Faith, Business, and Flourishing Economies

Part 0 of 2: The Intersection of Leaders in Business and the Church
with Darrell Bock, Greg Forster
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Darrell Bock

Welcome to the Table where we discuss issues of God and culture. Our topic for today is faith and work. As those of you who have been watching us regularly know we’ve been clipping away through a document called Theology that Works that’s provided by the Kern Family Foundation.

My guest today is Greg Forster who is Executive Director for the Kern Family Foundation in relationship to the faith and work initiative. I may not have stated his title exactly right but I’m trying to get good at it.

We’re going through part four of this document today which is available on the Kern Family Foundation website. Our goal is to produce a commentary on this document to give it some depth and underscore the logic that’s behind it. Today, our topic is very, very important. It’s the intersection, or perhaps the lack of intersection, between religious professionals, pastors and church leaders, and business leaders.

Greg, why don’t you start us off by talking about what the problem is or what the problem has been?

Greg Forster

It’s such a deep and multi-faceted problem. It’s hard to know where to begin. There has been, over the course of the last century, a significant gap relationally, operationally, functionally, you name it, between those who are engaged in religious professional activity and those who are engaged in economic professional activity, not only among leaders but among people at all levels. Sometimes the leaders are the most estranged, but really it’s a problem from the top to the bottom.

At the deepest level there’s a failure to acknowledge the reality that Paul was talking about when he said that the eye can’t say to the hand, I don’t need you and the hand can’t say to the eye that I don’t need you. Each of these groups has a tendency to view itself as the most important, the central –

Darrell Bock

the brain, the heart, the soul –
Yeah, and the way I put it in the paper is there’s a failure to recognize that both groups bring knowledge to the table. I’ve been influenced in this particular respect by Dallas Willard and his analysis of how people will respond and change the way they live based on who they think has knowledge. As I’ve meditated on that and looked at it in the world that we move in, in our program what I see is religious professionals coming to the table with an unspoken assumption that I’m the one with knowledge because I know the Bible very well, and I know theology or I know that world. That gives me the deepest insight into the way the universe works.

Meanwhile, economic professionals will come to the table thinking “I’m the one with knowledge because I know how things get done.” In the world that economic professionals live in you are not recognized as possessing knowledge if you don’t know how to produce results. The people who accomplish things are recognized as having knowledge because that is the measurement of whether you have knowledge.

Whereas, in the world of religious professionals and particularly in academia which is where my work is focused, you are recognized as having knowledge if you are able to systematically articulate a propositional body of knowledge.

Economic professionals, for the most part, even if they are very articulate people who can make a verbal presentation very well, they don’t have a systematic propositional body of knowledge. That’s not the way their world operates.

So they’re traveling past each other –

What is underneath that layer, often the two groups are really intimidated by one another. This attitude that I am the one who knows is often caused by a deeper level of anxiety that pastors and religious professionals are intimidated by business leaders. Business leaders are also intimidated by pastors because of this lack of communication, because of this lack of understanding, because they are both recognized in some sense as having authority, but they don’t understand one another’s world. There’s an intimidation factor involved. That’s what drives them often on both sides to come to the table with something of a chip on their shoulder.
We’ve got that as kind of the environment that the, generally speaking, pastors and business people don’t connect very well or let’s deal with this perception that I think I’ve heard. I’ve sometimes heard that pastors don’t really know how to relate to their business people in the church because they tend to view their business people in a certain way and that gets in the way. What is that dynamic?

What you said is true, and the reverse is also true. Business people don’t often know how to relate to pastors. There is, on the one hand, a tendency to treat particularly the business leaders primarily as sources of revenue for the church. That creates a lot of relational difficulties.

I remember attending a conference for Christian business leaders and as I went around the room, introduced myself, met people, people would ask me what I do. I said that I teach the pastors that you are not a checkbook. I cannot tell you how many smiles, thank yous and how much affirmation I got from the business folks at that conference that they feel like their pastors, if they even have pastors, view them as a paycheck.

Now, on the other side, there is often a failure among economic professionals to recognize the need for the church and the critical role of pastors. That’s why I add if they even have pastors because many of them have simply dropped out of the local church. We can call upon pastors to say, these guys are not checkbooks. But we can also call upon business leaders to say, God uses the local church. The local church is pretty important. It’s pretty central. You should show up. You should be there.

