men working in the middle ages makes this point. The two men were doing the same job, hauling rocks. One said, “I hate my job. It is hot, dirty work and seems so meaningless.” The other said, “I love my job, I am building a cathedral.” Barry Rowan, the CFO of Vonnage, says we need to bring meaning to our work rather than find meaning in our work.

Second, we have enough scope for leadership that we can help some in the company see a connection between their tasks and the broader vision. Bill Pollard, former CEO of ServiceMaster, used to do this for the people who did the dirty work of cleaning toilets and bathrooms in the hospitals where they worked. He had the medical people meet with his cleaning people to build awareness of the link between their task and the larger mission. Cleaning the toilets and bathrooms was an important task on the team that was helping patients get well.

Finally, in our imperfect world if we can’t nudge the company mission in the direction of God’s bigger purposes, we may need to go do something else in order to “have no other gods before us.” Making this difficult call is best not done individually, but in a community of believers. We can be blinded by the money from the job, our own egos, or even a misplaced sense of self-righteousness that clouds our own vision. Our families may have needs that make leaving a job especially difficult. Leave or stay, Jesus said that we should be salt and light wherever we are, and working this out in the workplace is one of the most important ways that this happens.

Fourth: Treating God --- and Those Bearing His Image --- With Uniqueness, Value, & Exclusivity

We saw in the opening paragraphs of this essay that God wants to be our only God. His first command is that there be no rivals allowed into his rightful place. “You shall have no other gods before me.” We can call this the principle of “exclusivity” or “the unique place.” The Decalogue teaches us that this is the first way we love God. The Decalogue teaches us that God has a right to be accorded this exclusive place. He is unique, not replaceable or dispensable. He is valuable, not to be discarded or ignored.

This first command habituates us to a basic pattern of how to treat people made in the image and likeness of God. As we learn to love God, we learn at the very same time how to love a neighbor made in God’s image and likeness. Our business corollary to the first commandment can be stated as follows: *The first way to love and care for the other is by granting them a special, unique place in our existence and not letting any rivals emerge to threaten or take that place.*

With all people: the first movement of love is to make sure they have—and know that they have—a unique and irreplaceable place before you. If they think they are replaceable, all is lost. Children need to feel and know that, no matter how many other people are in the family, they have a unique place in their parents’ lives. In a flash, something occurred to David as he was giving a lecture on the Decalogue to a group of university students about thirty years ago: “this is exactly the first thing that my wife wants from me—to have her place in my life unthreatened by any rivals.” (Of course he knew this about marriage before that night—the new insight was that the first movement of love and justice was the *same* for God, for a spouse, for anyone). In the case of marriage, you may have other good friends, people you love. But no one should be offered the special place of life-long soul-mate, lover, and unconditionally-intimate

life partner that you dedicated and committed to your spouse. While there are many ways of threatening a good marriage, the most threatening of all is to allow a rival to enter the picture, to begin to come between you and your spouse. The point is easily seen in the marriage illustration but it applies equally to parenting: each of your children must know that they occupy a unique, irreplaceable position in your heart and mind. If they come to doubt that, the relationship is in trouble.

The principle applies in business as well: each of our employees (and customers and colleagues) need to feel valued and unique by their employers and colleagues if they are to flourish. Are they overlooked, dispensable, replaceable, or “just a number”? How will they perform if that’s the case? People can usually sense whether we notice them and value their individual existence. The fact is that every person *is* unique in their DNA, in the upbringing, experience, and perspective. Everyone has value somehow, somewhere (even in the case where they do not fit into our organization and must be replaced). Because people are unique, they *deserve*---have a right---to be treated as unique individuals.

Legendary founder of Hewlett-Packard, David Packard has written “. . . Our strong belief [is] that individuals be treated with consideration and respect . . . Every person in our company is important, and every job is important.”²³ Stanford business school professors Charles O’Reilly and Jeffrey Pfeffer concluded their major study of personnel and management practices of successful companies by arguing that “These places are also better at attracting and retaining people as a byproduct of how they operate. That is because great people want to work at places where they can actually use their talents, where they are treated with dignity, trust, and respect . . .”²⁴

It is not surprising that common sense and experience would lead many observers --- philosophers as well as managers --- to see the importance of treating people as unique and valuable. Immanuel Kant stated his “categorical imperative” as “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means.”²⁵ Don’t use people as means; value them as “ends.”

We don’t propose this principle simply on the basis of common sense or expediency, however. We argue that the Decalogue clearly teaches that the first way we must treat God right is by granting him a place that no one else can have and valuing him as he deserves. Because people are made in his image and likeness, they too wish to be so treated. It is important to let this implication of the first commandment permeate us and reform our relationships. We need to pray, “Lord, help me to truly see those around me as you see them: unique, valuable, made in your image. Help me to carve out a special place for each of them in my heart and my affections, my consciousness and my actions. Help me to value them and protect their place in my life. Help them to know where they stand with me.” This is, more often than we might think, really a matter of justice as well as loving care for others. Our women colleagues, for example, have a right before God to be granted dignity and value equal to what is given to men. This is justice, not grace! Our spouse and our children deserve to be treated as unique, valuable individuals; we are not doing them a “favor” when we do so. This is guarding their freedom to be who they are—who God wants them to be. Our workplaces can be transformed those who live out this principle. “Treat all people as unique, valuable individuals. *Never treat anyone as though they are dispensable, without value, or ‘just a number.’*”

Conclusion

It is a powerful experience to relate to the God of the universe and to have no other gods before us. This is not just for us in church or for us in our personal lives. We are whole people, and this first commandment should be at the core of everything.

