BUSINESS AS SPIRITUAL VOCATION:
EVANGELICAL EXECUTIVES ON FAITH AND WORK

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ABSTRACT

Largely confined to the disadvantaged ranks of the stratification system during much of the twentieth century, evangelicals have increasingly joined the professional elite in a variety of sectors, including corporate America. Quantitative studies of the effects of religion on executive behavior have thus far shown mixed and inconclusive effects, and those few qualitative analyses that have focused on evangelical business leaders have generally emphasized conflict between religion and business but failed adequately to explore areas of consonance.

Through semi-structured interviews with the most diverse group of evangelical executives yet studied, I expand our knowledge of the ways evangelical executives understand the relationship between their faith and their work. In contrast to the above-mentioned conflict narrative, I find that these evangelical business leaders are eager and able to assert that business is a sacred institution and a worthy occupation, equipped with an appropriate rhetoric to say and evidence to demonstrate that 1) business is a God-filled domain and 2) some aspect of business contributes to some spiritual objective for some group or individual. The first criterion is supported by the oft-cited connection between virtue and profit, which helps counter the charge that business is an ethically unclean domain. Satisfying the second criterion helps informants rebut the criticism that business is less important than other types of ministry with more explicit spiritual objectives, and is easily satisfied because of the flexibility evangelical executives have in interpreting the relationship between faith and business and what it means to live a faithful life. The flexibility to understand the appropriate way to bring faith to bear in business in different ways is, in turn, facilitated by the nature and structure of both contemporary business and contemporary religion.
In these evangelical business leaders and their accounts, the “spirit of capitalism,” defined by Max Weber as a positive attitude toward both work and wealth, finds ongoing embrace and new expression, with implications for our understanding of the so-called faith at work movement, evangelicalism, and the role of religion among elites.
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INTRODUCTION

“At Harvard they talked a lot about the Mormon Mafia,” said Kyle, a senior manager at a well-known consulting company, “but,” he asked, “who is in the Christian Mafia? Who are the evangelicals at your company that really value their faith and are willing to have that conversation with you about the struggles at work and maybe help you navigate the political situations?” Having grown up on a farm in the Midwest, Kyle considers it “a total God thing” that he had the dream, much less the means, to attend Harvard Business School. Now in his late-30s but having already worked for some of the most well-regarded technology companies in the United States, Kyle is still relatively early in his career—still striving for that destination job in which he will truly fulfill his potential. Hence the search for the Christian mafia. As he explains, these days, an MBA from Harvard is not an automatic ticket to a CEO position. “The big thing is who is pounding the table in your name? When it comes time for reviews, who says Kyle’s my guy and this guy is the greatest thing since sliced bread and if you don’t think so you should get the hell out of the room because he’s awesome. Who is that guy? In my experience, if you have a table pounder or several, you’re going to be fine with your career promotion track. If you don’t, you’re like a ship at sea with no rudder. You’re probably not going anywhere.”

As an evangelical Christian, Kyle feels that in some ways his faith has impeded his career, preventing him from fully connecting with peers and conforming to the social expectations for rising executives. He tells of celebrating a product launch with coworkers in New York City. “We get to the ‘bar’ and they are trying to get me to walk in there. It ended up being a strip club, which I had never been in and didn’t want to go in and they were trying to
push me in there. I had to physically grab on to the door post and pull myself out of there.

You’re almost discriminated against because of your faith.”

Where is the Christian mafia? Management scholars Mitroff and Denton (1999), in a widely read book on spirituality in business, claim to have found it, or at least examples of it, rehearsing with horror the alleged tactics employed by imperialistic Christians attempting to “take over their companies for Christ.” Evangelical Christians make some people nervous. The most visible evangelicals over the past couple decades—Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, James Dobson, and the like—have typically been the most controversial and out of step with mainstream culture, often championing far-right perspectives on issues like same-sex marriage and global warming. Scholars, especially, seem to be wary of evangelicals. In a 2007 survey of 1,300 college professors, researchers found that 3 percent held “unfavorable feelings” toward Jews, 22 percent toward Muslims, and 53 percent toward evangelical Christians (Tobin and Weinberg).

Some of this unease can be attributed to the fact that evangelicalism is an activist faith tradition, encouraging adherents to change the world by bringing about the kingdom of God on earth—an objective that involves, among other things, “witnessing” to others about their faith, caring for the poor, and changing the culture to reflect biblical morality. According to Hunter (2010:5), conservative Protestants, including evangelicals and fundamentalists, have been “the loudest, most energetic, and most demanding of all Christians in recent decades.”

For all the commotion evangelicals have introduced in the political arena—and most analysts suggest that the force of their rhetoric has outpaced their ability to influence policies and elections (Hart 1996)—they have been much less visible in other domains. For example, Bruce, a distinguished Wall Street analyst and, like Kyle, an evangelical Christian, claims to have spent
five years on Wall Street in the late 1980s before meeting another evangelical. Do influential evangelicals fly under the radar in corporate American and other social domains, or are they absent altogether?

A SURPRISE TO ME

“He’s pretty young for a CEO,” I thought as I navigated away from the website. Only a few minutes later did it occur to me that the face looked vaguely familiar. After several more minutes it clicked; resuming my staring match with the face on the screen I confirmed that, sure enough, it was him. Most every Sunday morning for the couple years leading up to my move to New Jersey for graduate school, this gentleman had handed me a bulletin and welcomed me to the worship service at a moderately sized, relatively affluent Baptist church in the heart of Houston, Texas. Ever cordial, with a sincere but low-key warmth appropriate to the early hour, we had chatted enough to know each other’s names, but no more, and I knew nothing about his occupation. There was nothing about him that would have disqualified him as an executive; I suppose he just didn’t strike me as the hard-charging type or a particularly commanding presence or one who enjoys the spotlight. “Greeter,” after all, was hardly among the more celebrated roles in the church. And yet he is, apparently, commanding enough to lead a multi-billion dollar publicly traded company with about 10,000 employees around the world—a role for which he is paid millions of dollars a year.

It turns out I wasn’t the only one who was surprised to learn of this congregant’s professional standing. A former church staff member who knew the man knew nothing of his lofty occupational status. Likewise, a deacon at the church was unaware, recalling that the CEO
had showed up on a Saturday morning to help move a divorcee with whom he was not previously acquainted.

In retrospect, perhaps none of us should have been surprised. There is some evidence that evangelical presence, or at least public presence, is on the upswing among corporate leaders and in the upper ranks of other social sectors, as well. Largely confined to the disadvantaged ranks of the stratification system (Wuthnow 1995) and excluded from the mainstream culture-making institutions during most of the twentieth century, evangelicals are increasingly recognized among the upper tier of a variety of sectors, including corporate America (Lindsay 2007; Schmalzbauer 2003). As of 1997, nearly half of all small-business owners in the United States called themselves born-again Christians (Roels 1997), and today evangelicals direct some of the nation’s largest companies, as well. Lindsay contends that, over the past couple of decades, an interconnected group of visible evangelical elites has labored, successfully, to make it more acceptable for elites to publicly embrace an evangelical identity, paving the way for more overt applications of faith in corporate environments. Miller (2007) agrees that evangelicals have, during this period of time, been active in the corporate domain—both as individuals and in concerted initiatives, having spearheaded what he and others call the “faith at work movement,” a loose coalition of management theorists and practitioners who have pushed for expanding the role of faith in business. On this account, over the past couple of decades evangelicals have labored to bring faith-oriented ways of thinking to bear on economic activities. Consistent with Lindsay’s and Miller’s analyses, Bruce, who in the 1980s could not identify a single evangelical on Wall Street, now works with several evangelicals and can quickly call to mind a number of other prominent finance executives who are evangelicals. Whether and how more visible evangelical executives take advantage of new possibilities for expressing their faith at work is an
open question. Does the CEO who hands out bulletins on Sunday mornings act with the hospitality of a greeter on, say, Thursday afternoons? And might emboldened evangelical business leaders attempt to advance their values in the corporate domain just as evangelicals have attempted in the political arena?

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGION AND BUSINESS

While most research on evangelical elites has focused on politics, what little research has been conducted on evangelical business leaders has generally emphasized the type of conflict narrative that Kyle articulated, wherein evangelicals must struggle to carve out a niche in the corporate domain. Laura Nash, writing in the mid-1990s, organized an insightful and widely read study of evangelical CEOs around seven tensions between their faith convictions and their business responsibilities. Nash’s analysis of evangelical executives fits with a broader body of scholarship that elaborates the conflict between business practices and religious expectations. Researchers at Harvard and elsewhere recently published the results of a study indicating that mere exposure to money triggers a “business decision frame” that in turn promotes unethical intentions and behavior. According to these researchers (Kouchaki et al. 2013:54), “a business decision frame entails objectification of social relationships (either those who stand to be directly harmed, or others more broadly construed) in a cost–benefit calculus in which self-interest is pursued over others’ interests (i.e., it entails a focus on one’s gains and losses largely to the exclusion of benefits and costs to others).” Thus defined, the implication is that business is inherently immoral and specifically opposed to the moral ethos encouraged by evangelicals, whose prescribed mindset is informally encapsulated in a popular acrostic, “JOY,” designating that in terms of priorities, Jesus comes first, others come next, and you come last.
Paine (2002) recounts another study of the effects of a corporate environment on individual perspectives, conducted at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School of Business, one of the most influential business schools in the world and training ground for a significant proportion of corporate executives in the United States and beyond. In this study, fifty-seven groups of executives and business students from eight countries were instructed to play the role of an imaginary pharmaceutical company’s board of directors and given a hypothetical scenario in which one of their company’s leading drugs was causing an estimated fourteen to twenty-two “unnecessary” deaths a year and would likely be banned by regulators in the company’s home country. More than eighty percent of the corporate “boards” decided to continue marketing the product both domestically and overseas, and to take legal, political, and other necessary actions to prevent the authorities from banning it. No group decided to recall the product. In contrast, when asked for their personal assessment of the decision to continue shipping the drug, ninety-seven percent of another set of seventy-one business students, managers, and faculty members said the decision was “socially irresponsible.” Thus, as Paine summarizes, eighty percent of the participants acting in a corporate capacity made a decision that ninety-seven percent of those acting in a personal capacity judged to be morally unacceptable.

These studies suggest that corporate roles can powerfully shape behavior, prompting people to act differently in corporate environments than they would elsewhere and making the challenge of integrating one’s faith and one’s work particularly difficult. Jackall (1988:115) corroborates this assertion, contending on the basis of ethnographic observation of corporate leaders that firms often have a morality of their own, observance of which is necessary to climb the corporate ladder, and that “what is right in the corporation is not what is right in a man’s home or in his church.”
These contemporary studies carry forward a long tradition of thought, especially prominent among public intellectuals, which holds that profit-oriented economic activity tends to promote greed, envy, and trivial satisfactions at the expense of moral and spiritual commitment to more substantive concerns (Hirschmann 1982, Hirsch 1976, Veblen 1899). Drawing on these insights, some scholars distinguish sharply between the religious and economic spheres. Friedland and Alford (1991), for example, suggest that the dispassionate calculation esteemed in market relations excludes the more affective evaluations encouraged by religious institutions. Similarly, Boltanski and Thevenot (2006, 1999) insist that financial value, which represents the criterion of worth in the market, conflicts with other orders of worth oriented to, among other things, divine grace or other-regard.

Consistent with this theme, in recent years evangelical Christian presses have published a number of practical guides for business leaders, offering to help them bridge the “Sunday-Monday gap” and succeed in business “without selling your soul.”1 The implication of this type of language is that business is not just unspiritual, but hazardous to spiritual health—that business responsibilities conflict with religious responsibilities.

REVISITING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BUSINESS AND RELIGION

In contrast to the “hostile worlds” perspective (Zelizer 2007a), in which the interpenetration of the supposedly distinct spheres of economic activity and personal and moral affairs degrades both, another account portrays market activity as a powerful moralizing agent. As Hirschman (1982) recounts, classical economists like Adam Smith and some early enlightenment philosophers like David Hume associated participation in market society with a

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number of virtues, including thrift, industry, honesty, reliability, and even creativity. The underlying idea is that commercial success requires attention to the needs of others and depends on the establishment of trust that conduces to efficient transactions.

Most economic sociologists now embrace a moderate position on these issues, considering markets to be relatively impotent social constructs, subject themselves to other, more powerful social and historical dynamics (Fourcade and Healy 2007). Emphasizing its embeddedness in broader institutional dynamics, economic sociologists emphasize the contingent nature of the market’s organization and effects. Markets are, in fact, sufficiently infused with moral order and evaluation that the distinction between market activity and moral valuation is unhelpful if not misleading. On this view, economic activity is always characterized by moral considerations.

This more nuanced perspective allows us to assume that in some circumstances people act more in line with moral or religious considerations than in others, and that some types of economic activity are hostile to certain values, as are some types of organizational contexts. Markets, and the firms of which they are often comprised, are neither inherently nor inevitably hostile to religious considerations and associated moral evaluations, nor necessarily benign to the same. Instead, their moral effects vary along many dimensions at every level of social organization, from the individual to the institutional. As such, the effect of working in market-oriented corporate contexts on business leaders’ faith convictions and expressions is a dynamic to be explored, not assumed. At the same time, while institutional and organizational contexts are important, they are not necessarily determinative. In fact, Zelizer (1997; 2007b) demonstrates that people are remarkably creative and adaptive in shaping and describing
economic activity to affirm evaluative commitments and the nature of the social relationships involved.

**DOES RELIGION REALLY MATTER?**

How do evangelicals, who typically embrace a subcultural identity that is nourished by tension with the broader culture (Smith 1998), distinguish themselves from non-evangelical business leaders, if at all? Does upward mobility take the edge off of their religiosity, as studies suggest is common among leaders in various professions? Or do their religious convictions prompt distinct ways of thinking, speaking, and acting—thoughts, words, and actions that might reverberate throughout their organizations and beyond?

Perceptions regarding the impact of evangelical business leaders attempting to live out their faith in the marketplace vary widely. While some are wary of trends that encourage the interpenetration of faith and business, insisting, as does renowned consultant and author Tom Peters (1993), that companies should be “spirited but not spiritual,” others welcome such integration, seeing in contemporary Christianity and other religious traditions elements that would challenge unhealthy aspects and consequences of modern capitalism. Some, in fact, have come to believe that religious faith represents a wellspring of resources and concern that might help reshape corporate America by re-humanizing business and fortifying its ethical moorings. Recounting the socially responsible initiatives of several well-known firms led by religiously motivated executives, Marc Gunther (2004), senior writer for Fortune magazine, insists that faith-driven “compassionate capitalism” is transforming American business. In light of the so-called financialization of corporate America, characterized by intense focus on shareholder value as an overriding corporate objective, some scholars assert that religious institutions in general (Bellah et al. 1991) and Christianity in particular (Hart 1996) possess ideological resources that
might redirect focus from purely economic ends to a variety of higher goods. Nash, in fact, having studied evangelical executives in particular, concludes that their faith commitments can often “keep at bay the more predatory aspects of advanced capitalism” and “stimulate commitment to high ethical standards and humane employee policies” (2004:xv). More broadly, Miller asserts that “if the faith at work movement can go beyond personal expressions of piety, virtue, and religious practices, it has the potential to affect and positively alter the larger cultural value system and norms of the economic sphere, both domestically and globally” (2007:12).

While some are skeptical of the potential influence of evangelicals and other business leaders who desire to bring their faith to bear in corporate contexts and others welcome such integration and anticipate favorable effects, still others suggest that religion simply does not matter enough to be of interest or concern. Despite the fact that the relationship between religion and commerce preoccupied seminal sociological thinkers like Weber, Durkheim, and Marx, there is a persistent inclination among sociologists to downplay the role of religion in social life. In a recent contribution to the American Sociological Association’s “footnotes” publication, Ryan Cragun (2012) insists, in response to fellow sociologist Christian Smith’s attempt to drum up interest in religion, that sociologists would gladly pay more attention to religion if only it actually mattered. Cragun asserts, “Religion has very little effect on health or criminal behavior. If religion plays any significant role in societal development, it’s as a small impediment. And religion has, at best, a marginal influence on migration patterns, communication technologies, consumption, and the economy.” The one domain in which Cragun allows that religion is important is politics. “Knowing someone’s religion,” he says, “significantly improves our ability to predict how he/she will vote.” In fact, while several scholars have pointed to the demarginalization and growing influence of evangelicals, what little research has been done on
evangelical elites has largely been confined to their influence in the political arena. Its apparent influence on political perspectives notwithstanding, Cragun concludes, “If religion explains marginal amounts of variation in a variety of areas, I fail to see how we can fault other sociologists for not caring about it.”

Against Cragun and others who apparently consider regression analysis a reliable indicator of the magnitude of social influence, a variety of studies demonstrate ways religion has influenced economic behavior and institutions. Keister (2011, 2003), for example, marshals evidence that religious affiliation and participation exerts significant influence on individual economic outcomes, both directly through the inculcation of economic goals and habits and indirectly through influencing demographic behaviors. Likewise, Hart (1996) contends that the character of religious discourse about the market profoundly influences economic behaviors within it. Abend (2009) suggests that only by emphasizing business ethics, derived from religious principles, did business schools come to exert profound influence on the shape of American business. At a broader level, Guillen (1994) suggests that religion has played an often neglected role in the innovation and diffusion of management paradigms, positing that in Spain, the Catholic Church supported the human relations school for its humane treatment of workers, and in Germany, Protestants supported the scientific management movement for its emphasis on individualism and self-reliance. And of course Max Weber, in his classic work, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, contended that a particular branch of ascetic Protestantism (Calvinism) helped shape and spread the spirit of modern capitalism by breaking down the moral disapproval of capitalistic activity and creating and promoting a methodical approach to economic affairs. While Weber expected that, for various reasons, religion was unlikely to exert ongoing influence in a market-oriented economy, Berger (1986:207) reminds us that, even today,
“Capitalism does not legitimate itself….It depends for its legitimation upon traditional values, such as those furnished by religious morality.”

On the basis of these and other studies, it seems clear that religion can matter in economic life—both individual and collective—and, Cragun’s objections notwithstanding, attention to the role of religion in business contexts is on the uptick. Surveying the segment of this growing body of literature that employs quantitative methods and focuses on managerial behavior, Longenecker et al. (2004) suggest that empirical studies of the effects of religion on managerial behavior have thus far shown mixed and inconclusive effects. This of course does not mean that religion does not matter, but that its effects are difficult to predict, and suggests that quantitative analyses alone are insufficient to understand the role of faith in the lives of people like evangelical executives.

In light of current economic circumstances and cultural perspectives, it is possible that the attitudes and actions of religiously committed executives might now matter more than usual. Business, it is widely claimed, is currently experiencing a crisis of legitimacy and identity. The near collapse of the global financial system in 2008 and the consequent Great Recession, the memory of a handful of highly visible and costly corporate scandals, and the perception, at least, of a transition to a more competitive, profit-oriented corporate environment have contributed to growing sentiment that business is responsible for a variety of social, environmental, and economic problems. According to polls\(^2\), the legitimacy of businesses and their leaders has fallen to levels not seen in recent history. As of December 2008, fifty-eight percent of the public believed that business corporations make too much profit, compared to just 35 percent who believed that corporations make a fair/reasonable profit (PSRA/Pew Research Center). Of this

\(^2\) Relevant excerpts of each of the surveys referenced in this paragraph can be found in Taking Stock of Business, a compilation of public opinion studies published by the American Enterprise Institute in 2010, at https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/20100422-Business.pdf.
perceived excess profit, most believe that too much goes to executives. In fact, in March 2009, seventy-nine percent of the public agreed that business leaders are generally paid too much, with just nine percent dissenting (Harris Interactive/Financial Times). And much of the public believes not only that executives are paid too much, but also that they are unethical. In 2009, just twelve percent of the public rated the honesty and ethical standards of business executives as high or very high (The Gallup Organization). Even in 2002, before the recent financial crisis, sixty-seven percent of the public indicated that most American executives are not honest (CBS News/New York Times). The perception that businesses and their leaders are profit-obsessed and unethical has convinced many that businesses are not living up to their responsibility to society. In April 2009, fifty-eight percent of the public mostly or completely disagreed that business corporations generally strike a fair balance between making profits and serving the public interest (PSRA/Pew Research Center). Similarly, in July 2009, business executives ranked last among ten professional groups in terms of perceived contribution to the well-being of society (Pew Research Center). In sum, business has come to be associated with illegitimate and excess wealth, and business leaders are some of the least respected members of society.

For executives, unfavorable public sentiment is no mere nuisance; diminished trust in business can prompt political leaders to implement policies that undermine competitiveness and threaten the prosperity and even the viability of commercial enterprises. Much is at stake in the response of business leaders to the crisis of legitimacy facing their profession; public opinion analyst, Daniel Yankelovich, responding to statistics like those presented above, concludes that “the social contract with business is in a state of flux” (Mendonca and Miller 2007:66). And Khurana (2010:5), documenting the evolution of business schools, suggests that, in light of recent events and trends in the corporate world and a mounting chorus of criticism against
business, “the time seems ripe for reopening the question of what exactly this institution is for, what functions we as a society want it to perform, and how well it is performing them.”

Evangelical business leaders are well positioned to contribute to answers to these questions by providing narratives of legitimation and/or attempting to do business in ways that would enhance its reputation and be more compatible with their own religious convictions. But does religion influences the ways evangelical business leaders approach business? They certainly suggest that it does.

**Professional Oxygen**

We must have been traveling at least twice the speed limit as we zipped through the streets of Laguna Beach in a sports car that must have been twice as expensive as any car I’d traveled in before. On the way to his next appointment, Ryan dropped me off at my rental car, bid me a hasty farewell, and raced away. Time is money, I thought, especially for a venture capitalist. It was not as if our conversation had felt rushed, but looking back it is clear that Ryan was managing the time throughout, and even before, our conversation. In our email correspondence through which we arranged to meet, not once did his reply exceed one line. You’ve seen these emails—capitalization, punctuation, and articles optional; greeting, text, and salutation all on the same line; liberal use of abbreviations—efficient. During our conversation in a hotel lobby, if a topic failed to grasp his interest, Ryan offered no more than a brief comment, immune to follow-up questions designed to prompt elaboration. When his interest was piqued, however, he would pause just for a moment to compose his thoughts before discoursing. Even then, he often disclaimed that, for the sake of time, he would not pursue the matter as far as he might. And it was clear that he could indeed speak at length about a variety of subjects; obviously well-read, during our conversation he referenced Max Weber, Charles
Sumner, Francis Bacon, the Apostle Paul, and Peter the Great, among others. Dulled by discussion of the state of corporate America, Ryan perked up when we began to discuss the religious dimension of business. “Scripture informs my professional life in the way that oxygen informs my biological continuation,” he asserted.

Ryan is one of almost one hundred evangelical executives I interviewed over the course of two summers. With Ryan and the rest, there is nothing ostensible that obviously distinguishes those I interviewed from other business leaders. They keep the same schedules, occupy the same executive suites, use the same business vernacular, and, for the most part, drive the same cars and live in the same houses. Ryan certainly looks the part of a venture capitalist; nice suit, fast car, hectic pace. Yet he claims that his faith is so integral to his work that, without Scripture, the foundation of his faith, he could not so much as catch his professional breath.

Without question, their faith informs the way informants talk about business in general and their work in particular. And their stories are fascinating—full of variety, irony, and unexpected juxtapositions and affinities. Their accounts call into question popular and scholarly descriptions of evangelical executives, a group whose very existence calls into question longstanding and increasingly obsolete stereotypes of evangelicals in general. Their accounts suggest that religion matters—in business as elsewhere—albeit in different ways and to different effects than are implied by common narratives regarding the strained relationship between business and religion. In fact, their accounts suggest considerable consonance between elite expressions of evangelicalism and business as understood and experienced in executive suites, along with considerable dissonance between perspectives on business endorsed by different groups of evangelicals. To these accounts we now turn.
CHAPTER 1: SIMILARITY AND DIFFERENCE

Raised in South Africa, Kirk’s grandfather was a Baptist minister and his parents were business people who started churches on the side. Consequently, he explains, he did not grow up with the idea that church work was more important than business or vice-versa; his parents did both. Following in his parents’ footsteps, Kirk was drawn to both business and ministry, and wound up pastoring a church upon completing college and obtaining his accounting certification. Always one to request and receive specific instruction from God, he then interviewed with one—and only one—global accounting firm because, as he told those who interviewed him, “I believe this is where I am supposed to work.” And as he tells it, they offered him a job because he felt called specifically to their firm.

While he enjoyed both assignments, Kirk confesses that it wasn’t always easy to live in multiple worlds. Despite experiencing what he considered a “temptation” to enter full-time, church-oriented work, he says that he “never had the release from God” and so was “stuck in two worlds.” “To make matters worse,” he reflects, “I began consulting to mission organizations and realized that what they really needed was business tools….They had evangelists, preachers, and guitar players, but they really needed financial analysts, marketing people, and systems process people.” Attempting as a full-time businessperson and part-time pastor to develop conduits through which to connect Christian businesspersons with ministries landed Kirk in a “no-man’s land” where he “took a lot of friendly fire” from people asking, “Why didn’t you go full-time?”

Eventually, in a sense, he did. In the midst of a distinguished career in which he advised companies around the world on financial, technical, and strategic issues, Kirk felt called by God to leave the consulting company at which he was a partner and establish an institute to “repurpose business.” For the last two decades Kirk has operated the institute with a stated goal
“to repurpose corporations and leaders so that they discover and implement a personal and corporate calling, thereby transforming people, societies and nations.” Kirk refers to the institute as a “corporate chiropractor” that helps businesses and executives increase impact through alignment. Practically, this means producing a “corporate x-ray” that identifies the key drivers of impact and diagnoses areas of misalignment. In addition to working on-site with management teams at interested companies, Kirk and his colleagues host retreats and seminars designed to train individuals in the biblical principles and practical strategies associated with repurposing businesses, all in the context of a supportive community of like-minded business leaders.

At the heart of Kirk’s perspective on the integration of faith and work is his insistence that both people and corporations have and must follow specific callings, or vocations. “I think we all agree that an individual has a calling,” he asserts. “Each of us is unique in some way, shape, or form, and so we believe we have a personal calling. That’s exciting and that’s good. Then at the macro level we’ll at least give head nodding to the fact that a nation can have a calling; at least the nation of Israel. We kind of go with the two ends of the spectrum. In between, however, we ignore the fact that families or households have callings. Before there was a nation, there was Abraham; Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—it was multigenerational. Then the tribes [of Israel] had particular emphases in thought. So I believe that a business is equivalent to a household in Scripture. There were many examples in Scripture of God dealing with families and households. So I believe that a business can have a calling—can have a purpose that is completely aligned with God’s purpose and that the particular legal entity with its pluses and minuses doesn’t impact the fact that a corporation can have a calling.”

Just as Kirk felt specifically called to work for one particular accounting firm, he believes that each company has a specific calling that is consistent with its particular strengths and
resources. The way a business fulfills its calling is by “developing products and services that meet needs God cares about that make the world a better place.” Kirk’s intent is to match company strengths with the social problems that God is most interested in addressing. “In every country that we go into we sit down with the business, church, and other leaders in that countries government,” Kirk explains, “and we will ask them, ‘What are the big challenges in your society? What are the big giants?’ And they can normally in a brainstorming session tell you pretty quickly.” As an example he cites South Africa, where the list of “giants” included HIV and the breakdown of the family structure, with poverty and unemployment at the top of the list.

“We take the list of giants as companies get a refreshed purpose and they develop business strategies to accomplish…a particular business purpose which is aligned with God’s purpose, remembering of course that our goal is not to get God into their business but their business into God’s business….We don’t mind which giants to [tackle]. We’re not prescriptive. We don’t tell them, you know, you do this one or that one. We simply say, ‘Hey, you pick them, as long as you’re addressing stuff that God cares about.’”

While Kirk labors to repurpose business, Raymond, an investment strategist for a Fortune 500 financial services firm, scoffs at the idea. When I asked what one thing he would change about his firm, he interrupted before I could finish the question. “Dream on,” he said, laughing, “Wave a magic wand and make half, if not all, of the employees followers of Jesus Christ...” Raymond focuses not on changing the purpose of the firm, but instead on changing the people in the firm, and even then, he is skeptical of the potential for influence, and for good reason. “I just had a very difficult time at work, including really a double-level demotion for something I didn’t
do that they wanted to blame on me,” Raymond reflected. Once seen as candidate to lead the powerful Wall Street firm for which he worked, Raymond still occupied an important position, but was no longer part of the inner circle of top executives. The pretext of his demotion, he recounts, included accusations of deceptively enhancing the apparent performance of the portfolio for which he was responsible—a charge he denies. While he won’t claim that his faith commitment had anything to do with his demotion, neither will he rule it out. “When I was on the executive committee there were about a dozen people and there were two of us that weren’t Jewish. The other guy was a non-practicing whatever, so me the only Christian. So who knows? I never felt anybody thinking, ‘Because you’re a Christian we’re going to push you aside,’ but who knows?” What is clearer to Raymond is that his allegiance to Christ indirectly contributed to his demotion, explaining that his colleagues, and the executive team, in particular, “bleed [the company].” “I don’t kiss the holy ring every time I’m in New York. I just try to do my job.” While he would not characterize his professional life as one fraught with tension, he recalls occasions when his unwillingness to embrace a win at all costs culture resulted in adverse consequences. “When those around me or above me have said, ‘You’ve got to go kick that guy in the teeth,’ when I’ve decided I should tackle the issue a little bit differently, have I gotten yelled and screamed at for some of the stuff I’ve done? Absolutely, all kinds of four-letter words, physically pushed, it’s all happened!”

One of the positives to come out of this difficult period in Raymond’s career is greater opportunity to share his religious convictions with others. “I think during that period my prayer was—and I think this was God’s way of answering my prayer—‘Lord, help me to climb down,’ is the prayer I called it—climb down from a job and a career that is all-consuming and taking too many hours to one where I have a little more balance and allow me to use that extra time from
this chair as a platform to speak to others.” For Raymond, balance does not entail more rest. “I need to learn how to relax,” he confesses. “I don’t know how to relax, and I’m not comfortable relaxing. I’m always thinking about the next thing, always working on the next thing.”

By all accounts Raymond has put to good use the extra time he now enjoys as a consequence of his reduced responsibilities. He tells of learning to be a Christian leader in the financial community, and in particular of speaking at conferences and campuses. These days he receives invitations to speak at some of the most important evangelical gatherings in the world and some of the most prestigious business schools in the country, where he generally speaks for one hour to the Christian fellowship and another to the investing or finance club. Even to the latter, he claims, “I mention the main reason I’m there, which obviously creates an opportunity for all kinds of intrusive questions along the way.”

Raymond retired a few months after we spoke, an event that generated significant publicity and speculation—some not very generous—about the circumstances of his departure. For his part, Raymond, through spokespersons of his former firm, cited the desire to allocate more time to his family, his faith, and philanthropy. Less than six months later, he took another full time job—one in which he expects to travel almost half the time. In published interviews these days, he now cites as the reason for his “retirement” the need to recharge. Apparently he is still working on learning to relax.

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Nancy is not much for relaxing, herself. The CEO of a publicly owned food service company, Nancy offered that if I wished to dialogue with her about matters of faith and work before our scheduled interview, I could call her during her vacation. After all, she emailed, “I
can’t vacation all day!” A natural and energetic leader, Nancy suggests, “When I try not to be a leader, I just fail miserably.” “There was a family reunion when I was nine years old,” Nancy recollects, “and I decided that every family reunion had to have a play production, and I had to be the producer. I started organizing things at a very young age, and telling people what to do, and helping people see what their role was.” Not only was Nancy producing family plays at age nine; she claims to have started planning her career at the same age. “By then I was picking colleges. There wasn’t even a web then, but I was getting organized at nine for a career. Go figure! But, I lived in this environment where I was just encouraged to pursue and learn and grow. So, it felt very natural. My parents had four children. All four of us are CEOs. How weird is that?” she asked.

Unusual or not, Nancy’s ambition for and exercise of leadership roles have been a source of tension with the faith communities to which she has belonged. With respect to her role as a business executive, Nancy confides, “I’ve been told by pastors at my own home church that what I’m doing is not biblical, certainly a disservice to my family, and maybe even sin.” She characterizes the circumstances of female Christian business leaders as one of inherent conflict and laments, “Frequently you do not receive the support of your minister in your church, or your neighbor, or your best friend. You have to have really rigorously decided that you are okay, spiritually, with work, because you have to defend it all the time.”

Faith-oriented criticisms are not the only criticisms Nancy has had to engage. During the week leading up to our conversation, Nancy had been invited to meet with First Lady, Michelle Obama to discuss ways to combat childhood obesity. “I sell fast food for a living,” Nancy deadpanned, “so this is a conflict on a lot of levels.” Among those points of conflict is Nancy’s political orientation. “I’m not really a big fan of this administration,” she admitted, “and then
I’m going to get yelled at because I serve fast food for a living.” For these reasons, and despite the honor of the invitation, Nancy did not want to attend the meeting. But, feeling compelled to view the situation through what she calls her “faith construct,” Nancy concluded, “Okay, faith model: I will be respectful to the First Lady of our country. I will stand. I will be polite. I will not exhibit one iota of disdain for the wife of our President, ever. That’s faith based—overcoming whatever my humanness is to do that. That’s biblical—to respect people, treat all people with dignity.” Alas, this perspective did not make the meeting any more pleasant.

“When [Michelle Obama] says, ‘Will you serve carrots in your restaurant?’ my first mind said, ‘Ugh, nobody buys carrots!’ But, I will go home and think about carrots. One, a person of leadership has asked me to think about carrots. Yes, too many children are not eating enough carrots, and I will think about my role in feeding carrots to people. I mean that seriously. That’s a ‘taking your faith to work thing,’ and putting it up against the business realities—that nobody buys carrots and I’m going to throw away more carrots than I’m going to sell. How do you deal with that? How do you make money and sell carrots? But, if I’m a faith person, I’ve got to think about it.”

She may very well think about it, but if our conversation is any indication, she is unlikely to change the menu. In response to criticisms leveled against fast-food restaurants, Nancy is quick to encourage moderation and deny responsibility for consumer behavior, even making a theological principle of the right of consumers to manage their diets. “You know, I really believe in that whole concept of free will; a central faith principle for me, therefore, is personal responsibility, and I think we’re given a lot of choices in life to do or not to do and that it’s our responsibility to figure this out. I can drink too much, I can smoke, I can lie, cheat, or steal; I can do any of those things that are bad for me and relatively speaking fast food is one of the least of
those possibilities. I am not into regulating what I am allowed to eat or drink or smoke.”

Essentially, by providing food that is, in her estimation, only unhealthy in excess, Nancy provides opportunities for the cultivation of restraint. “I probably come more from the school of moderation,” she asserts. “My grandmother lived to be ninety-seven. She made a really good custard pie. She didn’t eat it three meals a day.”

Nancy is eager not just to deflect criticism regarding the health impact of the food served at her restaurants, but also to assert the positive value of her line of business. “When a restaurant is well run,” she boasts, “we provide a real sense of family and community, a place you enjoy going every day; you do something well and good, take care of people, and feed them.” More broadly, and despite the disapproval she has experienced from co-religionists, Nancy has been able to convince herself not just of the value of her line of work, but that her work is a legitimate spiritual vocation to which she has been specifically called. “It starts on the first page [of the Bible], where God said, ‘There will be work.’ I can’t find anything wrong with that, when I read that chapter on creation. I think [God] intended for it to be good and fruitful and healthy, and purposeful. He made the garden really beautiful, so that might have been our first clue that it was going to be a good thing. Only our human nature has twisted work into something not good. My theology of work is a very positive theology; therefore, I have no bad feelings,” Nancy claims.

Phillip does feel bad about the impact of his work at one stage of his life. “If I can help other twenty-five to thirty-five year olds avoid making the same mistakes I did, I think that is huge.” The mistakes Phillip references consist of allowing his career to overwhelm his life to the
point that he developed a drinking problem and imperiled his marriage. A high achiever with an MBA from Harvard, Phillip rose rapidly through the ranks of the automobile industry through a combination of talent and hard work. “I never stopped working except when I slept when I was going through the meltdown,” he recalled. During the most difficult period, he estimates that he was out of the country seventy to eighty percent of the time, sometimes for two or three weeks in a row. “I hated that experience,” Phillip laments. “I hated the trips. I hated the environment.”

And it wasn’t just the schedule or the workload that was problematic. He explained that, in the parts of the world he worked, “bribery is part of the culture. They do not even see it as wrong. You are just kind of expected to pay government officials to get favors, and [companies there] don’t see anything wrong with it. American companies try to play by American rules, and a lot of times they get slaughtered in the process. I just hated that issue. It is very much a relational, tit-for-tat deal—pay to play. It was kind of like Chicago politics. I just didn’t like it.”

Moreover, he complained, “As an American business man, they always try to set you up with prostitutes because they want you to have a good time. It is just an embarrassing, awkward situation when you say no and offend them. I just hated all that.”

The combination of an overwhelming travel schedule and an uncomfortable moral environment prompted Phillip to request a return to stateside responsibilities. Phillip’s request was denied, and consequently, he took another job in a related business, only to find that his lifestyle worsened. By this time his wife had moved away with their children and Phillip was completely dispirited, feeling that “everything I’d worked for was gone.” He needed a fresh start in a new professional context—a business environment that was consistent with his values—one where he could live consistent with his faith. Around that time the founder of a family-entertainment company for which Phillip served on the board asked him to take a more
prominent position with the company. Impressed with the way the owners, who were committed Christians, did business, Phillip “felt called to help them to create Christian principals into their business.” “This is the way I always wanted a business to run,” he said. “I want to reflect my faith in my work.” The problem, he explained, was that accepting the position would mean taking a two-thirds pay cut relative to what he had been earning. Figuring that, in order to stay in the same house he would need to make $30,000 more per year than he was offered, Phillip prayed about the opportunity. The day the owner offered Phillip the job, he too prayed—for confirmation that this was what God wanted and that Phillip would accept the offer. The very same day, Phillip exults, he received a phone call offering him a board seat for $30,000 a year, confirming in his mind that this opportunity had been providentially arranged. He took the job and, he explains, “Ironically, the pay thing kind of took care of itself, and I became CEO.”

Looking back, Phillip explains the transition from his former job to his present job as a function of a reorientation from what he calls “to-do goals” to what he calls “to-be goals.” “I spent the first thirty-five years of my life focusing on my to-do goals: I want to be at a certain level, certain income, certain net worth, certain responsibility where I want to use my MBA. It was what I want to do in my job. It was very single dimensional. The to-be goals that I have now established for myself in my early forties and that have taken me into my early fifties and that I am so much more content with are the rules that I want to have and how I want to behave.” These days Phillip is able not only to focus on his personal to-be goals, but to extend the concept of to-be goals to his company, as well. The company’s motto, which he conceived, is adapted from a phrase excerpted from the Apostle Paul’s first letter to the church at Corinth: “love is a verb, not a feeling.”
Strikingly, in reflecting on the ways his career nearly destroyed his life, Phillip blames himself, not the nature of business in general, public company incentives, in particular, or even the particular circumstances he found so difficult. It was not the hours, the travel, or the obsession with financial results that caused him to neglect those things he now values most, but his own obsession with advancing his career. If only he had cultivated an appropriate perspective and been motivated by the right things, Phillip believes he could have acted out his faith like he does at his current company, where he does so with the support of the company’s owners. When asked what might have helped him avoid the dark place he inhabited at the nadir of his personal and professional journey, he replied, “The Bible. If I would have just followed what it said. I think most people have way too much knowledge and have way too little execution. The decisions I made to do what I did were not really biblical. I think all the answers are in the Bible if I would have followed what it said.”

**SHARED EXPERIENCES, RELIGIOUS FOUNDATIONS, AND PERSPECTIVES ON BUSINESS**

Kirk (consultant), Raymond (investment strategist), Nancy (food service CEO), and Phillip (entertainment company CEO) have much in common with each other across several dimensions, including career stage, family circumstance, and religious beliefs and practices. All in their fifties and married with three or four children, each has managed to ascend the corporate ladder and summit with families intact. They are ambitious and hard-working individuals who made their way into the upper echelons of the business world, but whose success has come as a function and cost of deep commitment to their work. We have seen that in his previous positions, Phillip worked and traveled to the point of excess, and he estimates that he still works close to seventy hours a week, typically retiring to the study at home to do some work after the
rest of his family is in bed. Nancy ordinarily spends Monday and half of Tuesday in the office, traveling the rest of the week. When I asked how she spends her free time, she replied, “First, you assume there is some.” Balance is in short supply on Wall Street, too, and even well-meaning attempts to introduce it can backfire. When Raymond was commuting three-hours per day, longing for a local position that would add to time at home with his young children, the person who recruited him suggested that instead of commuting for three hours a day, he take one of those hours for himself, give one to his family, and give one to the firm. He took the job. But, he explained, “The P.S. is—I gave five hours to the firm, because it was so messed up.”

Even now, as we have seen, he hardly knows how to relax, and his first attempt at retirement didn’t take. Retirement holds little appeal for Nancy, either. “If I work until the day I die, I’m okay with that. When my husband says, ‘When are you going to retire?’ I say, ‘Retirement’s not in the Bible. It’s not there. Nobody retires in the Bible.’”

Each of these evangelical executives describes an inflection point at which he or she began more conscientiously to attempt to integrate faith and work. For Kirk, the catalyst was a sense of specific calling to start an institute; for Nancy, being diagnosed with a serious illness prompted her to reconsider her priorities; for Raymond, working and living in the same place enabled him to hold different parts of his life in closer relation, and his demotion forced him to rely on his faith more heavily than ever; and for Phillip, the near-collapse of his family necessitated a major shift in career direction. All now feel called to their work in some capacity and desire to participate in ministry—at work, as elsewhere.

Each of the executives introduced thus far also share most of the same foundational religious perspectives and God-concepts. All quote Scripture extensively, viewing the Bible as authoritative and replete with specific principles that straightforwardly prescribe appropriate
perspectives on and behaviors in the midst of contemporary institutions and circumstances, and thus speak to the nature of business and how it should be run. All four perceive God actively orchestrating their particular circumstances and directing their thoughts and actions. Each identifies specifically as an evangelical, and none claims a strong denominational preference. Despite sharing fundamental religious beliefs with one another and most other evangelicals, each has also, to varying degrees, experienced criticism associated with their chosen profession—made to feel by members of their own faith communities that their work is, at best, a poor substitute for true ministry.

The overriding theme of their accounts is an intense resolve to characterize business as a worthy vocation, and this despite the fact that business has in some ways been a source of difficulty for themselves and others. Phillip’s climb up the corporate ladder placed him in moral predicaments and jeopardized his family relationships. Nancy has experienced intense criticism for her career choices from those close to her. Raymond has endured painful and personal attacks at work, perhaps prompted by his faith commitments. Kirk thinks business as currently conceived is fundamentally misguided. Nancy and Raymond have to fend off charges that their companies do more harm than good—to the physical and financial health of the nation, respectively. And yet, their assertions regarding the value of business are overwhelmingly positive. Sometimes these assertions are more generic. As Kirk says, “The world needs business. We believe in business, support businesses, and make no apology for being a business because we believe it is generally the most efficient vehicle to get the job done.” Sometimes they are more specific. As Nancy asks, “What’s more rich than providing meals to people? It’s a very caring kind of work when you think of it that way.” Generic or specific, these four business leaders insist that their work matters, undeterred by criticism directed at business in
general or their companies in particular, or even by the dysfunctions and difficulties they have experienced in their own work. Businesses, these executives insist, promote a variety of positive consequences for a variety of groups of people.

In some ways such assertions are hardly surprising. As Wuthnow (1996) has shown, almost everyone sees their work as an important source of personal worth and a channel for enhancing the world around them. Business elites, in particular, have for generations argued that the economic and social benefits of their work accrue not just to themselves, but to society at large, citing the salutary effects of enlightened self-interest. Evangelical executives are not unique in wanting to feel good about their work. But what is particularly interesting about the way the evangelical executives I spoke with describe the value of their work is the religious language in which this value is described. For example, it is not just that, as Raymond the financier asserts, “if every firm maximized its value, the standard of living of each person on this planet would be a little higher,” but that, as Kirk the consultant insists, “Deuteronomy chapter eight verse eighteen says it is God who has given us the ability to create wealth,” and that, as Nancy states, “the idea that God might have made some enterprise to create wealth makes sense.” The overriding message is not simply that business is worthwhile, but that it is sacred—a God ordained institution that is integral to the accomplishment of God’s purposes. These evangelical business leaders are burdened to portray business as a sacred domain by demonstrating that God is present in and works in and through business—to see themselves as participating in ministry in some sense, inasmuch as their work advances religious purposes.

According to Kirk, when a company develops a product or service that addresses an important social issue, the company “glorifies God” in doing so. “Now, from a perspective of somebody that believes the Word of God,” Kirk counsels, “I have to say, ‘What’s the purpose of
man?’ It’s our purpose to know God, to enjoy Him, to glorify Him in religious language. How does a company, which is simply a collection of people working together for a greater good, how do they come to glorify God?” The answer, Kirk insists, is by following its calling.

When discussing the purpose of business, Nancy, too, waxes theological. “We’re part of God’s economy,” she states, “and in doing our work, which I think is His will, you combine a community that is relational and healthy for humans to live in at the highest order, and at the lowest order we sell meals and make money.” Even as businesses produce material provisions, they make spiritual contributions, as well.

