Butterflies AND Worldviews

SMALL COMPROMISES MATTER

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Abstract

Small compromises in ethical situations set in motion forces that could lead to drastic transformation of an otherwise biblical worldview. Theories related to chaos in dynamic systems, cognitive dissonance, and social identity shed light on the dangerous consequences of moral compromises. Reliance on critical analysis, intentional study of Scripture, and a community of like-minded Christian colleagues could be ways to protect and strengthen a biblical worldview. This essay offers insights to enable business professionals to excel in ethically challenging environments while maintaining integrity and Christian witness as they face the explosive growth in global business and the resulting clash of worldviews and values.

A tech company is in competition for market share, and slowly losing. The CEO comes up with a plan to capture the market by selling their product far below the cost of its main competitor and at a price below what it takes to manufacture it. The CEO plans to tap into reserves and use some creative accounting to cover the losses. The new prices will be extremely low compared to the competitor's prices and when the competitor begins to lose market share and feel economic pressure, the CEO will begin recruiting key employees from them by offering salaries that are substantially higher, even above the average in the CEO's own company. His plan is to buy the competitor's company and use the newly hired employees from his competitor as trainers for bringing his company's employees up to speed on the former competitor's technical processes.

After a year, the CEO plans to release the new employees, as well as any others from the company he has purchased in a downsizing maneuver. As a senior manager at the company, Xander will play a prominent role in this and the CEO assures him that he will reward him well once the dust settles. Xander listens and begins to feel very uneasy about the plan and its impact on people. To Xander the whole plan stinks of deception, injustice and manipulation. He raised some of these concerns with the CEO but the CEO explained that to his understanding none of this is illegal; this is just playing hardball business.

Behind the decisions in the scenario above reside a number of values that reflect a secular worldview. As followers of Jesus, professing to adhere to a biblical worldview, how would we feel about working at this CEO's company? Would any of his decisions raise red flags to us?

Unfortunately, situations like this are far too common in the highly competitive world of business. Those who seek to adhere to a biblical worldview are often confronted with policies or decisions that seem to demand a compromise of their values. When confronted with drastic, egregious ethical challenges, the probability of capitulation is low.

Many, however, would have no problem with small, seemingly harmless compromises. In reality, by making small compromises the believer could slowly drift away from a pre-dominately biblical worldview into a predominately secular worldview where more serious compromises may become common. Even a partial adoption of a secular mindset may begin a process that could ultimately be destructive professionally and spiritually.

When confronted with the myriad of problems en-

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countered daily in business, there is temptation to take the standard route followed by the greater business world.[1] Approaching business like a game that states you can do anything you want as long as you don't break the rules (too often interpreted merely as not breaking the law) is tempting, but is it ethical from a biblical worldview?[2]

Biblical vs. Secular Worldviews

What constitutes a biblical or a secular worldview? Barna's definition of a biblical worldview includes commitment to these: absolute truth; the Bible being fully accurate in all the principles it teaches; the reality of Satan; salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ; Jesus having lived a sinless life on earth; and God being an all-powerful creator of the world and ruling the universe today.[3]

When looking at servant leadership from a biblical worldview, a number of broad categories can be identified: justice, proper use of power, stewardship, respect for human dignity, compassion, character, personal responsibility, and care for the marginalized or weak.[4] Pearcey echoes Schaeffer by emphasizing how a biblical worldview involves perceiving the world through the lens of biblical teaching as it pertains to every aspect of life - art, business, science, anthropology or any other related field of study.[5] This coherence in every aspect of life, including thoughts and values, has been referred to as holism and creates stability and resilience.[6]

The more we practice our worldview in daily choices, at every level, the more ingrained and stable our worldview becomes and the more it is resistant to change. Ultimately, recognizing that morality has been defined by God, every aspect of life comes under the scrutiny of the biblical ethic. There can be no part of life or thought that is compartmentalized in order to justify the violation of biblical standards.

