



Profit or Prophet?

Andrews University, in 1990, held a conference on business ethics. Organized by Malcolm Russell, the conference produced this sermon and the succeeding two essays.

by Peter Bath

WHEN ORGANIZATIONS UPROOT US FROM OUR communities and transplant us to new jobs, sociologists suggest that we have just six to 12 months until we are fully absorbed into routines. Do you remember the last time you were moved to a new town? Do you remember how everything was new? The street signs, stop lights, buses, shopping malls. Everything was new, and you noticed every bit of it. However, as time passed, your awareness diminished to the point where it no longer mattered what you saw. What was important as you began was now no longer inviting your attention. Instead, your vision narrowed and focused on the things of life that were part of your routine, and you found yourself back in the rut!

Habits, patterns, and routines. Corpora-

tions—indeed all organizations—love predictability! The challenge that we face as Christians, as educators, as students, as members of the corporate business world, is to get out of the ruts and routines that keep us from seeing and hearing, that prevent us from having a moral/ethical vision.

Last fall, flying to Minneapolis, I had an experience that opened my eyes and ears. All the airlines have a preflight routine that they take all passengers through. Experienced flyers know that it goes something like this:

“FAA regulations require that we inform you about certain aspects of the 737 you are flying on today. Please reach in front of you and get the card from the seat back pocket and follow closely.” They then proceed to tell you about the plane depressurizing and how the oxygen masks will drop down; how you are not to smoke in the bathrooms; how, if you have a water landing, you are to use the seat cushion as a flotation device; and finally how to put on a seat belt. After you’ve heard this speech once, you’ve heard it a million times. But not on my flight to Minneapolis. As I was

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preparing to bury myself in a magazine, expecting to hear the same old stuff, a steward picked up his microphone and said:

“All right, folks, you’d better listen up and listen good!

“How many of you can tell me how many doors and windows there are on this plane?”

Not missing a beat, he went on to say, “I didn’t think so. You need to know, for it may make a difference in your life!

“Reach in front of you and grab a safety card now!”

You know, we all did it—for the first time in many a flight I reached along with everybody else in the plane and took my card out of the seat back pocket. He went on to say, “If the plane depressurizes, oxygen masks will drop from the ceiling. Put them on right away, and if you’re traveling with

a child, or the person sitting beside you acts like a child, put theirs on next!

“There will be no smoking on this plane. If you go into the bathroom and smoke or mess with the smoke detectors, unspeakable things will happen to you and your generations forever.

“Should we have a water landing, those of you who are single and traveling alone will enjoy it because you’ll have something to hug—your seat cushions!

“Now for the brain buster. How to put on a seat belt!”

The steward had done such a great job that a friend I was traveling with started excitedly checking out the window exit beside us. I got him settled and we took off.

As the plane completed its flight and was taxiing onto the jetway, the steward got back to

the microphone and said, “Anyone who stands up before this plane has stopped will have his picture taken and faxed to all airports in the world. You will never fly again!”

We gave the steward a standing ovation because he made a difference in our lives. He helped our eyes to see and our ears to hear through a wonderfully creative way of presenting what was to everyone a horribly boring routine. He lifted us out of the rut of life and let us look around and enjoy the view. He made the old and familiar new and fresh. He gave

the mundane new life and turned the “ho-hum” into an “ah-hah!”

I appreciate rut busters. These are people who help us see anew, who wake us up to the real concerns and the issues of the world round about us. Rut busters are people who can break the grip of sin that so transfixes us

that we cannot see the forest for all the trees in our way.

In a very real way you and I are called to this kind of ministry. As Christians we are called to have a prophetic voice. Not a voice that speaks in terms of beasts and times of trouble as much as a voice that breaks the ruts of our lives, our society, that dares to ask the whys and why nots of our world. We are called to have a voice that dares to make a mind think; a voice that speaks of values fundamental to the worth of humankind, of the limitless potential of each person, of being a citizen in our society; a voice that speaks to our brothers and sisters around the world. For indeed, this is not just an occupied planet but a global village.

In the Old Testament it was the prophet sent by God to interrupt the lives of people in

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the midst of their misguided, unjust, and deceitful ways. It was the prophet who called the people to a happier, peaceful, more wholesome life, a life that embodied a higher value than their temporary maximizing of gain at the expense of the unwitting client. It was the prophet who invited them to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God.

It was the prophet who dared to call evil by its right name and not soothe it or explain it away. It was the prophet whom the people killed, for no one likes to hear that he needs to change or that his little world is in need of some heavy-duty reformation.

So, too, we kill the prophets today. We silence them by calling them "communists" as those in the Sierra Club or Greenpeace were called before the environment became a good marketing ploy. We call them "radicals," "wild-eyed liberals"! We still kill the prophets because we still don't want to be disturbed.

Prophetic voices speak today. One such voice spoke in an article entitled "Values and Integrity in Health Care," by John A. Whitt. In excerpts from this article, he speaks about the changes in the health-care industry, about the loss of values, but principally about the loss of the human factor.

