

LEANING INTO THE WIND - A MISSION OF BUSINESS

If you were accused of being a Christian, would you be found guilty? That question was posted on the sign of a Goshen laundromat by some local philosopher some 23 years ago - but the image and the idea remain fresh in my mind. The question is very simple et ultimately profound. Does it matter? Does it make a difference that I am a Christian? If nobody can notice, if there is no evidence, do my claims really matter.

If you were accused of being a Christian in business, would you be found guilty? What if Jesus had come to this earth, wandered around for 33 years and nobody had noticed? That was impossible because his teachings and action cut through the values and the hypocrisy of his day at such a sharp angle that either he or the authorities had to adjust. He was accused of being King of the Jews and he was found guilty. Has anyone ever accused you of being a Christian in your business dealings?

Does business have a mission? Milton Friedman would say that it is to operate as profitably as possible. If we operated a very profitable business, will that be used as evidence of our Christianity? Hardly, but operating a business poorly is certainly not a sign of Christian fervour either. As Christians in business, what is or mission? If Christ paid us a return visit and became manager of your insurance office or my furniture factory - would the suppliers, customers, employees and neighbours notice? If society was perfect, his way of managing might not be that different. However, our world is less than perfect! Would Christ be a comfortable part of a financial community that takes insider trading and unbridled greed as the norm? Would the 30 million Americans living below the poverty line influence his location decisions and employee selection policies? What about the 2 million disenfranchised and disillusioned aboriginal people of Canada, the single family parent, the black youth facing a 30% unemployment rate? If Christ ran my business or yours, he might not solve the totality of society's problems, but I am certain his business practices would make a difference. Making a difference may not sound very profound, but be assured that there are many sincere Christians in North America who do not think that their faith requires them to operate their business differently from society's norm!

The title of this talk is *Leaning into the Wind - A Mission of Business*. The human mind remembers longest and functions best when an idea is captured with a picture or a metaphor. "Leaning into the Wind" is one metaphor which is easy to remember and my help each of us to translate our own business situation into a Christlike response.

What kind of mental picture does "Leaning into the Wind" stimulate in your mind? Many of us will think of the "Stars and Stripes" charging to Victory off Fremantle last winter. Although much could be made of that image, let's instead picture the windward coast of one of the Caribbean islands or the top of a mountain ridge in the Canadian Rockies. Both of these settings are subject to steady and punishing winds from a single direction. Have you noticed how nature responds to this challenge? Instead of leaning away from the wind, trees will actually grow in the direction of the wind. Branches on the windward side are strong and full, while on the leeward side there may be no branches at all. If we could look at the root structure we would find that the roots in fact grow into the direction of the wind to provide a more solid foundation. Nature has learned that survival depends on its ability to counter balance external pressures. Any tree which chooses to grow with

the wind instead of into the wind will not survive the first storm.

What are the prevailing winds of our society that we must lean into or risk being blown away? They are the winds of materialism, individualism, greed, social injustice, loss of integrity in business and government and many more. The notion of leaning into the prevailing evils of our society is not that difficult to accept - but is evil always that easy to identify? What about the basic philosophy and direction of our society?

As business and professional people we participate in the economic systems and structures of our society and, by our action or inaction, our words or our silence, we endorse specific economic and political acts and philosophies. You cannot be part of the business world and claim to be neutral on questions of philosophy and practice. Within the last few generations economic philosophy has become dichotomized in terms of left and rights, collective versus the individual or socialism versus capitalism. Socialism tends to produce tyranny and loss of individual freedom; capitalism promotes materialism and greed and produces many victims of its success and excess. If Christ walked among us he would undoubtedly need to say very frequently ...”But I say to you” as he points out the inadequacy of our human philosophies.

