

THE MEASURE OF MAN

The Devil took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world, in all their greatness. All this I will give you, the Devil said, if you kneel down and worship me.

When the world offers us its dazzling array of riches, personal success, opportunity for service - do we truly understand the price? Or are we like the pianist in a whorehouse - persuading oneself that including "Abide with Me" in the repertoire will have a beneficial effect on the inmates.

Jesus climbed another mountain and said to each of us - "No one can be a slave to two masters: he will hate one and love the other; he will be loyal to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money."

Ever since Adam and Eve rejected the wisdom of God and tasted of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, it has been the nature of man to stand on the dung heap outside his door and from this lofty perspective make an assessment of the world and his role in it.

It may be only a coincidence that Christ rejected the riches of this world while surveying them from a mountain-top, he told us how to relate to this world from the top of another mountain - and he conquered death on the brow of Golgotha. Then again, it may be more than coincidence. What we see is a function of the place from which we choose to look. The answer we hear is determined less by some abstract sense of truth than by the question we originally asked.

If you and I begin to ask questions about ethics in corporate finance, about the morality of industrial power, about the justice or lack of it evident in the distribution of the world's resources, or about the life style which is correct for a Christian; do we ask these questions while embroiled to our armpits in these issues - or do we climb the mountain to sit at the feet of Jesus and share in his perspective which encompasses not only the present, but the past and the future as well.

The story of the Russian and American diplomats debating the merits of their own societies illustrates the dilemma of asking the proper question. The American diplomat stated emphatically that "in my country I can stand in front of the White House and shout - 'Nixon is an aggressor, Nixon is a dirty imperialist, down with Nixon'. I could say all that and the authorities wouldn't do a thing!" The Russian reflected for awhile then finally said; "If I stood in Red Square and shouted 'Nixon is an aggressor, Nixon is a dirty imperialist, down with Nixon', I don't think the authorities would do anything either."

In the 25th chapter of Matthew, Jesus tells us of the final judgement when each soul will be placed on the scale of divine justice. How much credit do we get for regular church attendance, giving of our surplus to a charity drive, the esteem of the neighbourhood, or building a successful business? Jesus says "I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you received me in your homes, naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me." But Lord - when did we do these things? "Whenever you did this for one of the least important of these brothers of mine, you did it for me!" When is the last time you or I performed some worthy deed and didn't know we had done it. It's strange that we will be judged on actions and attitudes that we may not be aware of!

God's criteria in judging every man is man's own measure of his fellow man. Our own measure of

man then becomes the overriding criteria when evaluating our business, social and political dilemmas. Christ did not tell the rich young man that wealth per se was wrong - but he pointed out that perfect discipleship meant removing every impediment between the young man and his fellow wanderers through life. Christ tells us that "your heart will be where your riches are", and the young man went away sad, the text tells us, because he was very rich.

The foundation underlying the ethical principles we hope to develop is thus the criteria by which God judges man - his relationship and love of other men. How do we move from this simple philosophical statement to a rational solution to the dilemmas facing each of us? We have been left a tremendous legacy of human experience ranging from the life of Jesus himself to the joys and tribulations of a legion of fellow pilgrims.

What has mankind done with this fabulous treasure of human experience? It has been said that the only lesson of history is that we have learned nothing from history. The cover of the recent best seller by Charles Reich "The Greening of America" boasts the following:

"There is a revolution coming. It will not be like revolutions of the past. It will originate with individuals and with culture, and it will change the political structure only as its final act. It will not require violence to succeed, and it cannot be successfully resisted by violence. This is the revolution of the new generation."

How wonderful! A new generation free of the traditions and hangups of the past which will achieve dizzying heights of what? In his book "Jesus Rediscovered", Malcolm Muggeridge writes the following: "All that has been achieved by our poor little human species in the way of understanding and expounding what life is about and how it works fills me with wonder and joy when I see it in relation to the shining mystery of things: as scribble on the fly-leaf of a mighty and incomprehensible tome. It's when it's presented with infantile arrogance and credulity, as betokening men like Gods, that it seems so pitiable and absurd." A Chinese student was asked his opinion about the effect of the Reformation on Western Society. He pondered for awhile, then replied; "It's too early to tell."

In contrast, our concept of history is the previous month, seasonably adjusted! Several decades after the introduction of the automobile, the computer and the nuclear bomb we regard the pollution as a necessary evil, the electronic invasion of privacy as inevitable and the stockpile of 40,000 atomic bombs as a contribution to world peace!

