Faith, Business, and Flourishing Economies

Part 2 of 2: The Moral Requirements of Flourishing Economies
with Darrell Bock, Greg Forster
Release Date: September 2014
Let’s talk some more from this angle, because sometimes the impression is left, well the poor can be cared for, and that’s something that the marketplace should do, or that’s something the state should do. How does a materialistic mindset get in the way of providing good care by suggesting that the help isn’t really the business of the church?

Right there is a tendency on one side to assume that the state should take the lead in caring for the poor, and then there is a tendency on the other side to think that if we just get the economic policy right, market activity will automatically create flourishing for everyone, but neither of those is really adequate, and both proceed from a materialistic assumption that if you just get the material conditions, right the machine will work. It’s mechanistic thinking. Essentially the problem is that these are human problems, and human beings are not material creatures only. They’re spiritual creatures as well as material creatures, and making thing more complicated their spiritual and material realities are integrated so you can’t effectively deal with one without effectively dealing with the other.

We have the problem on both sides. There are people who want to deal with the spirit and not the material things, and that doesn’t work. Then there are people who want to deal with material things, and not spiritual things, and that doesn’t work either. I think that it is imperative that the church takes the lead in caring for the poor, and some of my friends will say, “Well today the state takes the lead in caring for the poor, and the church can’t do it until the state gets out of the way.” I say, “Poppycock!” to that, and that’s not just my personal opinion.

If you look at the Mormon community they do it. There are virtually no Mormons on welfare anywhere in America, and it’s not because there are no Mormons in economic distress. It’s because their religious community has an enormous nationwide and even international system that is run by them, run by their religious community, and it delivers huge amounts of material aid to people. You know canned food, and clothing, and all that is moving through warehouses. They have their own warehouse, that’s how much stuff they’re moving, but it’s not done exclusively through material aid. There is relationship building, there’s healing, they’re addressing behaviors, and they’ve been at this for a while, and they’ve shown that it can be done.
Now when I tell people that story I will then often conclude with the following question: Correct me if I’m wrong, but that’s the biblical model, yes? The faith community is supposed to be doing this. Why are the Mormons doing this, but the Evangelical church is not? Somebody explain this to me, because it doesn’t look right to me. So I think we should be deeply convinced about that, but thankfully I think we are becoming convicted about it, and I think good things are starting to happen.

**Darrell Bock**

So your idea here is that really you need all the various levels of society contributing to the solution of this, that there is a place for business. There’s a place for the state. There’s a place for the church.

**Greg Forster**

Yes I think that’s right. I would like to see the church taking the lead, particularly in dealing with poverty, but the state has a role to play in a number of dimensions. The most essential role of the state is to enforce the rules of fair play. I don’t want to limit the role of the state to that, but that’s the central job of the state, and again like I mentioned Hernando Desoto, and his graduate students have all gone around the world, and found that this is something that states just don’t do in many, many places around. There’s a new book called The Locus Effect, which is all about this written by the head of the International Justice Mission, and it’s all about how in large parts of the world, the poor and the marginalized are not protected by the laws, and they are brutally victimized by powerful people. Nobody is going to bring a charge against anybody for stealing, violently attacking, or killing people from the poor and marginalized populations. So doing a good job of enforcing the rules of fair play actually contributes a lot, that’s not the only thing the state can do, but that’s a 101 starter level.

Then market activity, again, I think we don’t need to draw hard and fast boundaries here. There are a lot of places where you can’t really draw a line between what is Christian activity, and what is market activity, because Christians are active in the marketplace, but you know we want business creation. Ultimately the long term solution to poverty has to involve getting individuals, and families, and communities out of poverty where the church will no longer need to be focused on them, and that’s going to involve the growth of business, but the market will not automatically bring that to the neighborhoods that are in the most need.
Darrell Bock

Particularly the more materialistically they’re oriented, than the less value they bring to this kind of service, which gets actually to the next question I had that the chapter raises. That is obviously a materialistic focus, and particularly greed can get in the way here, and impact these goals. What are we seeing that shows that, and how do we address that problem?

Greg Forster

We have a growing problem here, and it’s a long-term impact of the separation between the theological world and the economic world, that the materialistic presuppositions in the economic world are becoming more, and more out of control, and it leads to materialistic and selfish behavior. David Miller, who is at the Avodah Institute at Princeton, which is a faith in work center, he travels really around the world speaking to business people at every level including the largest national and international companies, and he says that everywhere he goes he will ask the question: if you had a problem in your marriage, would you feel comfortable talking to a pastor about it? He says large numbers of hands go up. If your teenage child had an addiction, would you feel comfortable talking to a pastor about it? So there’s not a hostility to pastors, but then he’ll ask if you had an ethical dilemma in your work would you feel comfortable talking to a pastor about it? He says not only do not any of them raise their hands, but they laugh. They laugh, and we wonder why we have the problems we do.