A difficulty for Christians is that we think of biblical precepts in terms of absolutes - somehow more perfect and therefore more demanding and rigorous than human laws. We find comfort in philosophies which have absolutes - and both the philosophies of the left and the right are very willing to claim a full measure of truth. If these two competing philosophies of the left and right represent the two extremes - where then is the Christian position? Is it at one extreme or the other - is it in the middle or 75% in one direction? Can that position change over time and circumstance? That may sound suspiciously like situation ethics or a flexible morality. What I would like to challenge today is the idea that as Christians we can take fixed positions in terms of human philosophies. We are commanded to be uncompromising in the degree to which we love our neighbour, but there is no biblical teaching which suggests an ideal mix of free enterprise and government involvement. The Bible will always demand integrity, but does not speak to the merits of a particular affirmative action program in the U.S. or pay equity legislation in Canada.

Most issues in economic or political philosophy can be described in terms of two extremes.

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| Collective | verses | individual |
| Equality | verses | inequality |
| Regulation | verses | laissez-faire |
| Free enterprise | verses | government |

The danger is that we not only fail to think as Christians, we often fail to think altogether. Too many of us, if we are in business, automatically vote for Republicans in the U. S. or the Tories in Canada. We too easily encourage less welfare, stricter control of unemployment insurance, no government involvement even in monopolistic businesses and so on. Truth is seldom that simple. The real danger is that when society moves toward one extreme or the other there is a reduction in freedom. Tyranny has come from the right as often as from the left. Recent history has given us the Soviets but also Hitler, Samozia, Iran and Cambodia. Loss of freedom is often not limited to the realm of economics and politics - but also to the freedom to practice your faith.

The goal of Christians should be to keep a range of options alive so that we can make the choice we consider to be most Christian. Christians should abhor the extremes since they lead to the danger of tyranny. The desire to have total equality among people will require a heavy hand to eliminate the differences in ability and desire. A system which maximizes incentive also guarantees that there will be many losers or victims since many can't compete if the chances are equal. Freedom for one is tyranny for another.

This takes us back to our metaphor of leaning into the wind. We don't only lean into the winds of evil that are clear to everyone. The metaphor suggest that we step back and look at our society from a little more distance. As society moves toward an extreme, Christians should raise caution flags, or, to use the metaphor, lean into the wind. If the government becomes too involved in economic affairs, we should actively promote the private sector. But what if there is growing corporate concentration and unhealthy monopoly - do we also speak out? If society becomes too libertarian, we promote moral values, but what if religious extremists under any banner promote McCarthy-type witch hunts? We promote a free market for labour, but is the discrimination against women, immigrants or minorities always based on objective factors such as ability or education? The U.S. is faced with various affirmative action programs and in Canada we have pay equity. Do we lean into the wind and promote justice inside our organizations before there is rigid legislation?

I suggest that the Christian way is seldom at the extremes of human philosophy. It is more often a tension between what works and what is fair. When Jesus said "He who is without sin cast the first stone" he was neither minimizing the woman's sin nor challenging the justice of Jewish laws. He simply spoke to the reality of a sinful world that this woman's sins should not be punished when those of her tormentors were ignored.

Which winds do you encounter in your business or community? Which way did you lean on the Bork nomination? Why did it become such a major issue? There is the assumption that the other eight members of the supreme court are split on the approach to determining justice in our society. Will we uphold morality by insisting on strict interpretation and rigid application of law (the conservative view), or will the court interpret the law to reflect the changing reality of our society (the liberal view)? The ninth member will presumably determine the philosophy of our legal system and influence the nature of our society for the next decade. There is an underlying assumption by the supporters of Bork that the moral fibre of our nation can be legislated. However, the fragmentation of our moral values is not a product of judicial interpretation, but a product of a fractured and fragmented society which has lost its moorings. Many Bork supporters are like the father who is still preaching the virtues of chastity to a daughter who is already pregnant.

I am neither for nor against Bork and am certain he is of outstanding intellect. The debate is simply a clear example of society trying to lean into the wind - but having different interpretations about which wind needs leaning into.