It starts with getting a right and full understanding of who God is. While we can never understand him fully, we at least know that he is God over everything including our work and business lives. To have no other gods before us means that there is no corner of our lives where we can retreat and not be involved in living this out.

Understanding God moves us to carry out his mission in the world. Serving him *is* our mission. Our work is part of his mission, and doing our work missionally is part of what it means to live under his sovereignty. It leads us to an ethic that is much bigger than not doing wrong; it is about doing right and advancing the mission.

God's mission in the world involves both creative work and, this side of the Fall, redemptive work. In all of the work he has given us, we need to "work at it with all your heart as working for the Lord and not for men,": Col 3:23. As we pursue and promote godly creative work and godly redemptive work we are living out what it means to have no other gods before us but Yahweh.

Finally, because every person is made in the image of God, living out our acknowledgment of "no other gods" causes us to treat image bearers of him in a unique and singular way, parallel to the way we treat God by protecting and valuing his unique place in our lives. James and John both remind us that we cannot say we love God and mistreat our brothers and sisters. We demonstrate our love for him in the way we treat each other.

Do the commandments, and in particular the first commandment, have anything for the Christian who is "not under law but under grace," for the Christian in the 21st century working in business? We can't miss it!

¹ This essay is a collaborative effort but it draws heavily (with occasional repetition of language) on David W. Gill, *Doing Right: Practicing Ethical Principles* (InterVarsity Press, 2004), especially Chapter 3 "Nobody But You: Uniqueness & Exclusivity" (on the first commandment) and David W. Gill, "A Fourth Use of the Law? The Decalogue in the Workplace," *Journal of Religion and Business Ethics* Vol 2., Issue 2, Article 4 (10 Sept 2011) Available at: <http://via.library.depaul.edu/jrbe/vol2/iss2/4>. We find it difficult to improve on the practical expositions of the Decalogue by Martin Luther (*The Large Catechism*) and John Calvin (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.8). Two of our favorite recent studies are Alphonse Maillot, *Le Decalogue: Une morale pour notre temps* (Geneva: Labor & Fides, 1985) and Jan Milič Lochman, *Signposts to Freedom: The Ten Commandments and Christian Ethics* (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011). Avroham Chaim Feuer, *Aseres Hadibros: The Ten Commandments; A New Translation with a Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic and Rabbinic Sources* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Mesorah, 1981) is a wonderful little source of classic Jewish insight o the Decalogue.

² Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), p. 10.

³ John Calvin *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2.8.16.

⁴Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, p. 9.

⁵Actually, it is not nation, race or gender per se that threaten God's place but rather *nationalism* (and *Americanism* is no better than *Serbianism* or any other form), *racism* (in all forms, covert and overt) and *sexism* (including *genderism* in either of its two potential versions).

⁶Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, p. 9-10.

⁷Joy Davidman, *Smoke on the Mountain: An Interpretation of the Ten Commandments* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), p. 26.

⁸Jacques Ellul, *The New Demons* (New York: Seabury, 1975).

⁹J. H. Hertz, ed., *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs: Hebrew Text, English Translation and Commentary*, 2nd ed. (London: Soncino, 1988), p. 295.

¹⁰Avroham Chaim Feuer, *Aseres Hadibros*, pp. 33, 56.

¹¹André Chouraqui, *Les Dix Commandements Aujourd'hui* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2000), pp. 180-82; (David W. Gill translation).

¹²Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1976).

¹³Alphonse Maillot, *Le Decalogue*, pp. 22-23. (David W. Gill translation)

¹⁴Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, p. 15.

¹⁵James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras, *Built to Last* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994).

¹⁶Max DePree, *Leadership Is an Art* (New York: Doubleday, 1989).

¹⁷"The Ethical Roots of the Business System," *Harvard Business Review* Nov-Dec 1983, p. 186.

¹⁸Jeffrey K. Liker, *The Toyota Way* (McGraw-Hill, 2004), pp. 37, 71-72. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁹William Barclay, *The Ten Commandments for Today* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1973), pp. 17-18.

²⁰Nikos Mourkogiannis describes this as "discovery," one of four basic core purposes grounding great companies; *Purpose: The Starting Point of Great Companies* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 30-31.

²¹Jeffrey Liker, *The Toyota Way*, p. 42.

²²Mourkogiannis also highlights this theme, calling it "altruism," one of his four basic core purposes. He suggests "Excellence" and "Heroism" as the third and fourth core purposes undergirding great companies. There is no single way to describe our topic but, in my view, excellence and heroism are more about *how we approach* "creating good and useful products and services" and "fixing broken things and helping hurting people" (my "two great themes") than separate thematic purposes See *Purpose: The Starting Point of Great Companies*, pp. 32-37.

²³David Packard, *The HP Way* (1995), p. 127

²⁴Charles O'Reilly and Jeffrey Pfeffer, *Hidden Value: How Great Companies Achieve Extraordinary Results With Ordinary People* (Harvard, 2000), p. 3.

²⁵Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysic of Morals* (1785)

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