While Phillip and Raymond are less specific in connecting material and spiritual objectives, the very fact that they feel specifically called to business lends spiritual importance to their work. Phillip claims that, with respect to the owners of the family entertainment company he runs, he “felt so called to help them to create Christian principals into their business.” Raymond, too, believes he is where God wants him to be. “I’ve made more money than I ever thought I would make, and we’re at a point where we’re giving it away,” Raymond shared. “My view is, ‘God, to the extent you want me here, I’ll earn as much as I can and I’ll give it all away.’”

**DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES AND EMPHASES**

These four evangelical business leaders share an intense desire to portray business leadership as a worthwhile spiritual vocation, the umbra of which tincts every aspect of their professional lives and the accounts they use to describe them. At the same time, perhaps even more striking than their shared sense of purpose are the diverse ways these executives attempt to infuse their work with spiritual significance.
**MEANS VERSUS ENDS**

Whereas Kirk encourages businesses to go beyond “maximizing shareholder value or its bankrupt derivative purposes,” Raymond sees maximizing shareholder value as an appropriate goal. In fact, presented with an alternative way of thinking about business, proposed by a Christian businessman, namely that “the purpose of business is not to maximize profits, but to steward our resources to serve the world in an economically sustainable way,” Raymond responded, “Yeah, I take issue with that.” Given the nature of their firms and professional backgrounds, such differences are hardly surprising. Kirk, who as a consultant advised companies on their strategic direction, is conditioned to evaluate big picture issues regarding corporate strategy. Raymond, a financier, is more inclined to focus on returns on investment. As an investor, Raymond cares less about what a company produces, as long as it makes money doing so. Accordingly, while Kirk considers what a company does in the first place, Raymond is more preoccupied with how well a company accomplishes whatever objectives it pursues.

Relatedly, whereas Kirk focuses on the impact businesses can make on communities and even entire societies and Raymond emphasizes the value his company contributes to shareholders, Phillip and Nancy emphasize the benefits their companies provide to employees. Phillip leads a private company whose owners include among their stated objectives not just making a profit, but providing “a great place to work for great people” and maintaining and demonstrating “Christ at the heart.” Phillip, therefore, is able to balance the financial interests of the owners with the interests of employees, as evidenced by the firm’s policy of contributing from profits to an internal foundation that meets employee needs. It is difficult for Nancy, meanwhile, to make a very strong case that the wellbeing of customers is paramount in light of the criticism she endures regarding the health effects of the food served at her restaurants. For
her, when thinking about what she considers higher-order purposes, it is easier to think about the training and support her restaurants provide to employees.

Kirk, as we have seen, believes that businesses can and should tackle society’s most recalcitrant problems. Raymond focuses more on business’s economic impact. “You know, if every firm maximized its value, the standard of living of each person on this planet would be a little higher. Is that contributing something to society?” Raymond asked, before answering his own question, “Yeah, I think it is.” Phillip is especially proud that his company numbers among its purposes not just creating income, jobs, and a service that people are willing to pay for, but helping employees who are in need. “We have a foundation that we have established to help our employees in need that is funded through employee donations and company matches,” he explains, adding that “the stories are fantastic.” Nancy, meanwhile, is eager to point out that “one out of four Americans’ first job is in the restaurant industry and it’s where they learn to show up for work, how to wear a clean uniform, how be trained in a skill, how to work collaboratively with other people, how to move up to the next level.” “When a restaurant is well run,” she adds, “we provide a real sense of family and community, a place you enjoy going every day; you do something well and good, take care of people, and feed them.” For Nancy, the sense of community her restaurants provide is a source of pride.

Businesses, these four executives assert with different foci and emphases, contribute to higher living standards, offer opportunities for character development among both employees and customers, cultivate caring communities, provide essential products and services, and address stubborn social problems. The benefits they produce, moreover, extend to a variety of stakeholders, including employees, customers, shareholders, and communities.
Along with different stakeholder emphases, the four evangelical business leaders place differential emphasis on the ends businesses accomplish and the means by which they accomplish them. Kirk, for one, contemplates the effect that repurposing businesses could have on entire societies, and Raymond references rising living standards. For Phillip, in contrast, what a company produces is less important than how it operates. Unlike Kirk, Phillip makes no reference to addressing social or spiritual problems. In fact, what Phillip’s company offers is, in a sense, not an antidote to the world’s disorders but an escape from them. “We want what happens inside the gate to feel unique and not remind people too much of what’s going on right outside the gate,” Phillip explains. What matters most to Phillip is that his company operates according to Christian principles. As such, he has made an effort to extend the concept of to-be goals beyond himself to the company, as well. All company leaders go through training during which Phillip and other company leaders explain “that the problem with the English language is that there is only one word for love, but there are three in Greek.” As Phillip understands it, “eros doesn’t hold up well when things aren’t going well, when there is frustration and anger. Agape love is a verb; it is a behavior—how you treat people when you want to have a healthy relationship. We want to have healthy relationships at work so that is why we use this verb. It happens to be the management style that Jesus used,” he says.

**Diagnosing Disorders**

Alongside their support for business, Phillip, Nancy, Raymond, and Kirk acknowledge that, for various reasons, businesses sometimes fail to fulfill their purposes. Just as they articulated different perspectives on the purposes and primary beneficiaries of business, so they offer different diagnoses regarding how and why businesses fail to fulfill their underlying objectives. For Kirk, incentives that prioritize the interests of shareholders indicate that business...
as commonly understood and practiced today is misdirected and in need of repurposing. Raymond associates dysfunction with the misguided interests and actions of specific business leaders, including some of his coworkers, but does not sense that business is in need of fundamental reform. In thinking about what is wrong with business, Phillip points to himself; if only he had followed Scriptural principles more closely or adopted healthier perspectives, business would not have represented a destructive force in his life. Nancy, too, views business’s shortcomings as a spiritual issue. Recall that, for Nancy, the most important function of her restaurants is facilitating a sense of community for employees. It is with significant concern, therefore, that she cites a survey indicating that eighty percent of people are not happy at work. Hypothesizing about the root cause of employee dissatisfaction, she states, “I start with the heart and human nature because I think that’s where everything goes astray; after that you create structural problems. For example, if you say, ‘The way we invest in and grow our businesses in the United States causes an environment where stealing, lying, or heartbreak occurs,’ that’s just because that’s what humans create in their worst state in any structure. I really do think it’s a spiritual problem at the heart of any workplace problem, but that’s my worldview.” The antidote, Nancy posits, is a new perspective. “I literally laughed out loud this morning at this article that says, ‘CEOs, there’s one four-letter word you should start using, and that four-letter word is love.’” It’s the value proposition that most CEOs still don’t get….It really starts with the heart.”

**BUSINESS AND MINISTRY**

Different understandings of the nature of business and different emphasis on its primary benefits are accompanied by different understandings of the relationship between business and ministry. For Nancy, business is a venue for ministry—a place where she is able to influence
others. “I really believe that we have vocational callings,” she explained, “and that ordinary, everyday work—whether you’re making sandwiches or making electronic equipment—can be a place where you exert influence on people’s lives, or touch people, or influence their spiritual journey. So, work to me is an outright mission field, and it will be mine in my life. I will never go to Africa and serve my church. I’m not cut out to do it; but this, I’m cut out to do this in a spiritual fashion and touch lives.”

Phillip agrees, specifically distinguishing between the purpose of business and his purpose in business. For Phillip, the purposes of business include “creating income, creating jobs, and creating a service that people are willing to pay for,” and, at least for his company, meeting employee’s needs. For Phillip, himself, however, “My purpose at work is to show that God is at work in my life. I just see every day as a ministry that I want to show people that God is working in my life. There are dozens of opportunities every day to do that—from how you greet people in the hallway, to your positive energy level, to how you admonish people publicly versus privately; are you selfish or unselfish, are you honest or dishonest, are you trusting or not, are you dedicated or not, do you help other people?”

Whereas Nancy and Phillip speak of engaging in ministry at work, Raymond emphasizes that business facilitates ministry outside of work. As we saw above, as long as God wants him to be in business, he will make as much money as he can and give it all away. Or perhaps not quite all of it. Raymond tells of arguing with his wife the night before the interview over whether or not they should buy a new car or a used car. “We can afford the new car” he said. “It’s not about affording a new car; it’s do we need that new car? What if we got the used car, or not the BMW that you want, and gave the money to…you pick it.” Raymond and his wife do indeed contribute financially to a number of organizations, most of which are committed to a
specifically Christian agenda but also to some academic institutions that are not associated with a faith tradition. He serves on the boards of several of the organizations to which his family contributes, and is heavily involved at his church, where he says his family has quietly matched every dollar raised for a new facility.

In sharp contrast to Raymond, Kirk is irritated by the idea that business serves an instrumental purpose in the church. “We have to discourage the notion of using business to fund missions,” he urged, adding that while we are at it, we might as well “scrap the term ‘business as missions.’” “It’s ridiculous from a biblical perspective because,” he insists “in the Old Testament the word for business and for ministries is the same word, so you may as well call it ‘business as business.’” While Nancy sees business as a forum for ministry and Raymond views business as a way to facilitate ministry, Kirk insists that there is no fundamental difference between business and ministry—indeed, that business is by its very nature, ministry. He recalls, “One of my staff said to me, ‘Kirk, are we a business or are we a ministry?’ and I said, ‘Yes.’ He said, ‘No, no, no, let me explain.’ He thought I didn’t understand the question—if we are a business then there’s a set of business rules; if we are a ministry there are ministry rules. I said, ‘No, no. There is the Kingdom of God and those are the rules. Business principles, church principles, government principles are just a subset of those things.’” Consistent with this perspective, Kirk’s institute operates as a business, charging fees that enable it to be self-sustaining and supporting Kirk’s contention that business is, or at least should be, ministry. Further supporting the equivalence of business and ministry is Kirk’s practice of encouraging businesses to produce products and services that address issues God cares about.
In light of their diverse organizational contexts, professional responsibilities, and understandings of the relationship between business and ministry, the four executives profiled in this chapter feel called to different things. Kirk’s sense of calling is clear and expansive. He specifically desires to repurpose business with the resources of an institute he felt called to start. Raymond, in contrast, does not feel called to alter the purpose of business in general or of his firm in particular, but rather to make all the money he can in order to be able to make substantial contributions to worthwhile causes. Phillip believes that God specifically arranged for him to become the CEO of his current company, where he feels called to implement Christian principles and exemplify God’s work in his own life. Consistent with the distinction he made between the purpose of business and his purpose in business, Phillip focuses on specific personal interactions and impact. When asked about his sphere of influence he admits that it is large and growing, but contends, “Honestly, I could care less about that. I really am one who—I like the one-on-one impact. I like the stories where I’ve seen our foundation help a person and I can tell that story, because that’s what resonates with people’s hearts and souls….To tell you I’ve spoken to a thousand business leaders about servant leadership, who cares? I mean, I care, but I’d much rather tell you about this one person that I helped get their life turned around, who is now working for us when we fired him, and I went to his graduation because I was the man who came into his life. He had seven brothers and sisters through seven different men. He had no father figure in his life. Those are the stories that are meaningful to me. I would rather help one deeply than help a thousand superficially.”

Largely as a result of her own experience of discrimination, Nancy has resolved to be “a visible Christian leader” for the sake of other women facing similar circumstances and
disapproval. “They’ve got nobody to talk to, look to, encourage, or support them,” Nancy
complains. To prove her point, she continues, “If you do a Google search about devotion books
for women who work—the last time I did it, there were five. For men who work, I think it was
eleven thousand. So, you know, you can’t even find published material; you can’t find a Bible
study; you can’t find support.” Moreover, while she is satisfied that her calling is legitimate,
feeling as though she has heard from God to that effect, such subjective experiences do not
satisfy all interested parties. “Boy, when you have to explain that to you brother, and your
minister, and your next door neighbor, I really believe that it’s the reason why there are so few
Christian women leaders. It’s too hard. It’s just too hard.”

**GOD TALK**

As one final example of how these four executives differ in terms of how they attempt to
apply their faith in business, consider their differential use of religious language in general and
their energy for evangelism in particular. Raymond has long sought opportunities to discuss
spiritual matters with his coworkers. “I pray for the leadership of the firm, that the Holy Spirit
would tug them and make them understand their need, and/or give me an opportunity to witness
in some way by some small or big thing, as appropriate. I pray that for this team here, the team
that I interact with more often.” More specifically, he reflects, “I like it when I’m sitting at that
table in the morning, having my quiet time, and somebody says, ‘I know Raymond always gets
in early. Let me go ask him something. Let me get it done while I can.’ They walk in and I
have the Bible open. Sometimes nothing’s said. Sometimes, ‘Oh sorry to interrupt you,’ and I
say, ‘No, come on in, come on in.’ So that’s one way [I witness]. Two, I mention my faith from
time to time, [saying] ‘I’ll pray about that,’ or to somebody who’s got an issue, ‘I’ll pray for
you.’ Sometimes, after a while they’ll just say, ‘This is Raymond; that’s what he says.’

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Occasionally somebody comes back and says, ‘Just what is it you pray about?’ Subtle, hopefully clear and direct, and hopefully the Holy Spirit leads that person to ask a question or two. That’s one way [I share my faith]. The other is by the way we conduct ourselves. We all live in fish bowls, particularly if you claim to be a Christian, people are watching.” While Raymond makes little attempt to infuse business strategies or company policies with religious language, he does hope to “witness” at work, though he prefers to wait for people to ask. As such, he regularly signals his faith but infrequently verbalizes it.

Despite viewing business as a mission field, Nancy, meanwhile, has “stopped short of outright evangelizing” in the workplace, even though “others think it’s the first thing we should be doing in the workplace.” This does not mean that sharing her faith with others, in the hope that they will be persuaded to adopt it, is unimportant to Nancy. But like many of those with whom I spoke, Nancy prefers indirect modes of “witnessing.” “I have personally found role modeling and relationship building to be the most important precursor to spiritual influence, not lecturing or passing out pamphlets or books. So, I live my life and let people ask—and what’s really interesting is that in leadership roles, people do ask you—people will look at me and they’ll ask, ‘Why are you calm in this situation? This is not a calm situation,’ and it gives me an opportunity just to tell them why. ‘How do you balance being a working mother?’ And it gives me an opportunity to tell them spiritual ways I do that. I think if we listen carefully, it’s amazing how many opportunities we get to share [our faith].”

Despite her reluctance to initiate conversations about faith, Nancy desires that her company be a faith-friendly place. “I think businesses should be hugely faith friendly, because if you think of faith as a means of discovering your purpose…no matter what faith you pursue, it’s kind of finding your purpose in the universe. If you are in step with your faith-given purpose,
you bring your whole self to work. You are at peace. You are energetic. You’ve got a lot to
give. So, why not tap into that?” Nancy asks. Noting that the team that runs her company’s
Middle East operations are all devout Muslim, she recalls unknowingly scheduling a meeting
during Ramadan. “I publically apologized and said, ‘I respect that this is an important tradition
of your faith. I intended no disrespect, and I’m really quite horrified that you’re here and you’re
not with your family, and that I’ve allowed this to happen.’” Summarizing her thoughts on the
topic, Nancy concludes, “I think when you shove [faith] under the carpet, or suggest that it’s not
important, you leave people no option but to lead these two lives—their real life, and their work
life. I’m just against that idea.”

While evangelism is an important responsibility for evangelical Christians, Kirk
disparages the idea of witnessing at work, at least as the primary thrust of integrating faith and
work. For Kirk, what makes a business a Kingdom business is not that Christian employees
witness to non-Christians or that it incorporate religious language, but that it pursues worthy
ends through honorable means. Consistent with this disposition, Kirk is quite content, and
indeed in many situations compelled, to communicate such ends and means in non-religious
language. “You have to appeal to good business sense,” he explained, “not, you know, it’s a
good thing to do, God wants you to do this, etcetera, etcetera. That will scare them off. Make a
connection between doing the right thing and the impact on the company.”

This does not mean that Kirk does not use more explicit religious language if his clients
are receptive to it. He recalls, “I had an example with a company overseas where the CEO was a
Christian as was the COO; the head of product development was a Muslim. There were
Buddhists on the management team. You know, a whole cross section. And when we talked
through redefining the purpose of the corporation it fell into three sections: One was what they
would do for the people in the company themselves, the second was what they would do for the industry, and the third was the impact they wanted their company to have on their particular country and other countries. When we got to the third part of the conversation they had through an exercise chosen two words to describe the desired impact, which were ‘Blessing Nations.’ The Muslim guy raised his hand and said ‘Kirk, I don’t believe we can bless nations. I believe only God can bless nations.’ Now that’s a stretch further than you would find in many conversations here in the USA. But that’s what he said, so I took him back to God’s conversation with Abraham. Of course as a Muslim he was happy with Abraham, so I said, ‘Look, this is what happened when God conversed with Abraham; God said to him I will bless you and you will be a blessing to all nations.’ So that’s a principle—a top and bottom line. The top line is that I will bless you. The bottom line is that you will be a blessing. It’s what God told Abraham. He looked at it for a moment. He paused—and this is a Ph.D., a smart guy—he said, ‘Okay.’”

Now that Phillip is in charge of a private company that is owned by committed Christians, he is much more inclined to use specifically religious symbols and language. “You don’t have to believe in who Jesus was,” Phillip makes clear, “but we actually give out a statue of Jesus washing Peter’s feet to those who want it. If they don’t want it, like the Muslim person chose not to put one in her office, and that is understandable. She still went through the class, and she still enjoyed it. Our point is regardless who you think he was, it is pretty amazing that on the last night he had with his disciples, he could have done a number of things. He could have given them his writings. He could have given them money. He could have introduced them to kings and queens. Instead, he got on his knees and washed their feet and said if you don’t behave like this you are not part of me. That is a pretty powerful thing. If you were
making up a religion, you probably wouldn’t make that up. It is too weird to be made up in our minds. That’s kind of how I talk about it that it is all about behavior. We do talk openly that the words are from the Bible, and Jesus is a great example of great leadership according to those words.”

SHAPED BY CONTEXT

The divergent perspectives elaborated above do not seem to be a function of differential religious beliefs or commitment, but instead seem to correspond with the organizational contexts the executives occupy. All four take their faith very seriously. Kirk, for example, has demanding standards for faithfully discharging one’s religious responsibilities, framing his thoughts regarding a Christian approach to business in opposition to what he considers to be the prevailing concepts of what it means to be a Christian in business. “If you’re speaking with a Christian businessman in Texas and he says, ‘I’m a Christian and I’m in business. I have a particular set of books; I’m a nice guy; I go to church on Sundays; therefore, I have a Kingdom business,’ it’s generally not true. Most of the business people that we meet are Christian in regards to salvation and humanist in regard to the way they run their business. And so most are Christian-humanists.” Raymond certainly articulates a stronger desire to bring his faith to bear on his work than does the Christian humanist Kirk derides. When asked what he aspires to, Raymond quotes Scripture, saying that he wants, upon meeting God after death, for God to say to him, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” He tells of consistently praying the following prayer: “God, for every day you allow me to wake up, I’ve got twenty-four hours. Am I using these twenty-four hours in every one of my spheres of influence in the right way? And are they
the right spheres of influence? If not, hit me over the head and tell me I should be spending more time here and less time there or whatever.”

Both Kirk and Raymond insist that faith is something that matters every day, but this looks very different for Kirk than for Raymond. Kirk, who sets his own schedule, strongly disagrees with the pursuit of balance, perceiving it as an impediment to integration. “Balance is bogus,” asserts the promotional material for one of the institute’s training programs. “It is a futile pursuit, an elusive dream. Integration, on the other hand, is the philosophy that wins at the end of the day.” The relevant program is designed to “dare you to stop balancing life's ever-increasing demands and start living 100% of your life fully integrated with your purpose,” after which “you will be freed from the false notion of balance and embrace a holistic vision for your life that is fully integrated with your purpose and calling.” For Raymond, who works in a more competitive, results-oriented environment, balance is a destination, a state of equilibrium wherein work assumes an appropriate emphasis and leaves room for other important pursuits. For Kirk, balance is the vocabulary of disintegration, the vain quest to keep the separate spheres of work and faith from contaminating one another.

While these four evangelical executives have much in common, their professional backgrounds, trajectories, and circumstances differ in important ways, as well. Kirk has chosen to attempt to influence businesses from outside them, having withdrawn from a larger company context to start his own advisory practice. He has now surrounded himself with a small team of people who share his convictions and embrace his vision for corporate reform. Like Kirk, Phillip transitioned to a corporate environment in which he is relatively free to work in ways that are consistent with his faith, having been attracted to a privately owned company owned by committed Christians who encourage him to run the firm in accordance with Christian principles.
The dynamics of Phillip’s firm, however, are different inasmuch as it is much larger and its employees more diverse. “We choose not to call ourselves a Christian company,” Phillip emphasizes. “I say we have Christian owners, and we have Christian principles. We employ people of all faiths and we do not want them to feel uncomfortable because they don’t believe a certain way.” “They will be uncomfortable if they don’t behave a certain way,” he adds, “but everybody will be [uncomfortable] whether they are Christian or not.” Given the diversity of employee perspectives, Phillip does not experience quite the same degree of latitude to promote a specifically Christian vision as does Kirk. Unlike Kirk and Phillip, Raymond remained with a large, public company—even after his uncomfortable demotion and despite the consequent strained relationships. As such, his ability and even desire to shape the purpose of the firm is constrained. “[This] is a publically-owned company,” Raymond stated, “and we are ultimately responsible as employees to the owners of the company, and they’re the shareholders. They want us to maximize the value of the firm.” Nancy, meanwhile, leads a publicly traded firm that operates under a franchise model, such that franchisees are added to the list of stakeholders whose interests she attempts to balance.

These four executives’ companies belong to a variety of industries and produce different types of goods and services marketed to different types of customers and with more or less obvious connections to the public good. Kirk’s company markets a service that is specifically designed to make other companies’ products and services more worthwhile. Phillip’s company is a service business, as well, providing family-friendly entertainment and recreation experiences. Raymond sells a service, too, namely the attempt to turn money into more money subject to pre-specified investment goals and risk tolerances. But while the services Kirk’s and Phillip’s firms provide are unlikely to prompt objection, the value of the particular service that
Raymond’s firm provides has been vigorously challenged by academicians, practitioners, and consumers, who assert that asset managers make a handsome living despite not demonstrating the ability, in aggregate, to outperform the stock market or randomized investment processes. Nancy, meanwhile, sells primarily food that is widely understood to be unhealthy.

These four executives are also influenced by the size and location of their companies and by their areas of professional expertise and their positions in their firms. While Kirk’s institute is very small, composed of just seven employees, Raymond works for a Fortune 500 firm that employs close to 10,000 people. Nancy and Phillip oversee midsized firms, each responsible for 1,000-3,000 employees. Kirk and Raymond operate on the West and East Coasts, respectively, where people typically demonstrate lower levels of religious commitment, and evangelicalism is sparsely represented. Nancy and Phillip, on the other hand, operate in a major metropolitan area in the Bible Belt, where conservative forms of religion, in particular, are prominent. Three of the four business leaders occupy the highest ranking position in their firms, while Raymond held a position of leadership but was answerable to higher ranking executives, limiting his discretion to shape the strategy and culture of his firm. Finally, while each possesses broad business knowledge such as is required to lead or hold significant responsibility in their firms, the four business leaders have different areas of professional expertise. Raymond is best versed in finance, Nancy in leadership, Kirk in strategy, and Phillip in operations.

Varying organizational contexts appear to give rise to several other perspectival and behavioral differences. For example, because Kirk and his team are formally outside of the organizational boundaries of the companies they advise, he and his institute only bear a very small fraction of the risk of implementing the types of reforms he proposes. While for Kirk’s institute repeat business is presumably a function of the perceived value of his recommendations,
for the leaders of the companies he advises, changing corporate strategy is surely a difficult and risky proposition. Certainly it seems easier to think about and recommend wholesale reconsideration of the nature of a company when your livelihood does not depend on it. That said, Kirk originally intended for his institute to be housed in the large, publicly traded consulting company for which he worked at the time he began contemplating the idea. As he recounts, “When I was at [the consulting firm] and I felt that God told me to start an institute I assumed it would be at [that company]; that was where I was working and God hadn’t told me to move yet. So I went to them and I said, ‘I think we should start an institute,’ and they said, ‘Great, what’s an institute?’ So we talked that through, put a business plan together and then I went to the president of the company and I said, ‘I want two months a year from the institute to do pro bono consulting for non-profits,’ and he agreed.” Though Kirk did not elaborate on the reasons this arrangement was discontinued, it seems likely that he now experiences greater freedom to articulate and implement his agenda with the institute an independent entity. Needing no external capital to finance the operation, Kirk is answerable to no one but himself for how he spends his time and allocates the resources of the firm.

Despite Kirk’s choice to work from outside companies, part of his institute’s objective is to equip rank and file employees to exert influence within their firms. While Kirk and his team allocate primary attention to corporate leaders because of “their potential to make a huge difference, and to leverage their influence,” they also provide a program for people who are just “one of x thousand employees.” To inspire people like these Kirk points to biblical examples like Daniel, Joseph, and Nehemiah who, Kirk explains, “found a gap [in the organizational context in which they found themselves], even as they remained respectful to the authorities and
structures they encountered. They weren’t trying to use up anything or take over the company—they were doing their job. But they got the resources of the company behind God’s agenda.”

Kirk teaches rank and file employees—who have no direct influence on the course of an organization—to look for “pain points” in a company so they can find opportunities for influence. “We teach our people to say, ‘When there is a problem in the company that’s God’s opportunity.’ If there’s a problem with product development, or with a customer service issue, or returns, or with receivables, that’s an opportunity to ask God for a creative solution.” He recalls, “One of my staff members was working at a major manufacturing company and noticed that people were always working late and she was concerned about that. What was going on? She found out there were problems with the product development process. She came up with a new process. It solved the problem, was better for the health of the employees, their families, and the company. And what she put together got written up in an industry article and became an industry standard. She wasn’t looking for an opportunity to witness or say ‘in the name of Jesus.’ She saw a problem that was inconsistent with the way God would want the thing to operate and came up with a creative solution.”

While this example sounds promising, the prospects for widespread implementation of such an approach are cloudy. One clue as to the difficulty of actually implementing the orientation he proposes is the nature of his clientele, which consists mainly of smaller, privately owned firms. While he and his team have worked with public companies, in such cases he insists that “the owner needs to have a significant influence and the reason is because public companies often hide behind tolerance and all this kind of stuff and they don’t want to take action. And so we think the battle is won or lost in the mid-market companies.” “I’m not saying a large company a public company cannot do it,” he continued, “but the corporate veil provides
more excuses to not actually tackle some of these tougher things except in a politically correct way—you know, support United Way Worldwide or something; Boy Scouts of America might even be too risky nowadays—but you know, something nebulous. And so, the impact gets watered down.” Kirk acknowledges that it is much more difficult to implement the principles he prescribes in large public companies than in the middle-market firms he focuses on.

Nevertheless, there is some hope that eventually the strategic orientation he endorses will be embraced by companies of all types and sizes. “Our goal isn’t just to repurpose businesses,” Kirk says, “but to get a critical mass of corporations, business, media, government, etc. repurposed in major cities such that there will be transformations in their societies.”

Raymond’s experience suggests that this is easier said than done. While Kirk insists that the battle is won or lost with mid-market companies, Raymond is disinclined to join the fight in the first place, showing little interest in changing or “repurposing” his firm. Wall Street is a bottom-line environment, obsessed with measuring and maximizing. About this, as we have seen, Raymond has little qualm. In light of the demotion Raymond described and the intense devotion required of executives to the financial interests of the company, it is difficult to imagine that Raymond would have much room to lobby for change even if he so desired. While not at the absolute top of the corporate hierarchy, Raymond is much more than just “one of x thousand employees” at his firm. And yet, he sees little prospect of changing the way the firm does business, focusing instead on the spiritual health of his co-workers. One wonders if Kirk would gain an audience at Raymond’s firm, and if so, how his message would be received.
DIVERSE INFORMANTS

Even for those who share a number of core religious convictions and overriding dispositions toward business, the ways they express and claim to live out their convictions are appropriate to their particular contexts. Thus, in their accounts we find both uniformity and diversity. From the start, then, we should abandon any attempt to identify the evangelical approach to faith and work. One of the great virtues of studying religion outside of specifically religious contexts is that it reminds us that there is no Platonic religious essence that can be abstracted from the competing institutional priorities in which it is situated. Religion is no more a priori than are other institutions. Terms like executive and business elide important variation in informants’ professional contexts, responsibilities, and backgrounds. In fact, given the important differences between informants and evangelicals in general, it will be helpful to set aside preconceptions about evangelical dispositions and priorities. Despite the evangelical emphasis on faith as the most important thing in life, it is not necessarily the case that religious identity is more salient than occupational context. At the same time, neither should we assume that context is determinative. As we have seen already, informants sometimes select into particular contexts that they believe are compatible with their faith commitments.

By design, the group of executives I interviewed is characterized by abundant contextual diversity, such that we should be able to distinguish between domains of rigidity and flexibility. I chose to open with accounts from these four executives in particular because they give a sense of the similarities and differences evidenced by the full range of evangelical executives I interviewed. All are deeply committed to integrating faith and work and enthusiastic proponents of the spiritual value of business, but each occupies a different organizational context. One owns and operates a small organization that primarily works with other organizations. One leads a
large private company owned by committed Christians. One had limited but significant management oversight in a publicly traded company run by people he suspects may be hostile toward committed Christians. And one leads a large public company whose shareholders compete with franchisees for her allegiance. To these and several other contextual differences are added a number of perspectival and behavioral differences regarding the spiritual contributions of business and the nature of faithful living in business. These evangelicals, in turn, differ markedly from the popular perception of evangelicals. Think back to Ryan, for example, the venture capitalist we met in the Introduction. For most people, a jet-setting, sports-car-driving financier is not who comes to mind when thinking about evangelicals. Indeed, Ryan is in many ways the antithesis of the stereotypical evangelical. Obviously not poor and, with four degrees in four disciplines from four elite universities, certainly not poorly educated either, Ryan is about as far from a rural Southerner as possible, having lived and worked on three continents and currently dividing time between major metropolises in Europe and both coasts of the United States. But Ryan shares with fellow evangelicals beliefs, practices, and religious intensity that transcend geographic and socio-economic characteristics. Before exploring the ways the evangelicals I spoke with differ from rank and file evangelicals, it will be helpful to have a basic sense of what nearly all evangelicals have in common.

During the course of my research I came across an offering envelope from a Southern Baptist church attended by one of the evangelical executives I interviewed. Southern Baptists are the largest evangelical denomination, numbering sixteen million members and, as the name suggests, clustered primarily in the South. The envelope, slightly weathered from its use as a bookmark and probably now a decade old, had spaces for congregants to enter name, address, and Sunday School class affiliation, as well as areas to indicate financial contributions to the
general budget, a building fund, and a separate capital campaign. The envelope, to be completed and submitted weekly, also contained a series of check boxes, including the following: Present, Bible Brought, Bible Read Daily, Lesson Studied, Giving, Worship Attendance, Number of Visits to Prospects, and Number of Visits to Members. This envelope, along with the expectations and accountability it communicates, imply a good bit about the values and intensity of commitment that characterize evangelical Christians.

Evangelicals are a group of predominantly white conservative Protestants who hold a particular regard for the Bible, embrace a personal relationship with God through a “conversion” to Jesus Christ, and are encouraged to lead others on a similar spiritual journey (Smith 2000; Bebbington 1989; Kellstedt et al. 1996; Wald, Owen, and Hill 1989; Hackett and Lindsay 2008). Evangelicals prize overt expressions of faith and esteem intense religious commitment. Evangelicalism is a “full-time” religion, and evangelicals consistently rank near the top of lists of religious groups in terms of frequency of religious participation and commitment to consistent spiritual practices like Bible reading and prayer. Consider the time it would take to check all of the boxes on the offering envelope described above; to attend a Sunday School class and a worship service, read the Bible daily, study a lesson in preparation for the Sunday School class, and visit both prospective and current members of the church could easily amount to ten hours per week, not to mention time dedicated to prayer and midweek activities at church. Then there are the financial expectations. Most evangelical congregations encourage their members to contribute both “tithes” and “offerings.” Tithing, generally considered a Scripturally mandated baseline level of giving, consists of contributing ten percent of income to God’s work, usually focused on supporting the local church. Contributions to building funds, special campaigns, and other religiously oriented causes and activities represent offerings, which are given over and
above the standard tithe. Apparently, God expects at least ten percent of evangelicals’ money and ten hours of their time per week, even if evangelicals contribute far less on average (Smith et al. 2008).

In some ways these expectations actually understate the claim evangelical Christianity makes on adherents’ lives. Religious traditions that require personal conversion or a deliberately chosen religious identity, as does evangelicalism, are especially comprehensive in their claims over the adherent’s life. The evangelical tradition of “accepting Jesus” stresses individual agency and a willingness to understand and frame all forms of activity—at work, at home, in leisure—as expressions of religious commitment (Griffith 1997; Martin 1996). Within many evangelical congregations, when a person converts to the faith, the adherent is asked to make a profession of faith that refers to Jesus as “Lord of my life.” Evangelical ministers often supplement this charge by challenging the new believer to dedicate every part of his or her life to God, reflecting the belief that the most important objective in life is a healthy relationship with God. The CFO of a media company, explaining the type of commitment required of evangelicals, observed, “Jesus said, ‘Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple’…everything. None of us are perfect at it, but it’s a state of the soul. That’s the one thing I would really want you to understand about me. This life of following Jesus—if it doesn’t start there, it’s leaving from the wrong station.”

The intensely personal nature of evangelicals’ “relationship with God” is an important dimension of the evangelical approach to faith. I was frustrated upon waiting for one of my interviews to begin, wondering why, even though the appointment time had come and gone, I was being given an extended tour of the office. As it turns out, it was a stall tactic. The insurance executive I was scheduled to meet had, apparently, become so caught up in his “quiet
time,” a designation many evangelicals use for their daily time of prayer, that he lost track of the time. “I’m running a few minutes late because I sat on my porch this morning in an extended quiet time with a trickling little water fall and just really got into the Scripture and the Word,” he explained.

In sum, evangelicalism as taught to adherents is an intense, personally appropriated, comprehensive, and continuously enacted religious identity that places premiums on both orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Demographically, self-identified evangelicals differ from the general population inasmuch as they are overwhelmingly white (81%), relatively uneducated (just 20% of evangelicals are college graduates), and slightly less likely to earn at least $100,000 (13% of evangelicals compared to 18% of the general population) (Lugo et al. 2008). They constitute a considerably larger portion of the total population in the South and the Midwest than the West and especially the Northeast. Consistent with the intensity of commitment described above, 79% of evangelicals consider religion “very important” in their lives, 78% pray daily, and 30% attend religious services more than once a week. Evangelicals are on average more inclined toward strict understandings of religious texts and concepts than are adherents of many other religious traditions; 59% affirm a literal understanding of the Bible as the Word of God and 41% assert that there is only one true way to interpret evangelical teachings, although only 36% insist that evangelicalism is the one true faith leading to eternal life. More than half of evangelicals identify as politically conservative and among religious groups evangelicals are among the most likely to oppose abortion and homosexuality and the least likely to support stricter environmental protection.

The business leaders I interviewed demonstrate characteristic evangelical sensibilities; they talk freely about their relationships with God, cite Scripture frequently, claim to engage
consistently in personal spiritual disciplines like prayer and Bible study, attend church regularly, and believe that faith should inform all aspects of life. Nevertheless, while they share with rank and file evangelicals a core set of convictions, informants differ from most evangelicals in important ways. Most obvious, of course, is their professional standing. The evangelicals I interviewed are business leaders, by which I mean that they now or in the past occupied a position of significant responsibility in a for-profit enterprise in a U.S. context. I estimate that most informants held positions that would be considered among the top two percent in terms of rank and responsibility in their firms. They are, therefore, significantly better educated and, of course, wealthier than most evangelicals, which could influence the nature of their religious convictions and their intensity of religious commitment. Weber long ago observed that the content of religious belief is shaped by the material condition of its adherents. Religious groups at the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum, such as early Christians and a significant proportion of conservative Protestants today, generally construct “theodicies of misfortune” that insist that wealth and other manifestations of privilege are indications of evil. Well-off religious groups, in contrast, typically construct “theodicies of fortune” that insist that privileges are deserved blessings.

Executives are particularly important in that they often have at least some discretion to shape both the competitive strategy and internal dynamics of their firms, and typically serve as the public faces of their organizations. Informants are unique even among aspiring evangelical business leaders in that the majority of them have reached the pinnacle of their professions. This study is, therefore, characterized by “survivor bias”—those who are interviewed are those who have succeeded in business. For the most part we do not hear from those who have, for any number of reasons, failed to realize their desired level of professional success or even left the
business world in favor of other pursuits, perhaps as a function of dissonance between professional responsibilities and faith convictions. However, while I asked for referrals to Christian business leaders who would be among the most influential employees in their firms, explaining that this might correspond to different titles in different sized companies, I could not always tell from prospective informants’ positions the extent of their influence in their firms. Four individuals I interviewed, including Kyle, the would-be CEO introduced at the outset, turned out not to occupy senior leadership positions in their firms; however, because they appear to possess the requisite skills, experience, and aspiration to ascend to such positions, conversations with these upwardly mobile evangelicals do provide useful insight into the dispositions of aspiring evangelical business leaders, and I draw on their interviews where relevant but note that they represent a separate case.

In order to identify evangelicals, most studies employ one or more of three primary methods: denominational affiliation, self-classification, and/or adherence to characteristically evangelical beliefs (Hackett and Lindsay 2008). In this analysis I rely primarily on beliefs and self-classification. Several scholars have argued that there is now as much difference within denominations as between them (Hunter 1991; Wuthnow 1989, 1988), and many who identify with and/or believe similarly to evangelicals can be found in Catholic congregations and those associated with mainline Protestant denominations, making denomination a suggestive but

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3 On some accounts evangelicals constitute up to 30% of the U.S. population, but their prevalence depends on how they are measured. In terms of their cultural location, two divergent portraits of evangelicals have emerged. On the one hand, Hunter (1983) describes evangelicals as relatively isolated and peripheral to mainstream society, relatively poor, poorly educated, and marginalized, and characterized by eroding orthodoxy, commitment, and salience, as increasing exposure to modernity undermines the plausibility of the evangelical faith (and this is particularly true of younger generations of evangelicals). Smith et al. (1998), on the other hand, depicts evangelicalism as a vibrant subculture energized by productive tension with mainstream institutions, with which evangelicals engage but retain symbolic distinction. Pluralism, on this account, strengthens evangelicalism by supplying relevant outgroups with whom to compare themselves. Hackett and Lindsay (2008) show that the differences in these two accounts are largely driven by measurement differences. The process by which I define and identify evangelicals, discussed below, is similar to Smith’s approach, and as such, evangelicals of the variety he and I studied are far less common than are those Hunter studied. Interpolating various measures of evangelicalism, the population of evangelicals to which the executives I interviewed belong constitute around 10% of the U.S. population.
indeterminate indication of religious identity. The overwhelming majority of informants self-identified as evangelicals, but seventeen specifically rejected the “evangelical” designation and several others indicated some hesitation to embrace the term, with both rejection and hesitation almost always on account of the public perception of evangelicals as judgmental and narrow-minded. In rejecting or qualifying the evangelical label, informants were rejecting popular perceptions, not doctrines or practices understood to characterize evangelicalism, and therefore, as long as they embrace characteristic evangelical beliefs, I consider them evangelicals even if they do not identify themselves as such. Informants almost unanimously consider themselves to be “born again” and believe that the Bible is inspired by God and that the only hope for salvation is through personal faith in Jesus Christ. Most also believe that the Bible is without material error and disbelieve in biological evolution, suggesting a conservative approach to Scripture interpretation and deference to the Bible over against science and other competing sources of authority. Two informants did not self-classify as evangelicals or embrace evangelical beliefs about the nature of Christian faith and salvation, and thus are excluded from analysis. Although denominational association is not determinative, it is still instructive; while informants as a whole did not indicate strong denominational preferences, approximately three-quarters of informants worship in churches associated with denominations that most scholars would categorize as embracing an evangelical approach to faith.
In all, I extended 187 interview invitations, of which 69% (129) were accepted. While some could not find a suitable time for an interview, I interviewed 79% (102) of those willing to participate, yielding an overall response rate of 55%. Just 3% of potential informants declined the invitation, while 28% never responded to my invitation. I employed a grounded theory approach to data collection and analysis, dividing interviews into two waves and allowing patterns gleaned from the first round of interviews to inform informant and question selection in round two (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967). Round one consisted of 40 in-person interviews conducted during the summer of 2010 and round two consisted of 62 phone interviews during the summer of 2011. The interviews took place, therefore, following the worst of the global financial crisis that began in 2008 but before the advent of the Occupy Wall Street protests, which might have made for a promising line of inquiry. Most interviews lasted around an hour and focused on informants’ perspectives on the role of business in society and the role of faith in business. I also discussed perceived social problems and responsibilities more generally, with emphasis on informants’ sense of agency and potential influence. Excluding the two informants who are not evangelicals and the four who do not occupy high-level positions in their firms leaves a total of 96 interviews with evangelical business leaders. Those interviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination of Informants' Current Church</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bible Church</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglican/Episcopal</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodist</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nondenominational</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undetermined</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
occupy leadership positions in companies with different ownership structures, sizes, locations, and industries, and are characterized themselves by different functional specializations and, in a few cases, demographic characteristics. Many informants have occupied several relevant positions, and are classified below on the basis of their current or most recent relevant position.

An important difference between this study and previous studies is the diversity that characterizes informants and their professional contexts. In fact, informants constitute the most diverse group of evangelical executives yet studied. The majority of informants held leadership positions in privately owned companies, which differ from publicly traded firms in important respects. They are, for one thing, not subject to the same reporting requirements as publicly traded companies, and therefore may not experience the same pressure to deliver quarterly financial results to the satisfaction of Wall Street analysts, potentially enabling a longer-term orientation accompanied by the ability to make economically or socially productive investments that involve significant up-front costs. Private companies may even, with the permission of their capital providers, who are likely much more concentrated than public shareholders, orient their efforts toward objectives other than that of maximizing economic value. It should be noted that, while the majority of informants held relevant positions in private companies, more than half of informants had current or prior experience in public companies, and would therefore not be unfamiliar with the pressures and dynamics associated with such business contexts.

Informants are relatively evenly distributed across companies of different sizes, as measured by number of employees. Companies of different sizes accommodate or necessitate different organizational structures, number and concentration of capital providers, types of funding, and level of external scrutiny—all of which can influence the discretion informants enjoy to pursue objectives consistent with their faith convictions.
Different industries experience different levels of competition and regulation, which can influence the culture and objectives of associated companies. Informants’ companies belong to a variety of industries and produce different types of goods and services marketed to different types of customers and with more or less obvious connections to the public good.

Because of the regional distribution of the key networkers who generated the majority of referrals to potential informants, as well as the order in which interviews were undertaken and from which more referrals were generated, informants are disproportionately located in the South, where cultural factors might make faith expression more acceptable than in other locations, such as on the East and West Coasts. It is possible, in fact, that more potential informants were identifiable in the South because evangelical business leaders are, in general, more public about their faith commitments in the South.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Table 1.2: Informants' Company Characteristics</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Capital Structure</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publicly Traded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privately Held</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Size (Number of Employees)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101-1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,001-10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10,001+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Industry</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investment Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Financial Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food and Beverage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Retail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Wholesale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consulting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Professional Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real Estate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Location</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midwest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1.3: Informants' Professional Experience and Responsibilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highest-ranking Officer</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company Founder</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional Specialization</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Resources</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operations</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public Company Experience</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Private Company Experience</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As discussed above, informants are among the most influential employees in their firms, though the positions to which this influence corresponds varies by firm size. The majority of informants occupied the most senior position in their firms, affording them considerable responsibility and influence. Thirty percent of informants founded their firms, most of whom maintain at least a controlling interest in their companies, giving them considerable discretion to implement policies that might sacrifice financial returns in favor of other objectives. About half of informants are responsible for charting the competitive strategies of their firms. Others have
different functional backgrounds and areas of responsibility, both of which can shape the ways organizational leaders set and pursue organizational objectives. As seen in Table 1.4, informants who occupy the highest-ranking positions in their firms generally do so in small to medium sized, privately held firms, though some informants lead large, publicly traded companies.

Table 1.4: Company Characteristics for Informants who are Highest-ranking Officers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size (Number of Employees)</th>
<th>Highest-ranking Officer (n=56)</th>
<th>Other (n=40)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-20</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-100</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101-1,000</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,001-10,000</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10,001+</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Capital Structure</th>
<th>Highest-ranking Officer (n=56)</th>
<th>Other (n=40)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Publicly Traded</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privately Held</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Because more than 80% of evangelicals are white and because women and minorities are underrepresented in the higher ranks of corporate America, achieving some level of diversity among informants proved a considerable challenge. As the interview process progressed, I began specifically to solicit connections with women and minorities who I might interview. Overall, 8% of informants are non-white and 13% of informants are women. These proportions, along with the variety of corporate contexts informants occupy, make this the most expansive study of its kind.
Table 1.5: Informants' Demographic Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;40</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60+</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highest Degree Earned</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MBA</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Masters</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JD</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on analysis of the eight interviews with minority informants, it does not appear that their perspectives or activities differ meaningfully from that of other informants. Women, on the other hand, do give indications of facing distinct pressures and tensions and of dealing with them in distinctive ways. The following table outlines select characteristics by gender.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male (n=83)</th>
<th>Female (n=13)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Size (Number of Employees)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-20</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-100</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101-1,000</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,001-10,000</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10,001+</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Publicly-Traded Company</strong></td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Public Company Experience</strong></td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Private Company Experience</strong></td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Highest-ranking Officer</strong></td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Company Founder</strong></td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Professional Specialization</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Resources</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operations</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;40</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60+</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Highest Degree Earned</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MBA</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Masters</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JD</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
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</tbody>
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While not too much should be made of differences between male and female informants given the small number of women interviewed, on average the women I interviewed were slightly younger than the men I interviewed and comparably educated, more likely to work for larger firms and for publicly traded companies, and more likely to specialize in human resources. Women were also less likely to occupy the highest-ranking position in their firms and, relatedly, to be responsible for their companies’ strategic directions.