Christ provides many beautiful examples of leaning into the wind on the issues of his day. When the woman was found in adultery he challenged the hypocrisy of the application of law. How would Bork have voted on that issue? Christ leaned into the wind of hypocrisy; he leaned in favour of the weaker person, in the direction of justice - even if it was contrary to the accepted law of his

day.

The nomination of Bork or the determination of economic philosophy may not seem relevant to some. It's like the woman who explained the relationship with her husband as follows: He makes all the big decisions like "Will the country go to war" or "Who should be the next President" while she handled the small matters like buying a new house or deciding where the children go to school. Let's shift to the small matters - the issues relating to personal ethics and lifestyle - winds which blow in the lives of everyone in this room.

We began with the question "If someone accused you of being a Christian - would you be found guilty?" It's not "Were you Honest?" or "Is it within the law". If our society and our culture represent the winds, then our society will notice when you lean in the other direction.

Allow me to use a personal example. The furniture industry trade shows traditionally include a Sunday. Although we recognize that there are many activities in our society which require work on Sunday, we felt that selling furniture was not one of them. When we began entering trade show, it was, and remains, our policy not to sell on Sundays. Several years ago I made the error of stopping by our space in Toronto on a Sunday afternoon to see if our hostess was having any problems. It was a requirement that our space be open - but we had no sales personnel present. She was very agitated because the largest retailer from New York (someone we had never met) was in the space and very interested in our products.

I instructed her to give him the price list and he could either leave an order or an indication of his interest and we would follow up in New York in a few days. At that moment he returned - they are very aggressive and persuasive brothers - and insisted on going through the line with me. I politely but firmly refused and suggested they leave an appropriate message with the hostess. They were flabbergasted - but next morning there was indeed a tentative order. We have done and continue to do many millions of dollars of business with this company but that little incident has helped establish an important element in our relationship. This company has a reputation for pushing suppliers very hard in negotiations. We find that when we claim to have reached the bottom line they believe us. They know that we were prepared to walk from their business on one occasion on a point of principle, so they are careful how far they push us - because they believe that we are indeed capable of walking away. In a strange way it has created a level of respect which has actually helped our business relationship.

A second story comes from my work in Southeast Asia at the Cambodian border. The UN and Red Cross were under tremendous political pressure from the Vietnamese to reduce the relief activity to refugees at the border. The implied threat was loss of freedom by these agencies to operate inside Cambodia. I represented a Christian agency and we were doing a program parallel to a well-known secular US aid agency. We were applying for two million dollars controlled by the UN and Red Cross and we thought there was an unwritten agreement to apply for one million each. We were surprised at the meeting to discover that the other agency was applying for the full two million - and the UN was putting a condition on the grant - that the flow of aid would be restricted to a relatively modest level - restricted for purely political reasons! The other agency quickly agreed. I had sensed the problem and had requested and received permission in advance from our agency that we would not agree to any conditions on the aid if these conditions were detrimental to the

refugees. This would have represented the first-ever grant to our agency from such a major donor so it was also strategically important to us.

There were at least 20 senior aid officials around the long board table and when we announced that it was a million without condition or nothing - there was an electric silence which defies description. The number two man in UNICEF, an expressive Irishman, leaned forward, looked at us and said slowly "Then screw you." This was followed by an even more electric silence as his Danish superior, a man of moral quality who fully understood this issue, totally demolished the Irishman with his blue Nordic eyes. He then leaned forward and announced that each agency would receive one million.

As we left the room, the representative of the other agency - realizing that his grant also was now free of conditions - said to me. "I'm please you took that position. For us, if it's a choice between principle or money - we'll always take the money." That program, which proceeded at a rate more than double the rate requested by the UN, was later recognized by everyone as an outstanding success and contributed, by some informed estimates, to saving 100,000 lives inside Cambodia.