Again, this comes back to the subject we began with, that there’s this divide, and what’s happening is there’s no counter-narrative to the narrative that the purpose of business is to make money. So the narrative that predominates in the economic world, I mean this is Orthodoxy in many business schools is that business exists to make money. There’s no other narrative in play, so of course that’s going to be the narrative that guides behavior, and I think unfortunately we have tried to fight this narrative with another narrative that is essentially negative about business activity that fails to acknowledge the goodness of economic and business activity in God’s plan for the world.
I think we don’t fight a bad narrative that’s pro-business with a bad narrative that’s anti-business, but rather with a narrative that begins with God’s intention for business, and begins with hope, and talks about the potential of business to be a force for good in the world, and not just when it’s taken over by the church, and the religious professionals are put in charge. But that business professionals have a role to play in God’s plan to do good things for the world by providing good products and services that people need that create value and make the world a better place. That I think is the answer to greed and materialism.

**Darrell Bock**

So the definition to success isn’t how many zero’s I have in the CEO salary. The definition of success is there a good or service being provided that helps people live better, function better, that kind of thing. It ministers to them, if I can use a normally sacred term.

**Greg Forster**

Absolutely, well the word minister means serve. I mean minister is a servant, and in fact the purpose of business is not to make money, but to serve customers. To provide goods and services to customers that are good, that serve authentic human needs and makes the world a better place. I think that business needs profit, and if the business is doing honest business that does provide a good product or service, then profit is good, and that’s I’ll go to the math for that’s biblical. You can find that fairly easily. As long at the activity that produces the profit is good, profit is a good thing, but that is not the purpose of the business.

A very common metaphor that’s used among Christian business people who are wrestling with this –they will say the body needs blood, but the purpose of the body is not to circulate blood. Another way that they’ll put it is you need to breath, but you don’t exist for the purpose of breathing, and similarly just as the body needs blood and air, or it’s going to die, the business needs profit or it’s going to die. So it’s absolutely legitimate to be concerned about keeping your business profitable, as long as you’re doing it in a way that serves people.
So a more effective response to greed and materialism is not, and I think you say this in the piece, abstinence or asceticism, but service and stewardship. In other words the air can be well we’ll just pull all the resources out, and not be concerned about how the resources are used. That’s what you mean by abstinence and asceticism, and rather no let’s think about how what we do in our service enhances our ability to continue to serve, and to continue to be good stewards.

Yes, I think while I appreciate people’s concern about greed and materialism, and I affirm it strongly, very often our concern about greed and materialism is couched in anti-work, anti-economic, anti-business narrative that ultimately can be very destructive. That because it reinforces the materialistic pro-business narrative, if we are out there telling a story that business is bad, because all it cares about is profit... If we repeat that over and over, business is about profit that’s why it’s bad. Business is about profit that’s why it’s bad. We are training people in business to think of business that way, and ultimately that reinforces the problem. We need to instead, help people come to discover business activity, whether that’s how you spend your own money in your checkbook, or what a business does, or what a bank does, or what investors do, what Wall Street does. I mean Wall Street has this problem in spades, but the answer is not to just go on a G Hunt against Wall Street, and say financial instruments are intrinsically evil, because if you teach people that, they will act accordingly.

We need to help people discover God can actually use financial instruments to do enormous mighty works for the good of all, to serve the common good. Most of those, and yes there are some financial instruments that were invented for the purpose of trickery, but most financial instruments exist in a form that can be and often is used to facilitate business activity that serves our needs. You know where do these microphones come from? Where did this table come from? Where did that screen come from? It came from businesses, and businesses need investments to operate, and where is that investment coming from? It’s coming from bankers and Wall Street types, and if they do their work with an eye toward promoting good business, and good activity then they’re part of God’s economy as well.
**Darrell Bock**

So in thinking about this work almost wrapping up here, what goals should businesses had? I mean we’ve already said numerous times, “Well the goal that they shouldn’t have is to merely make money.” That there is something more going on here, it’s more than a paycheck to use our call line here for the conferencing that we’re going to be doing on this topic. What should these businesses have? What kinds of goals should they have?

**Greg Forster**

I think to my mind the paramount goal is to provide goods and services that authentically serve human needs. Now we can get into well what is an authentic human need, and what is not really, and that gets into the weeds very quickly, but just to avoid that just provide goods and services that serve authentic human needs, and makes the world a better place is the paramount goal. Subordinate goals would include; staying profitable, doing business in a way that has integrity, helping the people in the business grow in their ability to do good work, and their relational lives —

**Darrell Bock**

So the ministry doesn’t come just through the services provided. The ministry also comes in how those who are employed by the company actually conduct their jobs and the personal development they have in doing their job.