We’ve introduced the topic and what the problem is in relation to thinking about how pastors and business people work together. You open up this section of the theology works by noting the distinction between the existence of faith-work problems which we’ve just acknowledged and the issue of addressing them in the right way. What gets us off on the right foot in terms of thinking about how to address these problems?
Greg Forster

One of the most common things that I have found pastors reporting was helpful to them is to spend time in work places. When I’m giving examples of things that churches do, one of the things that I will mention is, pastors will go spend time in people’s homes. Pastors will go spend time in hospitals. Pastors will go spend time in prisons. If you ask them, why do you go to the home? They can articulate the reasons.

Well, we need to see people in their context. We need to see how things work there. We pick up a whole lot when we go to the home. We pick up a whole lot when we go to the home that we don’t pick up if we’re not there. Then you just simply say, well then, why not go to the work place? Why not go to work places from time to time? And you just see that light go off over their heads. Oh, we’ve lost a critical context.

Obviously, you cannot go to everybody’s work place just as you cannot go to everybody’s home unless you have a very small church. But going to some work places you’ll begin to pick up some of the context that there is applicability beyond the one specific work place. You begin to understand that context pretty well. It also establishes your credibility.

When the pastor starts to spend time in work places people will see this is a person who’s willing to come to my context and ask how can I be of help to you? What could I do that would be helpful to you in making your work something that is part of your faith life and honors God? How can I help you with that?

On both sides, whether it’s the pastor or people from the economic world, just spending time in the other’s space – this may be one reason large numbers of business leaders don’t go to church is it’s a space that doesn’t belong to them. They feel alienated from it. Pastors feel that way about secular work places if I may use that term. We know that’s a problematic term. Getting into one another’s spaces is by itself a self-sacrificial act.

Darrell Bock

The point here is that you begin to build the relationships by which you can break down some of the barriers that have perhaps been not even erected in some cases. They’re just there. By the very different worlds that the two occupations occupy, there’s this space and this distance that gets created that you really have to work to overcome the inertia of having those spaces created to begin with.
When we talk about family you can say maintaining the relationship requires effort and attention. Everybody will nod their head and say yes, we understand. Maintaining a relationship requires effort and attention. You have to show some interest in what the other person is interested in. Yes, you really should take an interest. Those lessons, again, don’t just apply to the home. It doesn’t require the erection of barriers. It only requires the failure of effort.

Let’s think about this relationship. Why do theology and economics need each other? What does each bring to the table that the other needs?

They are both asking the question from different angles. What does it mean to be human? Both the discipline of economics and the discipline of theology are speaking really to the question of what it means to be human. They bring different sources of knowledge to the table, both of which are necessary.

I’ll give you an example. One of the prominent commands in the Bible is use honest weights and measures. You find that in the Old Testament. God is real serious about weights and measures. Use honest weights and measures. But what are weights and measures? How do marke places use weights and measures? How do market places rely on weights and measures in economic exchange? What were the weights and measures in the period of time when that biblical text was written? What are weights and measures in the modern economy?

I’ll tell you the internet is just incredibly overturning our assumptions about how you measure things. What is a measurement? What is a weight? What is a standard? These are difficult, complex issues. I’m just giving you one example. The economists can come to the table and talk about we know that we need to use honest weights and measures. What does that mean in the global economy? What does it mean for a company with a supply chain that may be spread out across the world? What does it mean for a company that might do business in virtually every culture?
There are businesses now that do business in hundreds of cultures. To what extent is honesty in the area of weights and measures culturally contextualized? To what extent are there absolute standards that apply across all cultures? To what extent do you need to being paying attention to local cultural context when you ask how do we do honest weights and measures?

To be very blunt, you need economic and business people wrestling with those questions because they know how the market place is operating in all of these places. That’s just one very small example.

Now go through the Bible and find all the things that speak to economic realities, and it’s pervasive. For all of them, if we want to understand the original context we need economic history. I spend a significant amount of time in my line of work talking about the economy of first century Palestine. I’m very surprised at how many theologians have never really asked, “What was the economy at first century Palestine like and how might that inform the writing of the Bible?” It’s actually a very important question. So we need economic history.

If we’re going to apply any of this to contemporary context we need to know what’s going on. Those are things that economists and business people can bring to the table. As in any discipline, in addition to empirical knowledge, there is a systematization that takes place. So the discipline of economics in gathering all of this information has learned to ask certain questions systematically.

Now we come to a place where I’ve already mentioned we bring the contents of the Bible to the table and theology obviously brings that to the table, but theology can also bring to the table an independent evaluation of what questions is the discipline of economics asking? Similarly, the discipline of economics can bring its systematic questions to the table and ask the theologians, “Have you considered these questions in your reading of the Bible?” For example, I will ask theologians how often do you see market exchange mentioned in biblical texts? When they go to the biblical texts and look where do we see exchange, buying and selling, occur? They will discover that it is more prominent than they had really appreciated.