Does this mean there exists somewhere a list of rules that apply to every choice we make? While there are some clear cut laws that should not be broken, such as federal and state civil and criminal laws governing business, a biblical ethic is

built upon principles revealed in Scripture that reflect God's original intent for how people should live in the world.

For example, in Scripture people are seen as an end, not a means. People are not objects to be used and thrown away nor are they resources to be exploited. The biblical demand for care for the marginalized and weak sits in contrast to the worldly demand for profit above all other concerns. Scriptural teaching on character requires doing what is right even if we suffer loss as a result. This sits in contrast to the worldly utilitarian approach that says doing wrong is okay if the outcome is good for us or good for the majority.

Adherence to a biblical worldview requires sensitivity to the Holy Spirit as we seek to address complex, often contradictory choices, discerning God's perspective. Since it is based upon absolute truth, it is portable, adaptable to any culture or environment and able to provide a perspective for evaluating moral or immoral behavior.[7]

Within the secular system, business is most often defined materialistically, mere economic activity that promotes self-interest.[8] Ethics and morality seem to stand in opposition to business goals and their value is determined purely by their contribution to the bottom line.[9] In this secular worldview there is no god (other than profit), no afterlife, and no absolute truth since these are not verifiable using the scientific method.

This is a fragmented view of the world that compartmentalizes such values as religion, morality, beauty, free will, and even human dignity into the realm of relative speculation.[10] Values are socially or individually constructed. Deciding what is good is generally based upon utilitarianism or pragmatism; what is best for me or for the group, or what causes the least harm while providing the greatest benefit. None of these are linked to any sense of absolute truth and thus their different expressions across cultures are not subject to comparison since each culture is viewed as its own self-verifying system.

In essence, when this relative approach is fully lived out, nearly anything goes, giving the feel of moral anarchy.[11] When we embrace this relativistic approach and encounter radically different definitions of morality from other cultures, we have no means to evaluate whether the encounter is immoral or merely different, or what can be easily integrated in doing business in that culture and what should be avoided. An example of how this relative approach to ethics is problematic is illustrated by the struggle the United Nations has with cultural diversity and human rights.[12] How then would embracing even a small part of the secular worldview affect one who seeks to follow a biblical worldview?

It's Just a Small Compromise

If you've watched the movie *Jurassic Park*, you might recall a reference to a butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil and later causing a hurricane in Florida. This was referring to a discovery made by Edward Lorenz while studying chaotic systems.[13] Small errors in an unstable state become large errors over time.[14] In these systems errors grow exponentially with each iteration.[15]

Chaos and Dissonance

The Butterfly Effect
A butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil and causing a hurricane in Florida a long time later speaks to how small changes in a dynamic system creates conditions that may lead to drastic results. The small change affects other aspects of the system; they combine, multiply until the system itself is altered. Our lives are an ongoing demonstration of this principle. A small choice such as deciding to visit a small village while traveling and talking to a villager who shares a novel insight that causes you to think of life and its purpose in different way is initially forgotten. Over the years the idea periodically returns and begins to influence you, eventually changing your perception until you begin to see the world in ways others do not. Others come into contact with this idea and we join with them. In time the obscure idea ends up altering history itself. Such was the nature of the birth of Christianity.

Cognitive dissonance
Cognitive dissonance theory states that when we do something that violates our own values, we feel dissonance or personal discomfort, often to the degree that we must bring about resolution.[18] We enter a time of self-justification, or we alter our original moral position to be more in line with the new moral activity or belief.[19] This effect is so powerful that merely having a person read a speech that presents a position totally opposed to what he actually believes morally, could lead the person to soften or change his belief.[20] If you are a committed Christian and have done something that broke one of your central values and then felt uncomfortable, then you have experienced cognitive dissonance. You see yourself as a good person and this action clashes with that view. How we choose to resolve this dissonance reveals a great deal about our spiritual maturity and character. It can be an opportunity for growth or it can be a descent into self-justification and further moral compromise. Growth requires altering behavior to conform to beliefs. Descent into negative traits involves changing our beliefs to match our actions.

