

**The Business Clergy Debate –  
Business and the Bible**

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## **The Business Clergy Debate – Business and the Bible**

The Genesis of this study was an article in the Wall Street Journal on August 30, 1988, page 19, “God and Mammon: Viewing the Business-Clergy Rift.” This article reports on a study by Walter W. Benjamin, chair of Hamline University’s religion department. It reports that “Business and the Clergy in the US have seldom been more at odds...”

It reports that many pastors “find the business world ‘unclean’ or lacking in moral principles.” It quotes the Roman Catholic bishops 1984 pastoral letter calling for a new economic order and condemning “privileged concentrations of power, wealth, and income.” The WSJ also quoted the social creed of the United Methodist Church:

We support policies which encourage workplace democracy, cooperative, and collective work arrangements. Increasing technology and exploitative economic practices impoverish many persons and make poverty self-perpetuating. We do not hold poor people morally responsible for their economic state.

This Methodist creed shows how clearly it is non-Lutheran origins. This study has several purposes. The first was to examine Professor Benjamin’s data more closely and, on that basis, suggest where the business-clergy rift is greatest. The other, which has turned out to be the major part of this study, is to do an examination of the Bible and see if it is possible to discover any themes developing of the attitude of religion to business.

The findings are that Professor Benjamin’s study is quite good and as he says, “It’s amazing how illiterate each is of the other’s world.” The WSJ article, however, turns out to be better journalism than scholarship. In fact, the rift between the local pastor, minister, or priest and business is not that great. The rift between the views in mainline denominational employees and business maybe different matter and very probably the above social creed is a reason why, since 1995, the United Methodist Church has lost 1.6 million members.

The Bible does have distinct themes on business as will be explained:

## The Bible and Business

“Laboring so long on the Bible...Luther fondly made it the all-sufficient source and norm of his religious faith...” He proclaimed the right of every individual to interpret the scriptures of himself.

The Episcopal Church Articles of Religion VI say, “Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvations: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man...”

For mainline protestant thus the Bible is the center of the faith and may be interpreted by an individual. The Roman Catholic Church would, of course, look to the Bible but also emphasize the tradition of the church. In either case, the attitude of our (and say “our” in the sense that the vast majority of Americans consider themselves Christians of one variety or another) religion toward business should at least begin with a study of the Bible.

I have chosen the Holy Bible Revised Standard Version, Thomas Nelson & Sons, New York, 1952 because this version is a widely used protestant version and I own a copy. The method of study was to choose key words and with the help of a concordance and examine the references in both Old and New Testaments. This method may not be totally exhaustive but it did center on general themes, was interesting, and provided an original look at scripture unbiased by any filter outside of my own experience.

### The Key Words

There is no reference to “businessperson” in the Bible. There are also no references to “businessman” or “businessmen”. “Business” is referred to 18 times but in each case it is to business as “one’s rightful work or personal concern, as, attend to business” and never “Mercantile pursuit or transactions; trade; commerce.” The word merchant is used although its meaning is somewhat narrower than the modern businessperson. Below is a table of words with the number of references in the Old and New Testaments:

	Old Testament References	New Testament Reference	Total
Business	14	4	18
Buy (buyer, buying, buy)	43	16	59
Interest	16	2	18
Lawyers	0	8	8
Merchandise	13	0	13
Merchants	18	5	23
Money	111	24	135
Money-changers	0	4	4
Profit	28	8	36
Rich (richer, riches, richest)	114	65	179
Sell	40	8	48
Tax (taxed, taxes)	6	32	38
Trade	31	9	40

Obviously almost anything can be proven from selective quotes from the Bible. An examination of the above key words indicates certain consistent themes although there is a distinct new direction in the New Testament.

In the New Testament one finds in Luke 18:24 Jesus looking at him said, "... For 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," or Paul writing in Hebrew 13:5 "Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have..."

These are two of the most damaging passages in the Bible. Fortunately for capitalist, they are somewhat out of context. But, it gets worse. In Luke 18:22, "one thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." Later in the passage, we are urged to leave our house,

wife, brother, parents and children “for the sake of the Kingdom of God” (Luke 18:29). That same story is preferred by the words “If you would be perfect” (19:21). The Bible nowhere suggests perfection as a required norm.

In Luke 3:12, the tax collectors come to be baptized and ask what they should do. The response 3:13 is: “collect no more than is appointed you” and soldiers are asked to “rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages”.

Tax collectors, Pharisees and lawyers are the three groups who come off worst in the New Testament. However, in Luke 19:2 “there was a man named Zacchaeus, he was chief tax collector, and rich”. Jesus stayed at his house which alone is not a sign of salvation. He told Jesus that he gave half of his house which alone is not a sign of salvation. He told Jesus that he gave half of his goods to the poor and if he defrauds someone, he returns it fourfold. Jesus said, “Today salvation has come to this house...” (19:9). He did not tell the tax collector to give up his profession, wife, children, and follow him.