Darrell Bock

Almost everywhere.
We each bring data to the table. The theologians bring the revelatory data of the Bible to the table, whereas the economists and business people bring empirical data about economic systems to the table. We also each bring a systematic set of questions that we have been trained by our disciplines to ask. The disciplines need to ask one another those questions.

Some people would say the world of theology, it’s about ideas and business is about action so those two don’t touch very much. After all, we just talked about spaces. Generally speaking, most people think of those spaces as completely apart from one another.

If we did a Venn diagram business would be over here in the world. That’s the Monday to Friday deal. The professional religious space is over here and that’s primarily a Sunday deal and maybe a Wednesday night if you’re really, really dedicated.

Those are the special Christians.

That’s exactly right. And these two worlds don’t really touch, and they’re completely different. That obviously is not the model you’re working with.

No, in fact, time and time again I come back to challenging that as really the center of almost everything that we’re doing. Challenging this idea that the economy is about material things and action, theology is about the soul, the spirit, ideas. This dualism between body and spirit is a major problem throughout the history of human culture.

This is one of the huge things that Christianity wrestles with is to challenge the natural tendency of human culture to dichotomize between body and spirit. In the Christian view, the human being is both body and spirit integrated. They can’t be separated, although they can be meaningfully distinguished.

If you take a materialistic view of economics you’re going to end up with one or another kind of very dehumanizing economic system.

That’s where economics is basely about the paycheck and the money and what it gives me.
Yes and there are both right-wing and left-wing versions of materialistic economics. We talked about that in the last podcast. Whereas, you can also take what I somewhat loosely call a gnostic view. I know this is not exactly what the original Gnostics are about but a view that privileges the spirit over the body so strongly that we really begin to ignore material reality when we talk about economics.

What you do with money really doesn’t matter, and because it doesn’t matter the only place where it counts is where you invest it for spiritual things because spiritual things matter. Is that what you’re saying?

That would be one form of it. Another form would be magical thinking about money, work, economic systems and prosperity gospel. I am not the first person to observe that there are major overlaps between prosperity gospel and gnostic theology. If you look into the serious theological critique of the prosperity gospel, this is a common refrain that there is such a superior emphasis on things of the spirit over the material world that the material world is essentially manipulated in magical ways by spiritual reality.

We don’t want to overreact against that into the opposite error. It is important not to indulge in magical thinking about economic realities. We are spiritual creatures but we are also material creatures. There is such a thing as human nature. There are real boundaries on the economic world.

I take it that we’ve flipped over, and this is what happens in the chapter and the section as well. That is, really what you’re talking about is an undeveloped theology of creation that helps to create this divide.

As I say in the paper, on the one hand, the discipline of economics having separated itself from theology first and then later even from moral philosophy. The discipline of economics has become very materialistic and proceeds from materialistic presuppositions.
Meanwhile, I think the discipline of theology, having with equal and opposite vigor, distanced itself from the study of the world and from the empirical and scientific disciplines in the last few centuries has an underdeveloped theology of creation and, as a result, becomes a “hot house” for all kinds of inadequate views of work and economics because that topic is not studied in a serious way.

If you come to the Bible without an adequate mental framework for thinking about an issue, what you end up doing is simply picking and choosing a few proof texts unconsciously that give a veneer of theological approval to whatever your predisposition is. When people come to the Bible and come away thinking the Bible teaches this economic theory or that economic theory, it’s not because they’re dishonest people; it’s simply because they haven’t taken the time to carefully connect how we study the Bible with how we wrestle with economic questions. That is partly because we’ve been equipped with economic thinking that has no place for theology. It’s also because we’ve been equipped with theological thinking that has no place for economics.

*Darrell Bock*  
So we’ve got a double problem.

*Greg Forster*  
We’re not thinking small. When we take on these problems, we don’t take on small problems; we’re taking on big problems.

*Darrell Bock*  
The point is that if your theology of creation has a place for work, work in relationship to service, work in relationship to ministry, work in relationship to calling, three categories we often associate with church ministry but we don’t necessarily often associate with a 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM job, that has a way of redefining how we look at work.