I chose to conduct interviews, as opposed to conducting surveys, analyzing texts, or other methodological possibilities, because interviews are helpful for accessing information about personal histories, beliefs, values, and identities (Wuthnow 2011)—all important material for this study, and in light of and guided by the productive application of similar methodologies to religious topics in recent studies conducted by, among others, Ecklund (2010), Evans (2010), Lindsay (2007), Chen (2008), and Schmalzbauer (2003) and to other topics by, for example, Swidler (2013) and Davidman (2000). Ultimately, I am looking for meaning, and the ways evangelical managers individually and corporately construct and transmit meaning, and interviews are well-suited for this purpose. Observing that the only evidence Weber provided in support of the existence of a new capitalist spirit among businessmen was citations from Benjamin Franklin’s writings, Marshall (1982) argues that the type of data necessary to confirm or disprove Weber’s thesis would consist of interviews with the entrepreneurs and workers in question. Interviews elicit “accounts” that elucidate sense-making processes, allowing scholars to describe real people struggling in concrete situations to act as moral agents. As evaluative statements, accounts provide insight into informants’ moral repertoires. As public declarations, accounts indicate what informants believe to be socially desirable or acceptable to a particular audience. Accounts are important, therefore, for ascertaining the willingness and ability of
executives to deploy a moral language that challenges instrumental logic. Accounts, moreover, feed and are a product of “disputes” that force people to bring to the surface implicit concepts of value and worth instead of automatically conforming to institutional norms and exogenous pressures (Boltanski and Thevenot 2006).

Some scholars, sensitive to the consistent disconnect between what people say and what they do, despair of learning anything substantive about actor’s motivations from interviews. But such skepticism is excessive, since individuals who regularly face the need to justify their actions (like business leaders) are unlikely to engage in behavior they consider unjustifiable. Indeed, discourse is not only shaped by experiences and identities, but shapes identities and the ways experiences are interpreted. Saying something out loud gives the vocalist something to live up to—a reputation and/or course of action to uphold for the sake of consistency. In fact, it is generally through one’s talk that one’s beliefs influence others. Indeed, business leaders regularly set the tone for the organizations they lead, intentionally or not. Despite their limitations, therefore, interviews are a rich repository of interpretable meaning with implications beyond the subjects, themselves.

Of course, the usefulness of interviews hinges on interviewing the right subjects. It would hardly be informative to interview executives with a nominal faith commitment inasmuch as such commitment would be unlikely to influence these executives’ perspectives or behaviors in professional contexts or elsewhere. Therefore, I purposefully engaged executives with a demonstrated interest in the relationship of faith and work and/or a reputation for such interest. Most prospective informants had participated in programs sponsored by organizations designed to prepare Christian business leaders to integrate their faith and their work, indicating an interest in attempting to do so. Indeed, informants demonstrated considerable interest in issues relating
to faith and work. My sense is that I was generally referred to individuals who are considered to be exemplars *par excellence* of the incorporation of faith at work. As such, informants are likely to have devoted considerable thought to the topics addressed in the interviews. One informant is chairman of the board of a national ministry to CEOs that several informants participate in and find helpful. Another started a fellowship group in Silicon Valley to provide a network of support for Christians working in the tech sector. For years, one executive has organized a Christian outreach program at which businessmen meet twice a month at the Harvard Club in midtown Manhattan. Another informant, through a family foundation, established a center for the exploration of faith and work at a business school. To think together about the role of faith at work, some of the younger executives have convened less formal groups for personal friends or members of their churches. More than 10% of informants have written or edited books on faith at work issues, and another two are currently working on book projects. These activities suggest that, as a group, informants take the integrative task seriously. I sought out business leaders who are not merely exposed to or embedded in the corporation and the church, but deeply invested in them and adept at the strategies of action and vocabularies that are associated with them. Not everyone is fluent with the concepts and terminology necessary to switch back and forth between different institutional domains, but the best interviews come from those who, to borrow Weber’s metaphor, are “musical” in both the world of business and the world of religion.

In order to locate this type of evangelical executive, I began with a pool of potential informants supplied by the H.E. Butt Family Foundation, an explicitly Christian and broadly evangelical foundation that sponsors programs designed to “create opportunities for people to encounter God for the transformation of daily life, work, and our world.”

The list consisted of actual and potential participants in their events and was supplemented through input from a

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handful of highly networked individuals who are well connected with evangelical business leaders, often on account of having leadership positions and/or intense involvement in academic and parachurch programs oriented to encouraging Christian business leaders to integrate their faith and their work. Sixty-three of one-hundred-and-two informants were referred by these key individuals. In order to expand the pool of informants, I employed a snowball sampling technique wherein at the conclusion of each interview I asked for names and contact information for others who might be good candidates for the study. Informant referrals led to thirty-six interviews. In a few instances, I reached out to potential informants on the basis of reputation alone, without a specific referral, leading to three additional interviews.

This study was sponsored in part by the H.E. Butt Family Foundation and their sponsorship was disclosed to potential informants when interview requests were extended. The foundation’s positive reputation seemed to have helped significantly in encouraging participation, inasmuch as many informants were familiar with the organization and some had participated in its programs. In addition, sponsorship by an organization sympathetic to the application of faith at work likely encouraged informants to be more forthcoming about their own efforts to integrate their faith and their work, enhancing the quality of the data. At the same time, it likely encouraged informants to be more liberal in their use of faith-oriented language than they would be in many other contexts—a phenomenon that was likely intensified in some ways by my own educational background, which includes a Bachelor’s degree from a university with a Christian affiliation and a Master’s degree from an evangelical seminary. Informants almost never stopped to ask if I was familiar with religious language or concepts and generally seemed to assume that I would be in agreement with their assertions about religious beliefs and phenomena. A couple of informants even asked to pray for me and the study at the beginning or
end of their interviews. At the same time, some informants seemed not sure what to make of my field of study and affiliation with an Ivy League university, seemingly encouraged by the presence of an assumed coreligionist at an elite academic institution but occasionally remarking about the assumed anti-Christian or anti-business bias of my colleagues. Most seemed unable to gauge my own disposition toward business, sometimes becoming defensive in ways that made it seem to me that they assumed the critiques of business I raised in the interviews were my own. For some, it seemed, my professional experience in the management consulting and investment banking industries mitigated any wariness associated with uncertainty about my perspective on the propriety of business as currently practiced. On balance, my professional and educational backgrounds likely enhanced the quality of the interviews inasmuch as informants did not feel the need to “dumb down” religious or business concepts.

As might be expected, scheduling interviews with executives proved challenging, so much so that I waited months for some interviews. But this does not indicate lack of interest among potential informants. On the contrary, it is clear that there is great interest in the religious dimensions and worth of business among the evangelical executives to whom I extended invitations, and informants demonstrated considerable passion, emotion, and deliberation when discussing the role of faith in their professional lives. I was in almost every case shown plentiful hospitality, greeted warmly, and wished well. While informants were uniformly enthusiastic about the project, several expressed apprehension about how interviews would be used and a few were concerned about confidentiality\(^5\). Despite a general trend toward increasing receptivity to expressions of faith in corporate contexts, some evangelical business leaders prefer not to broadcast their faith commitments.

\(^5\) In order to maintain confidentiality, I use pseudonyms throughout and redact quotes as necessary to remove potentially identifying details.
In this chapter we have seen that the evangelical executives I interviewed share certain underlying religious commitments and broad perspectives on the spiritual value of business, but that the ways they attempt to demonstrate and enhance this spiritual value differs markedly. As we proceed we will meet many more executives. But refocusing on the four with whom we have become familiar in this chapter, what stands out most in their accounts is the enthusiasm, tinged at times with defensiveness, with which they assert the spiritual worth of business and the range of different strategies by which they assert this worth. Having established in the Introduction that religion can matter in economic life, we are starting to get a sense of how it does matter for evangelical executives. Religious themes and resources, it seems, allow the evangelical business leaders I interviewed to rebut those who would question their “calling” to business leadership, endorse hard work without apology, and understand and explain business objectives and responsibilities in religious terms. It enables these executives to say in good conscience that faith is the most important thing in their lives, despite the all-consuming nature of their work. By highlighting the religious value of business, informants are able in their minds to live integrated lives in which faith is manifest in all areas of life, including work.

Crucially, the executives with whom I spoke do not attempt to be all things to all people. Fast food may be unhealthy, but restaurants provide community and character development. Wall Street may not mitigate global warming, but it does raise living standards. Public companies may be immune to repurposing initiatives, but some mid-market firms might embrace them. One executive emphasizes the products and services a company produces; another emphasizes the way products and services are produced or the economic value they generate.
One attempts to evangelize at work; another saves such efforts for other forums. It appears that, in order for evangelical executives to consider business sacred, all that is required is that some aspect of business or their work therein contributes to some spiritual objective for some group of people, or at least has the possibility of doing so. Practically, this affords these business leaders abundant flexibility to uphold the spiritual value of business in a variety of contexts, supported by all manner of rhetorical devices and forms of evidence. Without such flexibility, we might wonder whether informants could embrace their professional roles with such vigor and enthusiasm, for the scripts that work for a principal in a small venture capital firm do not always apply for the head of an international consulting firm, who is accountable to a broader set of partners, and the resources and support that are available to Christian men are not always available to Christian women.

Given the apparent flexibility felt by informants to affirm the spiritual worth of business, as we proceed we should steer clear of the misrepresentation of religion as an essentially regulative phenomenon, holding open the possibility that it both proscribes and empowers, even liberates. This we will explore in more detail. But first, we will seek to better understand the intense desire to assert the spiritual worth of business in the first place.
“I didn’t grow up in a Christian context,” explained Jin, the founder and CEO of a privately held software company. “I became a Christian through the ministry of Young Life in high school and basically I was a converted pagan. And like many people who get serious about their faith, in my enthusiasm I wanted to be a missionary or a pastor or something but some folks were helpful in saying there’s a much broader sense of vocation. I was always a technology geek and enjoyed reading physics textbooks when I was in junior high and high school when other people were doing more age-appropriate things. But I just loved technology. And when I wrote my first computer program I had this kind of ‘ah-ha moment’ where I felt like it was almost like creating something ex nihilo—out of nothing. It was a sense of feeling like this is what I was created to do. So I think vocationally, I thought that was part of who I was to be.”

Jin’s ability to consider his work a vocation was neither obvious nor natural. In fact, he relates having to overcome the perception that business was less spiritual than professional ministry options like being a missionary or a pastor. He confides, “I think part of the challenge for me—and I’d even say a struggle—is that from the evangelical context from which I come, we’ve had a sort of dualist view of the world in which the spiritual stuff is what’s important and the material stuff isn’t that important. I think recovering the sense that everything in life can be holy and is intended in fact to be redeemed and sanctified can be challenging.”

SECOND CLASS CITIZENS

Jin is far from alone in the struggle to find spiritual significance in business. He recalls, “My vice president of sales and marketing—a woman—grew up in a Christian family and we processed some things together, and she finally said, ‘I finally feel like I’m validated as a human
being. My sister is a missionary, and I always felt like a second class citizen.’ Actually having someone who understands that what she’s doing here is just as vocationally significant in God’s kingdom as what her sister is doing was transforming for her. I think often times there’s this sort of guilt that we ought to be doing something else instead.”

For some evangelical executives, the perception that business is a second class occupation is difficult to overcome, producing angst and guilt. “I’ve asked that a lot,” shared the CEO of an investment firm. “Should I be in business? Or should I be more about spreading the gospel.” Likewise, another investment professional confessed, “I even had somewhat of an antipathy towards the business world in particular, as being an arena that was problematic from a Christian standpoint, as well as one that just seemed like it was socially negative, in many respects. So, overcoming that has been one key to professional success.” It would be difficult to overstate the burden these evangelical executives feel to justify business to themselves and others. For the evangelical executives I interviewed, thinking favorably about business is less a perquisite of than a prerequisite for professional success. Why might this be the case?

**The Evangelical Imperative**

“It’s not about me,” explained the CFO of a publicly traded energy company, echoing the opening line of one of the best-selling books of all-time. “Whatever I’m doing, the larger purpose is to change the world, to point the world to God.” *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren, founder and senior pastor of an evangelical megachurch in Lake Forest, California and perhaps the best-known evangelical spokesperson and activist in the United States today, serves as a manifesto of sorts for many evangelicals. In fact, by the end of 2005, one-quarter of all American adults and nearly two-thirds of evangelicals were said to have read the book. Several
of the executives I interviewed mentioned and/or quoted from it, and in fact, nine of the evangelical business leaders I interviewed specifically quoted the opening line without prompting.

According to Nancy, the fast food purveyor we met in the last chapter, “My favorite line in the book is in the first paragraph of The Purpose Driven Life where Rick Warren writes, ‘It’s not about you.’ A lot of people live their whole life and never figure that out. If you believe you were created by God and that he’s the big guy and you’re the ant, it is completely defining in how you approach work.” In the gospel according to Matthew, Jesus is reported to have said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it (16:24-25).” For most of the executives I spoke with, appropriate business practices start with an appropriate perspective on business, and fundamental to this perspective is the idea that everything can and should have a purpose that transcends personal satisfaction. In fact, most of the executives I spoke with were quick to deny that they were in business for themselves, asserting instead that their professional standing was in service to others. Nancy reflects, “I’ve worked for a lot of people when it was just about them, and how many points they racked up, whether it be dollars and cents or boats or planes or awards or golf games, whatever, they value it personally. I’ve made a very conscious decision to separate from that model. But that’s different; that’s really different. Because I think it is human nature—most people are ambitious for their own gain. That is the downside of our human nature, and you have to fight that. So, how do I approach things differently? I fight my human nature. I fight pride. I fight ego. I try to get it out of my thinking and my day. It’s cliché, but I try to use a more service-
focused, calling-focused way to think about leadership. But, if anybody tells you it’s easy, that’s inaccurate.”

In elaborating our purposes in life, the opening chapters of *The Purpose Driven Life* emphasize one key contrast—that between the temporal and the eternal. “The things we see now are here today, gone tomorrow,” Warren writes, “but the things we can’t see now will last forever” (49). Likewise, Warren quotes C.S. Lewis to the effect that, “All that is not eternal is eternally useless” (50). In light of the importance of the eternal relative to the temporal, Warren recommends that “Christians should carry spiritual green cards to remind us that our citizenship is in heaven” (48). For evangelicals, in order for something to be of lasting significance, it must contribute to spiritual objectives, which include, according to Warren, worship, service, fellowship with other Christians, conformity to the character of Christ, and evangelism—all of which represent different dimensions of what it means to “glorify God” and all of which are ostensibly foreign to the practice of business, or at least to its generally stated purposes.

The evangelical imperative is to live with purpose by looking past the material to perceive every aspect of life, including work, in spiritual terms. As the owner of a chain of car dealerships, asked, “How do we infuse the world of the marketplace with a certain animating spirit or ethos that emanates from our Christian faith? If you were to say kind of my distinctive sense of calling—that would be it.” While some studies suggest that many Americans now prefer to seek meaning outside of work (Wuthnow 1996), the business leaders I interviewed have not abandoned hope of finding spiritual meaning at work—indeed, in light of the evangelical imperative, for one thing, and their schedules, for another, they cannot abandon hope of finding spiritual worth in business. Compelled to contribute to eternal objectives, but almost fully consumed with professional responsibilities, evangelical business leaders have little choice but to
pursue spiritual influence in and/or through work. Even then, they sometimes wonder if they are fulfilling the evangelical imperative. “Am I doing enough?” Nancy wonders. “You know, that kind of massive question of—I’m being a CEO, I’m being an industry leader, but I’m not doing anything right now in my church.”

**Evangencial Perspectives on Business**

The evangelical emphasis on eternally significant objectives helps explain the impetus of evangelical business leaders’ assertions regarding business as a spiritual vocation, but the intensity of such assertions is nonetheless surprising. For many of the evangelical executives I spoke with, the burden to frame business as a worthy vocation is intensified by pointed criticism from within their own religious tradition, precisely on the basis of the religious convictions they presumably share. Due in part to their history of relative marginalization and a subcultural identity that trades on embattled status (Smith et al. 1998), many evangelicals are suspicious of material success and especially the accumulation of wealth, drawing sharp contrast between spiritual objectives and material concerns (Keister 2003). As evangelical business leaders find themselves enjoying a measure of success that is largely unprecedented for evangelicals and a degree of prosperity that has been unknown to all but a few of the world’s population, many of their coreligionists find it difficult to imagine that they can succeed in business and remain true to their faith.

Many people would be surprised to learn that, on the whole, evangelicals are less committed to economic conservatism than is commonly assumed, and at any rate less likely to view private enterprise as praiseworthy and equipped and inclined to ameliorate social problems. Stephen Hart (1996), having analyzed quantitative and qualitative data on the economic
perspectives of various Christian traditions in America, concludes that there is no connection between theological conservatism, such as characterizes many evangelicals, and economic conservatism, corroborating earlier analysis by Iannaconne (1998), who found that evangelicals are nearly as likely as other Protestants and the broader population to advocate increased government spending on health, poverty, education, the environment, and problems experienced by African Americans and associated with urban development. Iannaconne argues further that there is no “free-market consensus” among evangelicals, and that when evangelicals endorse free markets, they often do so in naïve contrast to socialist systems. Hart, moreover, contends that, in terms of their perspectives on economic issues, biblical literalists are actually more liberal than non-literalists. Likewise, Woodberry and Smith (1998) insist that the average white conservative Protestant is more economically liberal than are mainline Protestants. As such, though the evangelical executives I interviewed generally avoid congregations that are openly critical of businesses and their leaders, they likely share pews with congregants who are, at minimum, distrustful of successful businesses and their leaders.⁶

Evangelical business leaders face three primary lines of criticism from within their camp, propounded variously from the lectern, the pulpit, and the pew. The first, propagated mainly by some evangelical scholars, centers on business as a corrupt activity within a corrupt economic system. The second, often articulated or at least implied by clergypersons, emphasizes not so much that business is corrupt, but that it is unspiritual and therefore of secondary importance.

⁶ Hart’s, Iannaconne’s, and Woodberry and Smith’s estimations notwithstanding, other studies suggest that evangelical business leaders also share pews with those who approve of or endorse free markets. Other scholars (Campbell and Putnam 2012; Skocpol and Williamson 2012), for example, have highlighted affinities between evangelicalism and Tea Party conservatism, along with its at least implicit approval of capitalism. The former group’s analyses, therefore, demonstrate not that rank and file evangelicals are unanimously hostile to business, but that a sufficiently strong current of disapproval exists that informants are almost certainly exposed to it, as their accounts indicate.
The third, consistently embraced by clergy and laity alike, maintains that the accumulation of wealth is immoral.

AN IMMORAL ORDER

Though by no means univocal, there is in the broad Christian tradition a long line of thought that condemns the pursuit of profit as unbecoming a follower of Christ. The fourth-century Catholic priest, St. Jerome, insisted that “a merchant can seldom if ever please God,” and St. Augustine, a fifth-century Christian bishop and progenitor of much evangelical theology, wrote, “Business is in itself evil.” As Weber asserts, “Surely it scarcely needs to be proven that the spirit of capitalism’s comprehension of the acquisition of money as a ‘calling’—as an end in itself that persons were obligated to pursue—stood in opposition to the moral sensitivities of entire epochs in the past…” ([1904-5] 2002:33). Focusing on Jesus’ teaching, Weber observes that the Gospels and the church forbid the charging of interest, without which the competition for capital that characterizes rational capitalism could hardly take hold. More broadly, Weber insists that the Bible favors economic traditionalism, from Jesus’ petition for daily bread to the eschatological expectation that Jesus’ return was imminent and accumulation of money or possessions therefore senseless.

Contemporary evangelical critiques of business, arising primarily from within the scholarly community and most ardently from what is sometimes called the “evangelical left,” add to this foundational skepticism the assertion that business as practiced in capitalist systems is responsible for a great many of the economic, political, cultural, and environmental evils in the modern world. Well-known Christian writer and political activist, Jim Wallis, for example, has stated that capitalist “economic institutions act to make profit, accumulate wealth, and exploit the
poor, workers, and consumers, while ravaging the environment instead of providing for the equitable distribution of goods and services” (1976:63). The essence of the critique articulated by evangelicals like Wallis is that business, in the sense of free enterprise, is a fundamentally immoral order in which the few profit at the expense of the many. This group reserves for business leaders particular disdain. As Gay (1991: 26) documents, “they hold the American business elite responsible for treating employees ‘as one more resource to be cheaply exploited,’ for requiring ‘near depression-level unemployment,’ for foisting largely useless products on consumers, for producing frequent periods of inflation and recession in which only the illusion of affluence is preserved, for neglecting modernization of basic industries, for developing what has been called the ‘national security state,’ for squandering valuable natural resources, and for the general deterioration of human potential.” Moreover, Gay (1991: 63) explains, “The [evangelical] left assumes that in the capitalist political economy virtually all social power is concentrated in the hands of a tiny business elite and that the rest of society, including what is ostensibly a democratic polity, is manipulated to the advantage of this elite.” Citing a variety of Scripture passages indicating God’s special interest in and concern for the poor, critics of this persuasion argue that profit-oriented business is directly opposed to fundamental Christian concerns.7

Concerns about the nature and effects of commercial enterprise among the evangelical community are not confined to members of the evangelical left. Though considerably less strident, many mainstream evangelical scholars who research and discourse on political economy evidence concerns about business (Gay 1991). While acknowledging some positive aspects of

7 Again, this is but one strand of evangelical thought regarding capital enterprise. Other scholars (Dochuk 2010; Kruse forthcoming) argue that evangelicals have played a profound role in the political advance of economic conservatism. Again, the point is that their remarks indicate that informants are both aware of and sensitive to criticisms such as those advanced by evangelicals like Wallis and Sider (2005 [1978]) and, more recently, Mott (2011) and McLaren (2009).
capitalism and the businesses that flourish in it, mainstream evangelical scholars lament the inability or unwillingness of businesses to consider the common good and to incorporate spiritual concerns. Especially concerning is the assumption, thought to be associated with capital enterprise, that ever increasing measures of production and consumption constitute the sole or best criterion of human progress. Whereas the left considers the adverse effects of the market economy the deliberate and devious objective of the business elite, the evangelical center is more willing to admit that outcomes associated with a market economy are unintended but suboptimal consequences.

A SECOND-RATE ACTIVITY

The critiques of commercial enterprise articulated by evangelical academics are typically filtered and spread throughout the evangelical community by means of the clergy, whose seminary training under such scholars often instills in them a suspicion of business. Frequently dependent for their livelihood on the largesse of congregants who have succeeded in business, and more likely than academics to include businesspersons in their social circles, any disapprobation expressed from the pulpit is generally more subtle than that articulated in the classroom and the press. Although some evangelical ministers disparage business to varying degrees, many choose instead to elevate other, more spiritual, vocations. As we have seen, some evangelical executives lament their perceived status as “second-class citizens.”

Much of the tension here arises from the evangelical emphasis on Christian pietism, or the conviction that what is most important is one’s spiritual condition, or relationship with God. As we have seen, Warren’s The Purpose Driven Life consistently contrasts money and possessions (“worldly wealth”) with spiritual blessings (“true riches”). Warren further encourages Christians, including those who make a living in business, to be “Kingdom Builders”
and not just “Wealth Builders,” explaining that Kingdom Builders “use wealth to fund God’schurch and its mission in the world.” While not explicitly denouncing business, Warren,capturing and fostering a pervasive sentiment among evangelical ministers, gives it at best aninstrumental purpose in pursuit of more important, spiritual objectives. In some ways this is notsurprising; given the generally low pay and prestige associated with vocational ministry and theneed for a steady flow of new ministers to maintain the viability of the institutional church,religious institutions have ample incentive to extoll church-centered ministry as a particularlycommendable profession.

**UNGODLY WEALTH**

Related to the evangelical prioritization of spiritual pursuits over against material concerns, accumulation of wealth by any means—through business or otherwise—is sometimes regarded as unbecoming or immoral in evangelical religious instruction. Among the most cited portions of the Christian scriptures are those pertaining to financial matters, and it is often noted that Jesus said more about money and wealth than about any other topic. In the Synoptic gospels Jesus advises, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourself treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in and steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” “The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil,” admonishes the author of the epistle to Timothy, and Jesus warns that “one cannot serve God and money,” adding elsewhere that “it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” Jesus’s encounter with a rich young ruler is particularly striking. Upon inquiring as to how he might inherit eternal life and after insisting on his fidelity to the Jewish law, the ruler was enjoined by Jesus to “sell all your possessions and give to the
poor,” stating that this was the key to treasure in heaven. While portions of Scripture are more tolerant of riches and more than a few biblical heroes are affluent, the distinction and, indeed, antagonism, between material and spiritual goods is a prominent theme in the Bible. Although he denies any inherent connection between material and spiritual condition, Blomberg (2000:246), in what is perhaps the most comprehensive treatment of the subject from an evangelical perspective, concludes that “in a remarkable number of instances throughout history, poverty and piety have been found hand in hand, as have wealth and godlessness.”

A SORE SPOT

Listening to evangelical business leaders, it is clear that the perspectives elaborated above are not mere abstract doctrines, bandied about by theologians but disconnected from actual experience. Instead, they strike a nerve with informants, especially regarding the relatively low esteem in which their occupation is held by some of their fellow evangelicals. “Just picture,” ranted the CEO of a technology company, “at the First Presbyterian Church in Oklahoma City, my pastor was from Princeton Seminary. That was the school of choice. A lot of the guys getting out of high school decided that they were going to be a doctor, a lawyer, or a preacher; it wasn’t a spiritual decision in a lot of cases. I would have had lots of attention over the next four to eight years as I studied for the Presbyterian ministry. I didn’t do that, and they didn’t give a rip what happened to me until I came back with enough money to make a significant contribution to the annual fundraiser. There was nothing there for people in the workplace. I don’t get much support for being in the workplace from the Christian community at all.” “The church is completely out of touch with this,” complained the founder of a software company. “There are
obviously exceptions, but for the most part they believe that God has nothing to do with business—it’s dirty, it’s filthy, so they don’t really want to be involved.”

So strongly do the four business leaders we met in the previous chapter feel about the spiritual import of business that each actively champions the integration of faith and business, burdened to defend this possibility and advance discussion of the issue. To this end, Kirk the consultant has published several books on faith and work, Raymond the financier speaks at business schools and Christian conferences, Phillip the entertainment company CEO, following an appearance on a widely watched prime time network television show, accepts as many requests for interviews as his schedule permits, and Nancy the food service CEO is resolved to be a visible Christian leader and was, at the time of the interview, scheduled to address the CEO Forum, a group of Christian CEOs of Fortune 500 companies. Not incidentally, all four are active in such groups, finding community and support among executive-level peers.

To be sure, evangelical business leaders are not the only ones who have occasion to justify their occupation. Business, like every social institution, operates under the banner of a nominal purpose that both legitimates the institution’s existence and claims on resources and constrains the range of purposes that may acceptably be attributed to it, irrespective of the degree of consonance between this stated purpose and the objectives that are actually pursued. In recent years the purpose of business has been hotly contested, with proponents of the traditional U.S. view that a corporation’s purpose is to maximize profits for stockholders contending with those who insist that the purpose of a corporation is to intentionally advance the interests of a broader set of stakeholders, including employees, customers, managers, suppliers, and community
members. The latter perspective is often championed by advocates of “corporate social responsibility,” who argue that businesses are obligated to expend resources in ways that advance the public interest even if such expenditures do not promote the specific economic objectives around which the business is organized. This perspective informs and has much in common with the criticisms raised by some members of the “evangelical left.” The former perspective, grounded in neoliberal ideology, has been trumpeted most forcefully by Milton Friedman, who contended that the social responsibility of business is to increase its profits, insisting that focus on this objective contributes maximally to the public good.

These days, most executives—religious or not—are called upon to offer up some explanation of the ways their companies are societally helpful. For their part, the evangelical executives with whom I spoke are not, for the most part, animated by the types of issues that generate enthusiasm among proponents of corporate social responsibility. Whatever their perspective on environmental concerns, wage inequality, executive compensation, etc., they meet such charges with equanimity and dispassionate arguments and evidence. When asked about Milton Friedman’s assertion that the social responsibility of business is to increase its profits, Kirk, the consultant who aims to repurpose business, responded, “I think Friedman was wrong. There is talk about a triple bottom line and corporate social responsibility, but there has, for decades, been this idea that if a company pursues the maximizing of shareholder value, everything else will fall into line. We know that that’s not the case.” Raymond, embracing a different perspective but evidencing the same measured tone, states, “My view is I hope management in the firms we invest in make zillions of dollars, if and only if their pay is correlated to the performance of the firm and therefore what I as an investor on behalf of my clients am going to earn.”
The responses these executives provide to what we might think of as non-religious challenges to the worth and propriety of various business practices and objectives are generally carefully reasoned. “Anything that’s labeled ‘corporate social responsibility,’ I come in with a skeptical view of it,” stated the CEO of a construction firm, reasoning that “I don’t believe in group guilt. I don’t believe in group sanctity. We are good or evil as individuals. We’re saved as individuals, not *en masse.*” On the other hand, narrow conceptions of ministry prompt informants to use emotion-laden terms. That your work is part of your faith calling is no trivial matter to these executives, eliciting arguments that are more emotional, subjective, and personal. “I bristle when people say they have to go to Africa to do ministry,” Phillip seethed. “I bristle at the idea that full-time church staff are the only ones in ministry.” Nancy, who also declared that she need not go to Africa to engage in ministry, gave strong responses to questions about the religious propriety and worth of her professional responsibilities. “Christian women leaders do not need any more people telling them they’re not doing God’s work,” she snapped. “We don’t need that help.”

Relatively unmoved by the so-called moralization of the corporation (Paine 2002), whereby businesses are accountable for discharging a variety of social responsibilities, Nancy and other evangelical executives are substantially more sensitive to the “friendly-fire” Kirk referenced—criticism from members of their own faith communities smart the most and engender the most impassioned responses. They can live with disagreement about the types of contributions their businesses should make. What they cannot tolerate is the idea that the contributions they make are not somehow spiritual contributions, or at least sanctioned by God. They refuse to accept that what they are doing is any less important than what anyone else is
doing, insisting that their work is part of their calling—that they, no less than clergypersons, are ministers.

We have seen that the four executives examined in the first chapter specifically characterize their work as and/or connect their work to ministry. Many more did so as well, not just asserting that their work qualifies as ministry, but downplaying the difference between the work they do and the work done by those clergypersons, to whom the vocational ministry designation has traditionally been restricted. “It bugged my dear friend and senior pastor when I was chair of the board of our church and head of personnel,” recalled the founder of a professional services firm, “that I wouldn’t call them ‘staff’ and ‘lay.’ I’d say ‘people who are paid for ministry’ and ‘people who are not.’ I see them as no different; some of us are paid for the work we do in ministry and some of us are not.” Others describe themselves in terms typically reserved for clergypersons, even daring to suggest that they might be more effective at the work of ministry than those who are paid for such. One entrepreneur, for example, whose company, for each product sold, provides a pre-specified number of meals are provided to the hungry or school credits provided to girls rescued from sexual slavery, shared, “I’ve been asked to be a pastor a couple of times, and every time I’m close to it I have no joy. In fact, a pastor asked me two weeks ago, ‘Would you be willing to consider being a pastor?’ and I said ‘I am a pastor,’ and he says, ‘Well, what do you mean?’ and I said, ‘Let me tell you what happened yesterday.’” The day before, this business owner had been engaged by a customer in an extended conversation about family, parenting, and the difficulties the customer was experiencing with his teenage daughter. Claiming to have such encounters on a weekly basis, he concluded to his pastor friend, “I’m a pastor. I’m in closer than you will ever get into because I’m sitting there with my products and I’m safe to these guys now.”
Downplaying the distinction between clergy and laity is important to the evangelical business leaders I spoke with, but is just one component of a broader impulse to break down the distinction between the sacred and the secular. “I would like to buy a Borders bookstore and call it a Christian bookstore because to me all of life is under God,” stated the CEO of a commercial real estate firm. According to Kirk, the distinction between the sacred and the secular is the primary source of the dis-integration many people experience between their faith and their work. “The problem is that we think some things are secular and some things are sacred,” Kirk said. “The distinction between clergy and laity? Not a biblical construct from what I can tell. But it’s propagated through churches and through just what we grow up with—this is the pastor and…even the separation between pastor and elders—not a biblical construct. And so it filters down all the way through to playing a guitar for worship is more spiritual than doing a doctoral thesis or doing a spreadsheet or doing an audit. We love to compartmentalize; we find it safer that way,” Kirk explains.

Naturally, the purported equivalence of the sacred and the secular supports related assertions that business is ministry, and even that business and church are essentially the same. Said a serial entrepreneur who believes that the purpose of business is to “serve others to the glory of God,” “That’s the problem—people have taken the view that church is different than business and it’s not. The church absolutely gets a burr up its saddle when I make this kind of a comment. The difference between a profitable business and a non-profitable church is simply tax law. Any church that operates on a deficit for a continuing basis won’t be around. There isn’t a pastor around who says, ‘I’m not worried about the money coming in.’ In fact, it’s the first question they ask when they go in on a Sunday because they are concerned the revenue will exceed the operating expense. As long as that happens, they are going to stay in business. If the
music goes the other way, they are in big trouble. They are careful to manage the church money and operations so it doesn’t go under, and a business is no different. The reality is the church has the same objective as a business.”

Similarly, the CEO of a technology company who teaches seminary courses that encourage students to think about business as ministry, said, “When I’m at the Doubletree in Pasadena, I have to get up in the morning and say, ‘Am I going to the jet propulsion lab today, or am I going to Fuller [to teach at an evangelical theological school]?’ One’s a block away; one’s a mile away. I work both places. So, I came to the conclusion that there’s no one more spiritual than the other. It’s just what does God want me to do today?” Citing Scripture to justify his perspective, he continues, “If you look at Galatians 3:23—‘Whatever the task, work heartily as serving the Lord, not serving men.’ Where Christ has you that day, if you apply that verse and try to follow his guidance that day—figure out what he wants you to do and do it—you can’t sort out the secular from the sacred. It’s all his.”

A SACRED DOMAIN

In this chapter we have seen that evangelical executives feel compelled to justify the value of their occupation and also that for informants this compulsion is prompted most frequently and intensely by co-religionists. Evangelical executives experience conflict not because business and religion are inherently opposed, but because they are made to feel like second-class citizens by members of their faith communities. How deeply this criticism penetrates is difficult to ascertain, though it is probably fair to say that for at least some informants, assertions of the value of their work are likely driven not entirely by settled convictions, but also in part by uncertainty or even guilt. As such, the accounts they provide are
addressed primarily to critics within their faith tradition and should be read with this audience in mind, but probably also serve to assuage their own consciences.

Legitimating accounts in this instance are occasionally catalyzed by charges that business is bad but more frequently by the accusation that it is not good enough. Most of the reservation informants experience regarding their chosen profession relates to the opportunity cost associated with what they are not able to do—including especially more explicitly religious work—rather than what they do but perhaps should not. In response, most informants would not say that business must be sanctified, or made holy, but that it is already a sacred domain in which God is present and in which they work with God to accomplish God’s purposes. Burdened to fulfill the evangelical imperative to find eternal significance in their work and sensitive to criticisms leveled against businesses and their leaders by members of their own faith communities, the evangelical executives I interviewed are keen to defend business as a sacred domain and their work as part of their commitment to ministry.

In sociological parlance, sacredness connotes distinctiveness; to be sacred is to be exceptional in some way—to stand above or transcend ordinary daily life. Durkheim ([1912] 2001), for example, posited a clear distinction between the sacred, as borne of and most clearly manifest in what he called “collective effervescence,” or experiences of intense and shared religious experience, and the profane, as represented by everyday experience. For evangelicals, in contrast, to say that something is sacred is not to say that it is distinctive in some way, but in fact just the opposite—to provide evidence that it is like everything else over which God exercises sovereignty. During the course of my research I attended a retreat for Christian business leaders, the theme of which was “Christians in the Marketplace: What Would It Look Like if God Was Running the Show?” Later I will discuss this experience in more detail. For
now, I simply observe that, apparently without coordination, both of the instructors who shared teaching responsibilities—one a pastor of a relatively prominent church and the other the dean of the business school at an evangelical university—oriented their introductory remarks around the following quote from Dutch theologian, Abraham Kuyper: “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, ‘Mine!’” Central to evangelical theological perspectives are the interrelated assumptions that God is present, active, and in control of every context and circumstance. Indeed, the theme of this retreat was that God is present and consistent across contexts, and therefore already inhabits business environments.

Popular Christian author and speaker Henry Blackaby regularly meets with and advises executives from Fortune 500 companies, including some I spoke with, who are members of a group called the CEO Forum. A couple decades ago Blackaby published a Bible study called *Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God* that has proven immensely popular to this day, with several million copies sold, and was referenced by some of the business leaders I interviewed. The study focuses on one key Scripture passage, found in the fifth chapter of the Gospel of John, which quotes Jesus as follows: “My Father is always working, and so am I.” The core advice of the study, derived from this passage, is that faithful living in any context requires finding where God is working and joining God in that work. The implication of this advice, at least as implied by the executives with whom I spoke, is that business, like every institution, is a sacred domain by virtue of God’s activity therein. While businesspeople can be holy or not, the underlying status of business as a sacred institution remains constant. It is not informants’ responsibility to make business sacred, but rather, recognizing its sacred character, to articulate and act in ways that are consistent with God’s activity in their careers, firms,
industries, and beyond. Next we will investigate in more detail the ways evangelical business leaders perceive God’s role in business.
“Let me tell you a story about two merchants,” offered Gary, the founder of a publicly traded computer products retailer. “They were roadside peddlers of local produce,” he went on. “They were in this small town. They were poor people, poor guys. They lived day to day and if they didn’t make money that day, they would be thrown in prison because they would have debts. These guys were typical—like everyone else, they would lie, cheat, and steal. They would use inappropriate weights and measures. These two men—and this is a true story,” Gary adds,—“these two men one day were caught up by the Spirit of God and they began to study his word and became Christians. They began to say, ‘Lord, is there anything about our lives that is not right before you?’ The Holy Spirit led them to this issue of honest weights and measures. So, they decided that they would focus on being honest men and they would give honest weights to people. This was a tough decision and you can’t appreciate it until you understand where they were. They were in the grocer section of town, because markets do have sections; they have the butcher section, the goldsmith section, and so forth. They are all advertising the same product at the same price. All of them are cheating and everybody knows it. These two guys come along and instead of saying a penny for a pound of apples like everybody else, they say a penny point one or a penny point two. The people come in and look at your wares and say, ‘I know you’re cheating me and now you’re gouging me! Cheating and gouging, why would I ever buy from you?’ These guys were so worried about how it was going to turn out that they agreed they would check each other’s weights and measures. Well, nobody thought about the God factor. When God became involved, when he saw what they were doing, he gave them favor among the people and people began to trade with them. All of a sudden, they had more business than anybody else in the whole vegetable department. This went on for a period of time and they
decided that they would create an organization that had a series of rules from the Bible. They created one-hundred-forty-four rules and a service organization because people came to them and said, ‘What are you doing that’s different? Why are you so successful and we’re failing?’ They said, ‘Well, we are following God. You have to commit your life to God and you have to follow him and follow these rules and we will come around and check you on a regular basis.’ Well, they created what are called livery companies today. That little town went from a backwater little city—a village, really—to the financial center of the world. It’s London. These two men changed everything.”

**THE GOD FACTOR**

I confess that this episode in commercial history was new to me, and for our purposes its historicity—doubtful though it may be—is unimportant. What matters is what we can learn about how executives like Gary conceive of God and God’s role in business. In the “story” Gary related, God is seen watching the behavior of businesspeople, ready to bless those who transact with integrity, such that differential success can be explained by God’s favor or lack thereof. “The Bible is all about prospering,” Gary asserts, “but we don’t prosper unless we walk with God.” This idea—that business is a domain in which virtue pays—is a central element in the accounts provided by Gary and others, and a crucial component of their defense of business as an honorable profession. In the previous chapter I noted that, for evangelicals, all of life can be considered sacred inasmuch as it holds spiritual significance and is inhabited and ruled by God. In contrast to the portrait of an immoral order painted by some evangelical critics of business, for Gary and others, business is a moral order in which God ensures that justice obtains.
In many ways the story Gary shared about the grocers is autobiographical. Well established in his career before he began taking his faith seriously, Gary explains that he had “received Christ” at a Billy Graham crusade when he was fifteen, but subsequently “forgot all about it.” It wasn’t until he was thirty, he recalls, that he thought about religion at all. At that time, he and his wife decided to let their son make up his own mind about religion, unencumbered by the dispositions of his parents, for whom “religion was pretty much irrelevant.” Having decided to expose their son to different faiths, Gary and his family began their tour at Gary’s childhood church. They never left. Gary reminisces, “God got a hold of us and changed our lives.”

These days Gary describes himself as “an evangelical fundamentalist charismatic believer.” “I believe it all,” he gushes. “I believe the entire Bible. I do deliverance; I preach and I speak in tongues; I just believe it all.” For Gary, believing it all means embracing some biblical practices that many consider a product of more primitive understandings. One of the only executives I interviewed to specifically embrace more Pentacostal faith expressions, Gary accords an active role to spiritual forces in our lives. When he speaks of “doing deliverance,” for example, he means casting out demons. During our conversation, moreover, Gary made reference to Satan as “hiding” in certain false assumptions. Speaking in tongues, which Gary also practices, means uttering incomprehensible vocalizations, often as part of personal prayer but sometimes for interpretation by someone gifted to do so. Gary attends an independent charismatic community church when home, but due to his travel schedule, he and his wife spend many Sunday mornings by themselves, “studying the Bible, talking about it, sharing, praising, praying.”
Like other executives I interviewed, God’s expectations for a faithful businessperson were not always obvious to Gary. Upon recommitting his life to God, he began to ask, “If God wants me to be in business, which is what I want, then how do I do that? How do I be a businessman and be faithful to God?” Looking back now, Gary perceives God’s hand in his career. An entrepreneur, Gary sees evidence of God’s involvement in business in God’s willingness to bless—and curse—the companies he has established.

Gary is convinced that the companies he built were more successful than competing companies. Acknowledging that, with the exception of their degree of success, his companies might not look any different from the outside, Gary allows that “secular people invested in my company just like Christians did. They didn’t see the difference until they came inside the company.” “But,” he points out, “people knew the difference inside. Within the company, they knew they would be treated fairly in the sense of what is righteous and what’s appropriate and what’s correct. They knew that they would be viewed as equals, whether they were men, women, homosexuals—the issue was are you the right person for that job? They knew when we did things and it wasn’t right before the customer—those things happen—that we would take the time to correct it no matter what it cost. The customers began to understand this and they would turn to us because they knew that they could trust us. It was a sense of trust and a bond. We created what business people call goodwill—what I would call an appropriate level of behavior before God. It wouldn’t necessarily be so obvious; I don’t think people have to wear their faith on their sleeve, although I tend to. They have to operate within the principles of God.” The businesses Gary founded were successful, he believes, because they operated according to biblical principles.
Gary’s career, however, has been marked not just with lofty successes, but with crushing disappointments, as well. “A number of years ago, I sold this company that I’d built from scratch,” he relates. “When we sold the company to another company, the stock was at forty-eight dollars a share. They asked me to please hold onto my shares for at least ninety days because I would be the largest shareholder in the combined company, so I said that I would be very careful and wait. During that period, it came out that the company we sold to had misrepresented the value of their inventory, which gave them a hundred million dollars in earnings over a three year period. Well, the stock went from forty-eight to four. Literally, I was starting over. I sat there thinking, I’m older in years and I’m going to start over, after twenty years? I was absolutely numb.”

Consistent with a charismatic approach to faith, Gary turned to God for a direct explanation. “I just couldn’t do anything. I was praying. I was asking God for direction—asking for help. I didn’t know what to do. My wife was worried about me and I wasn’t hearing from Him and one day she went outside and was sitting on the grass and she said, ‘Lord, I’m worried about my husband. If he keeps this up, he’s going to die. He’s really in bad shape.’ As she was sitting on the grass, the Lord spoke to her. He said, ‘I know Gary’s heart. I will fill in the voids. Gary has inquired of me, I know his heart and I will fill in the voids.’” She heard this twice, so she ran upstairs, came in my office and said, ‘Gary, I just heard from the Lord! Let me tell you what He said.’ What she told me—in my spirit, I agreed with her, I received it, and I was completely changed and everything was back to normal.”