Granted, Lorenz was examining natural laws in relation to material systems, not the mushy, unpredictable world where humans can make irrational decisions. However, chaos theory has gained acceptance and use within the social sciences precisely because there are chaotic patterns of human behavior that need explanation. This effect has been examined from the perspective of business in relation to the secular ethic of self-preservation, as well as within the field of marketing.[16]

In terms of worldview, when we adopt an idea or practice from a secular worldview, we set in motion mental

forces that affect our Christian character. In essence, because we have acted contrary to our biblical worldview we have created instability or a level of chaos in our moral system. The more often we use ideas or practices that are contradictory to our worldview, the more instability increases. This manifests itself as inner tension or disappointment that we have not acted in accordance with our values. This inner tension of contrary values is called cognitive dissonance[17] (see box *Chaos and Dissonance*).

When a person's sense of morality is primed to moral behavior (through reading the Ten Commandments, for instance), his or her willingness to participate in immoral

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behavior is reduced.[21] It has been shown that when a business promotes a code of ethics that management follows, modeling appropriate behavior, employees are less likely to act unethically.[22] The inverse was also found to be true. When participants were exposed to an article promoting negative morality, they actually chose to cheat to win a raffle.[23] What we have is a confirmation of an old biblical principle: "Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners" (I Corinthians 15:33, NIV).

What must be realized is that when we adopt any method, idea or principle from a secular worldview, we are not merely borrowing a tool, but are borrowing the whole tool box with all its associated problems and biases.[24] The more often we use the borrowed method, idea or tool the more its associated tools and ideas become attractive. Over time, even small compromises create enough psychological weight and practical results that the follower of Jesus may undergo what Kuhn called a paradigm shift.[25] All of those compromises, hedges on moral principle, or adaptations of "means to an end" thinking may initially swirl around as outliers or anomalies of behavior. The person may even trivialize or compartmentalize them in order to lessen inner conflict.[26] Over time, however, one develops patterns of behavior and thinking that can't be sealed off or rationalized. Jesus referred to this when he stated that, "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much" (Luke 16:10).

Research reveals that our moral choices are grounded less in rationality than they are in emotion and action because of our innate desire to fit into our referent group.[27] With organizations' emphasis on being a team player and loyalty to the brand, people may find that the pressure to conform in order to maintain employment or advance their career

begins to crowd out their desire to live a life congruent with their biblical worldview. Those responding to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and standing true to their principles often experience getting the cold shoulder from other employees, being excluded from work activity and decisions by supervisors, or even verbal abuse from supervisors.[28] The voice of the workplace begins to drown out the voice of the Holy Spirit and compromise ensues. This compromise is more than going along to get along. It involves a shift of allegiance. In essence, the adoption of a small aspect of a secular worldview in order to fit in and avoid sanction may begin the process of an identity shift, however subtle.

Identity and Moral Choices

As Christian businesspeople, it is important how we view ourselves. Do we identify ourselves as businesspeople who happen to be Christian, or as Christians who happen to be businesspeople? It speaks to the locus of our heart's affection and its allegiances. Haidt's research makes it clear that our moral anchor resides in the culture or group in which our identity resides.[29] We use our rational mind to justify our moral choices more than to form them. Our gut reaction to moral issues has been shaped by the process of conforming to our referent group's worldview. By adopting the tools or methods of a secular worldview, subtle shifts of allegiance take place.

Jesus made this clear when he said, "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money" (Matt. 6:24). Note that Jesus is not saying that you must have the core of your identity match your actions; rather, your affections grow out of your core identity. Every act inconsistent with one's biblical worldview is a corruption of one's core or essential self.[30] "...Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit" (Matt. 7:16-18). The need for our actions to conform to our sense of self is so strong that when our sense of self is contradicted by our actions, more than just moral confusion takes place. What we encounter is identity confusion.