Winds of change are blowing across American health-care organizations. Generations of trust are being blown away like so many dry leaves in the fall winds.

In team-building seminars, we discuss service strategy, human development, and the differences between success and fulfillment. We never talk about how to really listen to what people are feeling. Emphasizing hospital budgets and clerical work more than caring confuses people.

Unless we allow our employees and managers to talk about, discuss, and process their feelings, we will not deliver the caring, quality service that is needed. Do we publicly profess to want the highest quality service, but privately congratulate the cost cutters who produce a bigger bottom line?

Long-service people who are loyal, dedicated and produce to the best of their ability are unceremoniously dumped.

Do we cloak our mission statements in the humanitarian language of social-service agencies, but write Machiavellian business and action plans that seek to crush our professional peers like grapes?

The challenge is to make our philosophies and corporate purposes integrative so that service professionals at all levels can truly buy into our missions. Values that take their nutrition from the mission statement are what employees are hungering for. They want a sense of purpose that will serve themselves and their employer.

What are your values? How far are you willing to go for them? What beliefs are you willing to stand up for? How integrative are you in your dealings?

Standing up for integrative practices and values may sound like an ethical discussion for philosophy professors. However, I am reminded how essentially practical it is to stand up for principles by some thoughts that were born in the ghastly crucible of Germany during World War II. The author was Pastor Niemöller, a German Lutheran minister:

In Germany they came first for the communists.
And I did not speak up because I was not a communist.
Then they came for the Jews,
And I did not speak up because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for the trade unionists,
And I did not speak up because I was not a trade unionist.
Then they came for the Catholics,
And I did not speak up because I was a Protestant.
And then they came for me, but by that time,
No one was left to speak up.

Oh, that you had eyes to see and ears to

hear! Who is left that will speak up today?

In the business world today, the world of education, the world of health care, bicycle building, the manufacturing of service in the public or private sectors, profit or not for profit, I would suggest that there are two voices that are calling. These two voices call to us often in tension.

One is the prophetic voice; the other, the corporate bottom-line profit. Two prophets—both in apparent tension and in competition. One calls to value the means as much as the end, the other to let the end justify the means.

One has the calling of a comprehensive concern, the other a very clear and clean bottom-line concern.

Both are important, as is the tension between them.

The voice of the corporate bottom-line profit speaks in terms of taking care of business as:

- maximizing return on investment in the short term,
- current asset ratio,
- minimizing labor costs,
- increasing earnings-per-share ratio,
- protecting the Standard and Poor's rating,
- insuring annual shareholders for an annual meeting.

The prophetic voice speaks of taking care of business in terms of:

- integrity, honesty,
- value and quality,
- community, not just shareholders, but the city; the world,
- minimizing environmental impact,
- maximizing employee relationships and worth,
- protecting the community and investing in it for the long haul, not just the short term.

Two voices in tension that inform each other and with their tension call to us today.

Think of all the examples of the end being used to justify the means. It's not an item that is restricted to the corporate world! Churches taught corporations how to do it! Governments have been doing it forever, exploiting people for their own ends.

Just south of where I live, near Cincinnati, is a place called the Fernald Feed Plant. If you drive by it, you'll see a red and white checkered bill-

board sign that simply says, "Fernald Feed Plant." Now whenever I see red and white checkerboards, I think of Ralston Purina, a company that makes feed for cattle and livestock. But this isn't an animal feed plant. This is a plant that creates radioactive materials for bombs and nuclear power programs.

The place literally glows at night. For years it has been there. No one told the developers, who were building nearby, and all the mothers who miscarried children, or the children who contracted cancer. No one was ever told.

How's this for another example? R. J. Reynolds, the tobacco giant, hires scientists whose express purpose is to deny the connection between smoking and cancer, as well as lobbyists who fight against the good of our public. They define "taking care of business" that way. Recently they've decided to target women and blacks as potential market sectors that can be exploited, so that in taking care of business they can maximize their return on investment for the shareholders. Their recent marketing efforts were deterred, not by the

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shareholders or by their executives, but by the press, which cried out in protest.

R. J. Reynolds now markets cigarettes to the Third World. It takes our illness and disease and turns them into cash, yet these unsuspecting people have no medical infrastructure that can support them or handle the illness that these cigarettes bring. The cigarettes are offered to the people in a way that makes them think that if they smoke, they'll be like those wealthy and fabulous North Americans. That's how R. J. Reynolds takes care of business.

Nestlé, the manufacturer of infant formula, is going to the Third World to market its product by suggesting that breast feeding is passe. Successful people like the people of North America don't breast-feed babies. So Nestlé offers these powdered formulas to people in the Third World, who can't afford to buy enough. These people do with the baby formula what you and I often do with apple juice or orange juice—add five cans of water instead of three. Then the parents in the Third World can't understand why their children aren't growing or are getting sick. That's how Nestlé takes care of business.