*Greg Forster*  
Definitely, it also redefines how we look at pastoral ministry and professional religious activity. In fact, one of the central topics that I find myself discussing with people again and again is taking this perspective on work implies a pretty serious rethinking of what is the mission of the pastor? What is the task of the pastor?
One of the images that get used very frequently in the faith and work movement is that church is not the frontline of the spiritual war, the local church. The local church is not the frontline of the spiritual war. The local church is the base camp of the spiritual army where you get equipped, where you go to the infirmary if you’re injured. Everything that the soldiers do when they’re in their camp, not when they’re fighting the war – it’s out in the other six days of the week where the spiritual war is being fought.

Unfortunately, we have too often, in many cases, we think about the life of the local church as the center of the action. It is the center of much action but the war to live Christian lives and to extend the kingdom is being fought seven days a week, not one day a week.

**Darrell Bock**

When we get a benediction in the church and the pastor in effect says we’ll see you here next Sunday, it’s like what happened to the rest of the week.

**Greg Forster**

We’re seeding that ground if we think that way.

**Darrell Bock**

I’m going to shift gears a little bit here because one of the issues that come up in the section as we’ve laid this groundwork about work being for service and service being something where you care about all people, in all situations, in all spaces, if I can say it that way, that means that you’re also going to be concerned about the care of the poor and what part they occupy in the economic pie. So I’ll just ask it straight out how does care for the poor enter into the conversation and has and should the church opt out of such care?

**Greg Forster**

The church should never opt out of caring for the poor and the marginalized. That’s non-negotiable. It’s so clear in the Bible that there’s just really no doubt about it. And the history of the Christian faith resounds with testimony that it is central to the task of the church to have a care for those particularly who don’t have natural advocates on their own. The church is to be the advocate for those who have no other advocate. We cannot take simply a pull yourself up by your bootstraps approach. We are to be active in doing whatever we can that will contribute to the flourishing of the poor.
I believe the difficulty, though, is that we have become in many ways captive to materialistic thinking in how we help the poor that we think only in terms of money and resources. Money and resources matter. They’re important and I don’t want to fall into gnostic thinking like I was saying before.

It is absolutely right for the church and not exclusively the church to provide material help for those in need. However, that is really dealing with symptoms in most cases. The causes of need really have to be addressed if we want to be helping the poor in a long-term, deeply effective way. Our goal should be to get people out of poverty not to simply hand them resources as they remain in poverty.

The primary issue is broken relationships, broken relationships with God, broken family relationships is a huge issue. Multi-generational poverty is intimately connected to the breakdown of family relationships. People don’t learn the behaviors that they need to flourish, to support themselves economically. Broken relationships lead to addiction, all sorts of things; you name it that, again, keep people in poverty.

On the one hand, we shouldn’t just wag our fingers and say, “Start behaving yourselves.” That’s not a grace-based approach. That’s a law-based approach. The church is a grace-based institution. The law matters, but we don’t want to leave grace out of the picture if we’re going to be doing it in a Christian way. However, we do need to be helping people reach a place where relationships are healing, where behaviors are changing, addictions are being removed, where people who are not working are being helped to reach the development that they need so that they can be working.

Christians can encourage entrepreneurship that creates jobs so the jobs are there. One of the exciting things that we’re seeing happen in a number of places is Christian churches and Christian business people working together to promote entrepreneurship that intentionally reaches out to those who are not working to help connect them to work so that those who are not working will work. That is not simply a matter of creating businesses. It also requires healing relationships, confronting behavioral issues, the whole package.
I remember, in the context of dealing with poverty, I wish I could remember who it was who said this but somebody said, “The only effective place to intervene in a vicious circle is everywhere at once.” If you intervene in only one place in the vicious circle you’re just going to be defeated by the other factors that are acting onto that part of the circle. If you have a vicious circle situation where one problem is feeding another problem and that problem feeds the first problem you’ve got to attack everything at once.

Unfortunately, many of our traditional anti-poverty programs aren’t doing that. I am encouraged to see a lot of new approaches emerging and I think that’s only going to grow.

**Darrell Bock**

I’m reminded as I hear you talk of a book that I know we’ve both read called When Helping Hurts. In fact, we haven’t talked much about resources as we’ve moved through these podcasts and it certainly is one to recommend. Its thesis is that there are ways to help that they may help in the short-term but they really don’t deal with the long-term impact of why the person is caught in the cycle that they’re in. Then there’s helping that really helps as opposed to simply hurting. Help us to get that distinction between helping that helps and helping that hurts.