Two thousand eight hundred years ago the writer of Ecclesiastes wrote, "There is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which it may be said. See, this new? It has existed long ago in times past." Let's learn a few lessons from history - if for no other reason than the fact that technology has pushed the cost of failure to catastrophic levels.

At this juncture some of you should be muttering: "I hear you, but I'm not convinced." A philosophical statement may be a thing of beauty - but what does one do with it in a context of harsh economic realities - which is the context within which most of us operate. Remember, Christ also lived in this same world, among the same greedy people - let's look a little closer at his walk and his words for guidance in this economic jungle.

Christ never left us any clear economic manifesto - but there are innumerable statements and

examples which can be combined to give us a relatively consistent idea of his values. According to the record of Luke, Christ began his public ministry with the words from Isaiah 61:1

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.
He has annointed me to preach the Good News to the poor,
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives,
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To set free the oppressed,
To announce the year when the Lord will save his people!”

If we attempted to define the nature of the economic system which Christ would subscribe to - it would look something like this:

1. The system should provide sufficient for all.
“It is God who clothes the wild grass - will he not be all the more sure to clothe you?”
Matthew 6:30
2. Differences between people should be minimized.
“It will be very hard, I tell you, for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 19:23
3. There is a limit to what one should accumulate.
“Woe to those joining house to house, who unite field to field until there is no more room; you shall be made to live alone in the middle of the land.” Isaiah 5:8 The danger does not lie in the concentration of assets - rather in the concentration of our loyalty, our time and our interest. Christ pointed out that “No man can be a slave to two masters - you cannot serve both God and money.” Matthew 6:24

It is for this reason that he told the rich young man to “go and sell all you have and give the money to the poor, then come and follow me. Matthew 19:21 He presumably couldn't keep his wealth and follow Christ simultaneously.

4. Freedom of the individual within the system. When Jesus uttered the words “The Sabbath was made for the good of man; man was not made for the Sabbath”, he recognized the inherent tendency of institutions to gather their own inertia - and demand to be served rather than to serve.

Keeping these principles in mind - let's take a closer look at one area of business we are all familiar with - the problems caused by growth - and more specifically - the financial pressures brought on by this growth.

The insatiable demands for more funds which are characteristic of most growth situations create pressures which cause us to seek avenues which will maximize the cash flow within the business. What is the governing factor at this point? The economic rules of a society, or the teaching and example of Christ. Some examples are the following:

1. Increase profits through minimizing wages. Operating a business provides a degree of power - the labour market is not really a free market, and when this power is balanced in

management's favour - then it entails responsibility.

2. Increase performance of key individuals through pressure as well as incentives - both financial and other. The problem can arise in that we impose a set of values, a use of a subordinate's time in a manner which may be highly inconsistent with the plan Christ may have for his talents or in disregard of his role as a father in the home.
3. Maximize cash flow by utilization of various tactics to delay or avoid taxes or other payments. Many tactics are not considered illegal simply because it is impossible to prove fraudulent intent.
4. Reduce support of community or other charitable activities which depend upon local business because the business "Can't afford it".

Invariably, the funds from your own operation are insufficient to satisfy the voracious appetite for capital - and you will turn to one of the lending institutions. They will evaluate the physical assets which you present, but even more so, will make an assessment of the loyalty and capability of your people. In a very real sense - you are mortgaging the future performance of yourself - but also of your employees. This can put some of the following pressure into play:

1. You must assure the loyalty of your employees - and you will be tempted to design many schemes around your remuneration policies, pensions, bonuses and other privileges which make it difficult for an employee to switch jobs.
2. The bank will set standards for your liquidity and capital positions - and you may be forced to take actions against the interest of employees, customers or suppliers to meet these standards. eg: The choice between a layoff or reduction in profits during a slow period.

The pressures created by financial needs can be great indeed - but in the above instances, they do not force you to contradict Christian values - they merely make it expedient to do so. The third major source of financing is not nearly as generous toward Christ's set of economic principles. This source is additional equity obtained through outside shareholders or a public offering.

To this point the pressure for profit has been either the result of actual financial needs or to provide security to a bank or bond-holder. If these requirements were met, the pressure for profits disappeared.

The new investors will now require maximum profits just for the sake of profits. The management in this event will eventually be forced into one or more dilemmas where their own or Christ's set of values dictates one course of action, but maximum profit another. Ea: Below average return of investment may suggest that a plant be shut down - but this action may leave many senior people permanently unemployed, or may mean real hardship if the plant is in a town without alternative employment opportunities.

Secondly, you may have talents which should be used in community, service, church or other activities - but the demands of your business may prevent you from dividing your time in the most "Christ like manner".