In Mathew 27:57 “...there came a rich man from Arimathea named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus...” The Context shows rich men, tax collectors and soldiers are also saved. Salvation does not come merely from leaving home, and children to follow the Lord

In the Old Testament, the most gloomy book is Ecclesiastes. In 2:1 ... all was vanity and striving after the wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun. In 5:10-12, “He who loves money will not be satisfied with money; nor he who loves wealth with gain...but the surfeit of the rich will not let him sleep.”

In proverbs 28:6, “Better is a poor man who walks in his integrity than a rich man who is perverse in his ways”.

But note there is nothing per se wrong with wealth. In Job we are told in Job 1:1 “there was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil”. He was a man of tremendous wealth. In addition to seven sons and three daughters, we are told in chapter one he had 7000 sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen (I presume a yoke consisted of two animals), and five hundred she-asses. We are told “this man was the greatest of all the people of the East” (Job 1:3). Job is, of something being wrong with

Job because he had accumulated great wealth. Job is broken and majestic of the Lord and the relative insignificance of man.

The traditions of the Christian church are often anti-business. St Augustine in the extreme says, "Business is in itself an evil, for it turns men from seeking true rest, which is God." The great medieval scholar of Oxford, A. A. Coulton points out that the church was the most powerful landowner of the time and the interests of business run counter to the interest of landowners and the church adopted "towards commerce an attitude not merely passive but actively hostile ." These attitudes do not have strong biblical support but remain part of Christian thought.

The most basic lessons learned of any world history class after the study of cavemen are the four ancient civilizations and trade routes. The Eastern Mediterranean is between Egypt and the Tigrus- Euphrates civilization is possibly the major trade crossing of the entire ancient world.

The Old Testament reflects this. It is a money (as opposed to barter or agricultural) culture almost from the beginning. There are 111 references to money and almost never in a negative sense. The first reference is in Genesis 17 and is a quote from God Himself. God commands Abraham as part of the covenant that every male shall be circumcised "whether born in your house, or brought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring" (17:12), This references to money at the beginning of the period of the covenant shows a money and trading culture and there is no hint that business and trade are some how evil. In addition, there is never a condemnation of slavery. In fact, in times of famine one would buy food with money. If the money ran out, one would sell one's children into slavery and finally sell one's self. Best known is the story of Joseph and his brothers where the final act to survive is to become a slave. Times could be harsh! There are numerous references (e.g., Deuteronomy 14:25-26) to using money to buy sacrifices for the Lord. This theme repeats itself frequently. One goes to the temple, buys the sacrifice with money and gives it to the Lord. The Old Testament assumes a money based business economy there is no hint that there is essential injustices in the economic system. Also, the virtue is seldom mentioned in the Old Testament.

One sign of an advanced society is a system of taxation. Tax is mentioned 32 times in the New Testament but only 6 times in the Old. In 2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles 24, the temple of Jerusalem was in need of repair and taxes were collected to pay the workmen in for their work on the temple. We are told in verse 10 “And all the princes and all the people rejoiced and brought their tax and dropped it in to the chest.” It is indeed an iron digesting faith that can accept this passage as the true and inerrant word of God!

The best example in the Old Testament of the attitude toward business and money is in Ezekiel 26, 27, and 28. It is the description of Tyre and its fate. Tyre’s fate is also mentioned in Isaiah. If a poor person is also wicked and evil, the story is not interesting and not really an example to anyone. The faults and fates of the rich are not only more interesting but also serves as a stern warning to the rest of us. Tyre, a coastal trading city, became one of the wealthiest, attractive and successful commercial cities of its day. It was clearly the envy of the world. It was admired by all and is glowingly described as a world city in Ezekiel 27. An appendix of Ezekiel 26, 27, and 28 describes the glory of Tyre, its ruin and, in chapter 28, the reasons for Tyre’s downfall. The description of this world city is fascinating. “Your builders made perfect your beauty,” (27:4) we are told. The ships’ planks from fir trees of Senir, the mast are cedars of Lebanon, the oars are the oaks from Bashan. The decks are pines from Cyprus (inlaid with ivory) and sails are “fine embroidered linen from Egypt,” (27:7). Tyre traded with and brought in goods and people from the ends of the then known world. The business of Tyre was business. The city is described in positive terms and thence is no hint whatever that the city is other than a model for all other cities. Naturally, it is no Old Testament story unless there is a downfall. Tyre’s single and overwhelming sin is to turn away from God and set itself up in His place.

...Thus says the Lord God: because your heart is proud, and you have said, “I am a god; I sit in the seat of the gods, in the heart of Theseus.” Yet you are but a man, and no god, though you consider yourself as wise as a god... (Ezekiel 28:2)

Tyre suffers horrible fate for its arrogance. Yet there is not hint or tone whatever that there is anything wrong with being a business oriented city. Even Paul in 1 Timothy 6:10 says “For the love of money is the root of all evils.” In verse 7 & 8, often used phrase “for we brought nothing in to the world and we cannot take anything out of the

world; but if we have food and clothing, with these we shall be content.” This New Testament theme is the same in that we are warned of the consequences of turning away from God, but there is a stronger emphasis on the dangers of wealth. In Luke 12, we are told to consider the lilies of the fields and the lesson is that we should not be concerned with the treasures of this world. Verse 21 warns against “he who lays up treasures for himself, and is not rich toward God.” Verse 34 is the familiar “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” Another passage quoted to show Jesus’ anti-business attitude is of the merchants and money-changers at their business in the temple. Jesus pours out their coins and overturns their tables. He says, “You shall not make my father’s house a house of trade,” (John 2:16). The Old Testament is full of references to the purchase of sacrifices and there is no hint that those taking their profits from this were somehow unclean. Jesus’ objection is clearly on time, manner, and especially the place of the business.

