

RELIGION PAGE COLUMN

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BUSINESS HAS A MORAL DIMENSION

By

Dean Feldmeyer

Every year I go to Nicaragua with a group of people from my church and we spend a week at a little mission there called Project Chacocente.

Project Chacocente is a ministry to the poorest of the poor. We take families that were living in the city dump of Managua into the fresh air of the countryside just outside the town of Massaya. There we give them a second chance at life, but we don't hand it to them. They sign a covenant and if they keep the covenant for five years they get to keep and own a small house and two acres of land

In the covenant, they agree learn to read and write. They agree to keep their kids in the school we have built. They have to build their own house, learn a trade, learn how to farm and open a small business.

Did you get that last part? They have to open a small business.

One of the things we are teaching the poorest of the poor in Nicaragua is capitalism.

We believe in business.

Personally, I think that business is the genius of America and is one of the important factors that has made this country great. I believe that, while charity is important, the real answer to the problem of poverty in the world is to be found in business. I think that business, like government, can be a power for tremendous good, a power for both transformation and edification.

But, sadly, it is rarely so.

History has shown us that, left to its own devices, business falls prey to all of the temptations and sins that individual people do: pride, gluttony, sloth, envy, greed.

That's why the "free market" isn't such a good idea if by free we mean free from responsibility, free from restraint, free from law, free from consequences.

Business needs laws just like people do, because there is a moral/ethical dimension to the things that business does. It's not "just business." It's not "just money." It's people's lives. And irresponsible, unrestrained, immoral business practices can destroy those lives.

But where do we get the laws that should govern responsible, ethical business?

Well, if we are Christians or Jews we go to the Bible, but there is precious little in the Bible about ethical business. Moral rules for commerce are mentioned only twice in the book of Leviticus in chapters 19 and 25. In both cases the admonition is the same: be honest and fair.

Beyond that the general biblical rules for all human behavior apply to business as well. Be generous and kind. Be loving and forgiving. Help those who genuinely need help. Remember the poor, the widow, the orphan. And always remember that there is only one god and that god's name is neither Money nor Profit.

For people of faith, a business can't call itself a success if the only people who are prospering are the officers of the company. A business isn't truly successful unless and until the whole community prospers.

I don't know what they teach in business school, but that's what we teach in Sunday School.

Dean Feldmeyer is the pastor of The Wilmington United Methodist Church.