The real difficulty with equity financing arises when the proceeds go into the pocket of the owner - rather than into the expansion of the business. When you sell a factory - you really are selling the productive and creative capacities of your employees. The technique of looking at the annual profit potential of an enterprise - then multiplying by some number which reflects the power you have to guarantee the continuation of that profit level - would make an interesting comparison with the calculation of an appropriate price paid for a slave in the hey-day of that trade. It is one thing to run a business, but it is something completely different to sell it - and as Christians we have not even begun to come to terms with that problem.

The example of Christ is to put the dignity of his fellow man to the fore. When we make business decisions - is this the deciding criteria? A Goshen businessman displayed this sign outside his enterprise: "If you were accused of being a Christian, would you be found guilty?" In the same vein, Christ says that we will be judged on our willingness to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, and visit those in prison. Will our business decisions reflect these commands, or don't these activities result in maximum return on investment?

Another question each of us face but seldom ask is the question of why we want to grow. Our culture has made growth something to be revered for its own sake - the GNP has become our Golden Calf. We regularly measure its height - but we seldom ask about its distribution. Take each of the economic guidelines we listed earlier and look at them in terms of your own enterprise.

1. Create sufficient resources for all - then take a close look at the product or service you provide. Is it really something the world needs more of?
2. Minimize differences between God's children - look at the effect of your wage policies and competitive practices - will they improve the distribution of wealth - or merely pile more of it in your corner.
3. Are you growing for the sake of growth. Christ doesn't condemn riches per se - he merely says that they aren't worth our total attention - there are more important things to be done.
4. Will your growth increase the freedom and choice of your employees, your customers and your community; are you utilizing coercive means to prevent mobility of your employees, monopolistic practices to increase the dependence of your customers upon your product, and political tactics to neutralize the wishes and needs of the community with regard to pollution or services?

Let's take a long hard look at what we are doing, and the pressures which cause us to act that way. Remember - nobody is forcing you or me to grow by 30% annually, to sell our companies to the public, or to do anything else.

The essential question facing each of us in our daily business transactions is not whether we should make a decision - but the scales by which we measure value against value. Kahlil Gibran the Lebanese mystic writes in "The Prophet" -

"It is in exchanging the gifts of the earth that you shall find abundance and be satisfied. Yet unless the exchange be in love and kindly justice it will but lead some to greed and others to hunger."

How do we reconcile the clamouring throng of priorities and claims? Gibran advises us to

"Invoke the master spirit of the earth, to come into your midst and sanctify the scales and reckoning that weighs value against value."

How does one explain the fact that a worldwide price support program was adopted for wheat, where North America is the dominant supplier, but the U.S. refused to sign a similar sugar agreement, leaving that commodity, the basis of numerous small economies, to the vagaries of international trade? What are the scales which determine that a fireman without any function who rides on a diesel locomotive received \$5.00 per hour, and the Persian artist who can produce a beautiful carpet from memory receives \$.05 per hour?

Gibran goes on to warn us that "before you leave the market place, see that no one has gone his way with empty hands. For the master spirit of the earth shall not sleep peacefully upon the wind till the needs of the least of you are satisfied".

Do you leave your desk at night secure in the knowledge that all have left the market-place with enough to meet their needs? Or are we only concerned if our own needs have been met - sales are up, profits are healthy - I can sleep well tonight.

The example of Christ sets a powerful standard for us to follow - a standard which speaks very specifically to your daily problems. Christ tells us that we will be judged on our attitude toward our neighbour - or our measure of man. The measure used by most of us is ourselves, and in our eyes we generally stack up pretty good. Many of us are eloquent in pointing out God's grace in giving us wisdom and success - but I have heard few testimonies where God spoke as he did to the rich young ruler - give away your goods and follow me. Possibly God doesn't speak that way anymore - a switch in strategy.

Man is a proud creature - if we could only see ourselves through God's eyes. The ego of man has been described as being like the dust in a sunbeam - it glows brilliantly in the light given it of God - but vanishes into oblivion without this source of light. If we seek the perspective of Christ's teaching, the right answers won't be all that hard to find, but the application of these answers may provide a genuine test of our commitment.

I'll close with the prayer of a man who left a comfortable business situation, rejected the advice and company of his family and friends, but will be remembered for all time because of the strength of his commitment to follow Christ. The words are from St. Francis of Assisi.

"Lord make me an instrument of thy peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is sadness, joy; where there is darkness, light.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; not so

much to be understood, as to understand; not so much to be loved, as to love. For it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, it is in dying that we are born again to eternal life.”

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