The most pro-business part of the New Testament is the parable of the talents in Mathew 25. The master is away and the servant who increases the five talents to ten and the one increases the two to four are rewarded. The servant who does nothing is told “You ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest...”(27) The worthless servant is cast “into the outer darkness” (30) where men weep and gnash their teeth. While this told as a parable and an allegory, the terms money banking and interest would not be used if they were evil per se. This story of the obligation to use one’s talents (money or abilities) is one of the most haunting in the Bible.

The question of lending at interest is frequently mentioned. Ezekiel 18 mentions a litany of sins including he who ...”lends at interest, and takes increases; shall he then live? He shall not live ...he shall surely die.” (13) Yet in Deuteronomy 23:19-20, under the heading of various laws: “You shall not lend upon interest to your brother...to a foreigner you may lend upon interest...” Should we then interpret a specific over general and construe the provision against interest to one’s brother only? Today we regard the prohibition on interest as naïve but it tormented the church into modern times.

In conclusion, the Old Testament is the religion of the commercial people. Business, trade, and money are a central part of their lives. Worldly success is admired



and encouraged. Within this context dire punishment awaits those who forget the majesty and central place of God and the law of God in their lives. Men are constantly reminded that the Lord God led his people out of Egypt and through the wilderness. God allowed Job to be treated most unfairly by our standards and Job smarted at the perceived injustice. The Lord speaks to Job in the final chapters and makes clear the relationship. “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?... (38:4) God’s Majesty is not forgotten without severe consequences.

The New Testament is more difficult. There is ample evidence taken out of context to prove any point of view. The entire context, and in this the New Testament must be read in light of the Old Testament, is that there is nothing wrong with business per se. Wealthy people of many callings are followers of Jesus. Yet, within this context the call to a more aesthetic life and to the potential danger of money and worldly wealth is repeatedly made clear. The danger is mentioned in the Old Testament, but is stronger in the New. The New Testament is not a tribal religion but it is universal. The message of Jesus is for all nations. For this task, great devotion and sacrifice is required. This is obvious. Yet, if we all followed Paul’s highest standards, the human race would die out in a generation and little, if anything, would be produced. Does the survival of our race depend upon those of us who have fallen short? This isn’t logical either. The best answer from the entire context is that there are many callings. In Dante’s Heaven or Paradise, there are many circles of heaven. All are in heaven but some have achieved more than others. (In Dante, the same also applies to hell.)

Returning to our own day and the business clergy debate it may be that the dedicated pastor or priest is earning a higher place in heaven than the dedicated businessperson or soldier. It is, however, sheer arrogance and based on my study to hold up those who are in this other or lower calling to be in a state of moral deficiency. Is the income of a public servant somehow cleaner because it is taken from the tax payers and the income of the person in the private sector somehow dirty because it is what is leftover after meeting a payroll? Yet, I have long had the feeling that the dedicated teacher of the physically and mentally handicapped is earning a higher place in heaven than I am. Yet, I do not feel excluded from the circles of the saved because I teach honor students.

Returning to the clergy—Professor Benjamin’s study, when read carefully, shows an amazing ignorance on the part of the clergy of business. Anti-business remarks are easy to find and make good quotes in newspapers. But journalism is not scholarship. Clergy who have their own church or parish work with business persons all the time and are in many ways a “profit center.” I am certain it is noted in the denominational centers who can raise money and cannot. In virtually every church in the United States, businesspersons play a vital role in the life of those churches. There is nothing in Prof. Benjamin’s study to find these people any more morally deficient than anyone else.

Yet the anti-business bias and even stronger hostility in mainline denominations is present. More study needs to be done, but it is my theory that most of it comes out of the central headquarters of the denomination.

The central officers of the churches don’t have to deal with ordinary church members or even raise the pledges that support churches in the United States. Their money is not “clear” and they have time to indulge in their anti-business bias which comes out of ignorance and possibly the sin envy. The hostility, for example, of the Roman Catholic Bishops or the Social Creed of the United Methodist is not biblically based (my study shows) but ignorance and possibly envy. While it is the role of the church to remind us of our shortcomings more than to allow us to be content with our imperfection, the literature I receive from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) which is a fairly conservative mainline church is constantly anti-business and anti-free market. The great majority of people in the United States receive their income in one form or another from the private sector. The Bible speaks to their needs and wants and their strength and failings. The significant membership loss in mainline denominations of which this writer is a part, suggest that these churches have frequently adopted an ideological agenda which is both naïve and lacks strong Biblical support.