**Greg Forster**

Absolutely, a business is a culture, and that reality helps us I think to see the spiritual nature of business, that a business is a human community. It is a group of people that are in a relationship with one another, and are doing something that is actual personal and intimate. To work goes straight to the heart of your understanding of who you are, and what kind of creature you are, and then there are some businesses that set other goals as well. There are businesses that exist for going above and beyond ordinary purposes. You know some business intentionally locate in an impoverished neighborhood, because in addition to providing a good or service, they want to employ people who are marginal and where people do that I think we should applaud it. I think that should not detract from the good of ordinary businesses that don’t have that kind of above and beyond goal, and part of the challenge that we have to navigate is to honor what is done in just ordinary business.
You know when you show up at work to make widgets is good and glorifies God, and to honor that without then taking away from people who are doing something that goes above and beyond the ordinary. And that’s one of the tensions that faith in work movement often has to wrestle with, because there are people who are in the faith and work movement because they’re very enthusiastic about those special businesses. There are other people who are in the faith and work movement because they’re enthusiastic about helping the people who make widgets see how they’re glorifying God, and navigating that tension is a challenge in the faith and work movement too.

*Darrell Bock*

Now this section ends with a discussion of what’s called the “stewardship mindset,” which is also mentioned earlier in the document, and we’ve talked a little bit about this. I have a quote here that I want to read, and I’ll just let you comment on it when I’m done. It talks about what the stewardship mindset provides for people as they think about their work and their labor. A stewardship mindset, this is a mindset that says I’ve been given an assignment to help and manage my part of the world that God has given me well if I can put it into kind of laymen terms, provides a sound basis for ethical guidance for individuals and institutions responsible for managing and directing wealth. That’s what is happening. Resources are being moved around, and provided in such a way that people are engaged in the economy, and are ministered to by the goods and services provided.
Scripture rather, warns against the equal and opposite sins of squandering wealth, spending it in selfish and transitory ways, and interestingly the example that is brought up here in the appeal to Luke 15:11-32 passage, (I know a little about) is the picture of the prodigal who goes away, and had been given the gift of the inheritance of his father. So he ends up with nothing, or hording wealth. That is removing it from its use entirely, and the example here, yet another Lucan passage; Luke 12:13-21, which is the rich fool who when he gets this cash of wealth that comes in seemingly fortuitously he decides well I’m not going to use it in any beneficial way. I’m going to keep it for myself, and God addresses that attitude as basically fool that will require your soul of you. By contrast, Scripture commends caring for the needs of our own households, and other close relations, 1 Timothy 5:8, and after that generous giving for relief for other’s needs, James 2:15-17. In fact another passage jumps into my mind, the James 1 passage at the end of the chapter 26 and 27 where true religion is defined as caring for windows and orphans, and keeping ones self-unstained from the world –

**Greg Forster**

Passages that recommend generosity are not difficult to find.

**Darrell Bock**

Exactly right. I once worked with an organization in which the question that was asked to me –it was a good question. Why don’t seminaries have a class entitled poorology, the study of the theology of the poor, and what he meant was, he wasn’t talking about liberation theology, he was saying I’ve read through the Bible, and there are over 400 passages that deal with the poor in one way or another that can use systematic study for thinking through how you deal with this needy segment of the creation that God obviously is sensitive to, because he talks so very much about it. Anyway, after that giving generously for others in need, James 2:15-17, and productive investment to produce economic flourishing to the community, and here you have Psalm 1:12 3-5 that’s mentioned. So you’ve got a variety of things that a stewardship mindset is supposed to do, and basically what it’s saying is resources are to be used in a way that not only do you provide services, and provide the ability to have services, but then you provide the basis for continuing to serve and to serve hopefully more and more effectively all the time.
Yes, and while there are a lot of places we can take this conversation, I think the first thing that jumps to my mind to add to what you just said is in the contrast between hording on the negative side, and investing on the positive side, we talked in the last podcast about the development of the modern economy. One of the great blessings of the modern economy is that it makes it very easy to invest in ways that bring flourishing to the community. When you put your money in a bank, it is not sitting there in a silo like it was for the man in the parable. When you put your money in a bank, the bank takes that money and invests it in businesses. Now obviously the bank has an ethical responsibility, and I think we might do a better job of calling banks to that ethical responsibility, but the primary function of the system is to enable us to invest money in the community through the financial system. Michael Novak likes to use the example of the Battle of Lepanto, where Venice, which is this small city, state actually fended off the entire Ottoman empire, and one of the reasons they were able to do that is they had a huge banking sector where people who had wealth could put it in the banks, and it would be invested in productive activity.