Perhaps so, but this episode seems to have made a powerful impression on Gary. Already convinced that faithful living and success in business are correlated, this episode reinforced for him the converse—that unfaithful living—in this case misrepresenting
inventory—leads to failure in business. This was not the only time this principle was made clear to Gary. “I was involved in starting a company many years ago in telecommunications,” Gary related. “As we put the deal together, the CEO said, ‘Look, I’m working in another company, and I’m going to copy this business plan off of their copier machine. Then, we will distribute them.’ I said, ‘Please don’t do that.’ He said, ‘What do you mean?’ I said, ‘We are working on our personal time here. Eventually you want to start this company, but don’t start stealing from your company. That’s just wrong before God and while you might not be a Christian, I am. I will never support it because of my faith.’ The guy just laughed at me. Anyway, he printed this thing at his company’s expense and we put forty million dollars into this idea. It was the right market, right place, right time…and it went under. God just wasn’t going to bless it.”

Summarizing the principles demonstrated by these episodes in his career, Gary explains, “Most people believe that if I were to share my faith, be in business, and be a Christian, I’ve got a handicap; I’ve handicapped myself because I can’t lie, cheat, and steal like other people do and succeed in business. They just don’t understand the nature of God, and they don’t understand the nature of people. People don’t want to work with folks that lie, steal, and cheat….When they find out that you cheat, they are suspicious and will do anything to avoid you. An example would be the car business. People feel like they are being cheated every time they walk into a showroom. That’s just the nature of that industry. To be a Christian, to be a believer, and to follow your faith and the rules God has set is actually a way to make business much more successful—including profitability—than operating by the lie, cheat, and steal approach.”

Several of the examples Gary uses to demonstrate the correlation between biblical business practices and favorable business outcomes center on the moral order that characterizes business as an institution, such as when, for example, dishonesty erodes the trusting relationships
that lubricate social and economic exchange. In these cases, it takes no special insight to perceive the relationship between ethical or unethical behavior and business results. It is no mystery that people prefer not to do business with those likely to take advantage of them. But other examples require “eyes of faith” to interpret business outcomes as a function of the moral value of associated activities. For example, when his business partner copied his company’s business plan for competitive use, Gary says it was the right place, the right time, and the right market for their new venture, and yet it flopped. In this case, the business should have flourished, but, in response to his business partner’s transgression, God must have refused to bless the new company, and apparently, in light of the favorable conditions at its founding, actively intervened to ensure that it did not succeed. Gary’s disposition is such that he sees God as actively maintaining the relationship between virtue and profit, always at the ready to show favor to the righteous. “The fact is God is still on the throne,” Gary states. “He’s in charge of everything, and a corporation’s tone should be set by the CEO and the CEO should be coming from the standpoint of, ‘I am going to do what is righteous.’ When they do that, companies flourish all the way down the line.”

For Gary, God works in two ways to ensure that, in business, biblical behavior is rewarded. For one thing, free enterprise is structured such that, as a rule, virtue pays and vice costs, typically as a function of the relational impact of different types of behavior. And this is not just happenstance, for, according to Gary, “God created capitalism.” “God’s system is capitalism, it’s not socialism,” he explains. “That’s very clear throughout the entire Bible.” But even though God designed capitalism such that doing good generally leads to doing well, there are exceptions, and sometimes, as when actions are not visible to others, God stands ready to show favor or disfavor as necessary. Many times both mechanisms are necessary. For example,
once the London grocers had established a reputation for honesty, it makes sense that people would want to trade with them, but God had to inspire customers to begin disproportionately trading with them in the first place.

MADE MEN

Max Weber long ago recognized that Christianity could serve as a competitive advantage of sorts. He tells of attending a baptism ceremony of a Baptist congregation on a cold autumn day in the mountains of North Carolina, during which shivering converts subjected themselves to complete immersion in a near freezing brook. Weber ([1904-5] 2002: 129) writes, “During the immersion of one of the young men, my relative was startled. ‘Look at him,’ he said. ‘I told you so!’ When I asked him after the ceremony, ‘Why did you anticipate the baptism of that man?’ he answered, ‘Because he wants to open a bank in M.’ ‘Are there so many Baptists around that he can make a living?’ ‘Not at all, but once being baptized he will get the patronage of the whole region and he will outcompete everybody.’” Still puzzled, Weber came to realize, upon further questioning, that “admission to the congregation is recognized as an absolute guarantee of the moral qualities of a gentleman, especially of those qualities required in business matters. Baptism secures to the individual the deposits of the whole region and unlimited credit without any competition. He is a ‘made man.’” Upon further investigation, Weber came to conclude that “in general, only those men had success in business who belonged to Methodist or Baptist or other sects of sectlike conventicles,” and discovered that “when a sect member moved to a different place, or if he was a traveling salesman, he carried the certificate of his congregation with him; and thereby he found not only easy contact with sect members but, above all, he found credit everywhere.”
To assert today that Christian affiliation inspires great confidence in one’s business dealings would surely be misleading. One need only review the sordid history of the collapse of Enron to realize that self-professed evangelical Christians, such as was the late Kenneth Lay, hardly enjoy a pristine reputation or record. Nevertheless, it is but a short step from Gary’s assertions that biblical business is successful business to the idea that Christianity is a competitive advantage. The CEO of a commercial products company that markets itself as “Christ-centered,” in fact, specifically states as much. He told me, “Our valuation firm has reported—and it’s an independent firm—that they do believe that the Christ-centered element of our business is a competitive advantage.” Having reviewed this report myself, it seems to me that this is an overstatement. In a section titled, “Adjustments to Earnings,” the valuation firm notes, “We considered the Company’s contributions to Christian causes, which equal approximately 30% of operating income each year….Management believes that Christian giving is a key element in the Company’s culture that has contributed to strong employee relations, high morale, and higher worker productivity. Furthermore, management believes that elimination of the contributions would negatively affect culture and productivity. For these reasons, we have determined that the Company’s donations are not a discretionary expense.” I read this as saying that, now that a pattern and expectation of charitable giving has been established, it would be counterproductive to discontinue it. But this does not mean that, relative to other firms, the company’s giving program represents a source of competitive advantage. Nonetheless, it is the interpretation that is important, and the fact that this CEO understands the Christ-centered dimensions of the business to be a source of competitive advantage is telling.

In Weber’s account of the ways psychological premiums arising from new interpretations of Christian doctrine accelerated the spread of rational capitalism, Calvinists interpreted success
in business as divine favor—an indication that they were among the elect who were predestined for salvation. Indeed, on Weber’s account, even the ability to conduct business in an ethical manner was selectively bestowed by God, and hence counted as evidence of eventual salvation. As such, Weber’s Calvinists looked for evidence of God’s favor in their own business dealings. Some executives, like Gary, likewise look for a connection between virtue and success in their own careers. As the CEO of an investment firm expresses, “As a Christian, it’s made me a better person, worker—a more compassionate leader. I don’t think I would be CEO and president today if God hadn’t transformed my life and given me a heart for my team and people and the company, and given me a character that my owner/founder trusts enough to give me the keys to his company.” Other executives, like the above-mentioned CEO who cited his firm’s Christ-centered elements as a source of competitive advantage, take a broader perspective, focusing on the connection between virtue and profit at the company level. For example, the founder of the same investment firm does not think his company would have survived the global financial crisis if not for the biblical principles on which he operates his business. Among these principles he lists saving for a rainy day, recalling the biblical episode in which Joseph stored up grain for the Egyptian people in advance of an anticipated famine. He also cites investing more in downturns, which he claims is completely counter to typical industry behavior. “These are all biblical principles,” he says, “and you don’t have to be a Christian to understand them and follow the principle and be blessed.”

This business owner and many others made claims regarding the salutary effects of biblical behavior or adverse effects of anti-biblical behavior at the company level. For a few of those I interviewed, the relationship between virtue and economic success applies even more broadly. Gary, for example, pointed out the implications of the business culture that in his mind
characterizes the automobile industry. Even more broadly, Gary discerns a connection between a nation’s business climate and its economic circumstances. “Here’s the negative side of [the principles encapsulated in the story about the grocers in London],” Gary asserts. “Bangladesh. You’ve got Muhammad Yunus, who is the head of the Grameen Bank; he won the Nobel Peace Prize for his micro-enterprise. The people in that country have had more micro-loans per capita than anywhere else in the world. Well, how is their economy doing?” Gary asked. “It hasn’t grown a Euro in thirty years. Why? Because they still operate on the same non-faith principles: I screw you, you screw me. Their economy doesn’t get any better, but when people begin to walk and operate and exhibit God’s truth in an economic environment where it’s completely dark, the light is so bright that people are attracted to it. That’s how you build a nation.” To make clear that the economic problems in Bangladesh do not stem from the fact that the microcredit movement was initiated by someone (Yunus) who is, at least on some accounts, a Muslim, and at any rate not by any account a Christian, Gary adds, “At a country level, Guatemala is fifty percent born again believers and their economy is in shambles. Why? Because they do not bring their faith into their business life. The fundamental concept in Guatemala is buyer beware; if I screw you, it’s your fault. It’s just not God, so he’s just not going to bless them even though fifty percent of their country is Christian.” It is not Christianity that is advantageous, but biblical behavior, whether practiced by Christians or non-Christians.

The business leaders I spoke with perceived the relationship between virtue and profit across a range of contexts. Unlike Weber’s Calvinists, they do not see the relationship between virtue and profit as restricted to those few whom God favors, but instead as applying to business as a whole. As such, it serves as evidence not that God favors some and disfavors others, but that business is an institution in which moral order prevails.
COMPLICATIONS

Together, informants articulate an expansive application of the principle that God maintains the relationship between virtue and economic outcomes—from individual choices to corporate policies to national cultures to nationwide economic conditions. This assertion is an important component of their overall attempt to legitimate business as a worthy vocation. For several reasons, however, demonstrating the link between virtue and profit is both complicated and complicating.

The general character of informants’ statements notwithstanding, the extent to which ethical behavior is economically beneficial depends on a number of contextual factors, including, at a broad scale, the quality of a society’s educational and legal systems, and more specifically, the visibility and frequency of and the degree of consensus regarding the propriety of the behavior in question and the degree and kind of penalties legally enforced for its violation. Moreover, as Paine (2002) argues, the strength and significance of the links between ethics and economic advantage depend in part on the specific values in question. Cultivating a reputation for compliance with basic moral expectations regarding, for example, fulfilling contracts or avoiding harm to others, are likely to result in favorable consequences, or at least in avoiding adverse consequences, whereas acting in accordance with more advanced, demanding, and costly moral objectives such as promoting human dignity or contributing to community improvement are less likely to produce financial advantages. Paine explains, “The financial case for values like fairness and honesty is more robust than the case for altruism or charity….The financial case for shunning wrong and respecting basic rights is often thought to be even more robust—or at least more visible—than the case for fairness and honesty, given that many forms of wrongdoing are officially condemned and punishable by law” (2002: 67).
Informants rarely make such distinctions. Some did focus on the adverse consequences associated with what Gary called the “lie, cheat, and steal” approach to business. Others, however, claimed not just that avoiding immoral behavior helps avoid adverse consequences, but that engaging in charitable or altruistic behavior pays off, as well. “I think that, interestingly, every good thing a business does will, ultimately, benefit its profitability,” said the managing director of an executive search firm. “The community service that a business does, even if its entire motivation is altruistic, at the end of the day, it’s beneficial to the bottom line. The scholarships that it offers, the employee benefits that if offers, the insurance that it offers, all the different things that a company might do, the products that it produces—that have, as their primary mission, aiding society—all of those things, if a company does them and does them well, it will benefit the bottom line.”

This executive, like others, suggests that the good things a company does will show up on its bottom line. Contemporary accounting standards place residual earnings at the bottom line of financial statements, indicating that returns to shareholders are the target toward which firms should orient their activities. Thus, when informants assert that virtuous businesses will be more successful, they apply this concept to conventional success metrics, namely, profits. While the business leaders I spoke with could have proposed a connection between virtue and social or spiritual goods, they did not, deferring instead to the socially constructed and institutionally mediated definition of (economic) success. The problem with this approach is that, under most circumstances, the business case for any but the basic requirements of fair dealing is weak. Allocations to employee benefit plans, environmental remediation, or charitable organizations represent expenses that diminish residual earnings available to shareholders, for which it is difficult to imagine that the hypothesized accrual of goodwill, customer and employee loyalty,
etc. can compensate. More virtuous companies internalize social costs that less virtuous companies externalize, putting them at a competitive disadvantage relative to their competitors.

In fact, the virtue-profit connection is a myth; there is no evidence that behaving more virtuously consistently makes firms more profitable (Vogel 2005; Margolis and Walsh 2003). Moreover, not only is there no guarantee that corporate benevolence will pay off, but certain features of the contemporary business environment have made it easier to profit from unethical behavior. For example, innovations in information technology have introduced new opportunities for profitable theft, deception, and invasions of personal privacy (Paine 2002). In addition, even conditions in which corporate virtue generates strong trust, such as informants are wont to cite, are inherently unstable inasmuch as high levels of trust create new possibilities for opportunism. As Paine observes, a trusting community is a thief’s paradise. In light of the dynamics that work against a relationship between virtue and profit and the lack of systematic evidence for it, it is one thing to posit such a relationship and quite another to demonstrate it.

**TO MEASURE OR NOT TO MEASURE?**

How do evangelical executives uphold the supposed correlation between virtue and profit when confirming evidence is scarce and counter-evidence plentiful? By declining to quantify the relationship, for one thing. Conspicuously absent from informants’ accounts are specific examples in which biblical business practices translated to measurable economic advantage. In fact, informants almost never measured the effect of biblical behavior. They assumed but could not prove that virtue translates to better performance across contexts and levels of analysis. The outcomes they reference typically involve not absolute, but relative assessments—that, for example, a company was more successful than it would have been otherwise. Rarely were these effects expressed in terms of dollars and cents.
In some ways informants can hardly be faulted for neglecting or declining to calculate the effects of biblical business practices. Many of the benevolent objectives companies are called on to fulfill, such as helping others or bettering society, constitute “imperfect duties,” which do not create specific obligations to particular individuals. As such, the benefits associated with their necessarily partial satisfaction are often diffuse and may go unrecognized or undervalued. And because the beneficiaries may be unknown, or at least not individually identifiable, the benefactor’s largesse cannot be directly reciprocated or clearly tied to favorable consequences generated by beneficiaries or others (Paine 2002).

Informants sometimes point out, rightly, that it is difficult to measure the effect of virtue. The CFO of a multinational energy company shared, “We have a foundation through which we provide funds around the world to work on issues with children and education. Those are the two things that we tend to target. I can’t demonstrate to our shareholders there’s an absolute dollar return on any of those investments.” Likewise, he recalled, “During the moratorium on Gulf of Mexico drilling following the Deepwater Horizon accident, a number of our peer companies let people go. They just said, ‘We can’t keep you, we have no work.’ They fired people. We made the choice to keep our people. Even though there was a cost to our shareholders, we felt like it was the right thing to do, to keep their jobs—it wasn’t their fault. Ultimately, by holding on to those employees, we could improve our retention. There was, ultimately, a return there. You can’t calculate it. It probably would take a long time to see, but in terms of the goodwill of the communities we worked in, we felt like we should do it.” Twice this CFO acknowledges, with respect to two different types of corporate virtue, that it is impossible to measure its effects.
The same CFO, when asked if the social responsibility of business is better characterized by a do no harm principle or a more proactive commitment to address social problems, stated, “I think the do no harm principle is just a starting point. I’m expressing more of my personal opinion here. I think that ultimately if we can, in the context of what we do, do things better and provide things better, in the context of what the overall responsibility is, I think we should take it on.” After he recounted corporate initiatives to promote women’s rights in the Middle East, I asked him how the company would proceed if it turned out there was a trade-off between promoting women’s rights and realizing higher returns, perhaps because the women available for hire are less educated than the men available in the area. “I think that we would try to look at it very carefully,” the CFO said. “These are small investments we make. If I thought it was going to materially adjust our returns downward, I think I would have to say, ‘We have to step away. We have to figure out a different way.’ If we can do those things without damaging our returns, we will do it.” According to this CFO, measuring the impact of the company’s charitable programs might threaten their continuance.

Confidence in and commitment to the connection between virtue and corporate results, it appears, thrives on ambiguity and reference to an unspecified long-term time frame. The very prospect of calculation, it seems, attenuates the commitment to at least some forms of corporate charity. In speaking with this CFO, as long as the initial cost to shareholders could not be quantified and there could be an expectation of deriving some benefit at some point in the future, as in the case of retaining employees following the Deepwater Horizon disaster, the company would proceed to pursue the more socially beneficial action. If, however, the cost of social investments could be quantified, as in the hypothetical trade-offs between promoting women’s
rights and realizing returns, the company would have to step away. Enthusiasm for discretionary social commitments withers as soon as an adverse impact on results can be demonstrated.\(^8\)

Perhaps this explains why informants generally eschew quantification of the effects of virtue. Many remain entirely in the realm of generalities, offering nothing but qualitative assessments of the correlation between the moral quality of corporate actions and business results. A few do attempt to measure, but even these do so selectively. I asked an executive at a restaurant chain if the company would reconsider its policy of remaining closed on Sundays if it turned out that it threatened the viability of the organization. “I’ve always been asked the question, how much does it hurt you to be closed on Sunday?” he replied. “I’ve never been asked the question, how does it help you? There’s this natural assumption that it hurts us. But let me get a few facts behind it and maybe it’ll answer your question,” he said just before placing an order at the drive through of one of his company’s restaurants. (That he and other employees regularly eat at their restaurants helps counter criticism regarding the nutritional worth of the food they serve, he believes.)

Turning back to my question, he dug into the promised facts. The widely acknowledged best fast-food restaurant chain in the world, McDonald’s, he claims, makes around 2.1 million dollars per restaurant per year, much more than the industry average of approximately eight hundred thousand dollars. Next he bragged that his company’s average freestanding location made three million dollars in the previous year. Based on this difference, he concludes, “Some might say, ‘Well, if you’re open on Sunday you might do fifteen percent more,’ but I think that almost anybody at our company would argue just the opposite: if we open on Sunday, we begin

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\(^8\) It is worth noting that proponents of corporate social responsibility are hastily developing new and supposedly more objective ways of measuring corporate virtue and its effects. Based on my conversations with evangelical executives, it could be that generating new and more accurate ways to measure the impact of corporate social responsibility will actually undermine whatever impact it might have.
to look like everyone else, act like everyone else. I definitely believe that it’s your uniqueness and your differences that make the difference, and I also believe that being closed on Sunday creates a little bit of scarcity and scarcity creates demand. So while we certainly believe that the day of rest causes us to attract better employees—allows us to have a day where everyone can recharge and refresh and come back ready to go on Monday—if you can do three million in six days a week and it takes your competitors seven to do 2.1 million dollars, you can imagine the profitability difference. We do three million because we’re closed on Sunday, not in spite of it, I think is the way we view it.”

This executive is one of the few business leaders I interviewed who dared to attach a financial value to a biblical business practice. At the same time, he acknowledges that Sunday is “arguably the best day to be open because Sunday, as you probably know from your own behavior, is the day when most people eat out. So it’s a very good day to be open from a purely secular standpoint and a very bad day to be closed from a purely secular standpoint.” This is an important qualification inasmuch as it casts doubt on the argument from distinctiveness the executive had just proposed. The facts of the matter, it appears, are subject to interpretation. According to this executive, whether or not being closed on Sunday is an advantage or a disadvantage depends on one’s perspective. But note that, even employing a faith-oriented perspective, the nature of the evidence is highly selective. There are many ways to attempt to measure the impact of being closed on Sundays, the most obvious of which is to consider the amount of business that would be expected if the company’s restaurants were to be open on Sundays. But instead of assessing the amount of foregone revenue and profit, the executive thinks and speaks in terms of the incremental revenue and profit the firm supposedly earns on the days its restaurants are open. The metric chosen to demonstrate the financial consequence of a
specific biblical business practice—revenue per restaurant per annum—is so broad as to be subject to the effects of essentially all of a company’s strategic decisions, as well as many other circumstances outside the firm’s control. In addition, the selected comparison—to a competitor’s annual revenue instead of to the company’s potential revenue if open on Sunday—is also convenient, shifting focus away from the six days versus seven days comparison. In sum, to interpret an industry leading per restaurant revenue per year as a function of being closed on Sunday is to impose a perspective on the metric. “I certainly believe that it’s a big advantage to be closed on Sunday,” this business leader concluded, before acknowledging, “I think most of the world would interpret it the other way.”

Such is a typical pattern in the relatively few instances in which informants attempted to provide quantifiable evidence that biblical business practices translate to economic advantage. They often pointed to broadly favorable business results as consequences of biblical practices and sometimes referenced associated upfront costs, but rarely put the two together such that a return on investment could be calculated. This allows them to take the eventual payoff on faith and shields them from the burden of evidence. As the CEO of a pharmaceutical company insists, “You must never, knowingly, behave unethically in a business environment, even if you believe that it’s in the business’s best interest in the short term. I’m absolutely confident that the first thing you should ever do is say that behaving ethically trumps other consequences. The consequences of behaving ethically are that you damage the bottom line of your company? So be it. It is still an obligation upon you to behave ethically,” he maintains. “I also believe,” he continues, “that it will always, in the long term, turn out to be the right business decision, as well.” Likewise, according to the executive whose restaurants are closed on Sundays, “A mission motivated company, in my opinion, will always outperform a money motivated
company in the long run.” For these CEOs and others, any costs of virtuous behavior are short term, and eventually God will see to it that things turn out better than they would have otherwise. As an African-American CEO of an investment firm put it, “You might lose the battle but you’ll win the war.”

Casting the hypothesized benefits of individual and corporate virtue off into the future enables executives to forego the commensuration process by which near-term costs are weighed against long-term benefits. In most cases, the “long-run” never arrives, and the calculation is never made. With respect to the anticipated pay-off for virtuous behavior, evangelical executives can always point to the indefinite future, no matter how much time has elapsed since the action, itself. Ultimately, because their effects transpire in different time horizons, the relative magnitude of the short-term cost and long-term benefit of virtue are obscured by their remoteness. As such, the unwillingness and, in some cases, inability to match the costs of virtue with associated benefits exempts the purported virtue-profit connection from falsification.

In order to challenge the assumption that, in the long run, charitable behavior enhances business performance in almost every case, I posed to several informants a scenario in which they were asked to choose between two expansion opportunities. While the details varied to fit the informants’ particular industries, the outline was that they could choose to expand operations into an underdeveloped area in which both jobs and the products produced and sold were in short supply or into a more affluent area that was already well-served by several competitors. As framed, expansion into the underdeveloped area would generate risk-adjusted returns that exceeded the cost of capital but lagged those associated with expansion into the more affluent market.
A few refused to play along, insisting that they or the hypothetical executive should pursue both opportunities, even when pressed to choose one or the other and with ceteris paribus conditions emphasized. One informant indicated a willingness to consider the opportunity with higher social benefit and lower returns, but only if the return was “comparable” to the other opportunity. As this CEO explained, “I would say that there have to be business reasons for doing it, not just social. If we never expected to get a return out of what we were doing, I don’t think we would do it. If we were able to see that we could get a return, even though it may not be what we would get domestically, with the prospect that if we do things right we could get a comparable return, we would do that. That’s sounding more like an economic decision, but I think what you’re trying to do with your question is say, ‘What’s the price tag that you’re willing to put on the social agenda?’ There’s some, but it’s modest. Frankly, if we could make more money here and help those people in some other way then that’s maybe a better way to go.”

Others insisted that they, personally, might choose the lower return option, but that fiduciary responsibilities to capital providers require them to choose the higher return opportunity. “I can’t in good conscience, as much as I want to do something good…” the president of a commercial real estate firm began before recounting, “There was a situation that happened in our denomination a few years back—money got redirected by one of the people that was in charge of those dollars at a regional level. The direction they went with it was to help out something that was a very good cause, but they had no right to make those decisions. That person had to be fired immediately, and a lot of things had to be unwound because they were working outside their purview. They were allocating dollars inappropriately; even though it was a good cause they were going after, they had no right to do that. The same would be true when
you’re a steward over someone’s investment dollars. Now, if it’s just my own money, then it depends on if I can afford to do the thing that’s more social, but absolutely I’d consider it.”

**True Virtue**

The preceding examples confirm that the connection between virtue and profit resides most comfortably in the realm of the abstract generalization, not the concrete world of calculation. Declining to connect specific virtuous business practices with specific business outcomes enables informants to insist that, at least in the long-run, ethical behavior enhances business performance in almost every case. Thorough and accurate measurement of the costs and benefits of virtue in business might threaten to expose as false the belief that virtue inevitably pays off, or at least to cast out its benefits to a time horizon that might make it unpalatable to some stakeholders with a shorter investment time frame. But there is another, perhaps more important, implication of the standard practice of declining to measure the effects of biblical business practices, namely, that calculating the effects of doing the right thing calls into question the motivation for doing so. Calculativeness, Pierre Bourdieu (2000) insisted, is the opposite of disinterestedness. To fixate on the anticipated benefits for oneself of an action intended for the benefit of another is to pair the action and the reciprocation as an exchange, he explains, whereas to perform the same act in a way that is beneficial to another without regard for any benefit that may accrue to oneself is to bestow a gift. The factor that most clearly delineates the realm of disinterestedness from the realm of calculativeness, Bourdieu asserts, is the time lag between action and consequence. The farther from view the benefit of an action is, the more readily the actor experiences herself as disinterested.
Among the central requirements for true Christian virtue, as noted earlier, is to prioritize others above oneself—to be, in other words, disinterested. Recall the oft-cited opening line of Rick Warren’s *The Purpose Driven Life*, “It’s not about me.” In the gospel passage termed the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is reported to have instructed his followers to “love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back” (Luke 6:35). The fact that any costs evangelical executives incur on account of biblical business practices are incurred in the short term while the benefits associated with biblical business practices accrue in the long term enable informants to experience themselves as acting disinterestedly, while simultaneously upholding the connection between virtue and profit that supports their broader claims regarding the nature of business. To decline to calculate is to contemplate specific business practices not as investments but as sacrifices by which evangelical business leaders fulfill their religious duties.

The business leaders I interviewed may be mistaken in their assessment of the long-term relationship between virtue and profit, but they are not so naïve as to ignore the short-term effects of more or less ethical behavior. In fact, some acknowledge and indeed embrace the fact that to act virtuously is to “lose the battle.” As the CEO of a pharmaceutical company stated bluntly, “In the short term, there are surely benefits to unethical behavior.” Consider the costs anticipated by a commercial real estate executive and his firm’s lawyers when pangs of conscience prompted him to be more forthcoming in his negotiation strategy. “I felt like I was lying to people,” he explained, “because I had to make them believe that what I was arguing for was something that I really wanted, when in many cases, it was not. It was just to make them think I wanted it, so that when I gave up part of it or all of it in exchange for what I really wanted, it seemed like a fair trade, when in fact it was all just a game. Everybody played that
game. But I decided I didn’t want to do that anymore, and that I wanted to bring my ethics and
my faith, I guess, to my business. I wanted to just say what I wanted, and nothing else. I
actually thought that whoever I was negotiating with, on the other side, always had a fair
economic interest, and that if they reasonably did what they were supposed to do, that we should
make sure that they got what they bargained for. I told that to my lawyers, and they said they
wouldn’t represent me, actually. They told me that there were only two people in that company
that could bankrupt it: one was the chairman, and the other was me. We were the only ones
dealing with big enough pieces, and if I had to do that, then I had to go to the board of directors
and get their permission. So, I did. I asked them, and to their credit, they said, ‘Okay.’ …I made
the switch then…and it turned out to be the right thing to do. People responded very well to it. I
found that it was really a better way to do business; not just a viable way, not just an alternative
way—it was a better way. I ended up with no altercations and no lawsuits. I didn’t have to sue
people to get them to do what I wanted, and they didn’t have to sue me. Even though we were
inevitably in tough situations, everybody was able to come to a just result.”

For this business leader, even though negotiating with integrity apparently could have
bankrupted the company, it turned out to bring unanticipated business benefits. It is essential for
him and others to maintain that they do not act ethically in anticipation of enhanced business
prospects. Indeed, informants consistently and emphatically denied engaging in biblical business
practices for the sake of the favorable outcomes they would produce, characterizing such
consequences as byproducts of, not incentives for, right behavior. “I was recently interviewed
by a periodical about the diversity of our firm,” said the head of an insurance business. “Our
firm is extremely diverse, and I have intentionally pursued diversity. We have every ethnicity,
every faith—just every kind of diversity you can imagine here—and it’s a major part of our
strategy. The periodical continued to drill down on why we were seeking diversity. How were we going to create revenue because of our diversity? Now I’m a thinker, and I know demographics, and I know data on this point, but I think I frustrated this magazine by stating, ‘I am seeking diversity because it’s the right thing to do, and it’s a calling, and I’m doing it not for additional revenue or capturing a market that is increasing, even though I am absolutely convinced that we will capture markets that are increasing by seeking diversity and bringing in diverse people into a culture of excellence and helping them excel and grow in their life.’ It was the most interesting interview because they really did not believe me, I don’t think, that that’s why we did that.”

Some informants even suggested that inappropriate motives actually threaten the favorable outcomes that are ordinarily associated with upright behavior. “I think that all great goals are best achieved indirectly,” explained the managing partner of an executive search firm. “I think that if profitability is the singular goal, then I think it can be elusive, but I think if excellence, and service, and customer service, and all of those things become the primary goal, then I believe that profitability is more likely to follow.” This conditional conviction—that biblical behavior leads to economic benefits if and only if it is pursued for its own sake—poses a dilemma for the business leaders with whom I spoke. On the one hand, it would be nice to give evidence of the relationship between virtue and profit, crucial as the relationship is for demonstrating God’s involvement in and endorsement of capital enterprise. And indeed, a business can hardly operate without measurement. On the other hand, to measure the effect of an action that is assumed to be advantageous is to call into question the motivation for doing it.

Think back to Phillip, who left the automobile industry to join a family entertainment company in which he has the flexibility to incorporate biblical principles. Phillip recalls, “When
I was in the car business I would go to a board meeting and every question, every grilling that you got was always about the numbers—only about what your margins were, what your growth was. Now,” he celebrates, “at a board meeting I get just as many questions about people scores—our guest scores, our employee scores, reinforcing all the time that our own people and customers have to come first.” Phillip believes that the willingness to measure and compensate according to adherence to its stated values is a hallmark of a worthy company. “We put our money where our mouth is,” Phillip boasts, explaining that employees who score highest on two dimensions—those corresponding with to-do goals and to-be goals—receive the largest raises and increase their likelihood of promotion. This system of measurement was one of Phillip’s primary emphases upon joining the company. The owners of the firm, he told me, have three objectives: 1) profit, 2) be “a great place to work for great people,” and 3) maintain and demonstrate “Christ at the heart.” Of the third objective, Phillip prodded, “Hey, I’m a Christian, and I don’t know what you mean. If you don’t measure people, you can’t say whether you are doing a good job or not. How am I supposed to measure this?”

When it comes to evaluating conformity with company values, which he has designed to correspond with biblical principles, Phillip is an enthusiastic proponent of careful measurement. But when it comes to connecting specific business practices with financial outcomes, he demurs. While Phillip is proud of his company’s commitment to environmental responsibility, he speaks of deliberately downplaying it in order not to compromise the authenticity of the effort. “Some of our buildings are actually wrapped around trees; we’ve always done it because that’s what we were taught to do and we believe it’s the right thing. We really don’t try to measure the financial success; we don’t have a metric. We also don’t market it. You try to market it too much and it doesn’t look authentic,” Phillip said. The reluctance to measure in this case stands in stark
contrast to business and values-oriented metrics, which, Phillip claimed, “we measure like crazy.” Phillip’s company diligently measures adherence to biblical values, but declines to measure the consequences of such adherence, believing that to do so would compromise their authenticity.

The result of this selective measurement is that Phillip is able to make what we might consider a costless sacrifice. He is able to claim, on the one hand, to do the right thing irrespective of the cost, as in building around trees. He is also able to claim that virtue translates to a healthier company. Putting employees and customers first, Phillip believes, is the key to the company’s success. “I do not buy the argument that the focus on people isn’t profitable.” “For a guest service company like ours,” he explains, “the level of enthusiasm that the guests experience can never raise any higher than the enthusiasm of your own employees. If you don’t spend a lot of time and energy in resources making them passionate, happy and excited, there is no way they are going to turn around and do it for your guests…. If you add all those things up, those are exactly the right things to do for the long term health of the business….It works financially; we have outperformed our competitors. We have great returns. It definitely works.”

A Place for Saints

To maintain that business is a sacred domain, informants need an appropriate rhetoric to say and evidence to maintain that 1) business is a God-filled domain and 2) as an institution, some aspect of business contributes to some spiritual objective for some group or individual. In this chapter we have seen that in order to assert that God ordained and is at work in business, informants emphasize that business is a moral order in which virtue is rewarded and vice punished. This assertion they support with several proposed mechanisms by which virtue
translates to success; they claim that virtue translates to: a favorable reputation, which supports customer acquisition and retention; a positive corporate culture, which enhances employee satisfaction and productivity; and/or personal character, which makes one a better person, worker, and/or leader. Informants also claim that adhering to practical biblical principles—like saving for a rainy day—have favorable effects on the bottom line. Some of the executives I interviewed went beyond these natural effects to posit supernatural effects wherein God actively intervenes to bless people who act rightly.

This chapter also explored the devices by which evangelical business leaders maintain the relationship between virtue and success, sometimes in the face of evidence to the contrary. These devices include declining to calculate the effects of virtue, which threatens to disqualify actions as virtuous in the first place. Informants sometimes practice selective calculation, measuring broad outcomes that are a function of a sufficient number of inputs that it would be impossible to ascertain the relative weight of contributing causes. Some informants appealed to non-sequiturs, attributing effects to irrelevant causes. While often grounded in natural relationships, layering on evangelical perspectives on God’s providential control over all things transforms the connection between virtue and success into a non-falsifiable spiritual principle. Even when virtue appears to be costly, evangelical business leaders interpret such costs as lessons from God that, presumably, will pay dividends in the long run. As such, they are able to maintain that business is a domain where the good flourish and the blameworthy struggle—a place, in other words, for saints.

Max Weber ([1946] 1991) claimed that some professional domains are more or less accommodating to people of Christian religious convictions. Politics, for example, is no realm for saints inasmuch as it requires a willingness to employ questionable means in service to
admirable ends. On Weber’s account, traditional ethical systems, such as the so-called “gospel ethic” encapsulated in the Sermon on the Mount, brook no compromise and as such are too idealistic to be of much value in political contexts. While they express how the world should be, they fail to accommodate the way the world actually is. Moreover, the political task is, on Weber’s understanding, inherently at odds with the gospel ethic inasmuch as political action is, by definition, the use of (legitimate) force. Indeed, for Weber, the decisive means for politics is violence, and as such, it is incompatible with Jesus’ instruction to turn the other cheek, which Weber takes as a prescription for pacifism. In light of this incompatibility, Weber insists that “it is in the nature of officials of high moral standing to be poor politicians” ([1946] 1991:95).

At the heart of the tension experienced by politicians committed to a Christian moral perspective, according to Weber, is the conflict between two opposing ethical frameworks which he calls the ethic of ultimate ends and the ethic of responsibility. An ethic of ultimate ends makes intent the most important factor in evaluating a particular course of action. The proponent of this perspective adheres to absolute and inflexible moral principles, and having done so, accords responsibility for the outcome of his actions to God, secondary actors, or other material or spiritual circumstances. In contrast to the ethic of ultimate ends, under an ethic of responsibility, the ends of an action justify the means implemented to accomplish them, even when such means are incompatible with various moral principles.

Christians make poor politicians, Weber believes, because they adhere to an ethic of ultimate ends. “The Christian does rightly and leaves the results with the Lord.” Weber says, and indeed this is exactly the division of labor implied by informants’ articulation of the connection between virtue and profit. They are responsible for acting disinterestedly, believing but, they claim, not motivated by the fact that God will bring about a just result—one in which
virtue is rewarded and vice punished. Herein lies the great value of the asserted connection between virtue and profit for the evangelical business leaders I spoke with. Weber assumes that the ethic of ultimate ends and the ethic of responsibility are ultimately in tension because, he insists, “No ethics in the world can dodge the fact that in numerous instances the attainment of ‘good’ ends is bound to the fact that one must be willing to pay the price of using morally dubious means or at least dangerous ones.” But the purported connection between virtue and profit renders this tension irrelevant by maintaining that the key to the attainment of good ends is the employment of good means. By emphasizing the connection between virtue and profit, evangelical executives reconcile the ethic of responsibility and the ethic of ultimate ends.

Reconciling means and ends in business allows evangelical business leaders to rebut criticisms regarding the supposed immoral nature of business, to which they are clearly sensitive. As we have seen, one of the primary criticisms that evangelical business leaders face from co-religionists is the charge that business is a morally dirty domain in which profits are generated at the expense of others. Even if, say, increasing living standards is a worthwhile aspiration and a probable outcome of free enterprise, it comes at too high a cost. The supposed connection between biblical behavior and business success inoculates the evangelical business leaders I spoke with against this criticism. It allows them to maintain that, in contrast to a domain like politics, business is a domain that rewards righteous behavior. Said the former head of a prestigious global consultancy, “I sometimes find public officials, on a general basis, to be, frankly, less forthright and express more personal concern than they do about the general public. But I rarely find that in business because in business it doesn’t pay. In business we don't do things that don't pay, generally. But the fact of the matter is that unless my clients trust me, unless my customers trust me, unless my employees trust me, they’re not going to want me
around. And I sure can’t have any hope of having a successful operation. So one is dependent on the series of constituents that is held together by the glue of integrity.”

That God ordained and is involved in business is a common and critical claim for rebutting the type of accusations we saw in the previous chapter. Indeed, Gary is himself sensitive to such criticisms. “People believe that the Bible does not support business,” Gary laments, “and they are completely wrong.” “The church is completely out of touch with this,” he complains. “There are obviously exceptions, but for the most part they believe that God has nothing to do with business. It’s dirty; it’s filthy; so they don’t really want to be involved.” For Gary, in contrast, God is everywhere involved in business, and far from being a “dirty” place where the wicked prosper, business is a God-ordained institution where moral order prevails. In presenting business as a moral order executives like Gary acknowledge what is now a sociological commonplace—that all social institutions are embedded in and governed by moral orders that are, in turn, manifestations of underlying narratives and traditions. In this case, the narrative that is advanced is that of a just and active God who designed private enterprise such that virtue is generally rewarded, and steps in when such is not the case. As such, it is the type of environment in which Christians, like him, can flourish.
CHAPTER 4: AFFIRMATIVE RELIGION

“Years ago one of our preachers at church said—let me think—I think he said it was like three percent of the attendees were there because of the preacher, ninety-one or ninety-two percent were there because of somebody they interacted with, and that’s how they started having an interest in searching for Christ. I went up after the lesson and asked him why we pay him so well,” laughed sixty-something year old Arnold, the founder and president of a large, privately held commercial real estate firm. One of the more colorful and outspoken characters I interviewed, Arnold laughed a lot, mixing in mildly self-deprecating remarks with pointed opinions, which, in combination, gave off an air of complete comfort and confidence in his place in the world and the perspectives he shared. “One of the things I’ve always wanted to do is give lots of people a great place to work,” he remarked, before joking, “The Lord has not given me nearly as many as I thought I could handle, but he obviously knows I can’t do near as much as I thought I could.”

Arnold’s reflections on the reasons people attend church are consistent with his perspective on the most valuable types of and venues for ministry. “I personally believe that the ministry we have is greater here than it is in the pulpit,” he averred. “Each one of our people—I’m going to say about ninety percent—understand that their job is a mission job. Selling just is a way you get in touch with people and get to know people, but the real job—the important thing—is their ministry.” Like many of the business leaders I spoke with, Arnold thinks of his work as ministry, or at any rate an opportunity for ministry. “As for really what it’s all about, I think God gives us work just to get us out of the house so we don’t sit around watching Oprah all day. Because you can’t get in contact, you can’t touch people’s lives sitting around the house all day. If he did us like he did the Jews for forty years where he just gave them some food
everyday but they didn’t have to even hardly get out of the tent—just stick their head out and open their mouths, I doubt we would know nearly as many people and we sure wouldn’t be able to minister to them. So, I think work is simply—we ought to probably come up with a different word because for Christians, there shouldn’t even be a word ‘work;’ it really just should be ‘ministry.’”

Of his employees, Arnold says, “When they’re representing the company, they’re representing the Lord, too. That’s sort of our mantra. One of our sales guys that interfaces with financial advisors, if he’s got three appointments that day and the first one is suicidal—in other words got a lot of problems going on—well, he has the built in authority to cancel the rest of the day and just spend that time with the person, and that happens more often than you would think. A lot of times people won’t share with people that are close to them, but a stranger that walks in the door that they know has a spiritual bias in his life, they’ll share things that are amazing. I’ve known people that shared things on airplanes with me that I’m thinking, ‘I can’t believe they’re even saying this.’”

A natural salesman, Arnold has always enjoyed the relational aspects of business the most. Working for a fast-food chain straight out of college, Arnold recalls that he sold so many franchises in a year or so that it was going to take five years to build them all. At the company he founded, he has consistently dedicated most of his time to investor relations, drumming up new business and keeping existing investors happy. He also enjoys supervising employees, but leaves most of the actual real estate investing to hired hands.

Arnold’s faith has always been steadfast. “I must say I grew up in an environment where I have never in my life even doubted that Jesus was God’s Son, that God was the creator of everything, that the Bible is His word. I just never had those thoughts. Of the prosaic character
of his faith history, he jokes, “When I give my testimony a lot of times I say, ‘Well, I was in prison—I killed three people…’ But really I don’t have that kind of story. I feel like he has been my God as long as I have memory. I don’t think at my age I’ll change. He sure hasn’t.”

While Arnold’s testimony is commonplace, his worship preferences are more distinctive. “I’m not black but I like being in a congregation that’s got a fair number of blacks in there because I like the interaction. I like the people in church who are loose enough to say, ‘Preach it, brother, preach it!’ And when they sing, they really sing. I like that atmosphere.” Of his current church he says, “I told my wife, ‘I think I go to church now to cry.’ When they have altar calls, they’ll come down and say, ‘I just want to thank y’all for praying for me; I want to thank the elders; I’ve been off drugs for three weeks now for the first time since I was thirteen years old.’ That’s what these people say. Now, you talk about losing it man, I just get to crying [laughs] and the people that have been ministering to them come down and hug on them and love them. Man, that’s just—I love that! You don’t get that in these all white churches.”

I might not have guessed Arnold’s preferred worship context based on his political inclinations. “I used to help Democrats but years ago they lost me,” Arnold says. These days he claims to know one-third to one-half of the candidates for the 2012 Republican nomination for President, to be good friends with Tim Pawlenty and Mike Huckabee, and to be most impressed with politicians who know how to run a business.

Like most informants, Arnold cites the Bible regularly when telling his story and articulating his perspectives. In the context of his autobiographical remarks, he compares himself to King David, the psalmist, who said, “You knew me before I was even born. You knew me when I was formed in the womb. You knew me when I was sucking at my mother’s breast. You knew me then and you were my God then and you still are today.” In expressing his
perspective on the nature of social change, Arnold references Thomas, one of Jesus’s disciples. “Jesus didn’t have an organization behind him, he just did it and he motivated people and those individuals went out and died for him. To me, Thomas is a great example of that. Thomas said, ‘Lord, we’re just going to go with you and die.’ That’s what he tells the apostles. I mean he was ready to die and I think that when you get individuals that are willing to die, that can change the world,” Arnold concludes, adding, “That’s what the Muslims have going for them.”

Arnold’s understating of the fundamental themes of the Bible informs his approach to managing his company. “I work to glorify God and to care for people,” he claims. “If you just sort of start at Genesis and read all the way through the Bible, the one thing that—actually two things that sort of overwhelm me are how much God loves us and, number two, he doesn’t want you to get any glory. Once you get those two—in our organization we try to be involved a lot with like-minded people in that regard.” For Arnold, this perspective dictates to whom he devotes the majority of his care and concern. “It goes back to glorify God and care for people,” he reiterates. “Who are those people? People are anybody that God puts you in touch with and, obviously, if you’re sitting in the cubicle next to somebody, it’s as important for you to minister to them as anybody…. My customer is not the most important thing to me. The people that work in my office are the most important thing to me.” His business is of spiritual value, Arnold believes on the basis of his reading of Scripture, because he takes care of his employees, which includes paying for Bible teachers to teach at the office and, he claims, paying people more so that they have opportunities to give more away.
SOLA SCRIPTURA

We have seen that the evangelical business leaders with whom I spoke are sensitive to criticisms regarding the nature and worth of their work. While emphasizing the proposed connection between virtue and profit helps evangelical executives ward off certain types of criticisms of business, it is of less help in asserting the positive value of business, and does not establish that by pursuing a career in business they are satisfying the evangelical imperative to contribute to eternally significant objectives. For this, Arnold and others turn to Scripture, which represents for them the primary explanatory and justificatory resource—the way they make sense of their circumstances and defend their decisions—as well as a repository of themes and metaphors useful for articulating the spiritual contributions of business.

Ironically, in turning to the Bible to assert the positive value of business, evangelical executives draw on the very same resource that their critics use to denigrate business. As we have seen, it is certainly possible to interpret portions of Scripture as disparaging private enterprise. Recall, for example, that Weber concluded that the Bible favors economic traditionalism. How are evangelical business leaders able to use Scripture to marshal support for that which others believe it condemns? The keys, I believe, are the ways evangelicals are encouraged to read Scripture and the ambiguity and broad applicability of some important biblical motifs.