Identity confusion affects reputation. Vacillation between values of two opposing worldviews soon produces contradictory behavior and decisions that our followers may see as weakness or untrustworthiness. Trust is one of the most valuable currencies of business and is essential to credibility.[31] When individuals act in a manner contradictory to stated values, they erode trust. Followers look for leaders to walk the talk. If unchecked, these compromises of a biblical worldview become not only easier but greater in ethical intensity. As one rationalizes one's actions to decrease discomfort, greater compromises become easier and trust is further eroded. With one decision we can begin the journey down a slippery slope of moral compromises and a shift of our identity from being anchored in Christ and a biblical worldview to another defined by our profession or society and embracing values diametrically opposed to a biblical worldview.

In the scenario mentioned at the beginning of this article, one of the key biblical values being compromised relates to human dignity. Since humans are made in the image of God, they must not be treated as means or objects to be manipulated to achieve personal goals. By choosing to treat people as a means to an end, a Pandora's Box of potential ethical breaches is opened. What happens when employees or customers begin to sense that the business leader or the company sees them as objects to exploit for gain?

How to Avoid Moral Drift

If small moral compromises can threaten a biblical worldview, what can be done to protect one's integrity? This is all the more important since the globalization of business exposes people to many cultures with a worldview often in conflict not only with Scripture, but U.S. and sometimes international laws as they pertain to business. The complexity can be daunting as one navigates cultural and business practices of bribery, extortion, child labor, gender discrimination, exploitation of the poor, nepotism, environmental pollution, workplace safety and countless other issues. Despite the complexity, there are actions one can take to maintain one's witness and reputation and still advance one's career and business.

Critical reflection

Cultivating a practice of critical reflection is the first step in seeking to maintain an authentic biblical worldview. By cultivating a habit of critical reflection, we can actually strengthen our biblical worldview after moral compromises.[32] The Jesuits are trained to spend the latter portion of each day reflecting on their actions and reactions to people and situations.[33] What can they learn about themselves or the situation that would lead them to respond differently in the future and avoid compromise? What acts or thoughts require repentance and a recommitment to truth or even making restitution if someone is wronged? Such regular scrutiny has power to transform as well as inform and strengthen worldview.

We can also learn a great deal from those who seek to plant churches in other cultures. They wrestle with how to direct the church to become a part of the target culture, fully expressing that culture in its practice, without compromising the truth of the gospel or adopting cultural practices that are against biblical teaching. This is called contextualization, and business finds itself saddled with the same challenge as it expands to other cultures.[34]

A request for a gift in order to start business negotiations may or may not be an ethical breach depending on the culture or people involved.[35] What missionaries came to understand is that they must know not only the Word of God, but also become quasi-experts in the new culture, understanding the broad issues as well as the nuances of the culture. Ultimately, there is a realization that all cultures possess good aspects that can be kept or assimilated and bad aspects that must be replaced or eliminated. To be able to sort out the ethical from the unethical requires critical analysis that can't happen without having sufficient information to understand the situation. We must be committed to being a lifelong learner.

Intentional Study

Regular study of the Scripture with specific attention to underlying principles is essential. This goes beyond merely reading

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The Five Types of Justice

Commutative
Relates to the equitable exchange of goods or fulfillment of contracts. When you go to the market and the scales are accurate, that is representative of commutative justice. *"You must have accurate and honest weights and measures, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you. For the Lord your God detests anyone who does these things, anyone who deals dishonestly"* (Deut. 25:15-16).

Distributive
Relates to the equitable distribution of goods in a society. Distributive justice focuses on outcomes. *"When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the Lord your God"* (Leviticus 19:9, 10).

Procedural
Relates to fairness in processes to settle disputes or allocate resources. *"Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly"* (Leviticus 19:15).

Retributive
Relates to punishment for wrongdoing. *"If people are fighting and hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman's husband demands and the court allows. But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise"* (Exodus 21:22-24).