This is what enabled Venice to become able to raise a large navy, whereas, now this is the part that I find fascinating, when they would capture a flagship in the Ottoman fleet, they would actually find chests of gold in the boat, because the wealthy, prominent people in the Ottoman country wouldn’t leave their money behind, because they couldn’t trust it to anybody. That’s a wonderful image of the hording behavior that people are strongly tempted to if they don’t have an functioning economic system where you can trust if you put your money in the bank; A, you will get it back. It will not be simply taken by the sultan, but B, you put the money in the bank, and you know it’s going to good use.

There’s an assumption there that there is a virtue working through the culture that allows all these exchanges at a personal level that involves some level of trust, actually, to take place.

Yes trust is the heart and soul of any well-functioning economy, and it means you have to have a reasonably grounded belief that the people around you will behave themselves even if they will not pay an immediate price.
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**Darrell Bock**
One of the tensions that we’ve seen more recently with some of the scandals that we’ve seen with business and business people have been an inability to trust their ethics, and their virtue to function in a way in which the system can work.

**Greg Forster**
I think if this trend away from self-control in the broadest possible sense, that is intrinsic character, people behaving virtuously because they’ve been equipped with a character that behaves virtuously simply because it’s the right thing to do, and not because there is a criminal justice system that will haul you away. If we continue to lose that moral character, trust levels which have been dropping precipitously for at least two generations will continue to drop, and ultimately the economic system will be majorly disrupted by that lack of trust. It’s already being disrupted by a lack of trust. You know it’s going to get worse if we don’t turn that around.

**Darrell Bock**
It’s interesting. I’ve been doing a series of interviews on a variety of topics here lately, and one of them got into this area. And I was making the point that when you create school systems that don’t deal with character in a substantive way – you just simply teach your coursework – that we’re beginning to reap on the other end what we pay for. When we ignore character you don’t develop character, and when you don’t develop character that all the structures that society assumes will operate because people can be trustworthy at a character level break down, and then you in some instances, you force the state to enter in, and create laws to protect yourself against yourself.

**Greg Forster**
Absolutely, and for most human history you had an extremely high level of social control where a tiny group of elites at the top of society basically controlled how everyone lived, and it’s because for most of human history most cultures simply don’t have the kind of self-regulating character that has become normal in cultures that have been influenced by the spread of Christianity. It is no coincidence that the spread of the global economy is following the spread of the gospel in unprecedented ways around the world. I’m not trying to overdraft that, but there is a moral character foundation that has to be in place before economies can begin to grow and function in the way they can, and I think you’re absolutely right to identify lack of moral formation. I would add families but schools as well. Those are both critical areas.
Darrell Bock: Of course the problem is you have a lot of broken families around who are inhabiting the schools where character is not being taught, and the problem is just perpetuating.

Greg Forster: Again, vicious circle, like we said before. When character is not ignored, it is dealt with a way that is superficial and frivolous, and simply does not get to the deep sources of character.

Darrell Bock: So there is a very difficult problem. You know it is interesting that many of the economic theories that we talked about last time really did also talk about the importance of human character in making those economies work. The less strictly materialistically-oriented they were, the more they looked for the balance between a good economic approach and a character that can drive it that will make it work and function well. You pull the character part out of that equation, and you risk having a mess on your hands.

Greg Forster: Absolutely, as we said last time, the discipline of economics began as a subfield of moral philosophy, and grew rapidly, and gained independence, and while in some ways I’m, as a social scientist, glad to see social science maturing, it became detached from theology, and then even from moral philosophy in ways that really need to be repaired.

Darrell Bock: Interesting, well that’s kind of grim place to end.

Greg Forster: Well let’s end with hope; there are people in the field of economics talking about this now. There’s actually, just as there are local churches that are doing amazing things now in changing the ways we deal with poverty, there are economists, most of them Christian, although not all, who are seriously examining the need for moral presuppositions in the economic discipline. I am very encouraged by that.
Darrell Bock

Yeah without it I think we are really climbing uphill. Well I appreciate you being in studio with us in time. Sometimes we have you by Skype, and sometimes we have you here, Greg, and you’ve become a regular on The Table to discuss these issues with us, and we’ve got a couple of more pieces of this work to go, and we’ll have completed it, and then we’ll have to think of a new project to do together, but it’s been a pleasure to have you with us again on the Table. And we thank you for joining us on The Table, where we discuss issues of God and culture, and hope you’ll be with us again next time.