There are many winds, and some are much smaller and closer to home - but may have equally profound implications for the people involved. The law of the land and the law of our Lord bans prejudice based on race or colour - yet none of us is free of an affliction which probably caused more sufferings than any wars. A Mennonite pastor was telling me about his precious teenage daughter who rides 30 miles in a car pool each day to a Mennonite high school with a handsome, muscular 6 foot 2 black American. He is a fine Christian and is considering becoming a pastor. His daughter is finding the relationship in the car increasingly more rewarding. What does father do? He takes daughter aside for a fatherly chat. What does father tell daughter? He reminds her of the lack of a tradition of fatherhood in black families in America, of the cultural differences in his upbringing - you know the reasons and I know the reasons. Colour, of course, has nothing to do with it.... If his daughter rode in a car pool with a strapping young blonde man with an ethnic Mennonite name who wanted to become a minister - but tragically - his father had abandoned the family and his mother was valiantly raising her children, would there be the same fatherly speech? I happen to think about that a lot - because Leona and I have a daughter as dark as that black American - and some day she will ride in a car with some young man who will find the relationship increasingly rewarding. What kind of chat will his father or mother have with him?

When a person of another race or colour fills out an application form at our place of business - which way do we lean?

Society is never standing still. The winds are always blowing. If we are not leaning into the wind, then surely we are moving with the wind. We must take care that we don't use the excuse that because we believe in moral absolutes, we can ignore what is happening around us. For many people Robert Bork represents the wistful desire to have the world return to something with clear and simple rules - but it never will.

If we take extreme positions, then we are not standing where the wind is blowing - and we can have no effect on it. We can lean into the wind in many ways - through the political process, through he actions and policies of our business - and through the ultimate litmus test - or personal example.

A CBC reporter called me recently to do a story on Christians who practised their faith in their business. I enquired which people were being interviewed for the story - I noticed that every single name was Mennonite. I pointed this out to him - and he was quite surprised - and asked if being Mennonite may have something to do with the relationship of your faith and your work. I suggested that he was the reporter and it may be worth his trouble to try and find an answer to that.

Mennonites have no monopoly on ethics, but it is significant that there are conferences like this where the issue is at least seriously discussed. If you were accused of being a Christian in your business - would you be found guilty? Presumably this reporter had found at least some evidence among a few of our brethren.

My original plans were to end the speech at this point, but the recent upheaval in the markets have identified new gale-force winds which will rattle our Christian smugness to the core. The trade deficit, budget deficits and the decline of North American, currencies signal the end of North American supremacy. I predict that there will be a dramatic shift in the way economic power and wealth will be distributed. The globalization of our economic structures will mean that society will be stratified on a much more international basis. At present, a blue-collar worker in Canada or the U.S. earns many times what his counterpart may earn elsewhere. If you look at what is happening, wages are rising in Korea, Thailand or Turkey, but falling in the United States. The new jobs in North America are \$4 an hour service jobs, while they are building modern factories in Taiwan which pay almost the same.

Those who control the financial transactions, the owners and developers of the technologies, the merchandisers - they will be an elite in every country - with similar incomes. The blue-collar workers and service workers will also tend toward global equality - but that will mean increasing impoverishment for many North Americans while the Taiwanese and Turks move forward.

The difference between those who control capital and the rest will be much greater in 20 years than it is today. There will be less differences between societies, but more tensions within societies. Most members of MEDA will be in the group that prospers - but what do we say to government? The hundreds of bills on trade in Congress remind me of the Bork issue. It's like Congress trying to legislate against the tide or the law of gravity.

We use terms like deregulation, give-backs, rust-belt, de-industrialization - these are all terms which mean lower incomes and often less job opportunities and security for millions of our fellow citizens. These are new issues and new winds - and will undoubtedly result in themes for future MEDA conventions. Before we lean into these new winds - let's think about the much broader implications.

Leaning into the wind - a mission of business. The metaphor suggests that we don't isolate ourselves but live where the wind is blowing where the rubber hits the road.

Leaning into the wind suggests a positive force, a purpose - we balance the tendency of society to take the easy and usually selfish way. It says that your attitude and actions can make a difference. We started with a question - let's end with the same question. "If you were accused of being a

Christian - would you be found guilty?"

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