The perspectives of the executives I interviewed are consistent with the doctrine of Sola Scriptura, the belief that the Bible contains all knowledge necessary for salvation and holiness. For the business leaders I interviewed, the breadth of content contained in Scripture ensures its applicability across a range of circumstances. The CEO of an energy company, reflecting on his dialogue with a Christian counselor, remarked, “We started studying the scriptures. I would ask
questions, and then she would say, ‘Well, let’s look at what the Scripture says.’ So, I started looking at how much wisdom there was, and how much truth there was in what she was showing me. There was basically an answer to everything in there, if you knew where to look for it.” For him and many others, the Bible has all the answers. As the CFO of an energy company expressed, “The Bible is the very best resource that I go to. I actually go to very, very few external resources. I am not a reader of the latest pithy book from a secular or spiritual author.”

One of the external resources that he and, as we have seen, a number of others did consult—Rick Warren’s *The Purpose Driven Life*—a relatively short book by word count with just over three hundred large print pages, contains nearly a thousand quotations from Scripture. Warren’s emphasis on Scripture is apparent early on, as he suggests near the outset, “If you really want to improve your life, memorizing Scripture may be the most important habit you can begin.” To that end, he markets a Purpose-Driven Life Scripture Keeper Plus in which to organize Scripture memorization cards. Throughout the book, rarely, if ever, is a principle espoused without a supporting quotation from the Bible. If Warren wants to make a point, he quotes Scripture. What he does not do is explain Scripture. With three Bible quotes per page on average, there simply is no room for any sort of in-depth analysis of the text. Warren plucks verses from all over the Bible and lets them stand on their own, assumed to be straightforwardly understood and applied.

As an important resource for evangelicals in general and for many of the executives I interviewed, *The Purpose Driven Life* represents an example of how to approach and use Scripture. In isolating verses from their context, it goes against sound hermeneutical principles, according to which passages must be understood in the context of their immediate pericope and broader literary units. The book implicitly endorses the doctrine of “the perspicacity of
Scripture,” denoting that all of sound mind are able to correctly understand the Bible without help—a doctrine that encourages evangelicals to trust their own interpretation of Scripture.

This, the executives I spoke with are eager to do. “I think the Bible is too much limited by commentaries,” says Gary, the charismatic entrepreneur we met in the last chapter. Likewise, Arnold, the spirited real estate mogul, discourses, “I think we probably underestimate God’s ability and his spirit in us to convey most things, and I think a lot of us spend too much of their life seeking out somebody that’s going to give them the right answer. I’m not even sure they would know the right answer if it hit them in the head…. I think we talk about it too much. A little time by yourself praying and in the Word, it’s amazing—you read something fifty times and all of a sudden God’s spirit makes you see something in there that you never saw before. It hits you right where you need it. I just think we tend to read too many books about the Bible, too many books about what God says, too many books about what you ought to do and not nearly enough time reading what God said—not my interpretations about what he says, not books about what he says…I think God can be pretty doggone clear through our spirit, what he wants to say.”

If *The Purpose Driven Life* encourages evangelical executives and their coreligionists to make liberal use of Scripture, trusting their own interpretations along the way, another resource—this one endorsed by individuals and organizations that desire to equip evangelical business leaders for biblical business—grants permission for executives to apply almost anything in the Bible to their professional lives. The Theology of Work Project⁹ is “an independent, international organization dedicated to researching, writing, and distributing materials with a biblical perspective on non-church workplaces.” The initiative has generated support from people like the executives interviewed for this study and the ministry organizations that desire to support them. While the project focuses on “work” in general, the team consists largely of

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⁹ www.theologyofwork.org
businesspersons and theologians, and as such there is a clear emphasis on for-profit enterprises.

A subheading in a document titled, “A General Introduction to a Theology of Work” poses the question, “How do you do a theology of work?” According to this document, “The simple answer is, you study the Bible.” The document goes on to explain, “What we have done is to go through the Bible book by book and surface what we might not have seen about work had we not been looking for it.” From every chapter of every book in the Bible, contributors to the Theology of Work Project discern principles that in their judgment apply to contemporary business. From passages in Leviticus on skin diseases and mold infections to prophetic expectations in Daniel that God will overthrow pagan kingdoms and replace them with his own kingdom to the Apostle Paul’s instructions regarding slaves and masters in his various epistles, contributors find connections to contemporary business realities. The executive editor of the Theology of Work Project observes, “Often the most interesting resources come from the most unexpected places. Who would have thought that the Song of Songs would have so much to say about workplace relationships and employee satisfaction?” he asks, “or that the best example of a manager in the Bible is the Valiant Woman in the Book of Proverbs?” He adds, “I was surprised that Paul’s discussion about yoking oxen in 2 Corinthians would have so much practical guidance for workplace relationships in business today.”

There is good reason that this editor is surprised. I scoured several commentaries on these three passages and did not find a single reference to work. The only way to find lessons regarding work in such passages, it seems, is to go in looking for them. But this is exactly the type of hermeneutical lens with which the evangelical business leaders I interviewed are apparently equipped, ready and willing to describe business in biblical terms and with the use of biblical metaphors. From the Bible evangelical business leaders find guidance on why business
is important in the first place and appropriate for them in particular. And for those I interviewed, the lessons of Scripture are context-independent. They have received sanction to apply biblical metaphors and lessons—including those with no connection to business—to their occupational contexts.

**PERSONAL CALLINGS**

When Arnold reads the Bible from beginning to end, he concludes that the overriding emphasis of Scripture is to glorify God and care for others. Another real estate executive tells of studying Scripture at the beginning of his career, when, he says, the markets were down fifty percent and he had some time on his hands. “I had a good friend who was a new Christian and I said, ‘Why don’t we read the Bible and find out what it has to say about money and possessions?’ I told him, ‘Why don’t we split it up? You take the Old Testament. I’ll take the New Testament.’ He didn’t know the difference….I think the big thing we came away with is: What’s our part, and what’s God’s part? Our part is to be stewards; God’s part is he controls everything. And he prospers one, and puts down another. So in general, you do the right things and God will prosper you, but it doesn’t necessarily have to be that way because he’s still sovereign. So, those principles then became sort of guideposts for me, for all of my business career.” These principles, reminiscent of the virtue-profit connection we explored last chapter and which, he claims, gave shape to all of his business dealings, bear little resemblance to the themes Arnold emphasized. Both read the same Bible, but come away with different lessons.

While some, like Arnold and his fellow real estate mogul, attempt to distill Scripture into an overriding motif; others pick a theme verse or passage that for them represents the key to understanding their professional lives. The chairman of an industrial products company, for
example, related that he had grand plans for a sweeping study of Scripture during an extended vacation. “I was going to reread the New Testament real slow and all the notes and do all the counter scripture. I had this big plan,” he recalled. “Anyway, I didn’t do it. I realized that I had blown the opportunity, I had a bunch of time off—here I said I was going to do it and I didn’t.” Despite the missed opportunity, his disappointment quickly evaporated, he insists, because he soon came across a verse that saved him the trouble. “It was funny; I don’t know how many times I read [1 Timothy 1:5], then I came across it and the first five words really got me. I couldn’t believe it. It says, ‘The goal of our instruction is...’ I didn’t read past that. Wow! That’s as important as anything in the Bible! It says, “love from a pure heart, a sincere faith, and a clear conscience.” I thought, ‘Wow, that’s a tough one.’ So be pure, sincere, and clean of heart. God’s really put that on my mind that that is what love really is....What I got out of all that was—love is the New Testament.” A generic lesson, for sure, but one that has shaped, he believes, the way he has run his company and provided inspiration to the point that he includes on the company website pages titled “What’s Love Got to Do With It?” and “God’s Love” and even designed a television commercial that depicts the need for more of God’s love. This one verse, this executive contends, has transformed his approach to and understanding of business. Connecting the dots, he says, “You’re supposed to love other people all day, every day. I see business as every bit of a ministry as everything else. In relationship with your coworkers—in my case distributors—and then their employees and our dealer accounts and their families.”

Like this executive, the owner and CEO of a furniture company honed in on one particular passage that has provided inspiration for him in his career. “I adopted Psalms 37:4 as my life verse in my early twenties,” he told me. “It says, ‘Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart.’ As I pursued those desires, while continuing or
maintaining my delight in the Lord, He is the one who gave me these ideas that gave me these drives and gave me the passions, so I felt free to pursue those.” For this CEO, the fact that he enjoys business makes it a calling, as confirmed by one particular Bible verse. Similarly, a well-known CEO of a technology company recalls how he came to view business as ministry. “After I joined my first company, I became a Christian, and then really felt called to the ministry. It was sort of like, ‘What are you doing, God?’ It seems rather bizarre considering work and school and everything was going extremely well. Then, Colossians 3:23 really sort of came into my life and it was clear that God was calling me to workplace ministry and what that meant in its full complements. I felt very much a workplace minister ever since that.” Later, he explained, “A Christian business leader would be one who is, again, living by Colossians 3:23—working hardily as for the Lord and not for men. You’re treating Christ as CEO and your current role as a temporal one.”

Several informants note that the Bible has more to say on economic matters than on most other subjects, but few seem to appreciate that the Bible assumes a personal economy in which market participants know those with whom they transact. In most cases today, of course, the economic context is much different. Thus, there will be, at minimum, substantial challenges in deriving from Scripture principles that translate directly to current professional contexts. Evangelicals are not without strategies for doing so. Blomberg, author of a thoughtful and comprehensive study of biblical material on poverty and wealth, recommends running each Old Testament passage through a grid of its ‘fulfillment’ in Christ to see how its application is altered in the New Testament age, acknowledging that “one must often relate situation-specific mandates to broader, more timeless, categories” (2000:30). Blomberg observes, “the closer the situation in any given portion of our contemporary world corresponds to the features—in this
case the socioeconomic features—of the world behind any given biblical instruction, the more straightforwardly one can transfer the principles of those texts to our modern age. The less the correspondence, the higher one has to move up the ‘ladder of abstraction,’ to look for broader principles that may transcend the uniqueness of specific situations.” These theological dynamics and the general absence or weakness of conciliar authority give rise to idiosyncratic theological perspectives, which are often contradictory. Indeed, moving up the ladder of abstraction permits diverse interpretations and applications. Smith (2011) describes the “pervasive interpretive pluralism” that frustrates evangelical attempts to define the core tenets of their faith but permits evangelical executives to understand even the most generic principles and injunctions as applying to business in particular. Armed with confidence in their ability to interpret and apply the Bible, and emboldened to comb through Scripture for passages that appeal to their perspectives and speak to their circumstances, the Bible represents for the evangelical executives with whom I spoke a treasure trove of legitimating scripts and metaphors.

**AN AMPLE RESOURCE**

For many contemporary readers, the Bible is an outdated complex of inflexible moral proscriptions that serve to constrain behavior. This view fits nicely with some scholarly perspectives that see religion as primarily a regulatory example of culture. Friedland and Alford, for example, insist that “Contemporary Christian religions seek to convert all issues into expressions of absolute moral principles accepted voluntarily on faith and grounded in a particular cosmogony” (1991:249). These moral principles, moreover, conform to an institutional logic that is characteristic of religion and in tension with the logics of action that characterize other social domains, including the economy. For Friedland and Alford, religion is
an essentially competitive institution that attempts to subsume all other domains, including the market, under its particular rubric of meaning.

Weber, too, saw religion as essentially in conflict with economic life. For him, at the heart of the Christian ethic are the unyielding injunctions spoken by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, during which Jesus is reported to have overruled the ancient code of justice called the “lex talionis,” or law of retaliation, requiring no more than proportional retribution for an offense. “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles,” Jesus said. On this account, Christian character requires going well beyond the basic requirements of fairness. It requires supererogatory acts to the point of significant personal sacrifice.

This helps explain why Weber perceives such tension between “religions of salvation,” including Christianity, and “worldly” institutions. In Religious Rejections of the World and their Directions, Weber posits conflict between the manner of thought and action enjoined by “brotherly” religion and those that characterize essentially every domain of social life, including the economic, political, aesthetic, erotic, and intellectual spheres. For Weber, Christianity puts one on the outside looking in, constantly in tension with worldly standards. And, as noted earlier, Weber gives pride of place to the economic sphere as the domain in which tension with religion has been most obvious. Whereas the executives I spoke with used the Bible to validate their perceived callings to business, Weber’s reading of the Bible led him to conclude that the only way to reconcile business and Christianity would be to violate the character of one or both.
In contrast to scholarly and popular perspectives that paint religion as a restrictive phenomenon, one of the most consistent themes put forth by sociologists of religion in recent years is the trend toward more flexible and personal interpretations and applications of religion. With the publication of *Habits of the Heart* in 1985, Robert Bellah and colleagues set off alarm bells regarding the apparent trend toward individualism as increasingly characteristic of American life, a theme picked up more recently by Putnam (2001), among others. In the sociology of religion, Wuthnow (1998) and Roof (1999) emphasized the concept of spiritual seeking, and Roof has continued to champion the idea of individualistic spirituality as paradigmatic of American religion. More recently, Madsen (2009) articulates what seems to have become the conventional wisdom—that there is such a thing as “American religion” and that it is characterized, above all, by individualism. Religion, on this account, has become a buffet of sorts, from which various beliefs and practices can be selected or passed over as tastes and circumstances dictate.

While this account, on the whole, is likely overstated, there are some indications that evangelicalism has been affected by this trend. For example, studies suggest an erosion of consensus on theological matters among evangelicals (Hunter 1987). In many ways, however, evangelicalism has always been an individualistic religious tradition, encouraging spiritual improvisation (such as personally interpreting scripture or praying without liturgical language) and an individualistic ethic (Emerson and Smith 2001). For evangelicals, faith is intensely personal, and the faithful are expected to personally appropriate and creatively apply their faith in all areas of their lives. The doctrine of “the priesthood of the believer,” denoting that all of the faithful have direct, unmediated access to God, encourages evangelicals to pray to, and hear from, God directly. The business leaders I interviewed certainly evidenced abundant flexibility
in interpreting their callings and responsibilities in business. Think back to Nancy, who sold fast food and dared anyone to question her calling, declining, in turn, to judge other’s sense of calling. And recall that Phillip, the CEO of the family entertainment company, specifically distinguished between the purpose of business and his purpose in business. This sense of personal calling gives evangelical executives considerable latitude to emphasize different contributions made by business to different groups.

**OMNI-VALUATION**

In order to demonstrate the breadth of rationales employed by evangelical executives in asserting the sacred character of business, and to contrast this approach with the idea that religion represents a distinctive, consistent, and competing logic of action that is incompatible with a market orientation, I draw on Boltanski and Thevenot’s (2006, 1999) taxonomy of competing evaluative principles. Boltanski and Thevenot undertake to explain how people resolve circumstances in which they are challenged to justify their actions or intentions, as they are in the interviews I conducted. For these authors, social life is best analyzed as a series of discrete situations in which individual actors negotiate agreements as to the course of action that is most likely to enhance the form of the common good that best fits the situation. During the course of such negotiations, individuals draw on six fundamental and mutually incompatible “orders of worth,” each epitomized by a specific philosophical tradition, crystallized in a particular historical milieu, and characterized by a distinctive evaluative principle, form of evidence, characteristic relationship, and human qualification (see Table 4.1 below).
Table 4.1: Boltanski and Thevenot's Orders of Worth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode of evaluation (worth)</th>
<th>Inspired</th>
<th>Domestic</th>
<th>Civic</th>
<th>Opinion</th>
<th>Market</th>
<th>Industrial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grace, nonconformity, creativeness</td>
<td>Esteem, reputation</td>
<td>Collective interest</td>
<td>Renown</td>
<td>Price</td>
<td>Productivity, efficiency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Oral, exemplary, anecdotal</td>
<td>Formal, official</td>
<td>Semiotic</td>
<td>Monetary</td>
<td>Measurable: criteria, statistics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passion</td>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Solidarity</td>
<td>Recognition</td>
<td>Exchange</td>
<td>Functional link</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity, ingenuity</td>
<td>Authority</td>
<td>Equality</td>
<td>Celebrity</td>
<td>Desire, purchasing power</td>
<td>Professional competency, expertise</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Boltanski and Thevenot (1999:368)

- In the *inspired world*, worth is not earned, but conferred by grace and independent of recognition by others. Worthy persons in this world are spontaneous and creative, and produce objects of intrinsic value that resist traditional pricing and valuation.

- In the *domestic world*, worth hinges on one’s position in hierarchically arranged personal relationships, as has often characterized family dynamics. Worthy beings embrace their role, be it authoritative or subservient, and faithfully discharge their responsibilities to those to whom they are personally connected. Worth in this world is conferred and assessed by association.

- In the *civic world*, worth inheres in collectivities, while individuals are devalued as such. The worthy eschew self-interest and personal attachments in favor of communal goods, inciting others to collective action.

- In the *world of opinion*, people and things are deemed worthy by virtue of the quantity of attention they command, irrespective of their merit or affiliation.

- In the *market world*, worth is expressed by price (objects) or wealth (persons), as accrued through impersonal and dispassionate exchange.
In the *industrial world*, worth is based on productivity, as generated by professional competence and measured by statistics that capture dispensations of time and energy.

According to Boltanski and Thevenot, these six orders of worth, though not necessarily exhaustive, “are sufficient to describe justifications performed in the majority of ordinary situations” (1999:369). While their work, based on textual analysis, does not indisputably demonstrate such comprehensiveness, the analysis that follows does not depend on it. I use Boltanski and Thevenot’s systematization as a heuristic device, looking for at least rough correspondence with their proposed categories. The point is not to validate their typology, but to demonstrate that evangelical executives use a variety of apparently incompatible evaluative principles to motivate and/or justify their professional behavior.

Of the six worlds of worth, three are most consistently and explicitly endorsed by Christian teachings, namely the inspired, civic, and domestic worlds. Briefly and at the broadest level, while the market world encourages putting oneself (or one’s company) first, the Christian ethic urges putting oneself (or one’s company) last, after God and one’s neighbor. As Jesus is quoted as saying, “Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” More specifically, Christians are urged to rely on divine guidance and grace (inspired), love all persons, including neighbors and enemies (civic), and dispense special concern for one’s family and coreligionists (domestic).

Of course, the fact that the official doctrine of a religious tradition prioritizes certain forms of worth does not mean that it will have the practical effect of encouraging such valuation. Churches may articulate the inestimable worth of every soul while their deacon and elders boards consist of generous donors from families of high standing. They may denounce wealth while building opulent structures. And they may decry corporatism while implementing sophisticated
marketing techniques and bookkeeping procedures. So although most versions of Christian theology, as selectively culled from the Bible, draw most explicitly from the inspired, domestic, and civic worlds, this does not rule out the intentional or incidental promotion of other forms of worth.

Although logically each of the six principles of worth is incompatible with all of the others, some pairs are nonetheless more antagonistic than others. The industrial world, wherein efficiency is valued, can be straightforwardly, though not inevitably, shown to be in service of the market principle of worth, and it is thus no surprise that the industrial principle also holds some sway in commercial contexts (Boltanski and Thevenot 2006). The other principles of worth are considerably less compatible with the market world of worth. Consider the following corporate activities: donating products and services to the less fortunate (civic); producing custom, one-off products that express the artistic creativity of the producers (inspired); indulging nepotistic hiring practices (domestic); advertising indiscriminately across market segments (opinion). Each of these would, under most circumstances, pose a challenge to the market-oriented, price-based order of worth. Yet, as the following examples demonstrate, to designate what really matters in business, evangelical executives draw not just on the market principle that has been shown to dominate corporate affairs (Davis 2009, Useem 1996, Fligstein 1993), but also on those principles of worth that stand in contrast to this orienting principle. These various justifications are in turn justified by appeal to Scripture-informed concepts and metaphors that transcend or are consistent with the particular principle of worth invoked.
The Inspired World of Worth

In the inspired world, worth is not earned, but conferred by grace and independent of recognition by others. Worthy persons in this world are spontaneous and creative, and produce objects of intrinsic value that resist traditional pricing and valuation. There is a natural affinity between evangelical Christian theology and the inspired world of worth, and indeed informants consistently drew on this principle of worth and related concepts.

For several informants, the creative dimension of the inspired world was particularly important. For many, in fact, creation is a fundamental metaphor for work. As one venture capitalist stated, “A good theology of work starts with a fundamental understanding of the creation mandate, and our invitation to participate in creation and how that rolls through every moment of our lives that we have here on earth….It’s just a whole different mindset that you have in terms of approaching life as a co-creator as opposed to a business dude who wakes up when he’s fifty years old and says ‘Okay, I’ve got enough money in the bank, now I can do something significant.’” “Venture capital is a marvelous profession in terms of creativity,” he explained, “…of the creation of value, the creation of workplaces, of new technologies that make the world better—that make people’s lives better. If our mandate is to bring order to the universe, to bring order out of entropy and to bring it all under the crown of the Lord, then any work that we do that brings about that order—that brings about the creation of value including eternal value is a useful pursuit in and of itself.” Put simply by a junior executive at a software company, “I believe our God is a creative God and a God of creation, and that business is an outlet for creativity.”

Sometimes informants applied their appreciation for the creative dimension of business to their personal sense of motivation and worth. One entrepreneur, commenting on the nature of
success, confided, “I mean, what’s success? Monetary success, fame, status? I don’t think that ever interested me, as much as maybe other people. Money’s probably a secondary driver for me. I think it’s just the idea of creating something new. I think that intrigues me more, whether it’s starting up a company or nonprofits. I think that has always sort of driven me.” Another technology company CEO described the experience of writing his first computer program as “an ‘aha moment’ where I felt like it was almost like creating something **ex nihilo**—out of nothing. It was a sense of feeling like this is what I was created to do.” While the Latin phrase **ex nihilo** does not appear in Scripture, it is often used by evangelicals to designate the fact that God is the only creator of the universe and that he alone is eternal. As a popular evangelical theology textbook states, “The Bible clearly requires us to believe that God created the universe out of nothing” (Grudem 1994: 262). From statements like “you created all things” (Revelation 4:11) and “what is seen was not made out of things which are visible” (Hebrews 11:3), evangelicals extract both theological and scientific significance. For this CEO, the fact that writing a computer program is in some sense participating in “God-like” activity supports the spiritual value of his work.

**The Civic World of Worth**

The civic principle of worth is outward oriented, according value to the broader collectivity and emphasizing solidarity with those not necessarily associated with one’s own interests or those of one’s immediate group or company, or even with those opposed to such interests. Emphasis in the civic world is on responsibilities to unidentified, impersonal others.

Here again, informants provided theological justification for this orientation and also concrete examples of its implementation. “I think this Hebrew notion, **shalom**, or the common
good—part of our job as business people is to be concerned not only narrowly about our specific activity—of course that’s what we’re focused on but somehow it contributes to a larger purpose and part of that purpose is for that larger community that we’re a part of,” explained one CEO.

“I think every company perhaps needs to find its own identity and place in the common community and society.” For this executive, contributing to *shalom* means looking for ways to cooperate instead of compete, even when such cooperation might impair financial performance.

“One of the things that I’ve been wrestling with in our business context,” he said, “is that we exist in an ecosystem with various software vendors who compete with us, and the obvious strategy is to say, ‘Oh, well, we’re going to beat them. We’re going to be the best at this. We’re going to beat them at their game.’ That’s sort of the traditional model of competition. But I think at least for me, I’ve been challenged recently to ask—are there ways to cooperate? We actually had some conversations with another company and basically said, ‘The need is so great in the world. I mean, we could compete directly but maybe there is a way to cooperate technologically rather than duplicate each other’s work and waste scarce resources on something that we could be better off cooperating on.’” Acknowledging the discrepancy between this type of relationship and the standard market approach, the CEO explained, “I think the hard part of trying to think larger and perhaps more Christianly is that the common good might lead you some place that self-interest might not.”

A number of evangelical business leaders cited human flourishing as a key objective of their firms. Sometimes, this was focused internally on employee well-being; other times it was oriented toward the community. “At this company we are trying to promote human flourishing through our product,” explained a serial entrepreneur. “Sickness and disease we don’t believe are a part of God’s best for people and they derail people from accomplishing their vocation as well
as the larger purposes for life.” Describing the internal dynamic at his most recent startup company, he explained, “Our team members are invited to bring their whole selves to the office. We try to create an authentic community where candor and transformative relationships are the norm.” Desiring to facilitate “an environment of mentorship, camaraderie, and discipleship,” he allocates to each employee a monthly budget to be applied toward “learning initiatives” or “wellness projects,” which might include activities like conference attendance or sessions with a personal trainer or counselor. Employees are required to report on the results of these enrichment projects so that the entire team can benefit from each other’s experiences. Employees read a book together every month to expand intellectual horizons, work out together twice a month to encourage physical health, and once a week employees work remotely in order to encourage deeper reflection than is often possible in a bustling office. Time is allocated to talk about wellness because, as the entrepreneur explained, “If God is interested in humans flourishing, we want a culture and a budget that encourages all of this stuff.”

The Domestic World of Worth

If informants at times emphasized impartiality and impersonal relations as characterize the civic world of worth, they generally placed even greater emphasis on the domestic world of worth, which is most sensitive to individuals as distinct centers of value. In the domestic world, personal relationships matter. Informants consistently emphasized the personal nature of their attempts to incorporate their faith at work, preferring in most cases to cite concrete examples rather than the difficult to specify effects of abstract principles and guidelines.

Few personal relationships are more important to evangelicals than kinship ties, and informants regularly emphasized family responsibilities. The managing director of a financial
products company confided, “Our definition of success is extremely different in that we have a huge desire to have people maintain balance, and so, by and large, our people can work fifty hours a week, and we clearly state that if you go outside the fifty hours that we recommend you work, then you sort of discount your successfulness in that week. And so we measure marriages, and families, and children’s growth, and physical fitness, and spiritual growth, and mental development, and community involvement.” This same executive takes time to meet with employees’ spouses to discuss his desire for them to experience a balanced life and healthy relationship. Another enacted significant family-friendly policies at a major consulting firm, allowing consultants, for whom the consulting lifestyle can take a severe toll on their home life, to work nine months a year or four days a week for reduced compensation. Another executive recalled hearing an employee recount the way his work life had positively influenced his home life. As the executive tells it, he and a group of team members had taken a prospective hire out for dinner when one of his colleagues said to the prospective employee, “I’ve got to tell you—these values, they don’t just work at work; they work at home! A couple of months ago I went home to my wife and I said, ‘Honey, we’re trying to honor each other more at work, and I realize I could probably do a better job of honoring you at home, and I’m going to work on that.’ I’ve got to tell you, it has changed my relationship with my wife.” According to the executive who observed this conversation, “I sat there at that table, and I started weeping that night, because it was just one of the first times that God so clearly opened up my eyes to the fact that how we choose to live and act as leaders makes a difference in the lives around us, and not just their lives, but the lives of the people that they touch, too.”

Sometimes informants import family-oriented metaphors to their firms, as when the former head of a global consulting firm referred to employees as his “children.” The owner of a
contracting company with about forty employees, having specifically described his firm as a family, became emotional when recalling the contributions of a former employee. “My chief engineer walked in one day in this room and said, ‘Well, I’ve got ALS, Lou Gehrig’s disease.’ I said, ‘What are you going to do?’ He said, ‘Well, I don’t want to travel or anything. I just love working on this stuff.’ So I said, ‘Well, what if we try to make your strengths productive and weaknesses irrelevant.’ So, he worked for another three years. He passed away this last year. But, at the end, he was getting up at three o’clock in the morning to come to work by 8:00, and up to 11:00 getting into bed at night. We hired his wife as his personal assistant so she could be with him during the day when he was totally paralyzed and confined to his wheelchair, and he worked up until the month of his death. That’s the kind of family… I mean, that tells more about us than lots of things that I could say or are in the brochure.”

**The Opinion World of Worth**

The world of opinion, or fame, is less likely to receive theological justification than some of the other worlds of worth. On most accounts, the Christian ethic entails humility and “dying to oneself.” Nevertheless, informants sometimes made appeal to reputation oriented principles of worth, generally for instrumental purposes but sometimes as explicit claims to worth on account of recognition.

A number of informants referred to business in general, or to their standing in business and the associated reputation, as a platform from and through which to accomplish meaningful objectives. According to the managing partner of an executive search firm, “I think that there is an element of business that clearly is meant to be a platform from which we can let our light shine.” The marketing director of a food service company concurs: “I believe that business, like
any organization, is a platform to reach people; it’s just about what platform you’re going to reach….My pastor believes that business gives you the platform to reach people that church will never reach, because church in and of itself is a barrier for some people.”

On this logic, it makes sense to draw attention to yourself or your company in order to broaden your platform, and in fact several informants were strategic in this regard. “I started working on a fifty-year plan when I was in Vietnam in 1970,” explained the founder of a commercial real estate firm. The fifty-year plan basically had three phases to it. First phase was twenty-five years of education and military, and whatever else I needed to do, which I had just completed. So then I was looking at fifty years beyond that, and I divided that into two phases. The second phase then was twenty-five years to build a business and the third phase was twenty-five years to give back to the community. And so, I’ve always thought of my life in terms of those three phases: preparation, platform, and patron. So, I started the business with the idea that I was doing it in part to create a platform to make a difference.” Another company founder, this time in the retail real estate business, despite not necessarily wanting the attention, ultimately chose to use his last name for the company moniker, realizing that “the name which I originally thought was neat, then wished had been replaced, has now become a platform and an attribute which allows me to reach and impact people that I would not otherwise be able to reach.” One former CEO, proud of his current initiatives in the community, acknowledged, “If you want to do something like I’ve done, you’ve got years of hard work to build up where you have a platform that you can begin to do any of the kinds of things I’ve tried to do.” Other retirees lamented the loss of status, recognition, and influence associated with their professional standing.
The Industrial World of Worth

In the industrial world, worth is oriented to productivity, and the focus is on the work process itself. Several executives specifically affirmed the idea that work itself is God-ordained. “One thing I was astonished at, that I should’ve known, reading the Bible, was that there was work in the garden of Eden—there was work before the Fall. Work is no curse. It may have gotten harder. Conditions may have gotten tougher, but there was work before the Fall…. I think it’s in the Book of John, where Jesus said—it haunted me when I read it—he said, ‘My father is working, and I am working also.’ So, I think there’s a nobility to work. Work is good. You may not like what you’re doing right now. It doesn’t matter whether you like it or not. You may find your passion later in your life, but go get the skill set. Go do some good where you are. Learn a craft. Learn a profession. Help build up.” These comments, posed as advice to aspiring executives by a retired CEO, are consistent with the industrial world of worth. Essentially, he encourages them to be skillful and productive. Nancy, the food service CEO we met earlier, believes that people will work in heaven, despite the presumed absence of scarcity. “I’m kind of excited about that, that there’s a role and a responsibility in heaven. Because I had to wrestle with what my theology was going to be about work. The good thing is it’s in Genesis. It starts on the first page, where God said, ‘There will be work.’ I can’t find anything wrong with that, when I read that chapter on creation. I think he intended for it to be good and fruitful and healthy, and purposeful. He made the garden really beautiful, so that might have been our first clue that it was going to be a good thing. Only our human nature has twisted work into something not good.”

The idea that work has intrinsic value encourages some evangelical executives to couch their personal worth in terms of their productive capacity. Several decried retirement as
unspiritual and contrary to God’s purposes. Nancy, as we have seen, insists, “Retirement’s not in the Bible. It’s not there. Nobody retires in the Bible. So, it’s a question of how you’re going to apply the gifts you’ve been given for as long as you get to apply them in this world.”

Similarly, another executive confessed, “I don’t believe in retirement. You will not find it in Scripture. I think it’s extraordinarily boring. I had a period after selling a business and for about two years I had nothing to do. I was just about ready to be killed or kill somebody. I don’t know. I can’t do this….I will put it this way—I want to burn out rather than rust out in the end, so if it’s not this company then it’s going to be something involved in the business world and it’s going to be something similar—building a for-profit business with a very clear purpose of solving and helping solve social issues.”

The Market World of Worth

As the preceding examples show, evangelical executives are able to marshal theological support for and invoke principles of worth that, in many cases, oppose the market principle of worth that tends to dominate their professional environments. Nevertheless, the following examples show that, despite these affirmations, informants also claim spiritual sanction for the market principle of worth.

The market world is oriented to wealth, both individual and corporate, and is measured in such terms, and the evangelical perspective on wealth is complicated. Keister (2008, 2003), for one, finds that wealth accumulation is sometimes regarded as unbecoming or immoral in conservative Protestant religious instruction, depressing the incentive to pursue lucrative careers and engage in disciplined investment strategies and contributing to relative asset poverty among conservative Protestants. Generally speaking, the evangelical executives I spoke with exhibited
few such qualms. Nancy, for example, in articulating her support for Milton Friedman’s assertion that the social responsibility of business is to increase its profits, stated, “I believe somebody has to create wealth. So, the idea that God might have made some enterprise to create wealth makes sense to me.” Another executive located wealth creation among God’s fundamental purposes: “God has called us to create wealth—that’s sort of the creation mandate. He’s created us as workers, or in his image as entrepreneurs.”

The spiritual justification for wealth creation emboldened a few informants to measure their own worth by their wealth. “I had established two lifetime goals that had to do with money, two that had to do with family, and two that had to do with personal things,” recalled a former media company executive. “The first that had to do with money was to make a fixed net worth in my lifetime. It was a big number.” More than one executive expressed the intent to, as one put it, “earn as much as I can and give it all away.”

While some of the executives I interviewed assessed their own worth by their wealth, others evaluated the worth of their firms by the wealth they created for (certain) others. “Increasing shareholder value is what God wants us to do,” insisted a former CEO who owns and operates a firm that advises current CEOs, declaring on its website that the firm “is passionate about helping owners increase shareholder value.” “The Parable of the Talents is a perfect example,” he said. “Someone gives you a dollar—he wants you to do something with it. He wants you to at least return that dollar with a little extra change. So, to me, it’s wonderful.” The Parable of the Talents, attributed to Jesus in two of the Canonical Gospels, tells of a master who, before departing for travel, entrusted his property to three servants, allocating to each an amount commensurate with his ability. Upon his return, the master rewarded two servants who had doubled the value of the property with which they were entrusted, and severely reproved the
third servant, who had buried his “talent” so as to preclude its loss. It is most unlikely that this parable has anything to do with business. As commentators observe, the parable is one of several in the gospels that urge an appropriate response to the spiritual message Jesus preached. Nevertheless, from this account, among others, some evangelical executives derive the concept of stewardship, according to which Christians are encouraged to view their resources and abilities as belonging to God and to be used in God’s service. Combined with the sentiment, attributed to King David in the Psalms, that “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it,” some evangelical executives equate stewardship of God’s resources with maximization of shareholder returns, as in the example above. As one CEO puts it, “Work is managing God’s resources His way. That description of work has been really compelling for me. Thinking about the idea that all the resources that I have personally, all the resources at my disposal as a leader, as a worker—you know, in my worldview those are God’s resources. Thinking about being a steward of those resources and then managing them in a way that would be God-honoring is pretty powerful for me.”

That the funds they have invested belong to God would likely be a surprise to many shareholders, and perhaps even a source of alarm. According to the founder of an investment firm, “You might learn at Harvard Business School, you know, we exist at the pleasure of our shareholders, and for their benefit. And to a certain degree, and in a legal sense, that’s true…. But the spiritual aspect of this is you can just throw all that away and cut to the chase, and the cutting to the chase is this company exists at the pleasure of God, and he can wipe it out any moment he wants to. And, when I gave my life to God, I’m a manager. I’m a steward now. I’m squat. So that completely reframes what it is I’m doing and how I think about it, very powerfully.”
Whether on this basis shareholders have any reason to be concerned is far from clear, as this company founder boasted that adherence to biblical principles had actually enhanced returns in both good times and bad. And most interpret the biblical stewardship mandate not as challenging, but rather supporting traditional understandings of the purpose of business. According to an energy company CFO, “In the end, this business is about profit. It’s making money….It’s a stewardship, we at the leadership of the business have a stewardship to take the assets that our stakeholders provide to us and give them the best return that we can for their investment. I think that’s biblical, in terms of what I’m called to do as it relates to my daily work.” For this executive, increasing profits constitutes biblical business. In support of this perspective, he, too, cites the Parable of the Talents. “I think the Parable of the Talents probably is the passage that’s most key….In my view, everything is owned by God. This business is God’s; even though we may not acknowledge it, day in and day out, it doesn’t exist without God’s providence. In that context, in terms of working, that’s what I’m called to do. I’m called to give 100% to whatever task I’m given. One of those tasks I’m given as CFO is to manage the resources of this organization to the very best we can, to generate the very best return that I can. It ain’t about me, it’s about those others whom I serve. I see it holistically, I guess, and I feel the Parables of the Talents support that.”

As these remarks suggest, the concept of stewardship supports the market world of worth and generally blunts any inclination to engage in anything that might diminish shareholder returns. Still discussing the implications of an orientation to stewardship, the same CFO recalls, “In the Gulf Wars this company supported the military. One of the contracts that the company had was the support of the ground forces on the ground in Iraq. There were a lot of people who were antiwar, saying it’s wrong, it’s ethically not right for you to do this, and you are earning a
profit on the war effort and the war profiteering. It was a two percent profit on the work we did; it was very inconsequential. My view is: wait a second, I have this obligation to our shareholders. They are investing the resources to do this. The government has asked us to support the troops. I don’t think that our moral obligation extended to say we’re not going to do that because we are antiwar.”

Consistent with their endorsement of wealth creation for themselves and others, informants were nearly unanimous in their support for capitalism, as practiced in America today, as an efficient and, for some, God-ordained system for creating wealth. According to one entrepreneur, “There’s capitalism and there is socialism. God’s system is capitalism, it’s not socialism. That’s very clear throughout the entire Bible.” Another, articulating a slightly more restrained perspective, said, “God has always had a structure in place and it’s been a market-based structure. You see people violating it, but it’s there. There are things he’s asked us not to do—taking advantage of others, and there’s fair wage and such biblical principles in there. I believe that capitalism is consistent with biblical principles. It’s something that God has seemed to utilize through history.”

AN EASILY SATISFIED CRITERION

As the preceding examples demonstrate, evangelical executives draw on the full range of principles of worth when explaining the sacred value of their work as corporate executives and their actions and dispositions in those roles. According to Boltanski and Thevenot, the various worlds of worth are incompatible. In particular, the tension between the market world of worth—oriented as it is toward self-centered material interests—and those principles of worth that accommodate more transcendent and other-regarding concerns, is profound. But
informants’ accounts suggest that the dispositions and cultural tools evangelical executives bring to their professional roles enables omni-valuation—the use of multiple principles of worth in defending the sacred value of their occupational roles and the business decisions they make therein. Rather than imposing a consistent and cosmogonally-grounded set of principles, as some theorists insist (e.g., Friedland and Alford 1991), evangelical Christianity endorses a host of competing evaluative standards. While other institutions vie for primacy and influence by infiltrating other domains with their characteristic principles of worth, religion in this case expands its scope by absorbing or sacralizing various forms of worth. It trades, in effect, distinctiveness and coherence for relevance.

While evangelicals are typically known for what they oppose, often taking hard-line stances against certain behaviors, evangelical executives are remarkably capable of affirming things, and specifically seek to avoid the impression that they stand in judgment of other people and practices. So committed to affirmation are they that informants seem hardly to be troubled by cognitive dissonance. As such, their accounts are characterized less by tension than paradox. In fact, while theorists like Friedland and Alford and Boltanski and Thevenot attribute to supposedly distinct social domains, including religion, characteristic logics of action and modes of justification, respectively, evangelical business leaders regularly commit so-called domain violations with impunity, committed, as we have seen, to integrating all aspects of life. The evangelical business leaders I interviewed are capable of affirming, among other seemingly contradictory values, perspectives, and practices, the value of leadership and the value of followership, the pursuit of wealth and the rejection of wealth, the need for a strong work ethic and for a balanced life, the disposition to be proactively strategic and to wait for God’s guidance,
the desire to be distinct and to not offend anyone with specifically religious language, and the obligation to embrace power and influence and to forego power and influence.

Earlier I suggested that the ability to maintain that business is a sacred domain requires nothing more than evidence that God is active in business and that, as an institution, some aspect of business contributes to some spiritual objective for some group or individual. In the previous chapter we explored the evidence evangelical business leaders provide that God is present and active in business, namely that he ensures that moral order is upheld. We also saw that proponents of corporate social responsibility, among others, have in various ways attempted to expand the responsibilities of businesses. Indeed, corporations today are pressed from every side. Fickle investors, obsessed with quarterly earnings reports and desensitized by the irrational exuberance of the internet boom, expect perpetual growth and share-price appreciation. Policy makers, following the near collapse of the global financial system in 2008 and the consequent Great Recession, push for tighter regulation of financial markets and reduced managerial discretion. Activists, citing events like the explosion of the Deepwater Horizon, add mounting social demands to the financial obligations corporations already face. Even within corporations, themselves, employees increasingly expect from their work not just financial security, but emotional integration and existential fulfillment. If in the past managers could keep their heads down and focus on maximizing shareholder value, today they must attend to a range of diverse interests.

From a practical standpoint, balancing competing interests represents a considerable challenge for executives today. But for the executives I interviewed, the interests of various stakeholders also present an array of possible contributions on which to base the spiritual value of business and, as the previous examples show, they are equipped with an equally expansive
array of religious scripts and motifs that portray the satisfaction of such interests as religious responsibilities. Trends in the character of American religion, along with durable features of evangelicalism in particular, make it relatively easy to find some spiritual purpose to which business contributes. Multiple stakeholders, far from being a moral dilemma, is a moral “out” for any circumstance. Whatever order of worth is utilized, someone always benefits.

The particular objective and group that is understood to benefit depends on professional context and personal disposition, sense of calling, and proximity to particular constituents, which facilitates personal interaction and anecdotes. Ultimately, as related in interviews, articulated callings hinge largely on what types of effects evangelical executives can provide evidence for—what types of stories they can tell. Considering the variety of spiritual purposes conveyed, it is clear that a full buffet of legitimating scripts and metaphors is available.

It is ironic that Weber, who declined to define religion, attempted to distill Christianity to its doctrinal essence. What makes the Protestant Ethic thesis so provocative is the idea that the psychological incentives produced by a system of belief contributed to the spread of an economic system to which it is in principle opposed. But there is another possible interpretation of the purported relationship between Calvinism and rational capitalism—one that perhaps makes Weber’s thesis less compelling even if it helps explain the dispositions of contemporary evangelical business leaders, namely that new theological expressions were devised to accommodate and legitimate changing commercial structures and interests. Indeed, evangelicalism is characterized by just such flexibility—flexibility that enables evangelical executives to place much more emphasis on those aspects of business they appreciate than on those they lament.
CHAPTER 5: SUCCESS TO SIGNIFICANCE

“When I took over we were losing thirty million dollars a year,” recalled Beverly, a former division head and highest ranking woman at one of the largest financial institutions in the world. “In three and a half years with the management team we completely turned it around and were making one hundred twenty million dollars in profit. So the company was headed on a great path. And my management team and I were celebrating at the Yale Club in New York and I was walking back to my apartment and literally when I was walking back I had this real, very strong emotional moment where I got back to my apartment and I was on my knees and I was like, ‘You know, Lord, I know my life is out of balance, and I realize now that there’s got be more to life than this. My work is my life. I love it but I don’t have any friends and I never see my family—(because I was commuting to New York)—and I just had what was my greatest moment in my career and I’m disappointed. It’s a big letdown.’ And so it really was one of those things that I thought, ‘Okay, I can’t keep doing this. I have got to find a way to change things.’ So the next day I got on a plane and flew to Florida and in the airport I picked up the book, *Halftime*, and the thing that really resonated with me was, well, if you think of life as a football game that you play in two halves, you have the opportunity to be more strategic about how you play the second half. And so when I got back to New York that night I got on a plane, took the red eye to London and quit my job the next day.”

Like most of those I interviewed, Beverly had long felt compelled to participate in ministry in some sense. “There was always a little nagging,” she says. “Should I be doing something else—should I really be missionary or a pastor? And it always frustrated me.”

Consistent with the perspectives we encountered in the previous chapter, Beverly looks for guidance from the Bible, which she sees as supporting business. “[The Apostle] Paul was a
tentmaker, right? He had a business. He had a trade, a skill that allowed him to carry out his purpose and his mission,” Beverly observes. Naturally, in the midst of her mid-career crisis, Beverly turned to Scripture and, after what she describes as the most intense period of Bible study she had ever undertaken, concluded, “You know what, God has given me the skills, the contacts, the opportunities that I have had for a reason and it would actually be a bad thing for me to walk away from all of those things and not use them somehow.”

This is exactly the conclusion Bob Buford, a fantastically successful cable television empire builder, endorses in *Halftime* (2008), which, aside from the Bible and *The Purpose Driven Life*, is the resource with which the most informants are familiar. Part autobiography, part instruction manual, *Halftime* recounts Buford’s transition from media mogul to social entrepreneur and philanthropist. It is a handbook for transitioning, as Buford phrases it, from success to significance.

*Halftime* urges successful businesspersons to channel their accumulated skills, connections, and wealth into Kingdom oriented enterprises, and this is exactly what Beverly did. While she refers to leaving her former company as “retirement,” Beverly subsequently founded and now runs what she calls an “impact investment company” that aims to “produce scalable solutions to help solve poverty.” Still nowhere close to standard retirement age, Beverly now spends 60-70 hours a week providing opportunities for investors to “do well by doing good.” Desiring that her new company be known as a “God-fearing business” but having chosen not to formally identify as a faith-based company, the firm originally included among its stated beliefs the assertion that “faith in God gives meaning and purpose to life.” The statement indicates for Beverly the “very strong Judeo-Christian values that drive who we are and what we do and how we treat people.” It also generated a lot of discussion, she says, “not all of it good,” and was at
some point removed from the company’s published materials. Whether explicitly faith-oriented or not, owning and controlling her new firm represents for Beverly a chance to enact her faith more meaningfully than she had during her “first half.”