Restorative
Relates to the needs of victims and offenders, with offenders taking responsibility to repair wrongs done. *"But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, 'Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.' Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost'"* (Luke 19:8, 9).

Scripture or personal devotional study. It needs to also include focused exploration of key aspects of biblical principles as they pertain to business life. For example, how do the five types of

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justice mentioned in the Bible (see box *Five Types of Justice*) relate to how we conduct business in the world? In affirming human dignity, how do we also affirm personal responsibility? Does the concept of community only apply to the culture within the firm or does it extend to external stakeholders? Those who follow Christ are expected to intentionally expand their knowledge of God's Word and know how it applies to everyday life. "...you should be teachers (and)... can tell the difference between good and evil" (Hebrews 5:12-14).

By deepening our understanding in the Word of God and by daily applying these principles within the business context, navigating the complex world becomes much more manageable. This focus on the application of biblical teaching to business reveals how truly literate we are in the Word of God. For instance, in conducting business in a country where women are seen as property and have few if any rights, how would we apply scriptural teaching related to the equality of women and the need to affirm the image of God in them? How would our business treat the women it employed? Would we mirror the culture? Jesus seemed to go against the convention in how He related to women and their place in his work.

Study of the Scripture is only the beginning, particularly when it comes to doing business internationally. Business people should use the same diligence and study to understand the culture and worldviews of those with whom they do business. Superficial recognition of cultural issues must be replaced with deep understanding. This may take time. More importantly, it requires humility and a willingness to become vulnerable and learn from those in the target culture.

Development of critical consciousness, looking behind everyday life to uncover social and political realities, is what it means to be literate in the world and its practices.[36] For instance, is the gift giving practice in the foreign culture a form of bribery or a form of hospitality or commitment to community? What would be the telltale signs of bribery? Is this a pattern across the whole culture or is it isolated to this particular business or leader? Have we confided in a local member or expert on the culture for his/her views on this practice? Does the practice conflict with any national or international laws or codes of conduct? All of these questions force one to move beyond the superficial in understanding other cultures and how best to practice business within them. Failure to practice such critical consciousness could lead to not only embarrassing errors, but mistakes that destroy reputations and careers.

Community of Faith

Earlier it was pointed out that our sense of morality is anchored in our referent group and that we use our rational mind to justify those values. That led to a brief discussion about identity. Understanding identity is important for us since so much of our life is spent with a diverse group of people who may or may not share our worldview or challenge our values.

Since we are all subject to biases and blind spots, it is important that we place ourselves in a community of like-minded business people who are struggling to live out a biblical worldview, a community of learners and practitioners from whom we can gain new perspective.

Joining a community of like-minded business people that acts as coach, cheerleader, sounding board, philosopher, and when needed, conscience, provides protection by drawing on informed expertise. This community, large or small, will help us gain and maintain perspective as we debate approaches, discuss ideas, and explore new ways to apply Scripture to daily life. An authentic community requires transparency and vulnerability while encouraging its members to greater accomplishment and personal development.

Conclusion

What is exciting is that the Christian business man or woman has the best possible platform to demonstrate the glory of God and the righteousness of His teaching. Application of a biblical worldview in business has nearly limitless possibilities for transforming communities and individuals, making the world a better place while extending the Kingdom of God.

Consequently, Christian business people must guard against adopting secular ideas or methods in their practice. Small compromises can lead to changes in behavior and perspective that will harm one's witness and possibly one's career. By practicing critical reflection, lifelong learning and joining a community committed to living out a biblical worldview, we can protect ourselves from compromises and strengthen our witness and career.

Consider the lesson of Daniel and his colleagues in the Old Testament. They maintained integrity with their biblical worldview and culture while excelling in their positions of leadership in a ruthless and pagan culture. Their example required careful thought, deep commitment to the disciplines that nurture biblical understandings, and wisdom in navigating a complex and hostile environment.

About the Author

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