Major sugar-cane manufacturers in Haiti own most of the land. They drive the people off and place them on company town lots where they give them subsistence wages and no place to grow food. All so you and I can put sugar on our cereal and in our hot drinks.

What is the evil that drives this type of business practice? You and I may feel smug because we do not put sugar in our coffee, or smoke R. J. Reynolds' cigarettes, but let me remind you of the Adventist Church's record of paying women an equal wage! Let me remind you of our ability to be honest about investments in post offices or how we manage to account for Harris Pine Mills!

But, hey, we're just taking care of business!

This is where the prophet has to stand up and help us get out of our ruts and routines, to see, and to hear what it is we are to value, and whom it is we are to serve. For there is a voice

being heard now. A voice that speaks in shareholders' meetings, a voice that speaks through the press, a voice that speaks through public outrage, a voice that speaks through lawsuits. But the question is: Are we listening?

It would be rather simplistic to suggest that everything must change overnight or that it is possible to change everything overnight. Further, it would be simplistic to suggest that companies, churches, or whomever, are operating overtly with evil intentions. Perhaps it would be more realistic to suggest that we find ourselves in the midst of a society that is sincerely faithful to a value system that is inherently evil.

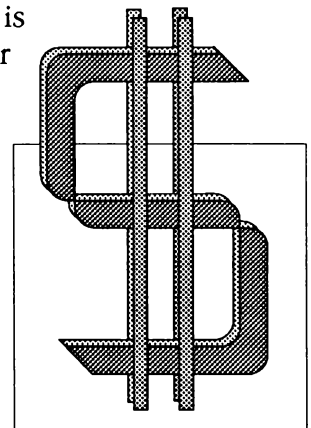
This is our rut. Our social institutions have inherent in them destructive forces that distort reality and goodness by excusing pollution as progress, by suggesting that bigger is better, by treating money as the core of our existence.

It is precisely here in the crucible of the market that the trade-off of values is controlled. It is controlled disproportionately by societal structures that institutionalize success, wealth, and progress as the highest ideals.

You never think of the Haitians when you put sugar on your cereal, do you?

These structures, societal institutions, don't have an address or a head office on Wall Street.

Instead, their address is your address. Your mailbox is their mailbox. I'm talking about standards of living, routines of consumption that reflect the same values we blame corporations for holding. We Americans have been described as a people whose lust for more and more is clearly psychotic.



Gordon Dahl has described this psychosis: "Most middle-class Americans tend to worship their work, work at their play, and play at their worship."

Think about it. We worship our work, which for most of us is the source of our identity. We then find ourselves becoming weekend warriors—working at our play—fighting as broken people to prove ourselves. And then, we play at our worship, for God has become just another good-luck charm in the bracelet of life. Dahl goes on to say, “The result of all this is that our meanings and values in life are distorted. Our relationships are disintegrating faster than we can repair them. And our lifestyles resemble a cast of actors in search of a plot.” In the New Testament, Jesus spoke of money more than anything else except the kingdom of God. There is in that perhaps a message for us. For he spoke of money as both dark and sinister, as that which controls, and yet he spoke of it as a blessing. He ate with the rich and the powerful, the poor and the powerless alike. And it is in all of these things that we are invited to see money not as a master, but as a servant.

The issue, as I read my Bible and experience life, is not that I should hate money or lust after it, but rather that I should become one who submits my money and my wealth to the will and the ways of God. To suggest that people are of greater worth than money is quite clear in Scripture, but it’s not so clear in our culture. A recent article in *Psychology Today*, December 1989, has the following quote:

What then can we surmise about the likelihood of someone’s being caring and generous, loving and helpful, just from knowing that he or she is a believer? Virtually nothing, say psychologists, sociologists, and others who have studied that question for decades. . . . Less than half the college students in a 1975 study resisted the temptation to violate an honors code on an exam, and their religious beliefs had little to do with

honesty. (Atheists were the only group in which a majority did not cheat.)

You and I go by the name of Christian and we find ourselves struggling. Will prophet or profit be heard? Which will supersede the other? Which will mold and shape the other?

I’d like to suggest the two most revealing books on values ever written were written by you. They are your checkbook and your daily appointment calendar. The challenge for us is that of integrity, of integrating that which we believe with how we live. Businesses wrestle with greed, pride, power, expediency, honesty, compassion, and integrity, just as we do as individuals. For businesses have no value, no ethical structure, except that which you and I bring to them.

If we know who we are, personally and corporately, we can have the courage to change routines. We can dare to challenge the arrogance and pride in churches and corporations. If we have committed ourselves to integrate faith and practice in our own lives, we can stand as prophets in a world dedicated to profits.

Taking care of business! We are all involved, but it is *his* business we are to be about. It is his business that we are trusted with to care. He doesn’t seek more market analysts, portfolio managers, controllers. But instead, people who in doing that work will give voice to their values, his values. People who will work for the integration of faith and practice. People who will lead where few have led before.

Taking care of business can begin only by taking care of your relationship with God and daring to stand as a prophet in a prophetless world.