A TALE OF TWO HALVES

For Beverly, the sacrifices associated with the pursuit of success caused her to miss out on some things of significance. While she is proud of her accomplishments, she acknowledges that they came at a price. It is this cost-benefit equation that Bob Buford explores in Halftime.

Buford’s story is a compelling one; few have experienced the heights of success or depths of tragedy he has tasted, much less their intermixture. Buford’s father died when he was in fifth grade, his mother perished in a hotel fire when he was thirty-one, and his only son, himself of adventurous spirit and burgeoning business success, drowned in the Rio Grande in his twenties. Like many of the executives I interviewed, Buford, an evangelical executive himself, describes “a titanic, internal tug-of-war between leading a life of success in business and leading a life of service in ministry” (41), claiming to have experienced a moment of “vocational transformation” in his teens that emboldened him to pursue business success with clean conscience and full enthusiasm. “I somehow knew instantly that preaching, baptizing, marrying, and burying were out, and making money as a TV executive was in” (42), he recalls.

And make money he did. Buford’s television network grew an average twenty-five percent per annum for three decades. He describes setting a goal to attain a certain net worth in his lifetime, comparing the target to a four-minute mile, that ambitious time achieved by only the most elite runners in the world. With this money, he planned to “invest in the work of God’s Kingdom in my lifetime, and live on the interest.” The interest, apparently, is more than enough
to live comfortably. “Let me be honest about this,” Buford writes. “I still have a penthouse in the city, a country home at the East Texas farm, and a new Lexus. I do not believe it is in keeping with my ‘calling’ to assume a diametrically different lifestyle from the one I have enjoyed throughout my life. Many people avoid taking the risk for a better second half because they mistakenly think it necessitates a drastic change. But I believe God gave me a gift to create wealth and enjoy its benefits” (55). When making the transition to his second half, Buford relates, “I was financially set for life and could afford some false starts” (98).

For Buford, the connection between success and significance is natural and the single-mindedness required to forge the success that leads to significance inevitable. “The first half of life,” he says, “has to do with achieving and gaining, learning and earning” (35). This may not, he admits, leave much room for applying one’s faith. “I think of the first half as a season in which to develop faith and learn more about the unique way the Bible approaches life. The second half, when the pressure lets up, seems to be more the time when most people round second base and begin to do something about the faith they have developed,” writes Buford, applying a sports metaphor to the four stages of spiritual maturity inspired by his friend, Rick Warren, author of the abovementioned *Purpose Driven Life*.

For those who, like many of the executives I interviewed, are inclined to participate in ministry and even torn between a calling to vocational ministry and a calling to business, having focused for an extended season on personal success to the point of marginalizing broader significance may prompt unease. This, Buford insists, must be set aside. “Make peace,” he counsels. “Too many people approach the second half of their lives with regrets over the first half. (‘I should have spent more time with my family.’ ‘I should have developed better relationships.’ ‘I should have…’) One of the first things you need to do in halftime is make
peace with your first-half set of issues….The key is to keep these things in perspective and accept them as an inevitable part of growth” (68). *Halftime* encourages evangelicals to pursue success, assuring them that the reward is worth the cost because the reward can be translated to significance.

It is important to understand that the majority of the executives I spoke with—most of whom claim that their faith is essential to their work, perceive a connection between virtue and profit, and deploy Scripture in support of their assertion that business is a worthy spiritual vocation—are on the significance side of “halftime.” I mean by this not simply that they are in the latter stages of their careers, but that their objectives and emphases have shifted over the course of their careers such that they now place more emphasis on and have more discretion to contribute to religious objectives inside and outside their companies than they did earlier in their careers. For many, the transition was intentional, for some abrupt, for others nearly imperceptible, and for a few quite dramatic. The former head of human resources for a Fortune 50 company, describing her decision to start her own company focused on producing “long-term, sustainable, positive change,” recalls, “I actually had a real epiphany experience one Saturday morning where I woke up and heard a voice say, ‘Time is running out’ and then kind of blurred off. I drank my coffee and was getting ready to run my errands and noticed that one of my clocks had stopped, so I went to get batteries to replace it. As I went into another room, that clock had stopped. Basically, four battery operated clocks at my house stopped. So, I got on my knees and said, ‘I don’t know what you are going to do with me, God, but I’m going to go [start this company].’”

Many others can identify a specific inflection point at which they began to think more seriously about contributing to religious objectives, as did each of the four executives we met in
the first chapter. Consider Robert, a homebuilder who points to a series of mid-career transitions that prompted a more serious faith. “One time in my mid-30s I almost lost the entire company,” Robert reflects, “and I kind of said, ‘God, give me one more boom and I won’t screw the next one up.’ One of my greatest regrets during that time was that I had millions of dollars in my hands and no good came out of it. I was driving a BMW and bought a big house, but nothing of any substance had really happened with it. So, I kind of had a realization that I wasn’t really in it for the money. After I had made a lot, then lost it, and came back again, I had kind of been rich and poor and rich again, and I realized that that really wasn’t the driver of happiness, fulfillment, etc. So, that’s when I really started down the nonprofit track….I had grown up in the church; I was involved in Young Life, so I had always been a faithful person. I had been tithing, etc., but like many, more of a cultural Christian than a committed Christian. I had been a cultural Christian in my twenties and thirties, and then worked towards becoming a more committed Christian in my early forties through today.”

These days Robert allocates half of his time and income to charitable endeavors, the majority of which, he says, are Christian focused. Like Beverly above, Robert attempts to apply his business experience in new ways. Across the organizations he supports, Robert draws on his own experience to build what he calls “competencies” in non-profits, which include things like board recruitment and strategic planning. He says, “What I found is that the business acumen that helped the company grow can be used in the nonprofit sector as well. There are different boards and donors, etc., but a lot of the same business strategies will work.” Having focused initially on local organizations, Robert and a couple of good friends who are Christians and business owners now travel around the world making “challenge grants” to nonprofit organizations.
**Pursuing Success**

Like many of the business leaders I interviewed, both Beverly and Robert admit that, prior to making a conscious decision to reorient themselves to broader initiatives, they were less committed to acting on their faith, and in some ways out of balance when it came to their priorities. While Robert regrets that he did not put his newfound wealth to better use, Beverly believes she could have been more intentional about and visible with her faith. In fact, after spending a few years running a company that operates in accordance with her value system, Beverly now thinks that maybe she did not need to walk away from her former job after all. She reflects, “Only in the last couple of years I realized, ‘Wow, actually now I feel like I could go back and do what I was doing,’” albeit apparently in more fulfilling fashion.

It is of course difficult to know if executives like Beverly and Robert really would do anything different if they were able to relive the past in light of their current convictions. When pressed on what she would do differently at her former job, Beverly responds, “This is probably the best example—my time with the Lord was always this thing that when I got too busy took the back seat. Now, it’s the thing that overrides anything else.” After detailing the value of her early morning devotionals, she realizes, “It’s probably had more of an effect on me internally in how I manage stress than how I behave because I look back and go, ‘You know what, I have pretty much always behaved a certain way in terms of how I treat people, how I make decisions, my sense of fairness, my sense right and wrong. Those things haven’t changed. It’s really—in fact this is a perfect example; this is something that would have changed—I haven’t always been present. So what’s interesting is most people would never know that, right? But I missed—I think I missed—opportunities to be a true greatness to people because I wasn’t always present—because I was always planning. I was always thinking ahead fifteen steps….So I would say
that’s probably the biggest thing that would change.” Clearly, Beverly is not contemplating a wholesale reorientation or new approach to business, and admits that from the outside nothing would really change at all. What seems to have happened is that, with some distance and in light of her newfound significance, she has become more comfortable with her previous circumstances, and would now be better able to handle the associated stress. Now that she is immersed in her second half of significance, Beverly has, it seems, made peace with the difficulties associated with her first half pursuit of success.

Like Beverly, many of those I interviewed experienced the rigors of climbing the corporate ladder. Although many have slowed down to various degrees, most recall working sixty or more hours a week early in their careers, with some working up to ninety hours a week and a few claiming to have worked essentially all of their waking hours. “Success in the first place was just survival,” explained the former CEO of a construction company. “I figured that you just get up every morning and you work as hard as you can.” This CEO and many others traveled a lot and were frequently apart from their families. Like Beverly, a good many acknowledge the difficulty of maintaining quality relationships. Despite these difficulties, most articulate few or no regrets regarding the commitment required to reach their career goals, even if that commitment meant sacrificing relationships and objectives that are highly valued by evangelicals. For these, the cost of success is the price of significance. In fact, the cost to climb the corporate ladder represents for many informants a necessary and noble sacrifice, or at least a natural progression. Nancy, who began to concentrate more conscientiously on significance in her mid-forties, contends, “It’s absolutely predictable that people have a change of perspective in their mid-forties, early fifties, and it has everything to do with them waking up one day and saying, ‘Oh my God, I’m not going to live forever.’” Then you go, ‘I’d better think about the
significance of what I’ve been doing.” “I don’t have any regrets that I was kind of clueless in my twenties,” Nancy insists. “We’re all clueless in our twenties, then we’re really busy in our thirties, particularly if you decide to mix family in the equation, raise young children, and then your first kind of opportunity to reflect is in your late forties, so that’s what we do.” For not focusing sooner on significance, Nancy and others make little or no apology. Some, in fact, specifically planned to defer significance until accumulating the requisite success. In the previous chapter I mentioned a CEO of a commercial real estate company who intentionally leveraged his business to build a platform to become a patron.

Unsurprisingly, those who plan for the transition from success to significance seem comfortable with the way their careers have unfolded, including the relative neglect of important things during the first half of their careers. The real estate CEO who thought of his life in three phases said of the second phase in which he strove to build up a platform through business success, “I think it costs you family time. I think it costs you personal time. I read all the time now—two to four hours a day; I would have loved to have done that in the earlier years, but I was in the activity mode where I had to be actually involved in the operations of the business. My answer to [whether building up his company cost him something] is yes, but that was expected, because I don’t think you can do Kingdom work—I don’t think you can do something that’s valuable without it costing you something. The question is, was the cost worth it? And I think our family would say sometimes no, and sometimes we’d say yes. But it has been a balancing act and it has not always been perfect. But in the end, I think you have to assume that it’s going to cost you something in life. I think one of my concerns about people today is the first thing they say is, ‘I don’t want to pay that price.’ I don’t think we have an option on that. I
think we have to pay the price of sacrifice in order to hold our society together and be a part of helping people flourish.”

Whether contemplated as a precursor to significance or not, the pursuit of success seems to have preoccupied most the evangelicals I spoke with until they fulfilled their professional aspirations. It is significant and typical that when Phillip, the CEO of a family entertainment company who left the automobile industry and associated pressures, transitioned from what he called to-do goals to to-be goals, he had already accomplished his to-do goals. In Phillip’s case, he pursued success to the point of jeopardizing his family relationships. While some evangelical executives, like Phillip, identified times of disappointment or hardship as catalysts for increased emphasis on significance, such is not a prerequisite. What is a prerequisite, however, as the “success to significance” slogan implies, is success. Even if the transition from success to significance is associated with a personal crisis of some kind, it occurs much more frequently at a professional crest than a professional valley. For Beverly, for example, it was the emptiness she felt at the pinnacle of her career that prompted a search for deeper significance. Even those who long for significance early on cannot skip over the requisite success. Robert, for example, claims to have been contemplating being “fifty/fifty partners with God” since attending a mayor’s prayer breakfast when he was twenty-one years old, but it was more than two decades before he put his plan into action. “After I reached some success in business and I was in my early forties,” he recounts, “I decided it was time to go start that process.”

The evangelical business leaders I spoke with did not, in general, transition away from the dogged pursuit of success unless and until they achieved their own version of Buford’s four-minute mile—a threshold of success that conferred professional and social standing and wealth of an order well beyond what most will ever realize. Several acknowledged that they had made
more money than they ever expected or would ever need. Most of the in-person interviews I conducted took place in executives’ offices, but I met a few informants in their homes, which were all impressive edifices in impeccable neighborhoods. After attaining complete financial security, some evangelical executives become willing to entertain actions, positions, and strategies that would result in lower profits or personal compensation. For example, in the context of how he hopes his company will change the world, the founder of an online service provider flatly, “I don’t care how much money we make. I mean, I’ve already got enough money.” Others would need to make still more to cross the threshold from a focus on success to a focus on significance. A senior real estate executive who renovates churches and orphanages on the side, when asked about his hopes for the future, stated that he’d like to do such renovations full-time. On why he chose not to do so now, he replied, “Unfortunately, I’ve made a lot of money over a lot of years, and built up a lifestyle that’s expensive. So, to maintain my lifestyle costs more than one should reasonably expect from a charity. I haven’t been able to convince my wife to downsize. She’s gotten used to the princess package. It sounds like I’m kind of blaming her, and I’m not. I love her a lot. But, the reality is that every time we talk about it, she gets this haunted look in her eye and fear like, ‘Oh my God, he’s finally going to do it!’ So, I don’t. Again, I shouldn’t be blaming her, but—it’s economics, I guess, in a way.”

Most informants are, by virtue of their accomplishments, not just wealthy but well-connected and well-known. As a high ranking officer at a publicly traded investment firm put it, “Sure, I live in a very high flying set of folks, lots and lots of money and lots and lots of beautiful people, and lots and lots of chance to be in the best places in the world.” Some informants are on television regularly and many enjoy significant name recognition in their regions of business and beyond. While most were more subtle, a few of those I interviewed
boasted of their reputations. “I am considered an icon in this business,” said one, “a big frog in a small puddle.” After recounting several of his professional accomplishments, another declared, “If you think I’m bragging, I am. You probably googled me, and I was elected by my peers, my competition, as the [top recruiter in the United States]. I’m proud of what I did, and I’m proud of the people that I’ve gotten to know.” The same executive boasted, “I could talk to anybody. I could get anybody. Consequently, I have a rolodex that you would kill for, that anybody would kill for. Name it, and I’ve known them.” Another executive, describing his personal network, offered, “I think I could sit down and name, without stopping, five thousand people.”

Wealth of this magnitude and social standing of this order are generally reserved for the most prominent executives, and indeed those informants who were still professionally ascendant often aspired to the most influential corporate roles. For example, I spoke to several fabulously successful executives who still hoped to become CEO of a company one day. As one expressed, “My primary objective would be to become a CEO; to be able to formulate, along with others, a vision to create a culture, to put together a set of values or core convictions for an organization, and hire a team, and develop people, and be active in a community, adding value to a community and helping employees make their lives better, advance their careers, and learn, and grow, and succeed, and ultimately creating a succession plan, where, as I would leave, the company is poised and positioned to go and do bigger and better things without me than they did with me. I’ve been General Counsel; I’ve been CFO; I’ve been COO; and to be CEO and really kind of be ‘the guy’ is my next goal.”

**DEFENDING SUCCESS**

Even if they lament (but accept) the costs associated with success, the evangelicals I spoke with embraced and were prepared to defend the associated benefits, insisting that the
resources and connections they accumulate are essential to the significance they desire. Few made any attempt to hide or apologize for their wealth or standing in their companies and communities, insisting that they are not consumed with these things and that they put them to good use.

Godly Wealth

Earlier we saw that one of the primary criticisms faced by evangelical business leaders is that the accumulation of wealth is immoral and likely detrimental to spiritual health. While the executives I spoke with did not call attention to their wealth, neither did they feel the need to hide or apologize for it. While describing how he takes wealthy associates on tours of impoverished portions of his city, an executive I met at his home remarked of his own residence, “As you can see, I don’t sacrifice much.” Although most evidenced little discomfort regarding their accumulated wealth, when questioned about their resources, most did wish to make clear that they put their resources to good use. The aforementioned executive, explaining his purchase of a private jet, noted, “I figured that having that jet got me home one more night a week, and that’s really worth it. It costs a lot to fly in a private jet, but one night a week—you know, I had five kids, so I figured, ‘Hey, that’s a good investment.’” The point of this observation, and many others like it, is that informants use their wealth to benefit others. The CFO of an energy company relates, “We have nice things, drive nice cars. My wife always drives a lot nicer car than I do because I like to buy her things. I love giving gifts to my wife. As an example, and as an executive, if you are using those nicer things for the benefit of others, it’s not bad. Our home is an example. Other people have a security system; I’ve got one installed—never turn it on. I bet twenty-five people have a key to our house and they use it all the time. Every Tuesday night for the last five years we’ve had young married couples come to our house and my wife and I
both teach Bible study and they have fellowship and we mentor those young couples in our home. If we had a smaller home, we could not do it. Because we have the space, we allow them to do it. Some of those young couples, over time, have lived with us because they needed a place to live for a while. Some of them lived with us before they got married, so we keep bedrooms available for people to stay in. There was a couple who my wife met. She was working in development at [a university] and she got married and had a baby who had a hole in her heart. They were struggling, so we let them live with us while her baby had heart surgery and we provided their living expenses for almost a month. I have to treat this with loose hands—it’s not mine—and allow others to enjoy it. We have a house out in the hill country and we regularly just let people go use it—take a break; it’s free; go do it; use this. I feel like that’s what we ought to do.”

Some of the business leaders I spoke with do make a point to suggest that they sacrifice in some way in terms of consumption, albeit almost always relative to their wealthy peers. According to a real estate executive, “There’s lots of things that we could do—we certainly have the resources to do anything we want to do—but no, I don’t need a private plane. I don’t wear a Rolex; we were comparing watches this weekend at this wedding and I’m wearing a hundred and fifty dollar watch and the guy across from me is wearing a twenty thousand dollar watch. My wife drives a Prius and I drive a Lexus; my partners drive Mercedes. We sold this half a billion dollar portfolio in 2005, and some of the junior partners and our president all went out and bought new Mercedes. My wife bought a $28,000 Prius. Just because you can, doesn’t mean you should.” Another executive, this one a CEO of a transportation company, acknowledged, “I have a nice home and a nice car and there are people in my town here that don’t have enough. I’m not going to act like I don’t know what’s going on.” Regarding his approach to handling his
resources, he explains, “My family has recently finished a five year working plan to challenge ourselves to be realistic about our giving and to make ourselves uncomfortable and to make sure that we prayerfully approach the things that we support and feel connected to those things and that we are helping in more than just a financial way.” When asked in what ways his family has made themselves uncomfortable, he responds, “Well, I look at the holistic view of our family’s situation and I try to think about—where would we not be able to do something we might like to do versus giving that money to someone who might need it more? Let’s take it to a point of some sacrifice. How would you say that? That I don’t replace my car every two years, I replace my car every three or four years. I don’t buy my kids a brand new car, I buy them a used car. I don’t know exactly where you should draw the line on what’s a real sacrifice or not.”

Many pick up on Buford’s theme of using wealth for influence. Said the retired president of a lumber company, “To condemn or put down people living in good surroundings and having some amount of material goods, I think that’s very individualistic….I don’t know where that simple lifestyle is, frankly. It could be, for some guy, sitting on a box in his living room and driving a twenty year old car and feeling really good about himself. He’s living simply. He may not be having any influence, but he’s living simply.” For several, the most important realm of influence for wealthy Christians like themselves is among the wealthy. According to Beverly, the financier we met at the beginning of the chapter, “I really do believe that people relate to other people who are like them and who enjoy the things they enjoy or can see the world the way they see the world. So, luxury goods—for example, let’s say a yacht. Non-believers are going to buy them anyway, being probably more driven by ego and other things to consume luxury goods, right? In order to reach those people other believers are going to have to play in that realm.” On his older model Volvo, the co-founder of a beverage company acknowledges,
“People could criticize my lifestyle, too.” They could say, ‘Why do you have a Volvo? Why don’t you drive a Honda?’ Because, quite frankly, I like my Volvo. They’re safe. They meet what I call the ‘minimum expectation.’ Quite frankly, I couldn’t pull up in a Honda in front of some of the buildings and go to some of the homes of some of the people that [I hope to work with], making a statement that I don’t want to make. Because I don’t want to make a statement either way. I pull up in a Volvo, nobody even notices. I pull up in front of some of my friends and their Jettas are leaking, they don’t notice it’s a Volvo, because I’m not trying to make a statement. I pull up with all of my friends and it’s all Mercedes and Lexus and a few Bentleys, and nobody notices my Volvo. That’s the whole point. I don’t want my car to make a statement.”

While the Bible contains a number of passages that commend the poor and disparage the rich, informants were adept at explaining such passages away and redirecting to references that are more supportive of wealth. Arnold, the real estate executive we met last chapter, commenting on Jesus’s statement that “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God,” retorted, “I think everybody always misuses that verse. Read a little further and it says, ‘Who then can be saved?’ and then ‘With God all things are possible.’” Then Arnold goes on the offensive. “If you read Job, he says God is walking around talking to the devil and he says, ‘Look at Job, he’s great isn’t he? Man I love that guy, he just loves me.’ Isn’t that what God’s doing? Is Job rich or poor? [Rich.] What about Abraham? [Rich.] So that doesn’t mean he loves all rich people but he loves some that are rich. What does he say about David? [A man after his own heart.] Absolutely, and David was certainly wealthy. I think God loves rich people just as much as He loves poor people.”
After declaring that the fundamental purpose of business is to meet basic material needs, Beverly, the financier we met at the beginning of the chapter, turned to Scripture when questioned about the value of luxury goods. “If you go back to the Bible, God didn’t destroy cities because gold was bad or jewels were bad or any of that. There are examples where it says the people were worshipping the gold and the jewels and whatever, so God destroyed the city….It just means anything that people put before God—the idols—that’s an idol that they worship….If somebody just idol-worships their mail and cannot do anything during the day until their mail comes, and that completely dictates their personality, that’s their idol, right? Well, then should we not make mailboxes?”

The CEO of a transportation company, deferring to others better versed in biblical interpretation, shares, “I’ve asked a lot of people that are more knowledgeable biblically than I am and the guidance I’ve been given is that God doesn’t hate rich people. He doesn’t look for us to surrender the things that we have; he’s asking us to participate with him.” One of the stories that comes to mind,” he adds, “is the story of Mary pouring perfume on Jesus’s feet. [One of the disciples said], ‘We could have sold that and given the money to the poor.’ [Jesus] is quick to correct and say, ‘That’s not always the answer.’ I think for my family, our approach has been more about—where’s our heart?”

In summary, informants are comfortable with their wealth, believing it to be spiritually neutral at worst and more likely pointing to the various worthy pursuits to which it can contribute. Most would agree with the retired commercial banking executive, who stated, “We need people who have wealth and who are generous. I hope more Christians get richer, who also live out their faith.”
Exponential Influence

I noted above that few of the evangelical executives I interviewed transitioned from success to significance until they reached the pinnacle of their professions. In support of their lofty aspirations, some informants cited the difficulty of influencing firms and communities from anywhere but the top and emphasized the relative influence that senior executives, and especially CEOs, have in comparison with other employees. The former head of human resources whose transition from success to significance was catalyzed by stopped clocks explained, “Anyone can influence the culture, but things really change when the guys at the top change, which is part of why I started my firm. That’s why I work [with people] at the top, because the amount of change—if they are willing to change—is tremendous.”

The founder of an online service provider confided that raising venture financing initiated a process in which the evangelical Christian presence in his company was progressively eliminated. Consequently, he is now attempting to repurchase the firm he started. Having sought counsel from another of the evangelical executives I spoke with on what he might do or have done differently, he was told, “You need to make sure that you have a CEO who is a strong Christian person, and you need to have a board that’s solidly Christian. You need to have ownership of your company in the hands of Christian people.” For some informants, this is the only way to maintain a Christian ethos in a firm, which is for some a key to significance.

Women, meanwhile, are especially emphatic about the value of women in senior leadership positions. Nancy, for one, believes companies would be different if there were more women in executive positions. “During my 30-year career I’ve often entered board rooms and management teams as the first woman to enter,” she explained, “and when I enter the room, they start talking differently. There’s less profanity. They don’t tell any more girly jokes. They
don’t go to strip bars anymore. They don’t have martini lunches anymore. And I didn’t say a word.” In her judgment the impact of women in leadership roles can be so profound that Nancy speculates, “Maybe the Enron thing could have been stopped if there had been more women in the room.” Citing grandmotherly counsel, Nancy observes regarding women’s distinctive contributions, “I think that women are wired to be relational, and we’re wired in our family responsibilities to be nurturing. We’re wired to teach values to our children, and it’s an accident that those things are valuable in the workplace.” The founder of a consulting company expressed a similar perspective. “I think that women, just from a diversity standpoint, have a different perspective and a different way of thinking through things. I’ve met plenty of men who are incredibly kind, and thoughtful, and caring, and sort of the classic woman characteristics and bring that perspective. It’s just that women typically tend to have more of those characteristics or in higher quantity. I hesitate to say, yes, we just need more women. No, we need better managers, better leaders who are more kind and caring and compassionate, and you tend to find that among women.”

The business leaders I spoke with regularly observed that their professional standing had opened up avenues for influence outside their companies. For example, the abovementioned executive who would spend all his time renovating churches and orphanages were it not for the associated lifestyle sacrifices also points out, in defense of his decision not to leave his current role, that the web of connections he relies on to contribute to the charitable renovations is kept current by his professional associations. Robert, the homebuilder we met earlier in this chapter, reflecting on the thought process that went into a self-named company, confides, “For the first five years, I thought it was cool to see your name up on billboards and all of that. As I had kids and realized that they were laboring under the assumption of quote, unquote—a famous dad, I
found that people had certain expectations of me, which I might not be able to live up to. I looked hard at changing the name to Craftsman Homes, or some other name, because I really didn’t want the nomenclature. Now, I realize that it’s become an attribute, which allows me to have access and a platform that I wouldn’t have otherwise. So, when I was asked to come and speak to the mayor’s prayer breakfast in front of two-thousand people, I wouldn’t have been asked to do that if it had been Craftsman Homes, and I was just the president of Craftsman Homes. So, the name which I originally thought was neat, then wished had been replaced, has now become a platform and an attribute which allows me to reach and impact people that I would not otherwise be able to reach.” Summarizing the disposition to retain one’s professional platform, a real estate executive explained, “I decided to keep one foot in corporate America, because that’s how your phone call gets returned. I stayed on as chairman, because people will return your phone call faster if you’re [name], chairman of [company], than if you’re [name], Social Justice Do-Gooder.”

**LEVERAGING SUCCESS**

Whether or not they cite the success to significance slogan and regardless of the nature and timing of their transition from success to significance, those evangelical executives who reach their professional and financial objectives are not content simply to continue to build a larger fortune and/or indulge new hobbies, substantially all devoting significant time and resources toward objectives they consider significant. In fact, given the energy with which some of the executives I interviewed commit to making a difference inside and, more commonly, outside of their companies during the second halves of their careers, one almost senses among some the felt need to compensate for years spent neglecting the types of ministry to which they feel burdened to contribute.
For many evangelical executives, the transition from success to significance involves a transition to a new work context in which they have more discretion to contribute to spiritual objectives in or through their companies. We have seen that this was the case for Phillip, who left the ultra-competitive automobile industry for a more influential role in a more accommodating family entertainment company, for Kirk, who attempted to start a business repurposing institute in his former company but ended up starting his own entity where he had more discretion, and for Beverly, who left a financial powerhouse to start an impact investing company. Many others did likewise. These leveraged the skills, experience, and resources accumulated in the first half of their careers to advance what they considered to be objectives of significance in their new professional contexts. Others, including primarily those who had reached the very top of their organizations, chose to remain in those organizations, applying their faith more deliberately and often more visibly in those organizations and/or focusing their attempts at significance in their communities. Few walk away from business entirely until well beyond the standard retirement age, hesitant to relinquish the professional identity and platform they have developed.

Many of the evangelical executives I interviewed are heavily involved in community-oriented and charitable projects. For example, the abovementioned executive who mingles with beautiful people in beautiful places, relates an incredible array of impactful activities. He recently purchased a piece of property on which he is developing a retreat center that will serve as an artists’ colony for Christians in the creative arts. With a filmmaker friend he is making a movie version of an acclaimed novel by a Catholic writer. He serves as a director of several organizations, including a national Christian ministry organization and a state-level organization that supports families of service members. On the political front, at the time of our conversation
he was underwriting, in association with prominent think tanks, a policy piece on federalism and healthcare reform, and working closely with a politician to, as he describes it, “make him the next President of the United States.” He is perhaps most proud of the foundation he established to encourage families, including and initially, his own, to serve together. Now a national non-profit organization, the organization connects and provides wholesome resources for families around the world. As he explains, “If a family plants small seeds—whether it’s effort, compassion, or just time—the results might grow to benefit many.” This executive exercises profound influence across the cultural, service, and political landscapes. He, like many informants, has parlayed success in the business world into significance beyond it.

While this executive surely has his hands in more initiatives than most, his concern to make a broader impact is typical. Almost all informants donate to various causes—some, but not all, explicitly faith-based, and the great majority give of their time as well. Most also serve on the boards of non-profit organizations—some in very high profile roles. While I did not ask informants to disclose the percentage of their income that they give away, two informants volunteered that they give away half of their income. Several have established foundations oriented toward community initiatives, academia, or ministry activities. A good number belong to groups of high net worth Christian givers, and at least one holds a leadership role in one such group.

As these examples suggest, informants are committed to leveraging their influence and resources for the benefit of their communities and favored causes, and just as Buford suggests in *Halftime*, are quick to point out that the connections, resources, and opportunities derived from their success in business have opened up substantial opportunities for significance. For the most part, the significance informants now experience is a function of their platform and/or their
wealth, both of which they claim to put to good use and without which they perceive that their ability to pursue objectives of spiritual significance would be greatly diminished. All this makes it easier to justify their fame and fortune and the institutional contexts in which they have been secured.

AN ELITE PHENOMENON

Because success is a prerequisite for the type of significance enjoyed by many of the business leaders I spoke with, the halftime transition is an elite phenomenon, available to those who have realized sufficient agency to set their own agenda and, at least to some extent, call their own shots. This agency is a function of having reached a degree of success that allows them to select into and out of most any corporate environment they choose. Most informants have achieved professional success to the point that they have realized the majority of their career goals and are financially secure enough to expand their gaze to contemplate new priorities and forms of influence, inside and outside their organizations or in new organizations. *Halftime* is, in fact, written to the wealthy, and the examples Buford uses include people like Peter Lynch, a spectacularly successful mutual fund manager and one of the most famous investors of all time. To younger readers, Buford says, “If you are in your twenties, don’t put this book where you won’t be able to find it later” (28). Aspiring business leaders are counseled to focus on reaching their own “four-minute mile,” thereby acquiring the skills, connections, and resources that can eventually be translated to significance.
THE CART BEFORE THE HORSE

It would be difficult to overstate the difference between the perspectives articulated by the evangelicals I spoke with who are still climbing the corporate ladder and those who have “arrived.” Whereas those in the second half view their success as validation of their calling, early-career evangelicals, in contrast, are far less convinced of the virtue-profit connection and doubtful of its relevance to their career trajectories. Kyle, the aspiring CEO we met at the beginning of the Introduction, suggests, “Life isn’t fair, because you think the good person will win out in the end. On this earth that just doesn’t happen a lot. In business, you see people being promoted to pretty senior positions, especially in investment banks when people were really good traders but they’re just total ‘a-holes,’ is the best way to say it. They just invoke their wrath on a lot of people that work for them. Everybody knows that they aren’t good to work for but they keep getting promoted. It’s like a minefield within a company. I see that with some of my classmates at Harvard Business School; some of them are running six billion dollar businesses right now and they are a little bit more shady on the ethics, definitely not people of faith. It’s easy to do the whole comparison thing and go well, if I really have God’s favor, then why am I not getting the benefit and why am I not CEO of every company right now? The reality is that in a broken, fallen world full of sin, it just doesn’t work that way.”

Just as do those who endorse the virtue-profit connection, Kyle appeals to the Bible when arguing against it. “When you read Paul’s letters about some of the challenges that he went through, and you read in Hebrews about people who are people of faith and examples of faith and they didn’t even end up getting a lot of what they had prayed about, in the end, you’re just like, ‘Man.’ Even Job’s story where he was a man that had lost everything he had, the end thing is that Jesus is not Santa Claus and just because you pray about something doesn’t mean he
shows up on Sunday or on Christmas day and gives you whatever you want. It’s more complex than that and it doesn’t always happen, and sometimes that’s for our own character development. I think that’s the hardest part about it. It’s not the wealth and prosperity gospel that a lot of people are hearing today; it’s a lot of challenges and a lot of seven years in the desert when you make the choice to be a man or woman of God. It’s not all rosy and, to me, that’s the hardest part about it. If you make more compromised choices, in a lot of ways, it would be easier.” As Kyle’s remarks show, the breadth of content in the Bible is sufficient to make sense of both success and lack of the same.

Part of the frustration voiced by some of the younger evangelicals I interviewed has to do with the difficulty of enacting their faith at work. Some, in fact, have been chastened by the recalcitrance of large organizations. As a junior program manager in a software company describes, “Initially, I was very frustrated thinking I’m here to see the entire company transformed and a huge revival and I would host prayer meetings every week. Then, I realized that a lot of the reason I’m here is for God to discipline me and for God to break me free of a lot of fear.” Her perspective on her purpose at work quickly shifted from an external orientation in which she would transform the corporate culture to a much more modest, internal orientation in which she was the one to be transformed.

Of the difficulty in living out his faith at the same technology company, a junior executive says, “It’s brought a cost in terms of my career and in terms of acceptance from people around here.” On the nature of these costs, he explains, “It’s hard to say because no one is going to tell me, ‘We’re not promoting you because you’re a rightwing Christian.’ No one’s going to say that. So I don’t know whether it’s psychological or it’s actual, but it seems like it’s actual….I let people know where I stand, in a rather public way, by starting a Bible study. Lots
of people do extracurricular things at this company. There’s all sorts of activities other people can do and no one criticizes the yoga people or any of the other groups that I’m aware of, but I’ve noticed that people kind of scowl at the whole idea of a Christian Bible study. I’ve noticed a difference in the way people interact with me after they know that I’m a Christian. So, I don’t think that I’m imagining these things. I just think people around here are generally pretty hostile to Christianity, and that’s just kind of how it is with a lot of people. And you just deal with it—try and be gentle.”

For the aspiring executives I interviewed, success is anything but assured, and the price of success possibly not worth the cost. Like some other ascending business leaders, Audra is not convinced of the connection between virtue and profit or success. On her career trajectory to date, she confides, “I know that I’ve been tremendously blessed, but I don’t know if that’s because of my faith.” Acknowledging that were she not born into a family that provided her with abundant opportunities, she realizes that her life could have been much different. “Every time something wonderful happens to me, I do say, ‘That was divine. That was God putting me at the right place at the right time.’ But I can’t reconcile…so does that mean that people who have hardships, who have had tragedies in their lives—does that mean that God put them in the wrong place at the wrong time? That’s something that I struggle with.”

Audra also struggles with the way her company does business. Ostensibly her job is perfect for her, and she acknowledges that it’s the type of executive position for which others would cut off their arms. But it doesn’t feel right anymore. The company’s stated mission hasn’t changed—like others of its kind, it provides mainstream financial services to the underbanked—and she continues to believe that this is vital work. It is a perfect fit with the most salient aspects of her identity—as a person of faith and an immigrant, it is important to Audra to
do work that improves the lives of the less fortunate. She thought this would be the ideal place to do good by doing well. But now she’s not so sure. In fact, she’s come to believe that the company’s social mission can be better addressed by non-profit organizations, in concert with government resources. With an MBA from Harvard, Audra has long understood that the corporate world can be coldly calculating, but she had hoped there were exceptions. She suspects, though, that the competitive environment has forced her company to make decisions that aren’t always in the best interest of the consumer, and she’s not sure she can live with that. Her faith in business has waned, and she longs to move on. But she also longs for significance, and of a magnitude that requires substantial success. “I feel that money will give me the freedom to do the things that I want to do, because from a very young age I thought I would do things that would really make an impact on people’s lives.” Audra did not envision spending her career in business. “For me it was always through the social and non-profit sector,” she says. “I have given so much of my time, as I work, to the community, to young girls, to people in Africa, and that is what props me up. It’s what makes me feel full and edified. And I feel that that’s where I want to find a career—in that kind of work. But I feel like I can’t until I’ve made money. And so that’s how I think about business.” While she professes, “My faith makes it easier to walk away,” it seems that the opposite is the case. “Oh, what I would give to be able to do work that takes me to parts of Africa,” Audra exclaims. “I’m particularly interested in women’s issues, women’s health issues, educating women; I would do that in a heartbeat. And I’ve just sort of resigned myself to the fact that I will continue to do those things on my personal time, but I need to stay focused on finding a job that will allow me to make money so that I can ultimately do the things that I want to do. But right now I think that those things are mutually exclusive.” For Audra, success and significance are connected in the long run but mutually exclusive at present.
Examples like this suggest that not only is success a prerequisite for significance, but that in many cases, temporarily suppressing the desire for significance is a prerequisite for success. Buford, in *Halftime*, acknowledges, “Few people are able to connect their work to their beliefs in the first half. The second half gives everyone a greater opportunity to do that” (158). The difficulty younger informants cite with respect to applying their faith at work suggests that many of those who now feel significant freedom to do so were able to bracket their faith during the early stages of their careers. Some freely admit as much. “I wanted my faith to be more in harmony with everything I did as I grew older in my career,” stated the retired commercial banker quoted above. He confessed, “The first decade of my career I think I could have coped with or not worried so much about big disconnects with what I believe from a faith perspective and the values I held from a faith standpoint and what my company was asking me to do. I think I would have tolerated a lot there because I was pretty highly motivated to have a good career.”

During the first half of his career, this retired business leader acknowledged, “I willingly behaved in ways that made my faith invisible. It wasn’t because others forced me to; it’s just what I decided it would be convenient to do.” But consistent with the success to significance paradigm, he continued, “In the last half of my career, I would have had a very difficult time trying to execute a mission or a vision that wasn’t complemented by my faith. I do not think I could have done that. I think I would have found a different place to work.” As we have seen, many do just that. Others, like Audra, do not yet have the credentials or connections to select into more accommodating professional environments. Time will tell if she can make peace with business long enough to attain the type of significance she desires.

The preceding examples suggest that aspiring evangelical executives who attempt simultaneously to pursue success and significance face an uphill battle. A mid-career technology
executive who now runs a small media company but previously held important roles in large public technology companies, has learned from experience that “we’re not going to influence those dominant companies anytime soon.” “I think there is this mystique around, ‘Oh, I’m a Christian and I work for Sony and I’m going to transform Sony.’ I think that is ludicrous. The single most important quality to have when working in a larger enterprise is ensuring your boss likes you. If your boss doesn’t like you you’re not going to have the influence you’d like to have….the long term ability to impact a publicly traded company that isn’t necessarily aligned with kingdom oriented values, I’ve just not seen it. As someone who’s worked with large entities I’ve seen the things that I’ve been able to accomplish that have been permanent have been almost always economic. The things that I try to put in place that are cultural, social, and focused on people were basically removed as soon as I left.” The ability to accept this reality, it appears, may be one key to achieving the type of professional success that is in turn essential to spiritual significance in and through business.

MOBILITY RECONSIDERED

Scholars and theologians have long posited an inverse relationship between wealth and religiosity, suggesting that executives, most of whom are members of the so-called “1%,” variously defined as the Americans with the highest income or most wealth, are likely to be less religious than most of the rest of the population. Likewise, sociologists have usually depicted upward mobility as a secularizing force, and Berger has suggested more specifically that “the capacity of evangelicals to resist the forces of secularization stands in an inverse relation to their success in achieving education and social mobility” (Gay, xi). Even Weber, in his analysis of the Calvinists who fanned the flames of rational capitalism, declared, “We find the most sincere
followers of the Puritan spirit very frequently among those in the middle class who operated small businesses, among farmers and the beati possidentes [those in possession of salvation]—all of whom must be understood as having been at the beginning of an upwardly mobile journey. Yet we find that many in these groups were prepared quite frequently to betray the old ideals” (1904-1905:118). Weber observed, moreover, that “Puritan ideals of life failed to meet the challenge whenever the test—the ‘temptations’ of wealth (which were well known even to the Puritans themselves)—became too great.”

Religion, on these accounts, is something that compensates for those things that adherents lack, and can safely be set aside once such things have been secured. This chapter has demonstrated, however, that for most of the executives I interviewed, far from dampening religious enthusiasm, success actually catalyzed a deeper commitment to faithful living. For these, fame and fortune do not quench the appetite for spiritual things, but rather activate and/or intensify such longings. “I had a view of the pinnacle of earthly power, and yet all I could see was frustration,” recalled the former CEO of a prestigious global consulting company. “I began to realize there’s a greater power at work in society than we humans possess even in our most influential posts. So I started thinking, reading, and trying to discover for myself the deeper meaning of life and what my Creator wants for me.”

Schervish (1990) has described how wealth opens up possibilities for the wealthy to contemplate new forms of altruism by, in some cases, transcending institutional boundaries. For some evangelical executives, it does. For others, it does not, and these are more likely to either select into another business context that is more flexible or focus their efforts on social sector initiatives. Regardless of the direction and venue, wealth often catalyzes renewed dedication to living out faith.

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10 These quotes are from a published interview transcript, not my interview with this CEO.
Similarly, success opens up avenues for talking about the spiritual significance of business. In the previous chapter we saw that there are abundant resources for evangelicals to interpret faith in a way that is consistent with business, and abundant business objectives to match these dynamics. In this chapter we have seen that the evangelicals I interviewed are those—and only those—who have achieved sufficient agency and resources to take advantage of these possibilities. It is much easier to uphold things like the connection between virtue and profit and appeal to biblical sanction for business when you have the flexibility either to shape your professional context or to select into a context that conforms to your desires and expectations for significance. Think back to Gary, the entrepreneur who told the story of the merchants in London, whose commitment to honest exchange caused them to prosper relative to their peers. When Gary was running a company, he claimed it had great success because it operated according to Christian principles. But when he didn’t have complete control—as when his business partner took company intellectual property, things didn’t work out. And when he sold the company, everything fell apart. Even given the flexibility that characterizes both evangelicalism and business, evangelical executives must have the discretion, or agency, to take advantage of various possibilities.
CHAPTER 6: TO WHAT EFFECT?

“I always have to put these neon colors on to make sure they don’t think I’m a burglar walking through the neighborhoods,” chuckled Harold, an African-American entrepreneur, as he described his daily ritual of walking and praying at 4 A.M. Like most of the evangelical business leaders with whom I spoke, prayer and other spiritual disciplines are essential for Harold. In fact, he explained to me in a nondescript conference room in his Nashville office, the idea for his current project emerged from a season of prayer during which he traveled overseas, removing himself from familiar stimuli in order to more clearly hear from God an answer to the following question: “Lord, when you made Harold, what was your purpose and plan?” The answer, it turned out, was to write a book—a book that, he explains, “is focused on taking lessons from work to succeed in life.” According to Harold, the profit motive in business encourages and rewards an intensive commitment to serve and care for one’s customers, and exporting these habits from work into the home and other contexts would make for healthier families and other relationships. According to the book, “You are the number one vendor to your wife and children. They look to you to provide a great product at a fair price and to keep them coming back with great service.” What is so striking about this idea, and the business language with which it is communicated, is that when social commentators bewail the commercialization of intimate relationships or clergypersons complain that today’s churches increasingly resemble businesses, these developments are not welcomed, but lamented. Business, according to the literature referenced in the Introduction, operates according to a set of principles that would be, at best, inappropriate in other contexts. For Harold this is not the case; for him, in fact, the Sunday-Monday gap can be thought of as the Monday-Sunday gap inasmuch
as business encourages Christian virtues and dispositions that can be constructively applied to other relationships.

**REVERSE INTEGRATION**

We have seen that for evangelicals, God is Lord over all creation, and evangelicals are obligated to view all of life as spiritual activity. As such, evangelical executives are committed to living integrated lives in which they view all of life as contributing to spiritual objectives. Integration is in fact, as we have seen, the key imperative for evangelicals. It is sometimes argued that to live an integrated life means to act the same at work as at church or at home—to bring to bear the virtues and “fruits of the spirit” that are practiced within the Christian community in other domains. For many informants, like Harold, however, integration works in reverse. It is not so much that they import church or family attitudes and objectives into business contexts, but the opposite, that they export business concepts into church, charity, and family contexts. Recall, for example, that the essence of Buford’s admonitions to successful evangelicals is to develop and apply business-oriented thought processes and skills to all areas of life. For Harold and other evangelical executives I spoke with, there is no need to bring God into the workplace because, as their accounts indicate, God is already there. According to the business leaders I interviewed, business is a God-ordained and God-infused domain. As such, informants are as likely to attempt to export business as to import religion.

**WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES FAITH MAKE?**

Based on Harold’s perspective and those of other informants we have heard from, it is easy to see how someone might maintain that religion makes little difference in corporate
contexts. The connection between virtue and profit, the diversity and affirming nature of many religious scripts and metaphors, and the success-to-significance template represent rhetorical tools that enable the business leaders I interviewed to fulfill the evangelical imperative—live an integrated life and contribute to spiritual objectives—while making peace with business as usual. Indeed, some, like Harold, seem more inclined to expand the economic sphere than to change it. But it would be a mistake to assume that because their faith appears to make no systematic difference, it does not make at least an occasional difference in the way evangelical executives act and the way their companies function. Harold, for example, recounts, “I recall a really tough time in our business. We got a call from a rapper that was extremely popular. We really couldn’t even make payroll. This guy calls with a half a million dollar order to get started yesterday. I ask him politely, I say, ‘Well, I don’t listen to rap music, but can you tell me—is it kind of where you’re calling women “B’s” and this and this and this?’ and he said, ‘Oh yeah.’ I said, ‘Oh okay. You’re going to think this is stupid, but we don’t want that business.’ My staff couldn’t believe that I said it. I said, ‘Because I spend my weekends walking through the housing projects of this city trying to take out of the minds of little kids what you’re pouring into their minds.’ I said, ‘I know no one would ever know that I’ve designed these shirts. My name wouldn’t be on them, my logo wouldn’t be on them, but I would know.’”

In this circumstance, Harold’s convictions prompted him to make a decision that ran counter to his company’s economic interest. We have seen that the purported connection between virtue and profit enables evangelical executives to justify a wide range of corporate practices and policies with instrumental appeals to the long-term financial health of the company. Increased investment in employees leads to reduced turnover rates, for example, or investment in the community enhances the company’s reputation and, consequently, the ability to recruit
highly qualified employees and generate brand loyalty. Nevertheless, some executives, like Harold, expressed some willingness to incur genuine costs to themselves and/or their companies in order to maintain ethical standards and make a positive impact on various stakeholders.

Occasionally this means challenging existing conventions. One lumber company, for example, after years of going along with the industry convention of rounding to their advantage when measuring shipping weight, began disclosing precise shipping weights even if it put them at a disadvantage relative to competitors. A hotel developer, feeling convicted about the dishonest nature of standard negotiating tactics, begins and ends his negotiations with exactly the amount that he thinks is fair for both parties, rather than periodically revising the “final offer” as is standard practice. One food service company stays open fewer hours than competitors and a family of auto dealerships accepts slightly lower margins than competitors because of the owner’s commitment to fair pricing and customer service. Seeing their service to clients not just as a source of revenue but a way to add value to their lives, the leader of an investment advisory practice sometimes continues to serve clients with whom they have a longstanding relationship even when they no longer make money from that relationship.

Other examples of unconventional business practices include paying down debt in accordance with perceived biblical principles—a policy that has implications for one company’s expansion strategy. One Catholic CEO, citing his faith convictions, does not provide health coverage for contraceptives. Another CEO applied what he understands to be biblical principles of saving for difficult times to his investment firm and believes that, without these principles, his company would not have survived the economic downturn in 2008. Finally, defying the expectations of Wall Street analysts and investors, the former CEO of a large public company
specifically disclosed in SEC filings that the company would not pursue profit at the expense of other stakeholders in the business—an action that drew much attention and some derision.

In terms of personal sacrifice, a few business leaders suggest that they have passed on promotions or promising career opportunities because what would be required of them was incompatible with their convictions or their responsibilities to their families or others. Balance is a key issue and source of tension for many informants, and it should be acknowledged that for many, career advancement came at the expense of investment in family. There are admirable exceptions, however. At one private equity firm, for example, employees work from 5am to 5pm every day so that they can work long enough to remain competitive on Wall Street and still have time with their families in the evenings.

It is one thing to sacrifice time and sleep, and another to forego compensation. Among those I interviewed, opinions were mixed regarding whether or not executive compensation is excessive in America today, but at least a few informants intentionally limit or reduce the amount of compensation they receive. The owner of one company instituted a policy capping the ratio of the highest paid and lowest paid employees in the firm at 7:1, while another owner established a ratio of 8:1 for CEO pay to the average wage in the company. A junior executive at an internet startup once took a lower salary so other members of his team would receive compensation that he felt was more in line with their contributions, and one consultant adjusts her fee structure so that non-profit companies are better able to afford her services.

As the preceding examples show, evangelical business leaders are on occasion willing to challenge conventions and/or make economic or other sacrifices in order to uphold religious commitments. Nevertheless, the majority of the claimed impact of informants’ faith on their work consists of thoughts and actions that are compatible with and/or advance the conventional
pursuit of higher returns on capital. In the previous chapter we saw that evangelical executives, acting as individuals, actively attempt to leverage their wealth and influence outside their companies. The following categories summarize the ways evangelical business leaders claim their faith makes a difference in and through their companies, as well. Many evangelical executives remain confined to the narrowest application of faith at work, primarily interested in the ways their faith enhances their own work experiences. Some, however, implement policies designed to promote employee flourishing, and a relatively small minority devote significant attention to their companies’ impacts on external constituencies.

**LEVEL 1 - FAITH AT ONE’S COMPANY**

When asked how their faith actually influences their work, many executives communicated that faith is primarily a personal resource that 1) confers a sense of meaning and purpose that translates into motivation and stamina and shapes understandings of personal success, 2) provides a basic ethical framework that keeps them out of trouble, and 3) prompts respectful and gracious interpersonal relationships.

For a number of informants, the primary impact of faith is perspectival. Faith informs perspectives on priorities, identity, success and, hypothetically, failure. It enables evangelical executives to maintain some semblance of balance and invigorates them inasmuch as they feel compelled to “work as unto the Lord.” As one executive explains, working for the purpose of bringing pleasure to God is more exciting than simply making money.

At this foundational level, informants think about and approach their work differently; they may strive to make as much money as they can, but their income is a byproduct of enhanced motivation associated with working for the Lord, or it is in service of philanthropic objectives. But for a number of executives it is not clear that, aside from encouraging them to persevere in
what is, for many, very demanding work, the perspectives that faith informs actually translate to
differential behavior. When it does move beyond orientation to action, it is generally in the
context of influencing others through one-to-one interactions. Treating people well is a common
theme, both as an end in itself and in order to serve as a moral model. There is every indication
that informants look for ways to “bless” those with whom they interact in a variety of contexts;
from informal water-cooler chats to official performance evaluations, informants strive to model
Christian virtue in their personal relationships. Some informants communicate that, above all,
faith makes them more virtuous than they would be otherwise. Faith provides a moral compass
that both encourages right behavior and keeps evangelical executives from falling into greed,
pride, and compromise. Most of the virtues cited are overarching and hardly distinctive;
integrity, honesty, and patience are frequently mentioned. As one executive suggests, “If you
think about the things that Christ has asked us to do in the Scriptures, it’s consistent with what a
business should do anyway. You know, to be honest and straightforward, to not steal, and not
kill, certainly [laughter]. So, I think it’s all consistent.”

LEVEL 2 – FAITH THROUGHOUT ONE’S COMPANY

Employee Flourishing

For many informants, the commitment to the well-being of those around them is largely
limited to personal interactions as opportunities arise. But some deliberately advocate or
implement official policies and ongoing initiatives designed to help employees flourish. Earlier
we met an entrepreneur who, reflecting objectives consistent with a civic world of worth,
includes among his employees’ job responsibilities various forms of personal enrichment,
including common readings and exercise sessions—all in service of what he calls “human flourishing.”

Several executives indicated that it is important to cultivate in employees a spirit of volunteering and service, and to this end a couple established paid volunteer days during which employees are released to serve in the community. A couple of companies subsidize service trips to foreign countries and encourage participants to report back on their experiences. Likely because of the pressures they face themselves, informants are sensitive to other employees’ ability to spend time with their families, and many indicate a willingness to consider flexible schedules or make allowances for employees to be available to their families. One actually meets with employees’ spouses to discuss his desire for them to experience a balanced life and healthy relationship. Another enacted significant family-friendly policies at a major consulting firm, allowing consultants, for whom the consulting lifestyle can take a severe toll on their home life, to work nine months a year or four days a week for reduced compensation. Some employee initiatives are oriented toward providing opportunities for employees to make meaningful decisions and contributions—to empowering employees at all levels to make the most of their abilities. The owner of an automobile dealership deliberately connected technicians, who were normally isolated, with customers, so that they could see how profoundly their work impacts lives. The CEO of a large, multinational company was so committed to delegation that he claims to have attempted to restrict himself to one important decision per year, and enacted policies stipulating that ideas were to be generated and problems solved from the bottom up, rather than dictated from the top down by managers and supervisors. Based on one CEO’s commitment to the value of every employee, the company he runs is 100% employee owned. At one company, employees contribute to a fund that employees can draw from as special needs arise. One CEO
expressed his intent always to pay employees a fair wage, and another described an experiment in “creative communism” whereby a profit-sharing initiative allocates a share of profits among all employees equally instead of proportional to their salary, constituting up to a third of the income of lower paid employees. Another CEO claimed to provide to employees more comprehensive benefits coverage than the market required. And the CEO of a public company actually challenged and defied federal regulations regarding the payment of hourly wages, believing that to do so diminished the sense of trust and dignity conveyed to lower level workers, to whom he preferred to designate a salary.

Some informants assume that a personal relationship with Jesus Christ is a prerequisite for human flourishing and, interestingly, some instinctively assume that questions about faith at work refer to evangelism in the workplace, even though this was almost never explicitly mentioned and rarely implied by the context. Some executives actively pursue opportunities to share their faith. For others, it is enough to model right behavior and be prepared to speak about their faith if the opportunity arises. Others feel that it is sufficient to embody the gospel through actions, and quite a few consider evangelism in the workplace inappropriate, especially for supervisors. A few executives provide opportunities for employees to be enriched spiritually at work. Several subscribe to corporate chaplain services, and most of these were pleased with the service these chaplains provided. While senior leaders almost never felt comfortable participating in on-site Bible studies or prayer groups, two CEOs occasionally sponsor voluntary, Christ-centered events for employees, and another invites Christian speakers and teachers to the office to address employees.
Corporate Culture/Values

A number of evangelical business leaders communicate that their companies’ culture and values are based on faith principles. For some of these, the connection between personal faith and corporate values is implicit. Others choose to infuse faith-based language into their mission statements or the self-understanding of their companies. A few companies specifically designate “glorifying God” or some variation therof as the mission or a core value of the company. One CEO stated that his employees are ambassadors for Christ. Another business owner observed that 90% of his employees understand that their job is a mission job and that when they represent the company, they are representing the Lord. And earlier I mentioned the CEO who, in order to inculcate a culture of service, distributes to each company employee a statue of Jesus washing Peter’s feet.

LEVEL 3 – FAITH THROUGH ONE’S COMPANY

Customer Flourishing

In general, informants are more defensive about than receptive to discussions regarding the social value of their products and services. For example, questions about the public health impact of foods and beverages or the value of producing and selling luxury products were often met with assertions that consumers should have the right to choose and comparative declarations to the effect that other products are worse. The aforementioned serial entrepreneur is one of few to specifically connect the company’s product—in this case focused on healthy living and eating—with human flourishing. To quote him again, “We don’t believe sickness and disease are a part of God’s best for people, and they derail people from accomplishing their vocation as well as the larger purposes for life. What we want to do is to increase peoples’ abilities and
motivation in a way that not only do they avoid getting disease but they’re free to really fulfill their potential on all fronts.”

Some executives focus on product offerings and customer interests. For example, the owner of a group of automobile dealerships declines to carry super-high-end luxury vehicles, though he does express an appreciation for the craftsmanship and aesthetic merit of a $100,000 vehicle. A commercial real estate developer will not finance anything that would detract from the quality of life in the community, and says he gets grief because he will not lease to payday lenders, rent-to-own companies, or hard liquor stores. Moreover, the developer deliberately tries to meet the needs of the community by building out clusters of essential product and service providers, including things like grocery stores, doctors, dentists, a post office, etc. An investment advisor measures the success of her team members not by the amount of money their clients accumulate, but by how much they give away. And the leader of an insurance practice backed up his insistence that the pursuit of commissions must be subordinated to pursuit of the customers’ interests by firing the firm’s number one commission producer—to the great surprise of other employees. Among business leaders with more personal connections to customers, at least a couple solicited, compiled, and distributed prayer requests from customers and clients. One executive mentions praying for such requests every morning, and another tells of emailing clients to let them know he is praying for them. Finally, while some executives in food preparation and service companies are defensive about the impact of their products on public health, others are intentionally moving toward healthier product offerings.
Community Flourishing

Those informants who exercise control over the distribution of their firms’ earnings sometimes demonstrate a commitment to enhancing their communities through philanthropic initiatives. While some companies, in keeping with the general practice today, designate a very small portion of profits to community causes, others make corporate philanthropy a higher priority. A privately-owned construction company, for example, tithes on its net income, allocating a tenth of its proceeds to charitable causes. Another company provides a certain number of meals to the hungry for each product sold at various price points. One investment company donates half of its profits to charity, with a large portion of these contributions directed toward ending genocide.

A few other informants described efforts to generate positive social impact beyond the walls of their companies. One private equity company, for example, invests only in socially productive initiatives in underdeveloped areas. The CEO of a Fortune 500 energy company boasts that his is the only company with a fully audited carbon footprint, and several other executives referenced environmentally friendly practices and products. In addition, one executive at a multinational company is leading an internal program aimed at empowering women entrepreneurs.

CONTEXTUAL VARIATION

As noted in Chapter 1, while informants articulate a number of common experiences and many share a common theological framework, their diverse professional circumstances ensure some variation in the ways they talk about applying their faith. Therefore, it is important to consider differences between, for example, emerging business leaders and those who are more
established, between executives who work in different sized companies, and between business leaders who own their own companies or answer to other capital providers.

Career Stage

*Early-career informants* are preoccupied with career advancement. Some have longer-term goals, but almost all are consumed with the task at hand. They want, more than anything, career guidance and champions within and outside their firms. Emerging leaders are less likely to have devoted significant thought to the purpose of business or the role of faith at work, or to have developed a theology of business. Then again, having invested less in and derived less from existing arrangements, some are considerably more sympathetic to critical perspectives on the range of effects businesses have on those inside them and beyond their confines. While some emerging leaders have already been chastened by the unyielding norms associated with work in large corporations, others continue to entertain creative possibilities for ways that work could be more fulfilling and consistent with human flourishing, even if they feel somewhat helpless to bring such possibilities about. Among emerging leaders, appetite for reform is inversely proportional to the degree of connection to and satisfaction with their current companies.

*Mid-career informants* are among the most proactive in terms of maximizing their influence, sometimes in profound and creative ways. Some of those who have reached the pinnacle of their professions have the financial wherewithal, the time horizon and, in some cases, the flexibility to pursue new initiatives in quest of fulfillment and impact. A number of mid-career business leaders, having secured their financial futures, have started their own businesses. Generally speaking, these have the most transformative energy and are thinking the most creatively about impacting the world around them, including and sometimes through the business world. Those who have not yet realized all of their career goals remain committed to these
goals. For example, more than one highly successful executive still hopes to become a CEO. Among mid-career informants, most of those in public companies or large private companies remain burdened by the pressure to produce “results,” but many are accumulating enough discretion to attempt to realize broader influence in their organizations. Many of those who are near the mid-points of their careers are seeking out and being recruited by charitable organizations and are developing a taste for making an impact in their communities.

_Late-career informants_ are concerned with establishing a legacy, ensuring the ongoing reputation and success of their firms, and preparing for retirement, during which they intend to focus on directing the resources they have accumulated toward good ends. They are among the strongest champions of the economic benefits of business and the most inclined to emphasize shareholder value, perhaps because they have attained positions in which they are directly answerable to capital providers. They are also among the least overt in terms of applying their faith at work, sensitive to the possibility of causing offense or being perceived to privilege one group of employees over another.

**Company Characteristics**

Informants in _public companies_ function more as salt than light, concerned to preserve the values and reputation of their companies. Most live faithfully as silent witnesses, but generally do not specifically invoke their faith or attempt to deviate from business as usual. They are intensely loyal to their firms, almost unwilling to question the value or propriety of any aspect of their companies’ operations. In some cases, this entails evasiveness, as in eschewing responsibility for certain functional areas in the firm. When questioned on advertising policies, for example, some public company executives demur, stating that these policies are beyond their areas of expertise and responsibility. They also draw on standardized scripts to provide stock
answers to questions about the social value of business in general and their companies in particular. For those who ostensibly appear to have the most power, they seem in many ways the most constrained.

Informants in private companies or partnerships often have more discretion than informants in public companies, but only if they own the business or their objectives are aligned with those of their capital providers or partners. Because of the pressures and obligations associated with publicly held equity capital, a number of informants have deliberately chosen to work in private company contexts, and more specifically, in companies wherein there is substantial alignment between the organization’s values and their own.

Informants in large companies are much less likely to attempt to implement unconventional practices or policies within their companies, regardless of their level of influence and the ownership structure of the firms. They are also less inclined to imagine new and different ways of doing business.

Informants who lead or work for what they or others have designated as “faith-centered” companies are typically more overt about their faith and enthusiastic about its application in their companies. In most cases, these companies attract employees who share similar convictions, diminishing the possibility of provoking offense through explicit invocation of faith-based principles. They are also more inclined to implement unconventional policies designed to benefit employees, customers, and other stakeholders.

**Position/Job Function**

**CEOs** are generally more discreet about their faith than others, concerned about the possible abuse of authority. CEOs who live in the public eye are more circumspect and less trusting than other informants; confidentiality and safe harbor are especially important to them.
For some informants in high profile positions, the influence associated with their positions sometimes feels like more of a burden than a blessing.

*Founders and owners* are more likely to identify their own worth with the worth of their companies. They also seem to feel the most intense responsibility for their employees. The acuteness of this responsibility diminishes to some extent their risk tolerance, offsetting in part the flexibility they enjoy to run their companies as they see fit.

An *entrepreneurial spirit* seems to correlate with the desire for greater impact. If informants have been successful at building something—even something small—they can imagine themselves building something bigger. Across the board, commitment to reform is less a function of visibility or absolute magnitude of influence or income than of amount of discretion in a particular company or context. For example, informants are more likely to be interested in widespread renewal if they own a small company than if they lead a large company.

**Industry**

While it is not mutually exclusive, in general informants emphasize either the value of their companies’ products and services or business as a platform through which to influence others, depending in some cases on the nature of the companies, themselves. For some, the social value of their products and services is easy to ascertain and affirm. For others, it is more of a stretch. That said, even those for whom the social value of their products and services is less clear go to great lengths to emphasize their value and downplay their potential harm. Some of these, in fact, choose to emphasize personal responsibility. Their products and services engender harm only when abused. Others cite salutary effects that are incidental to the core application of the products, themselves. One CEO of a multinational food distributor, for example, credits frozen dinners with prompting self-reflection and facilitating reconciliation. “I would hope that
in many places, not only here in the United States but around the world,” he says, “people have sat down over a meal with our product. They appreciated that. They’ve appreciated their wife, or they’ve appreciated their children, or they’ve appreciated their friends. Or they came together with somebody they might have had a disagreement with and they figured out that they no longer needed to disagree.”

**Unsystematic Influence**

Between them, informants thoughtfully appropriate their faith in and through work in a variety of ways. To reiterate, though, for most informants faith is primarily a personal resource that they bring to work. For these, faith functions not to transform their companies and communities, but to keep their own spiritual lives from being transformed by their work. Faith is more defensive than proactive; it keeps informants from indulging greed or abusing power. Above all, faith infuses work with meaning and legitimacy. It encourages informants to work hard and helps them succeed under the rules of the game, but does not prompt them to question these rules. It shapes the character of personal relationships, but does not figure prominently in professional responsibilities and “business decisions.” For most informants, the role of faith in business is spontaneous, not systematic, productive, but not creative.

In a sense Cragun, who asserted that religion is of little consequence in social domains like business, is correct in that religion seems not to produce any systematic difference in behavior. As a group, evangelicals can be found leading all types of companies with all sorts of objectives. Evangelical convictions can, in the right circumstances, challenge or soften the maximization ethic in their companies or working groups, but they do not displace the key components of the contemporary economic apparatus. Faith commitments do matter on an individual basis, even if the flexibility inherent in religious prescriptions masks this influence.
The individualization of religion is one reason it does not work well as a control variable in quantitative studies anymore and helps explain why those who study religion up close insist that it is important while those who observe it from afar downplay its impact.

**WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES FAITH NOT MAKE?**

Harold, introduced at the beginning of this chapter, prides himself on the quality of his relationships. Well-connected in the evangelical world, he is close friends with some of the most prominent names in music, business, and publishing. With respect to his network and sphere of influence, he says, “I pinch myself all the time over all the things that have happened….When I look at how God has taken this kid from east Nashville who has traveled the world and been with presidents and ambassadors of countries and some of the world’s best entertainers, sharing Jesus with all of them, it’s incredible.” His press kit lists a number of well-known individuals with whom he has worked, stating that Harold is “widely known in the corporate world for successfully creating beneficial strategic alliances and partnerships with Fortune 500 companies, sports and entertainment industries.” At the same time, he told me that he shies away from the spotlight. “I’m a guy that works smart behind the scenes,” he said.

At the beginning of the Introduction we met Kyle, who longed for help from a Christian mafia. Given his connections, if there is a group of evangelicals keen to advance evangelical objectives in the corporate world, Harold would be a good candidate to be involved. And yet, for Harold, the corporate world is no more in need of reform than anything else. If anything, business is one thing that is right with the world, and energy and resources can be more profitably expended elsewhere. When asked about the most pressing problems in the world today, Harold focuses on the family, pinpointing absentee fathers as a grave concern. He speaks
passionately about the future of Nashville, recalling tearing up upon noting the absence of a spiritual dimension to an otherwise commendable 50-year plan for the city. He speaks critically of the church, claiming that “part of our moral destruction is coming from the church,” and moreover that to look to the church to alleviate social problems is “kind of like saying to a child molester, ‘How are you going to help me help my children?’” He gets excited about training leaders and is intensely interested in academic studies about what makes leaders different. But changing corporate America is not on his radar, much less taking over companies for Christ or even propelling evangelical Christians to leadership positions in important companies. Harold, while acknowledging that business is subject to excess and abuse, prefers to emphasize the positive characteristics of business, including especially the service mentality that should characterize all Christian relationships.

While some scholars and commentators are optimistic that the influence of Christian executives might soften capitalism, re-orient business toward higher values, and/or alter cultural norms in the economic sphere, Harold and others are simply not oriented this way. For the most part, their goals are far more modest.

**MODEST ASPIRATIONS**

“I have one goal,” a CEO states, “and that’s to make it into heaven….I mean, I have a lot of shorter-term goals, like I want to get to dinner by 6:30 with my kids. I have no idea what God’s plan is for me. I just don’t know, but he puts stuff out there. He puts stuff in front of me, and when he does, I kind of know when he’s doing it, I think. I make a judgment, and then if I think it is from God then I work on it. I tackle it. So I spend very little time thinking beyond that because I’m always very busy with the junk he keeps throwing at me.”
As a father of five, the CEO of the parent company of seven subsidiary enterprises, an adjunct professor at two business schools, a leader in the movement for PreK-12 education reform in a major metropolitan area, and a board member of or official advisor to more than a dozen non-profit organizations, it is little wonder that this executive expresses little energy or enthusiasm for strategic planning. But his remarks are telling nevertheless. For him, as for many others, to plan is to presume. While there are more than a few exceptions, the majority of informants prefer to wait for specific divine guidance than to initiate plans on their own. According to another CEO, “I stopped a long time ago setting these big audacious—you know, by this date I’m going to hit this—goals, because my faith has led me to believe that being in this day and in the moment is the way that I can truly come alongside God and his plan and his work. So, I don’t have a whole lot of long-term grandiose goals that are about where I end up.” An emerging leader voices some of the same themes, saying, “I think there is a false sense of security that comes from thinking you are your own strategic planner, because we all know, in the end, our success has come from God and come from him opening the door….I used to take a real long term approach before and I think I’ve had a pretty good reality check here more recently and it’s just like God is going to open doors and I need to be networking and in the right places sending emails. He’s going to be the one driving from this point forward.”

To be sure, some informants are more proactive about seeking divine guidance than others. One informant, for example, claims to constantly ask God what to do next. A more common sentiment, however, is that informants are not looking for new opportunities or ideas. They are simply trying to be faithful where they believe God has placed them at present, dealing with people and issues as they come down the path. As one business leader explains, “I look at the people that come onto my path, and I say, ‘Okay, Lord, what do you want me to do with
these people?’” But I’m not necessarily going to say, ‘Oh, I’ve got to, you know, try to save the people in every needy African country.’” Likewise, a senior executive at one of the largest companies in the world, disclaims, “I absolutely refuse to seek out any new ministry stuff at all…. I’m just going to have the Lord bring it to me and I’ll respond. I’m not going to intentionally generate anything.” According to another informant, moreover, “A well thought-out career plan can kill God’s initiative.” This executive even speaks of desiring at one point to pursue full-time church-based ministry, but of not having “the release from God” to do so.

The inclination to wait for God’s specific instruction may be, at least in part, a rationalization for the inability to do more. Many informants are incredibly busy—they work long hours, spend time with their families, are involved with church and community, and allocate time to spiritual disciplines as well. It is safe to say that many informants are running at full capacity. Nevertheless, many informants are not actively and strategically thinking about how they can leverage their resources, skills, and connections to expand their influence. In fact, several informants specifically state that they do not want any more influence than they currently have, and for some, the influence associated with their professional statuses represents both a blessing and a burden. One investment banker describes his sphere of influence as “whoever God brings into my path.” When asked if he wished he had more influence with certain people or in certain places, he says, “In a way, I wish I were a better person, and that therefore my life was more transforming to other people. But, I don’t have a desire to impact millions. I just think that’s up to God. I think God called Billy Graham and people like him, people in history that have touched literally millions and millions of people. But, my goal is to just faithfully serve the Lord, whether it’s to one person, or to thousands. I think it can be a form of pride, vanity, and self-ambition if you sort of set yourself up like ‘I want to change the world.’”
God’s role, and my view is just to do what he sets before me, big or little.” Another executive articulates well the view of many: “I try not to think too much about that because it’s easy to get priorities misaligned if you worry too much about who you're influencing and how you're influencing them. I try to think more about that small core sphere and then act or conduct my professional life in a way that is pleasing to God and let things fall where they may.”

Paradoxically, a number of informants find that greater authority and influence in their companies diminishes their ability to use influence in meaningful ways. Informants are very sensitive to the potential for the abuse of authority and the possibility of showing partiality. In a pluralistic environment, which characterizes most of the companies for which informants work, they typically decline to signal their faith in any but the most generic ways, concerned that more overt manifestation might make subordinates uncomfortable or compromise the intended environment of religious neutrality.

“My sphere of influence? It’s not very big at all,” claims one executive who has attained leadership positions in several prestigious and competitive consulting firms, currently runs a private equity firm, is a senior advisor to one of the most significant foundations in the world, and is the chairman of the board of a prominent group of high net-worth Christian givers. Like this executive, most informants understate their sphere of influence, perhaps driven by genuine humility or perhaps by the belief that the exercise of power is inherently unspiritual. Naturally, those business leaders who downplay their influence feel relatively powerless to enact meaningful changes in their firms or more broadly. Recall Raymond, whose response when asked what one thing he would change about his company, a prestigious asset management firm, was “Dream on,” the junior program manager who wanted to transform the entire tech company
she worked for but settled for personal spiritual growth, and the mid-career executive who called the prospect of transforming companies like Sony “ludicrous.”

When asked if he has been in position to enact changes at his company, a high level officer at a publicly traded asset management firm responded that “Change is too strong a word; it implies something. All the values that I think are fitting for the workplace, I try to live on a day to day basis and apply to my partnership with my colleagues—to my efforts day in and day out…. I think all things taken into account, you can be influential on a day to day basis. Everybody can. It’s the old circle of influence thing. Everybody’s got that; everybody does—the janitor’s got it and I’ve got it.” Despite his stature in the organization, this executive articulates little desire or ability to “change” his company, going so far as to equate his influence with that of a janitor.

This is the same executive, mentioned last chapter, who relates an incredible array of impactful activities outside of work, including filmmaking, campaigning, policy-writing, and a variety of philanthropic initiatives. For someone who feels relatively powerless within, or at least disinclined to influence, the company at which he spends most of his time, this executive certainly attempts to exercise influence across the cultural, service, and political landscapes. As with many informants, the loci of his renewal-oriented efforts lie outside his professional domain. He, like many informants, channels the majority of his reform-oriented energy outside the business world, and does so as an individual.

In recent years a growing chorus of voices, mostly but not exclusively from outside the business community, has lobbied corporations to take a more proactive role in addressing some of society’s most recalcitrant problems (UN Global Compact 2004; Laszlo 2003; Waddock 2002). While a handful of evangelical executives suggested that businesses could and should
engage social problems, most informants, in keeping with their overriding emphasis on the economic benefits businesses provide, are unreceptive to calls for more expansive definitions of corporate social responsibility. It is enough, these business leaders insist, to create wealth; this is what businesses are supposed to do, and those that survive must be doing a good job of it. Informants acknowledge, of course, that economic benefits must not be realized at the expense of social harm, but there is little awareness of possible adverse externalities and, happily, in their assessment, ethical behavior supports financial performance such that this is hardly an issue in the first place. Informants are happy for their companies to, at the margins, donate a modest amount of profits to the community and ensure that employees, customers, and other stakeholders are treated fairly, especially inasmuch as such policies contribute to the reputation and financial performance of the business. But rarely would they aver that companies have the option, much less the responsibility, to directly engage crime, hunger, disease, or other social problems, unless of course the company’s core product or service is related to these issues. This does not mean that evangelical executives are unconcerned about societal problems. On the contrary, informants demonstrate considerable personal concern for the well-being of those around them. It does mean, however, that they generally do not see their companies as vehicles through which the renewal of society can or should be specifically pursued. Individuals, including themselves, are responsible for directing a portion of the wealth created by business to the amelioration of human suffering and the promotion of human flourishing, but the role of companies is indirect.
COLLECTIVE INFLUENCE

Evangelicals are notoriously fragmented in their goals and agenda, and few informants indicated that they feel like they are part of any sort of broader movement that might advance meaningful reforms. Informants, most of whom attempt to exert influence as individuals, may ask, “What does God want me to do next?” but rarely ask “What does God want us to do next?” They do not often contemplate collective influence, agendas, or resources. In order to explore the prospect for such questions and conversations, I attended a retreat for Christian executives hosted by Laity Lodge, a facility operated by the foundation that sponsored my research. The theme of this particular retreat was “Christians in the Marketplace: What Would It Look Like if God Was Running the Show?” The setting was rugged, remote, and spectacular, with activities centered on a lodge overlooking a crystalline river that winds through a deep canyon in the heart of the Hill Country of central Texas. While the interviews I conducted provided individual insights, attending the retreat enabled me to observe and interact with evangelical business leaders in a corporate setting specifically designed to facilitate exploration of the integrative task. Marketed to Christian executives, the few dozen guests included about half business leaders, mainly of comparatively small, privately owned businesses, along with a contingent of academics interested in faith and work and several Laity Lodge “regulars,” most of whom attend at least one retreat per year and a few of whom had no connection to business at all.

The grounds are carefully designed to promote a relaxing experience; with fountains throughout the property, the sound of running water is ubiquitous. Both solitude and conversation are facilitated, with swings and other seating options sprinkled throughout the property, in isolation and in tandem. Scripture verses and poetry—inscribed in wood beams and on stones—encourage contemplation. Recreation options are plentiful; in addition to hiking and
swimming in the canyon’s natural features, there are shuffleboard and tennis courts, a horseshoes pit, a ping-pong table, a jogging trail, a bookstore, and a library.

It would be difficult to overstate how far removed the setting and the experience are relative to the daily life of an executive. The “unplugged” nature of the experience is a point of pride and emphasis; with no television or cell phone coverage, participants, many of whom are ordinarily tethered to their smartphones, are truly disconnected. And at Laity Lodge, in contrast to executive suites where proprietary information is guarded and access restricted, keys are not distributed and doors not locked. This was no place to keep to oneself in the first place. Religious enthusiasm abounded, and the “evangelical” flavor of the retreat was obvious throughout. It was as if long suppressed religious energy suddenly burst to the surface. “God talk” abounded, punctuated with “amens,” “hallelujahs,” and “praise Gods.” Every conversation seemed to revolve around spiritual matters. I witnessed, for example, a spirited debate about the merits of Peter Jackson’s dividing Tolkein’s The Hobbit into three feature films, the participants in which cited specific characters and episodes and lamented the failure of the movie adaptation of the Lord of the Rings trilogy to accurately convey the moral and spiritual implications of certain episodes. During worship times, led by a renowned Christian musician, some guests sang with hands uplifted and many closed their eyes and sang with intensity. If not quite “charismatic,” the singing was certainly impassioned. It seemed to take not much more than a handshake for guests to connect, soon referring to one another in familial terms and joining hands around long tables to bless their food before sharing meals together.

Billed as an opportunity to think deeply about a particular topic, the atmosphere was more one of fellowship and emotional release than of intensive study. Nevertheless, there was plenty of time devoted to instructional sessions. Two instructors shared teaching responsibilities,
one a pastor of a relatively prominent church, and the other the dean of the business school at an evangelical seminary. The two alternated giving lectures, or lessons, most of which took up common evangelical themes. Apparently without coordination, both speakers oriented their introductory remarks around a quote from Dutch theologian, Abraham Kuyper, who said “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, ‘Mine!’” For the next couple days, the overriding theme of the dean’s prepared remarks was to formulate a theology of business by demonstrating how business fits into the biblical narrative, which he explained as a story of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. Unsurprisingly, the pastor focused more on pastoral concerns, emphasizing personal dispositions and virtues and encouraging retreat participants to “prune” the unhealthy aspects of their lives in order to allow the healthier dimensions to flourish. Whether by design or coincidence, the effect of such alternation was the impression that the personal behavior encouraged by the pastor was the key to implementing or living out the perspective on business articulated by the academic.

In order to facilitate dialogue and encourage practical application, plenary sessions were followed by small group discussions—a staple of the evangelical approach to spiritual vitality. In these groups, any possibility of thoughtful discussion broke down completely. The small group to which I was assigned reflected the diverse circumstances and objectives of attendees as a whole, and was led by a professor at a business school in Texas. Despite having an assigned topic and set of discussion questions, within just a few minutes, one discussant had shared that many years ago her first child had died at a young age, prompting tears from her and others and commendations for her courage and vulnerability in sharing such a painful experience. Gentle attempts by the facilitator to redirect attention to the assigned issues were largely unsuccessful,
impeded by the need to pass around an amplification device so that a ninety-nine year old
woman could hear what was said. Apparently still not able to hear the discussion, our elderly
friend interjected periodically with generic platitudes: “I’m just so glad each of you is here this
week,” she exclaimed. “I just feel like you don’t realize what great plans God has for you. All
of you are just so important to God and if you will just follow him, well I just can’t wait to know
what he does with all of you, so just believe that he’s gonna use you.” Needless to say, little
progress was made in fashioning a theology of business.

Subsequent small group sessions were more of the same. Inevitably, someone would
share something that was “on their heart,” thereby shifting attention away from the apparently
less interesting issues about which we had supposedly gathered in the first place. While we
might not have learned much about business, we were warned by one small group participant
that the easiest way to diverge by twenty percent from God’s path was to stray one percent per
year for twenty years. (This, apparently, was the story of his marriage.) When at last we reached
the climactic question—the culmination of all of our discussion and study—our opportunity to
discourse on what our company/industry/occupation would look like if God was running the
show—the prompt was met by silence. After a couple of aborted attempts to jumpstart the
conversation, we retrenched to more comfortable territory.

In a sense, we had been set up for this. From the start guests were encouraged to be
“open to God,” that they might hear the specific messages he had for them in particular. Even
the theology of business expounded by the business school dean stopped short of implementation
advice. The most substantive lecture of the retreat culminated in the presentation of a
PowerPoint slide showing a number of different company stakeholders and business objectives
that could be subject to trade-offs. But instead of presenting a framework by which to prioritize
groups and/or purposes, the speaker demurred, asking, “Who am I to tell you how to balance these things?” and insisting that to arbitrate between competing interests we must rely on divine guidance and the leading of the Holy Spirit.

A panel discussion late in the retreat demonstrated just how little consensus had been reached regarding an appropriate theology of business. The two plenary speakers were joined onstage by a businesswoman invited to participate on the panel just a couple hours before. Apparently the vetting process was less than thorough, as the businesswoman ended up saying exactly the opposite of what the dean had been teaching, admitting that she thought the purpose of business was to make a profit and stating that the way she implements her faith at work is by being a nice person. Awkwardness ensued as the speakers attempted obliquely to contradict what she expressed. The one time the discussion actually turned to concrete application, the awkwardness only intensified; during an open question and answer session, one guest came to the microphone and shared his conviction that if he couldn’t provide healthcare for his employees, he didn’t want to run that business—a sentiment that prompted an apparently unwelcome divergence of opinion that was quickly suppressed in favor of the next, more innocuous question.

The retreat concluded with an outpouring of hugs, well-wishes, and, if my experience is any indication, empty promises to keep in touch. Guests left encouraged and refreshed but, by all appearances, with little prospect of doing anything differently at work than when they arrived. Despite the need for reform implied by the hypothetical “what…if” in the title of the retreat, attendees demonstrated little urgency to contemplate or initiate systematic changes to the marketplace.
If, in light of their perspectives and this retreat experience, the prospect of individual executives coming together in common cause seems unlikely, the prospect of groups of evangelical business leaders doing so seems little better. During the course of my research, I solicited the input of a few leaders of prominent organizations that purport to help Christian executives integrate their faith and their work. Interestingly, the coldest reception came from former evangelical executives who had transitioned to leadership roles in such groups. When I described the project and asked for help connecting with potential informants, one of these ministry leaders asserted that he knew more about the topics I intended to investigate than anyone and would not permit me to “fish off his back,” and another repeatedly rescheduled appointments, even cancelling an appointment the morning I was to travel several hours to meet with him. I got the distinct impression that these and other ministries compete with one another to serve the executives with whom I hoped to connect.

**Exceptions**

While most informants gave little evidence of a desire to transform the business world, not all are content with their current level of influence, and some have significant goals, dreams, or plans. Some, in fact, are very strategic and ambitious. According to one executive, “We have a really significant visioning process. Over there in that book is my master-action plan, and that master-action plan is the 2010 plan that is one-fifth of a five-year focus. My heartbeat is not as much leading a financial services firm as it is leading and impacting our world—being a catalyst.” This executive is burdened to empower other firms to implement the type of values and culture that he has implemented at his firm, and is contemplating concrete steps to make that happen, including writing a book and founding an institute.
Others may have a shorter horizon, but their goals are noteworthy nonetheless. While most of the ways that informants are currently attempting to have a positive impact in and on their companies involve individual or company-specific initiatives within the rules of business as currently practiced, a few executives are thinking more broadly about paradigm shifts. A venture capitalist, for one, hopes to “revolutionize philanthropy” by using the venture capital model to make investing in social impacts more appealing than purchasing luxury items. Similarly, the leaders of two private equity firms are working to establish “impact investing” as a legitimate and appealing asset class, thereby dissolving the boundary that currently divides investing and philanthropy. Kirk, as we have seen, is working to “transform communities and nations” by “repurposing leaders and corporations.” He works with companies to identify the major social problems afflicting the communities in which they operate and devise solutions that leverage the companies’ resources and expertise. And the founder of the aforementioned company that donates meals to the hungry for every purchase of its products explains that the mission of his company is “to create a tsunami of micro funding that overwhelms the needs of those we are caring for….We have to change the ecosystem of how funding happens for the non-profits.”

**What’s the Problem?**

As noted above, some authors and scholars believe that religious business leaders might help reshape American business. In addition, some have argued that the evangelical impulse to integrate faith and work in business contexts has crystalized into a coherent social movement (Miller 2007; Lindsay 2008). Others fear that evangelical Christian business leaders will attempt to “take over their companies for Christ” (Mitroff and Denton 1999). As Hunter (2010) explains, evangelicals, like some other Christian groups, evidence an intense desire to “change the world”—a desire that could certainly extend to the business world, and evangelicals have a
history of activism on several fronts (Cromartie 2003). The aforementioned exceptions notwithstanding, based on informants’ accounts of their own aspirations, however, I see little desire to turn companies into explicitly “Christian” organizations or to transform the core values and objectives toward which businesses are oriented, or indeed much evidence that there is any shared agenda around which evangelical business leaders might coalesce. Hoffer ([1951] 2002) suggested that social movements don’t necessarily need a God to rally around, but do need a devil against which to mobilize, and the history of evangelical social action in America and elsewhere can be characterized as a series of crusades against particular sins (Young 2007). Given the general inclination to present business as a worthy vocation, such an adversary is hardly to be found. Informants are far more likely to cite eroding moral standards, the breakdown of the family, and the poor quality of education as pressing problems than any problems associated with the way business is conducted. While the Social Gospel movement of the early 20th century—a precursor to contemporary emphases on faith at work—was concerned with structural and institutional change, this preoccupation does not characterize the evangelical managers I interviewed. Indeed, their assessment of the root causes underlying social problems in general leads most informants to allocate the great majority of their “world-changing” resources and energy to non-profit organizations dedicated to religious and social concerns.

Evangelicals, as Hunter (2010) explains, contend that cultures change when people change, and that people change when they are spiritually transformed through the embrace of new ways of thinking. The evangelical business leaders in this study give much evidence of this type of thinking, insisting that any problems in corporate America are the result of flawed businessmen, not flawed institutions. Asked if he thinks corporate America is in need of reform, Harold responds, “I think that it goes back to the moral compass. It goes back to
integrity. It goes back to character. If character is absent, whether in the church, or in corporate America, then you’re going to see the residue of that.” Having complained that our moral compass needs to be recalibrated, the process Harold recommends is as follows: “I think one, you have to be the change you want to see. I think it starts with you first. I think that that becomes the attraction—that becomes the lightning rod—is someone will say to you, ‘Man, what is it about you? Why is it that you won’t do this, this, and this?’ You’re able to offer that input, live out that input, and then walk alongside with someone who desires that kind of difference.”

Other informants also articulate naïve, and typically evangelical, perspectives on social change, namely that large-scale problems can be addressed by greater intensity of personal belief or through one-to-one interactions. “I think you have to have a global vision and do it one life at a time,” explains one CEO.

A number of informants emphasize the spiritual roots of material problems. As one executive states, “I think most of the world’s problems can be described as sin. Its consumerism, or hedonism, or whatever our –isms are. I think that, basically, we place ourselves above God, and most of the world’s problems are a matter of people not loving their neighbors as themselves—loving the Lord with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loving their neighbor as themselves. I think there may be some structural, systemic things that wouldn’t get solved by that, but I would be interested to hear what they are.” Similarly, another executive insists that “at the highest level, the pressing problem is the widespread lack of relationship to God, which then results in oppression, greed, and every other vice, which leads to poverty, environmental disaster, etcetera, etcetera.” Another asserts that “corporate America is in need of reform in the same way the human heart is in need of reform,” explaining that “the root problems
we experience today are no different than they were a thousand or five thousand years ago, and it first starts with the human heart.”

In light of this diagnosis, proposed remedies include, most frequently, spiritual renewal resulting in improved decision-making by individuals. According to Hunter (2010), the effects of such strategies, while not insignificant, are unlikely to metastasize as desired. Meanwhile, with this orientation in mind, it is little wonder that informants overwhelmingly conceive of ministry and influence in terms of personal relationships. While there is some thought allocated to influencing the influencers—inside or outside the company, in general there is a democracy of ministry that defines neighbors in terms of propinquity, not need or potential influence. The evangelical executives I interviewed are also largely unversed in institutional dynamics, according to which, for example, at a community level, change often takes place through an institutional infrastructure that connects corporations, foundations, and other civic groups.

**Nothing to Fix**

Contrary to the perception that the business world is characterized by greed and other vices, or indeed promotes any number of vices, many of the evangelical executives I spoke with emphasized that the types of behavior that are expected and rewarded in the business world are fully consistent with those that are encouraged by Christianity. Informants rarely experience tension between their faith convictions and the competitive dynamics of the market. In theory, they would be willing to sacrifice profits in order to comply with individual and corporate values. In practice, it rarely comes to this. Informants insist that, at least in the long-run, ethical behavior enhances business performance in almost every case. While this characteristic reasoning, according to which success and virtue are connected, enables them simultaneously to draw on multiple orders of worth, it also rests on a functional explanation that is inherently
conservative; the myth that virtue necessarily pays enables executives to say that those companies, including their own, that generate favorable financial returns must, in fact, be virtuous. In so doing, it downplays the need for reform.

Even those evangelical executives who participate in groups and initiatives oriented to incorporating faith in business are not so much reacting against perceived problems with business, but rather against perceived neglect and disapproval within the church. In the end, the desire to integrate faith and work is less a quest for guidance than for legitimacy. Failing to find legitimation from the church, evangelical executives secure affirmation from one another. Indeed, the authors of prescriptive materials regarding how to integrate faith and business have largely missed the point. For the most part, evangelical executives are not particularly interested in grappling with difficult questions regarding the social and theological value of business. Most do not struggle with the amount of consumption in the U.S. versus other countries, depressed wage rates in developing countries, excessive executive compensation, the effects of monotonous and degrading labor, or what counts as an adequate return for shareholders or a fair wage. Rather, they talk at a high level about economic growth and jobs and returns and value. What informants seem to want most is encouragement and companionship, not answers. They are, it seems, more lonely than confused or disillusioned.