**Greg Forster**

I’ll admit forthrightly that I’ve been greatly influenced by Corbett and Fikkert in my description of the problem. They focus on relationships as the key, and I think that’s exactly right. They talk about the many different relationships that human beings are made to have, a relationship with God, a relationship with others, a relationship with yourself, which is your internal character, and a relationship with the world, so how you manage resources and work. They describe in the book how coming in with material aid not only does not address the repair of broken relationships, but can actually prevent the repair of broken relationships or even break them further if people become dependent on your aid rather than depending on one another.

Human beings are made to be interdependent. They’re made to be dependent on one another in the right relationship not be dependent on a relationship free resource provider. So family members are interdependent, and if the household is interdependent in the right way, that household will not be dependent on external infusions of resources, normally.
In fact, I think you can see in the Old Testament law and prophets and the whole literature that the desired normal state is households that are economically self-sufficient because they are interdependent. Everyone is making a contribution to the common good of the household. Similarly, a community of such households is interdependent through economic exchange and flourishes by that method.

If I remember correctly, in the book there’s the distinction between someone’s in crisis, a disaster hits or whatever, there’s that immediate relief of simply providing material goods to help the emergency situation and get them to the point back where they were. Then what often happens with a lot of relief efforts, the relief effort ends and that’s it or it’s the poor person who simply gets the handout. They get the meal and that’s it. That doesn’t deal with two other phases, if you will, of responsiveness that really completes the cycle.

One is, I don’t know quite how to word this because I’ve forgotten exactly how they word it but, something to the effect of you begin to create the skills and do the education and supply the capabilities to where a person can move to the point to where they can take care of themselves, and they aren’t dependent. Real helping that helps is a help that gets the person out of the mire where they are, out of the cycle that they’re in and works towards, the technical term when you’re doing this at the national level or at a civic level is development.

It really is the development of those independent skills that’s important. That requires multiple levels of support. That requires business support to supply the jobs or to supply the skills that are necessary, and it requires a family and/or community support to come alongside the person until they get to where they can sustain themselves. Is that the kind of relational dimension we’re talking about?

Absolutely and I think it’s important, once again, to stress that in those emergency situations coming in and just flooding people with material resources is the right thing to do. If there has been a hurricane that’s knocked down everybody’s house, yeah, you come in and you start to rebuild their houses for them.
The contrast is between that and – I was visiting a seminary where they have a long-term relationship with an impoverished community not far from them. The seminary has a long-term commitment to go in and do ministry there. In the past that’s been done in the traditional way. It got to the point where the local residents in this community would actually joke about what color is your house going to be painted this year. That’s just a startling testimony to the inadequacy of merely material approaches if they’re iterated over time. That community did not have a hurricane every year so that they needed people to come in and do housework every year.

The other two steps involve personal development of people so that their relationships are healed, their behaviors are addressed, and their material needs are also being addressed. They’re moving toward a place.

The third level is whole communities often have systematic problems that need to be addressed. That can range everything from the normalization of broken relationships, which we’re dealing with in a major way to even policies and practices by powerful people to come in and if anybody’s building anything and having success they’ll swoop in and take it.

In talking about resources, Hernando de Soto wrote a book called The Mystery of Capital in which he sent graduate students to the poorest communities around the world and found that one of the major obstacles that keeps people in poverty is just injustice that wealthy and powerful people will come in and take whatever you build so nobody builds anything. Of course they don’t. Why would they? That’s a key insight to have, that kind of thing.

There are a lot of complex systems that need to be addressed. One way of thinking about it is in terms of the old adage give a man a fish and he eats for a day but teach him to fish and he’ll eat for a lifetime. As Bob Lupton, author of another book Toxic Charity said, and then you have to start thinking about where the lake comes from. You can teach people to fish but if there’s no lake then you have a whole bigger problem. You can’t come in forever and provide lakes for people. Eventually, they’ll –

*Darrell Bock*      That’s the development of resources –
Yes, the larger development issue that communities have got to produce indigenous, entrepreneurial, business creation activity, which is difficult. You can’t just snap your fingers and make it happen. I think that’s why God raises up the church. It’s one reason God sends the church out into the world is because the natural, human, cultural system is not going to be concerned with that kind of difficult challenge. By God’s grace we can be an arm.

The church and business leaders can rally alongside one another to provide the variety of resources that are necessary. The business can provide the job expertise and the job creation potential and resources. The church can provide the personal counseling and direction that can help the system fix itself so that you aren’t just painting the house every year and nothing has changed inside the house.

In social science we have a concept called social capital. Pastors have enormous social capital. They have relationships and standing in the community that are phenomenally valuable in addressing these kinds of systematic issues. It’s not that the pastor has to go do everything, but the pastor can get all the right people around the table and boy, does that help!