The one characteristic of the economy that informants consistently singled out as suboptimal is “the tyranny of the short-term,” as the CEO of a private equity firm phrased it. A number of executives lamented the pressure incurred by public companies to deliver quarterly earnings results, believing that this often came at the expense of long-term value creation. Also, when prompted, many informants acknowledged that the ratio of executive pay to that of other workers is out of balance, though some resolutely defended the efficiency of the market in
allocating appropriate compensation for highly demanding positions. On the whole, though, the consensus is that while capitalism can get out of balance, in the long-run it works itself out. This conviction mitigates any alarm informants might feel about the recent financial crisis or the expanding ratio of executive pay to that of most workers. After asserting that the inequity of pay between the haves and the have-nots is the biggest single issue threatening the capitalist system, the former CEO of a multinational food and beverage company insists, “In a fair market economy, I think it’ll fix itself.” In the long-run, informants assume, things will work themselves out.

**MORE DIFFICULT THAN IT APPEARS**

While evangelical executives give little indication of possessing either the motivation or the ability to introduce systematic reforms in corporate contexts, it is important to observe that other attempts to take some of the same rhetorical tools used by evangelical executives and use them to reorient business have largely proven unsuccessful. In insisting on a connection between virtue and profit, the evangelical executives I interviewed are in many ways echoing a line of thinking that has been championed with enthusiasm by advocates of corporate social responsibility for some time. Stirred to action in part by the wave of corporate scandals in the late 1990s and early 2000s, along with a trend toward growing inequality, a host of interest groups and organizations, including NGOs and consumer groups, have arisen to assert claims on corporate resources and to pressure corporations to fulfill their perceived responsibilities to particular constituencies. These groups would add “meaning” to business by channeling their energy toward various “public goods.” While advocates of CSR originally appealed to moral principles, almost all contemporary writing on CSR emphasizes its link to corporate profitability. In relatively short order, the underlying rationale for CSR has transitioned from “doing good to
do good” to “doing good to do well.” As Vogel (2005) suggests, “It is impossible to exaggerate the significance of the contemporary claim that there is a business case for corporate responsibility, business ethics, corporate citizenship, environmental stewardship, pollution control, sustainable development, and the like,” adding that “while profitability may not be the only reason corporations will or should behave virtuously, it has become the most influential.” Whereas around 1970, only one of eight executives surveyed viewed their urban affairs programs as potential sources of profits, more recently, and depending on the survey, between 70 and 90 percent of executives believe that corporate social responsibility creates shareholder value (Vogel 2005).

As an example of this shift in emphasis, Paine (2002:78) recounts the following: “Not long ago, civil rights leader Jesse Jackson spoke to a group of Wall Street executives about hiring more minorities and African-Americans. Rather than appealing to ethical arguments about fairness, rights, or equality of opportunity, Jackson appealed to the executives’ financial self-interest. He told them that discrimination was costing them money and that they could not afford to deprive themselves of the talent residing in the non-white population. Jackson’s argument would have seemed ludicrous 50 years ago, but in today’s economic, legal, and social environment, it rings very true.” Paine concludes, on the basis of this and related evidence, “As a result of social and institutional changes, the ethical argument and the economic argument have become much better aligned.”

Alexis de Tocqueville ([1834] 2003) wrote of the ancients that they talked continually about the beauties of virtue while studying its utility only in secret. Today what was once a source of shame is carried out in full view. Whereas Adam Smith’s case for the morality of an economic system that is driven by the pursuit of private interest was based on its social
consequences, today social contributions are justified by their contributions to private interests. The virtue-profit myth does nothing to challenge the fundamental orientation of corporate capitalism toward maximizing shareholder value. In fact, in some ways the virtue-profit link is corporate America’s new legitimating myth, enabling the facile reconciliation of social and economic commitments.

Having resorted to utilitarianism, the corporate social responsibility movement has predictably proven impotent when it comes to influencing corporate behavior, especially given the lack of evidence to support the supposed connection between virtue and profit. Strikingly, it appears that, if anything, corporations themselves have assumed the mantle as the loudest champions of calls for more expansive corporate social responsibility. Firms have adopted departments dedicated to CSR but for the most part not changed their operations at all, disguising nonconformity by decoupling their organizational structure from their actual operations, as Meyer and Rowan suggest (1977). They have aggressively implemented CSR reporting, but use standards derived from NGOs funded and directed by corporations, themselves. As Cyert and March (1963) observed, firms can make side payments to various parties, as in, for example, aligning with certifiers to implement certification criteria that pose little threat to traditional performance metrics or to fees for providing such certification. In all these ways, companies have taken charge of the manufacture of their own virtue, as opposed to having standards of virtue imposed on them (Shamir 2005, 2008). Before its spectacular collapse amid audacious malfeasance, Enron was consistently lauded as one of the most socially responsible firms. Moreover, the great majority of the Fortune 500 qualify for so-called “socially responsible” mutual funds. Despite having secured widespread support, the inability of the CSR movement to introduce meaningful changes in economic arrangements shows how difficult such changes are.
WHAT DIFFERENCE COULD IT MAKE?

In light of the constraints outlined above, it is not as if evangelical executives can wave a magic wand and overhaul their companies or the market system in which they compete, nor do they give abundant evidence of wishing to do so in the first place. With respect to transforming institutions, in fact, some have argued that intentional efforts are less likely to engender change than the typically inadvertent intermixture of apparently discrepant categories and modes of evaluation. Stark (2009), for example, has argued that the juxtaposition of multiple worlds of worth is key to institutional change. Expressing similar ideas using a framework that emphasizes institutionally-defined logics of action instead of the more transposable principles of worth, Friedland and Alford (1991) contend that episodes of institutional contradiction, prompted by the manipulation and reinterpretation of symbols and practices, are the means through which the institutional structure of society is transformed. Along these lines, Espeland and Stevens (1998) assert that it is at the “borderlands between institutions” that claims about incommensurables are most likely to arise, generating the potential for new social categories and arrangements. If these theorists are on the right track, evangelical executives may in fact be well-positioned to catalyze change, even unwittingly.

Thinking back to Weber’s thesis in *The Protestant Ethic*, when ascetic Protestants attempted to account for their divine standing by measuring their wealth, they committed a domain-violation, just as we saw informants do when, as omni-valuers, they employ multiple forms of worth in justifying their professional pursuits and behavior. What was new about the phenomenon Weber identified, and what gave rise to new patterns of behavior and ultimately, new institutional arrangements, was the juxtaposition of elements from multiple worlds of worth. Individuals, whose worth hinged on the acceptance of divine grace, measured such worth by
accrued wealth, thereby combining the evaluative principle of the inspired world with the evidence of worth associated with the market world. This juxtaposition inspired new strategies of action and, by virtue of the church’s moral authority, afforded them the moral legitimacy that facilitated their widespread adoption.

Weber’s analysis suggests that religion is capable of bringing together multiple worlds of worth and providing space for new combinations of apparently discordant elements from multiple worlds. If so, rather than narrowing the scope of responsibility, as other institutions and principles of worth often do, religion expands it. Friedland and Alford rightly observe that religion is a totalizing institution, acknowledging that religious traditions seek to offer explanations of reality “within which all human activity takes place” (1991:248), thereby seeking influence in every social sphere. It accomplishes this, I have suggested, at the cost of coherence and through the process of “omni-valuation,” whereby various principles of worth are given spiritual sanction. While omni-valuation compromises the coherence of systems of religious doctrine, this is not necessarily any impediment to its influence. Recall that, as Weber explains, the logical response to the doctrine of predestination is resignation to one’s fate, the very opposite of what he observed in his analysis of religious history. Thus, religious beliefs prompted the psychological impulses that gave rise to the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism, but neither were logical derivatives of Calvinist doctrine. In fact, any contribution ascetic Protestantism made to the establishment of rational capitalism should be considered an unintended consequence.

Contemporary executives, meanwhile, consistently have occasion to arbitrate between competing principles of worth. Top executives are, moreover, regularly expected to provide public justifications for their decisions, and in making such justifications public, the justifications
become available for repackaging and reuse by other individuals and coalitions in their organizations and the network of organizations in which they are situated. Thus, executives can contribute to innovation in two ways: first, by combining elements from multiple worlds of worth; second, by publicly invoking and therefore legitimating various principles of worth, making them available to other members of the organization for competition and combination.

That the particular executives I interviewed are often socially concerned, involved in faith and work issues, influential in their firms and sometimes beyond, and connected to one another via support networks makes them especially promising candidates to attempt to challenge existing business practices. That both their business and faith-oriented roles are of particular salience makes them well-equipped to initiate institutional change. Informants are not merely exposed to or embedded in the corporation and the church, but deeply invested in them and adept at the strategies of action and vocabularies that are associated with them. Against Boltanski and Thevenot, who attribute to agents, by virtue of their common and plural historical heritage, a sort of omni-competence, wherein everyone is able to deploy any of the principles of worth in any context, I concur with Swidler (1986) that we must be facile with culture before we can use it. Not everyone is adept with the concepts and terminology necessary to switch back and forth between various worlds of worth. As I suggested earlier, however, informants are, to borrow Weber’s metaphor, “musical” in both the world of business and the world of religion, and are perceived as experts in both domains. As such, their capacity for innovation is significantly enhanced inasmuch as they are bricoleurs (Levi-Strauss 1966) who creatively import and export symbols and practices from one institutional order to another (Thornton and Ocasio 2008).
I argued earlier that the dispositions and cultural tools evangelical executives bring to their professional roles as a result of their faith commitments enables omni-valuation—the use of multiple worlds of worth in making and justifying business decisions. Now I add that this process holds the potential to catalyze institutional innovation. I suggest that evangelical Christianity in particular, as practiced by executives attempting to integrate their faith and their work, confounds tests of worth by attributing spiritual value to a variety of apparently discrepant temporal pursuits and objects. As such, it holds open possibilities for what Stark (2009) calls “creative friction” between different orders of worth, disrupting received categories and potentially prompting novel recombinations of ideas, practices, and resources. Again, as omni-valuers, evangelical executives are more keen to affirm principles of worth than to condemn them. For informants, faith does not logically resolve conflicts between incompatible worlds of worth, but enables the coexistence of apparently discordant ideas, symbols, and practices by infusing them with sacred value.

To be clear, I am not arguing that wherever there is an evangelical executive, there will be novel business practices. More modestly, I assert that the tendency toward omni-valuation among evangelical executives can produce unconventional attitudes and actions. From seeing customers as children of God, competitors as neighbors, employees as children, CEOs as servants, or organizational fields as mission fields, to measuring success in business by lives touched, adherence to values, or families strengthened, to attempting global change one person at a time, informants sometimes embrace unorthodox perspectives that mix discrepant orders of worth, and these perspectives can give rise to unconventional business practices. Even so, given organizations’ resistance to change (Hannan and Freeman 1984), most new business practices are unlikely to take hold, and even those that do are unlikely to be widely implemented. But the
greater the opportunity for innovation, as facilitated by omni-valuation, the greater the likelihood that new business practices will be generated, selected, and retained. Institutional innovation, like other aspects of social life, is probabilistic and evolutionary. Some mismatches may prove fecund, but most are sterile. One CEO, referring to an employee-generated policy permitting employees to maintain full pay and benefits while they volunteer full-time at local non-profits, said, “I’m happy to report that the idea that came out of our operations group was plagiarized by at least two local companies that I am aware of. One of them is a much larger, privately held organization.” Most informants, however, did not mention any such contagion.

Religion has the potential to prompt institutional change in the business world, but its influence is not necessarily straightforward or intentional. The secondhand effects described above, in which others pick up and repackage justifications offered by evangelical executives, are one way evangelical executives might influence the business world, though the shape of that influence is difficult to predict.
CONCLUSION

REANIMATING THE GHOST OF VOCATION

This dissertation represents a Weberian exercise in interpretive sociology as applied to themes seminally explored by Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*—both the ways religion and economic life intersect and Weber’s forecast of the dominance of economic rationality at the expense of religious values. Starting from the presupposition that people by nature prefer leisure to work, Weber saw in the concept of vocation an impetus for overcoming the traditional antipathy toward work, and especially toward commerce, by infusing it with “other-worldly” motivation and significance. Introduced into the Protestant vernacular by Martin Luther, whose reading of Scripture encouraged the acceptance of one’s daily work—arduous and mundane as it might be—as God-given, the concept of vocation was later reinterpreted and expanded by John Calvin and his followers to encompass the systematic and perpetual pursuit of profit.11 For Luther, Christian believers had been called by God into whatever particular line of work they found themselves, and hence were duty-bound to it. For Calvinists, Christians were obliged to pursue occupational mobility if presented with opportunities to make more money. It was this Calvinist understanding of vocation, Weber contended, that facilitated the transition from economic traditionalism, in which work is viewed as a necessary evil that infringes on more important activities like relationship with family and friends, to economic rationalism, in which work is enshrined as the highest duty and oriented to the perpetual increase of productivity. By enshrining money-making as a religious duty, the Puritans Weber described anchored a direct connection between the economic and the spiritual.

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11 In this paragraph I rely on Kalberg’s (2002) interpretation of Luther’s and Calvin’s understandings of vocation.
Despite its role in legitimating the systematic pursuit of profit, Weber insisted that, already as of a century ago, the concept of vocation had been reduced to “ghosts of beliefs no longer anchored in the substance of religion.” The perpetual pursuit of profit, originally inspired by religious beliefs, had become “routinized” such that it no longer required evaluative support. Whereas “the Puritan wanted to be a person with a vocational calling; today we are forced to be,” Weber lamented, implying that profit-oriented work is now central by necessity, not by choice, irrespective of its meaningfulness or lack thereof. Indeed, Weber anticipated little use for religion in the contemporary economy, observing that increasing reliance on formal rationality, which entails the conventional maximization of utility, comes at the expense of substantive rationality, which refers to allocation within the guidelines of other principles, including such things as sacred values. For Weber, the spirit that had infused economic pursuits with deeper meaning had evaporated, leaving workers to toil in an iron cage, characterized by a state of drudgery reminiscent of the traditional economic ethos that had disparaged work in favor of other, more meaningful pursuits.

In certain ways Weber’s pessimistic assessment of the evolution of “victorious capitalism” was prescient. For example, a Gallup Poll (Hueber 1991:1) documents a transformation of the American Dream in which “Americans [are] seeking more personal satisfaction through recreation, family life, friends, religion, and a search for meaning in life—not through work.” For generations a source of satisfaction and pride, to be characterized today by the Protestant work ethic and propelled by the spirit of capitalism would more likely be an insult, associated with disorders like workaholism and greed. Meanwhile, despite intense longings for resources and experiences that work cannot provide, Americans continue to work longer than they wish, apparently driven by the competitive dynamics of the marketplace. The
United States is frequently described today as a work-obsessed society (Swedberg 2009: xii), yet, when work and money are compared with other values in our society, they rarely rank highly (Wuthnow 1998). The captivity to work that characterizes the modern economic ethic is juxtaposed with a longing for the values privileged by the traditional economic ethic. For many Americans today, work is less a vocation than an impediment to more important pursuits.

Evangelicals have not been immune to transformations in attitudes toward work. While ascetic dispositions persisted among some groups of Protestants for several decades after Weber claims they contributed to the accelerating diffusion of rational capitalism, by the mid-1800s, the spiritual significance of vocation had dissipated even among evangelicals (Hunter 1987). More recently, even the secularized legacy of asceticism, promulgated until the mid-1900s by families and schools, has itself eroded. As Hunter (1987) details, not only have virtues like industriousness and competitiveness lost moral value and spiritual meaning, they have also been marginalized even as secular values, displaced by a preoccupation with self-fulfillment and values associated with the private sphere. As Hunter concludes, “the Protestant legacy of austerity and ascetic self-denial is virtually obsolete in the larger Evangelical culture and is nearly extinct for a large percentage of the coming generation of Evangelicals” (1987:73). For evangelicals and others, the concept of vocation, which established profit-oriented work as the central activity of life and gave it spiritual sanction, has been shorn of its religious connotations and today even the secularized version has been displaced in favor of an ethic of self-fulfillment that downplays work in favor of other more fulfilling pursuits.

At the same time, Weber’s expectations regarding the priority and tyranny of rationality neglect characteristics of business that facilitate a niche role for religion in economic life even today. In fact, in many ways Weber was mistaken about the nature of organizations. It turns out
that neither organizations—including economic ones—nor their leaders are strictly rational. Cyert and March (1963) successfully challenged the idea that organizations are oriented toward a specific goal, emphasizing the diversity, ambiguity, and incompatibility of organizational objectives. These characteristics, often taken as impediments to organizational effectiveness, make room for interpretive institutions such as religion to stake claim to relevance and influence in corporate contexts. For the executives I interviewed, the inability to optimize several, sometimes incompatible goals necessitates the type of satisficing rationalizations that I have previously highlighted, wherein evangelical executives are content to claim spiritually worthwhile outcomes for some stakeholder, typically without reference to other stakeholders who might experience relative neglect. Shamir (2005) has demonstrated how easy it is for businesses to tip their hat toward certain constituencies without making concrete sacrifices or even altering organizational behavior at all. And moreover, the inability to calculate the consequences of alternatives permits such claims to stand on their own, independent of evidence.

Weick (1995), meanwhile, has explored organizations as systems of meaning whose members retrospectively make sense of their choices and circumstances, highlighting the receptivity of organizations to different types of values and objectives. In addition, there is reason to believe that businesses are actually more receptive to diverse objectives than are organizations associated with other professions. For example, Merton (1973) asserts that one reason institutional science has been successful is that scientists, influenced by common professionalization processes, adhere to common norms and values, which, incidentally, typically consider religion inappropriate inasmuch as it threatens to cloud objectivity and introduce bias. Schmalzbauer (2003) observes similarly that religion is generally unwelcome in secular professions such as academia and journalism on account of its apparent subjectivity. But
the situation is considerably different in business, where businesspeople are generally not bound together by codes of professionalization or even common preparatory and educational experiences. Business, by itself, is not a compelling identity provider in the same way that someone would call herself a doctor or lawyer or professor, and as such is more open to the infusion of different norms and values.

All this makes room for the re-appropriation of the concept of vocation, or calling, which played an important role in the genesis and legitimation of capitalism, but for various reasons has been largely evacuated of spiritual significance and fallen into disuse. The evangelical executives I interviewed stand out as exceptions to the general impulse to devalue work relative to other pursuits. Indeed, many of the business leaders I spoke with seem intent on resurrecting the ghost of vocation and re-infusing it with spiritual significance, even as they demonstrate a work ethic reminiscent of that endorsed by Reformation-era Protestants. But the way they understand vocation and the process through which they come to this understanding, far from catalyzing or even signifying a revolution in the nature or significance of business, reinforces the appropriateness and worth of business as currently organized.

**Vocation in Retrospect**

Weber contended that some politicians live ‘off’ politics, meaning they derive their livelihood from it, while others live ‘for’ politics, meaning they make politics their life, in an internal sense. Importantly, ordinarily in order to live for politics the politician must be economically independent of the income politics can bring him—be wealthy or have a personal position which yields a sufficient income ([1946] 1991). Economic independence is often the inflection point or minimum criterion for the transition from success to significance, such that informants, who need no longer live off business, can approach business as a vocation in the
sense Weber applies to politics as a vocation. Therefore, most of the evangelical business leaders I interviewed are not like the Calvinists Weber described in the *Protestant Ethic*, who were at the beginning of an upwardly mobile journey. Instead, they are like those for whom politics is a vocation—those who are able to live for politics, not off politics. Moreover, we saw earlier that there is some indication that they, like Weber’s successful politicians, are willing to compromise, at least for a season—to take responsibility for the end (their own success) at the expense of the means. This does not mean that they do unethical things, but that they bracket their faith commitments and keep them largely hidden for a season. It means deferring significance.

The way this process unfolds over the course of successful evangelical executives’ careers means that, for some of them, business is not a vocation by default; rather, it *becomes* a vocation for those who accumulate sufficient influence, resources, and discretion to contribute meaningfully to eternally significant objectives inside and outside their firms. Almost all of the executives interviewed for this study feel called to business, but for many, calling is a retrospectively applied designation, not a prospective lens through which decisions are made. “How do you conclude anything else?” wondered the founder and CEO of a utility company. “We haven’t lost any money in 21 years, so yeah, this business is my joy and my calling.”

The process by which the evangelical business leaders I interviewed come to view their work as a vocation stands in contrast to other attempts to make work/business significant. They wish not to change business by infusing it with meaning from the outside or channeling its energy to different ends (as do most advocates of corporate social responsibility), but to legitimate—both to themselves and others—its core functions as possessing spiritual value. To convince themselves and others of this, we have seen that evangelical executives are able to draw on
several types of evidence and argument that paint business as a God-ordained and enforced moral order that is consistent with biblical principles. Sometimes such assertions are explicit and other times more oblique. Often they are commingled with components of the standard accounts of the purpose of business, enabling evangelical executives to contend that business is a spiritual activity while reassuring those to whom they are legally and economically responsible that they are focused on generating healthy returns on capital. In these evangelical business leaders and their accounts, the “spirit of capitalism,” defined by Weber as a positive attitude toward both work and wealth, finds ongoing embrace and new expression, with implications for our understanding of the so-called faith at work movement, evangelicalism, and the role of religion among elites.

RETHINKING THE CONFLICT NARRATIVE

In the Introduction I noted that research on evangelical business leaders has generally emphasized conflict narratives, according to which evangelical executives experience tension between their faith convictions and business responsibilities. Nash (1994) and Miller (2007), in particular, have highlighted areas of tension between people of faith, including and especially evangelicals, and the economic orientation required of corporations and their leaders. Lindsay (2007) contends that, over the past couple of decades, an interconnected group of visible evangelical elites has labored, successfully, to make it more acceptable for elites to publicly embrace an evangelical identity, paving the way for more overt applications of faith in corporate environments. Miller agrees that evangelicals have, during this period of time, been active in the corporate domain—both as individuals and in concerted initiatives, having spearheaded what he and others call the “faith at work movement,” a loose coalition of management theorists and
practitioners who have pushed for increasing the role of faith in business on the assumption that business tends to marginalize faith. Miller suggests that the underlying impulse of the faith at work movement is the desire for integration—the attempt to bring religious dispositions and priorities to work; to be the same person at work as elsewhere. For Miller this means bringing faith-informed values to the workplace, not “leaving one’s soul in the car,” as the contemporary marketplace apparently insists.

This perspective fits with broader research on evangelicals that emphasizes the tension evangelicals feel relative to other groups and institutions. Schmalzbauer (2003:113), for example, writing about evangelical elites in journalism and higher education, claims that “More than any other branch of American Protestantism, evangelicals emphasize the boundaries between Christ and culture, sacred and secular, and church and world.” In contrast to these perspectives, my research suggests that, while conflict is an important part of informants’ accounts, the nature of the conflict they experience, and hence a key source of strength for evangelical executives and perhaps for evangelicals more broadly, is different than previously theorized.

While this study contrasts with Lindsay’s (2007) to the extent that I find less inclination to reform the business world or even particular companies, this dissertation extends in some ways Lindsay’s arguments regarding elastic orthodoxy. Lindsay defines elastic orthodoxy as a set of core religious convictions that are firmly shared among adherents but not so rigid that they prohibit engagement and cooperation with people who do not share them. Lindsay argues that the evangelical commitment to orthodoxy—shared, fundamental beliefs—keeps the movement cohesive while the elasticity of that orthodoxy enables evangelical adherents to build bridges with other people. At the risk of taking a heuristic device literally, I would like to extend this
metaphor in terms of both its character and effect. Elasticity implies not just flexibility but a tendency to return to a neutral position, such that any stretching produces tension until it is resolved. While Lindsay focuses on the ability of evangelical public leaders to reconcile their faith with the various social settings they inhabit, I would also emphasize the contested nature of the various interpretations of orthodoxy. While there is abundant room for interpretation, contending for the right interpretation matters a great deal. In fact, against those who embrace a narrative that pits evangelicals against other groups and institutions, I contend, in line with Madsen’s (2009) perspective on the nature of religiously motivated conflict in America today, that the primary source of tension experienced by the evangelical leaders I interviewed comes from within, not outside, their religious milieu.

Madsen characterizes American religion as an archipelago of relatively self-contained faith communities in which individuals pursue community and personal fulfillment within the contours of a broader religious tradition, and also that compared to other domains, religion accords more freedom to believe and practice as one chooses. Drawing on and extending this characterization, I suggest that the nature of the apparent conflict between business and religion as addressed by the faith at work movement is akin to an alleged culture war emanating from religious convictions that is better characterized as a polemical skirmish within a religious tradition. Evangelical executives feel compelled to justify the value of their occupation, an impulse that is by no means unique, but for informants this impulse is prompted most frequently and intensely by co-religionists. It is important, therefore, to reorient the locus of conflict away from generic institutions toward specific groups of people with divergent interests and perspectives. Evangelical executives experience conflict not because they believe that business and religion are opposed, but because they are made to feel like second-class citizens by
members of their faith communities. They experience conflict because others, including those to whose opinions they are sensitive, believe that faith and business are at odds. The primary conflict is between evangelical executives and critics from within their own faith tradition who view business as sub-spiritual, if not immoral.

A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON THE FAITH AT WORK MOVEMENT

In some ways tension is intrinsic to the organization of the faith at work movement, such that much of the internecine tension just described is characteristic of—and indeed a product of—the movement, itself. While sometimes understood as a unified initiative, the faith at work movement is an ambiguous concept that is variously used to describe two quite different initiatives—one driven by external critics of business and another driven by internal defenders of business. During the course of my research I attended an event on faith and work sponsored by Princeton University’s Faith & Work Initiative. The schedule consisted of two tracks—one for practitioners and the other for academics. Predictably, the content and tone of the presentations organized under the two headings differed considerably, with practitioners generally defending the spiritual worth of business and academics challenging the moral character of business.

Consistent with the tendency of similarly situated individuals to congregate, evangelical executives write books on faith and work in response to critics within the church, but the audience for this literature is other evangelical executives. Informants find reassurance and support in faith at work groups that, not coincidentally, consist of their peers. From the perspective of most of those who consider themselves part of the faith at work movement but are located outside of business, the impulse of the movement is to make business different by making Christian executives different. For informants, however, the characteristic impulse is not
distinction—from other executives—but inclusion, in a group of like-minded people of faith who experience the travails associated with attaining and maintaining elite professional standing in corporate contexts and who help them recognize and sustain the spiritual value of their professional pursuits in the face of criticism from other evangelicals.

In light of the nature of the conflict evangelical executives perceive, organizations and literature associated with the faith and work movement serve a different purpose for evangelical business leaders than is often assumed. As noted earlier, when informants turn to faith at work literature and activities, they are not looking for insight into arbitrating between multiple stakeholders, appropriate levels of executive compensation, or other perceived moral dilemmas associated with business (this is not to imply that they are wholly unconcerned with these issues). They are looking for encouragement and companionship. For them, being an evangelical Christian in a corner office is not so much difficult or conflicted as lonely. Take the following from the president of an asset management company: “I think as a Christian business man at the top of the organization, you can feel very isolated. There’s certainly a lot of organizations that will try to reach out to you, but you get more of a sense that they are consulting groups or someone is trying to make some money off of you instead of finding a peer group that you can get together and share ideas and pray for each other and really support. I got involved with a group, I’m sure you’re familiar with: the CEO Forum, and it has been an amazing blessing to me to share and grow and be mentored by peers, particularly older business men around the U.S., taking me under their wing, giving me council, praying for me when I needed it. They are not in our line of business...well, a few of them are…but they’ve been there and done that and know what it feels like to be alone.”
For evangelical executives, the faith at work movement provides the sense of connection that is essential to identity construction and maintenance. To Madsen’s metaphor for American religion we can add that the individuals that inhabit archipelagos of religion cluster into villages of similarly positioned individuals wherein they make meaning together. Withdrawal to homogenous enclaves and adoption of idiosyncratic interpretations of religious principles that lend meaning to circumstances is common among evangelicals. Griffith (1997), for example, describes the ways in which participants in Aglow, a theologically conservative organization of Christian women, come together to fulfill ostensibly oppressive gender role expectations in ways that satisfy various physical, emotional, and psychological needs. Even as Aglow works toward the perfection of families, it supplies, both practically and theologically, family functions that not-yet-perfected families fail to deliver. Importantly, an individual-focused theology notwithstanding, neither these women nor the evangelical executives I studied can make meaning on their own; for this, they need enclaves of peers in similar circumstances. So while individualism is certainly an important aspect of American evangelicalism, its importance is sometimes overstated. It is not as if evangelical business leaders, in isolation, create and sustain meaning in their professional contexts. Rather, coming together with peers, they derive modes of meaning that fit with their circumstances. This is one reason faith at work groups are so important. Without the sort of support networks that the faith at work movement provides, it would likely prove much more difficult for evangelicals to find meaning in executive leadership positions. As Jackall (1988: 202) explains, “The problem of the senselessness of managerial work increases as work itself becomes more abstract, typically as one advances. With increasing seniority, one retreats from concrete tasks…thus losing immediate connections to tangible human or industrial needs….and experiences the structural fragmentation of corporate,
individual, and common goods.” Inasmuch as it facilitates connections among like-minded evangelical business leaders and these connections facilitate sense-making, which strengthens resolve, we can think of faith at work not just as a product of or response to, but a precursor of, the upward mobility of evangelicals in corporate contexts.

Notably, connections among evangelical executives have not catalyzed the type of encompassing conversations and perspectives that are sometimes associated with more abstracted contexts. Whereas DiMaggio (1991) has documented that professionals are more likely to sponsor reform at more expansive organizational levels than when situated in their home organizations, informants are sufficiently preoccupied with their own affairs and those of their companies that they rarely zoom out to contemplate broader structural issues. Support groups organized by and connections facilitated by evangelicals associated with faith and work initiatives provide opportunities for collective contemplation of structural arrangements, but even when they come together with other executives, the focus is generally on particular circumstances, not systematic problems. In fact, they may not even talk about business at all. Said one CEO of his regular phone conferences and prayer times with other members of the CEO Forum, the previously referenced group of high-level evangelical executives, “It’s almost never about their business; it’s almost always their families and what they are going through with their children.” Faith at work provides coping mechanisms that enable evangelical executives to feel good about themselves as business leaders and interpret their professional experiences as meaningful. The overriding objective is to sustain the vibrancy of faith—to be able to say in good conscience that faith is the most important thing in life. In other words, for the evangelical business leaders with whom I spoke, the object of faith at work is not work; it is them and their critics, all of whom must learn to recognize and appreciate the spiritual significance of business.
SOURCES OF EVANGELICAL STRENGTH

The nature of this study means that I have much more to say about elite expressions of American evangelicalism than about American evangelicalism as a whole. At the same time, I suggest that some of the same dynamics that help evangelical executives flourish in corner offices likely help explain why evangelicalism thrives more broadly, and that these sources of strength provide a different take on the evangelical response to the supposed threat posed by the pluralism associated with modernity and its offspring. Smith et al. (1998) proposed that the threats posed by exposure to dissimilar groups represent a key source of strength and cohesion for evangelicals inasmuch as they prompt coalescence around a distinctive identity and provide occasions for meaningful engagement with an eye toward reform. Evangelical vitality, in other words, is enhanced by conflicting values. While this may be the case in some circumstances, I suggest that evangelicalism flourishes, in executive suites and elsewhere, less by playing up conflict with non-evangelical values than by accommodating a wide range of values. In fact, we have seen that the panoply of values, instantiated by different stakeholders, that compete for attention and resources in the business world, rather than weakening religious conviction, actually enhance and enlarge the scope of potential religious application for the executives under study. It is tempting to qualify this assertion by saying that the values embraced in business contexts are less controversial and/or opposed to traditional evangelical priorities than those in, say, the political realm or the media, but then products like sugar-laden drinks and electronic diversions, processes that prioritize efficiency, and objectives that include accumulation of wealth could certainly raise objections among the faithful. Evangelical executives thrive in a pluralistic context not simply or primarily because, as Smith et al. (1998) contend, they are threatened by such and driven to distinction, but because it provides a range of people and
objectives to which religious values can be attached, and because evangelicalism is sufficiently broad and flexible to accommodate this range of objectives. In fact, in contrast to the “fundamentalist” tendency to perceive the economic sphere as secular and as such more of a distraction from God’s true work than an arena in which callings or vocations can be discovered and fulfilled (Ammerman 1987), the evangelical executives I interviewed seek to erode the distinction between the sacred and the profane and elevate “worldly” concerns to spiritual significance. Instead of accenting distinctions between themselves and non-evangelicals, evangelical executives downplay differences and make a point to blur lines—between sacred and secular, laity and clergy, business and ministry. As we have seen, most informants would not say that business must be sanctified, or made holy, but that it is already a sacred domain in which God is present and in which they work with God to accomplish God’s purposes.

This dissertation contributes to our understanding of American evangelicalism as a flexible and empowering phenomenon for certain adherents—an interpretation that resonates with perspectives on American evangelicalism that perceive it becoming more flexible over time in response to societal trends. Griffith (1997), for example, posits that stricter interpretations of divine expectations for Christian women have given way to more flexible interpretations focused on the ability to release divine power and produce change. For the executives I interviewed, faith is able to function as a cipher through which professional aspirations and experiences can be interpreted as meaningful and supply a grammar of significance that adorns business with spiritual value because of its above-mentioned flexibility—a flexibility that contrasts with perceptions of evangelicalism as rigid, dogmatic, and regulative.

I argue, moreover, not just that evangelicalism is relatively flexible, but that this flexibility gives rise to the above-referenced internal conflict that in turn represents a source of
productive tension and strength. While agreeing that productive tension is essential, I suggest that it is less a product of modernity or other external dynamics, as authors like Hunter (1983) and Smith et al. (1998) suggest, and more a product of the different social locations and priorities of different groups of evangelicals. This is why, for example, Lindsay identifies significant differences between “populist evangelicals” and “cosmopolitan evangelicals” and I perceive conflict between academics, clergy, and evangelical executives. For evangelicals, tension does indeed increase their sense of religious vitality. But since this tension comes from within, evangelicalism is a self-perpetuating religious tradition, producing sufficient tension within its ranks that it sustains itself. We need not look to a pluralistic social context to find the source of productive tension that sustains evangelicalism; rather, we can look to the pluralism that now characterizes evangelicalism, itself.

Importantly, as Bender (2003) contended and the present study confirms, evangelicalism is sufficiently flexible not just to devote attention to different values, but to meet different needs as needs change in tandem with changing circumstances. For young informants—those who are still striving for success—religion supplies motivation and perseverance; for those who have arrived it provides existential and spiritual significance. Religion is sometimes understood as compensation for economic disadvantage (Stark and Bainbridge 1980), such that strength of religious conviction is inversely correlated with material success. We have seen that this is not the case for the evangelical executives under study, and indeed that the strength of their religious conviction, or at least the frequency and conviction with which they invoke religious scripts, increases with the attainment of professional standing and the accumulation of wealth. For them, as for many less fortunate religious adherents, religion fulfills needs not met by other social arenas and is essential to their self-understanding and professional satisfaction.
To conclude these remarks on the sources of evangelical strength, I suggest that evangelicalism remains relevant because it both instills and addresses the desire for significance, is diverse and ambiguous enough to accommodate a range of values found in different contexts, and requires intensity of commitment sufficient to bring these values into productive tension, thereby sustaining itself through internal dynamics without risking potentially enervating showdowns with other institutions and their presuppositions and agendas. Indeed, having identified and insisted on God’s active sanction of and presence in business, the evangelical executives I interviewed are less focused on dysfunction within business as in other domains. As such, they are more inclined to export business concepts into church, charity, and family contexts than to import church or family attitudes and objectives into business contexts. Thus, this study prompts us to reconsider the direction of influence between religious and economic life.

Evangelical executives’ enthusiasm for asserting the spiritual significance of business fits well with a Marxian perspective that sees evangelical executives as preoccupied above all with maintaining elite status and keeping evangelical lower classes in line. And their general ambivalence and oft-expressed impotence regarding reforms in their companies and industries, especially in contrast to their motivation to deploy influence in other contexts, suggests, at minimum, reluctance to reshape an industry that already suits their needs. Without question, the religious scripts they deploy have the effect of promoting the status quo. At the same time, it would be a mistake to see religious perspectives in this case as merely a reflection of the material conditions of society or, more specifically, the ordered relations of industry and informants’ role therein. Most evangelical business leaders expressed a desire, at least, to bring their faith to bear at work from the outset of their careers, but the degree to which they were willing and able to do so changed with their level of influence, discretion, and job security, as did the ways they
brought faith to bear. In addition, the critics to whom informants’ justificatory accounts are primarily addressed have little apparent power to depose informants from their lofty standing or otherwise disrupt their professional pursuits. So legitimation is an important component of but not an exhaustive explanation for the accounts examined in this study, and at any rate oriented more toward psychological needs than the preservation or alteration of material circumstances.

We must chart a course between Weber and Marx, where ideology and material conditions exert mutual influence. With Marx, we must acknowledge that religion is grounded in and responds to the real world of contested interests and diverse needs that vary with social and economic context. Despite their supernatural referents, religious ideas are not suspended in the ether, untouched by the material world, but neither are they inescapably tethered to or merely a product of material relationships. Therefore, with Weber, we must assert that ideas can circle back on and shape the material conditions they aim to address. But we must not make Weber’s mistake of fixating on the supposed essence of a religious ethic. A religious complex like evangelicalism is too broad, ambiguous, flexible, and dynamic to be distilled to such. We must come to an understanding that accommodates the lived experience of evangelicals today; that does not presuppose the direction of influence between religion and economic life while allowing each to shape the other; that acknowledges the diversity of thought within religious traditions and their capacity to adapt to different circumstances. With this perspective we will find that while (evangelical) religion is often understood to be self-consistent, distinctive, characterized by proscriptions and prohibitions, and rigidly dogmatic, in fact it is flexible, adaptable, often incoherent, and abundantly capable of affirming institutions and activities.

Circling back to the different perspectives on the role of religion in business and the growing presence of evangelicals among the business elite, the conclusions I have presented are
unlikely to satisfy fully any of the audiences that are most interested in the role of faith at work. Those who are concerned about the growing presence of openly committed evangelicals in executive positions may be encouraged that evangelical executives rarely demonstrate the requisite combination of desire and ability to introduce religiously motivated reforms in their companies and industries, and also that evangelical values seem not too dissimilar to, and in any case compatible with, those already embraced in the business world. Those who wish for evangelical executives to promote more humane, even loving, business practices may be discouraged at their lack of widespread influence but perhaps encouraged by their expressed attitudes as well as the scattered examples of localized influence highlighted earlier. To the latter, I suggest that in order for the faith at work movement to make a meaningful difference in contemporary business practices, it would need to transform tension into dialectic as opposed to simple disagreement. As it stands, the thesis that faith can and should change business in some way is met with vigorous and creative antitheses asserting the spiritual value of business as currently organized. The emergence of syntheses that characterize business as flawed but redeemable would entail greater interaction and mutual appreciation between evangelical critics of business and evangelical business leaders. For now, however, for the evangelical executives I interviewed, faith at work consists primarily of preaching to the choir.
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APPENDIX A – INTERVIEW GUIDE

Professional Background

1. Can you give me a brief overview of your responsibilities in your current position and how you allocate your time at work?

2. Let me make sure I have your professional history right…

3. Would you say that your career path has been largely intentional or more circumstantial?

Business and Society

1. Do you think people are called to a specific vocation or type of work?
   a. [If so,] how can someone assess their calling?

2. Would you say that you’ve felt called in any sense to particular companies or more generally to particular industries or job functions?
   a. Some people consider a career in business to be less important or admirable than a career in “vocational ministry” or the service sector. What are your thoughts on business as a profession?

3. How would you describe the purpose of business? Why does a business exist?

4. Some people think businesses have social responsibilities in addition to economic responsibilities. Others, like Milton Friedman, insist that the social responsibility of business is to increase its profits. What do you think?
   a. Should businesses attempt to proactively address specific social problems? Is it more ‘do no harm’ or ‘do more good’?
   b. How should a company decide which social problems to engage?
c. How about your company? What is its social responsibility?
   i. Is anyone or anything adversely affected by your company's operations?
   ii. Has the company come under criticism for any reason?

d. Let's think about a scenario: If you were leading a company and had capital to pursue
   one of two expansion opportunities: the first in a developing country and the other in
   a developed country. Let's assume everything is equal (time horizon, risk profile,
   etc.) except that in the developing country jobs are less plentiful and the rate of return
   is slightly lower (but still higher than the cost of capital). How would you think about
   these opportunities?

e. Some companies (J&J, for example) have specifically distinguished between
   maximum returns and fair or adequate returns for investors/shareholders. Do you
   think this is a helpful distinction?

5. Some Christians believe businesses should have a spiritual impact. Do you agree with this?
   a. What might this look like?

6. Focusing in on your company, what is its overriding purpose or mission?
   a. How is the world a better place because this company exists?
   b. Is this mission/purpose standard for the industry or is there anything unique about it?
   c. Does pursuit of this mission/purpose ever entail financial trade-offs?
   d. Does the company have a set of core values that are central to its identity?
   e. How would you describe the culture at the company?

7. Does your company contribute to charitable organizations or otherwise support social
   causes?
a. If so, what is the rationale? Why not just pay employees more, reinvest more capital, pay higher dividends, etc.?

b. How are these organizations and causes selected?

8. Are there ways you hope your industry will change in coming decades?

9. Do you think that a market economy is entirely consistent with Christian values?

10. Do you ever experience conflict between competitive market behavior and your faith convictions?

   a. Can you think of any instances when your faith convictions have caused you to act in a manner contrary to your business’s financial interests?

11. Have you felt more or less comfortable in the different organizations you’ve worked for?

    Did some seem to be better fits than others?

12. Would you say that you’ve been in position to enact changes in the organizations you’ve worked for and has that been a goal of yours?

13. Are there ways you think Christians should be working together to transform the business world or even our economic system?

**Spiritual Life**

1. I’m interested in your personal faith journey. Could you talk for just a couple minutes about your religious background and the nature of your faith convictions today?

2. Can you identify a specific time of conversion or point at which your faith became real to you?

3. Do you identify with a particular denomination?

   a. If so, what is appealing about that tradition?
4. Do you have a regular place of worship?
   a. What do you appreciate most about your church?

5. Would you describe yourself as an evangelical Christian?

6. A few quick questions just to get a sense of your theological perspective –
   a. When you think about the Bible, do you believe that it may contain errors?
   b. Would you say that you've been born again?
   c. Do you believe that humans evolved from other animals?
   d. Do you think that the only hope for salvation is through personal faith in Christ?

7. Do you think that your faith has made it easier or more difficult to achieve the professional success you’ve enjoyed?

8. What, if any, difference has your faith made in your work life? Would you say that you work differently than others in similar positions?

9. Do you feel like your spiritual life has been impacted by your professional success?

10. What have you found to be most difficult about living out your faith?
    a. What other struggles and challenges do Christians face in positions like yours?

11. What has been most helpful to you as you’ve navigated professional contexts as a Christian?
    a. Do you think of people or authors or experiences that have had a profound effect on your faith over the years?

12. Have you ever felt like you’ve lacked anything in terms of community?

13. What are you most interested in learning about these days?

14. What are the most significant ethical dilemmas people in positions like yours face?
    a. Which of these have you faced? How have you handled these?
15. In your opinion, is good ethics always good business?
   a. Has ethical behavior ever cost you something, economic or otherwise?

16. Looking back on your career, are there things you wish you’d known from the start or things
   you’d do differently?
   a. Have there been ways you would have liked to incorporate your faith in the
      workplace that you couldn’t or didn’t for some reason?

17. Can you think of any spiritual or other resources that would have helped you to flourish
   spiritually at work or at home?

**Social Problems and Responsibilities**

1. Do you think of yourself as powerful or as wielding significant influence?
   a. How would you describe your sphere of influence?
   b. Do you wish you had more influence in certain places or with certain people?
      i. Is there anything you’d like to change or accomplish that you haven’t been able
         to thus far?
   c. Aside from your influence in your family, what do you think is the most significant
      thing you’ve done?
   d. Are there things you really hope to accomplish going forward?
      i. What would help you accomplish these objectives?
   e. In what ways do you hope the world will be different for future generations?

2. A number of Christian organizations have as their goal the transformation and renewal of
   society. Is this an appropriate goal? What would this look like?
3. Do you personally support any charitable organizations through direct participation or financial support?
   a. Why these organizations/causes?

4. As you are likely aware, one of the more persistent criticisms of business has to do with executive compensation. You may know that, in the U.S., CEOs make on average several hundred times what the average workers in their companies earn, but this ratio is much lower in other parts of the world. Does this suggest to you that something is out of balance in the United States?
   a. If so, what should be done?

5. Some people say that it is morally wrong to have a lot of nice things when others are starving. Do you agree with that?

6. My understanding is that, although there has been progress, women remain underrepresented in management positions. Has that been your experience?
   a. If so, why do you think this is the case?
   b. Do you think companies would be different if more women were in leadership positions?
   c. Do you think companies should take steps to increase the representation of women in leadership positions?
   d. Does the church have a role in this?

**Background and Demographic Information**

1. What is your hometown?

2. How old are you?
3. Approximately how many hours per week would you say you work?

4. With what racial group do you identify?

5. Are you married or single? Do you have any children?

6. What degrees have you earned?

7. How long have you been with your current company?

8. How long have you spent in your current position?

9. What previous positions have you held?

10. About how many people work in your office?
    a. About how many people work for your company?

11. Are you a member of any boards of directors?

12. Thinking in political terms, would you consider yourself conservative, moderate, or liberal?

13. In politics, as of today, do you consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat, or an Independent?

14. [If independent], as of today, would you say you lean more to the Democratic Party or to the Republican Party?

15. Is this a long-term affiliation or have you switched at some point(s)?

Closing Questions

1. Any closing thoughts or things you think would be particularly important to mention?

2. Can you recommend some other people I should include in this study?