



Interview: Albert M. Erisman

Since taking early retirement from the Boeing Company in 2001 Al Erisman has been Executive in Residence at the Seattle Pacific University School of Business and Economics. He earned his B.S. in Mathematics at Northern Illinois University, his M.S. and Ph.D. in Applied Mathematics at Iowa State University. He is the author or co-author of three technical monographs on advanced mathematics and technology and author of many articles on both technical and Christian topics. He is also author of the forthcoming Accidental Executive – a study of business management and leadership lessons from the story of Joseph. From 1969 to 2001 at Boeing, Al became a key leader in IT innovation and R&D, managing 250-300 of Boeing’s top IT researchers for the last decade of his Boeing career. He was honored as one of the 11 inaugural “Senior Technical Fellows” at Boeing.

Since 1998 he has been editor of Ethix magazine, producing a regular in-depth interview of a CEO or thought leader, a column on “Technology Watch” and multiple reviews of business and management books every two months. He is a core member of the Theology of Work Project based in Boston and has been a key leader and resource person for InterVarsity and other organizations addressing the theology and ethics of work and business. Al has become an international voice for ethical business and technology not just among Christians but for business and government groups, teaching and lecturing in Africa, Asia, Europe, and South America. Al and his wife of 51 years, Nancy, live in Bellevue WA and have three children and seven grandchildren. They are members of Westminster Chapel. Visit www.ethix.org to access Erisman’s amazing trove of articles, interviews, and reviews.

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David W. Gill: Tell me a little bit about your Christian faith background

Al Erisman: I was raised in a Christian home. I can remember recommitting my life to Christ many times when I was six, seven, eight, but I don’t remember the first time. It used to bother me until one day when I was reading John 3 and I saw that Jesus compared spiritual birth to physical birth. I don’t remember my physical birth either. I also realized that, while birth is necessary, it’s only the start. It’s about what you do in your life.

Gill: Would you say your Christian life is pretty self-consciously continuous or did you have any time of dropping out or serious doubt?

Erisman: I've had a number of times, like during my college years, when my Christian faith was put in the background to other things I was doing but I always knew I was a Christian and felt strongly about my faith.

Gill: How would you describe your denominational or theological orientation?

Erisman: I grew up in the Plymouth Brethren. The theology was fundamentalist and dispensationalist and we had a very high regard for the Scripture and the priesthood of all believers. After my college years I got involved with a Christian school and was working with a mentor, Al Greene, who had a Reformed background. I now teach at a Wesleyan university, Seattle Pacific. So I don't know exactly how to categorize myself. I have some strong views about what I believe about Scripture, God, and people made in his image. But I wouldn't say that I belong to any of the exclusive theological boxes people use to define each other.

Gill: What about your formal education? What was your college major and what is your business background?

Erisman: I majored in mathematics and minored in physical education, journalism, and education at Northern Illinois University. I was the editor of our college paper. I really didn't know what I wanted to do. After college I taught math for a couple of years at the eighth grade level before going to Iowa State University for a PhD in applied mathematics. My goal was to teach applied mathematics at a university but first I wanted to see why mathematics was useful so I took a position as a research mathematician at the Boeing Company. I planned to stay there five years or so and then teach at a university. As it turned out I stayed 32 years! During my Boeing career I eventually led a technology and mathematics R&D center with 250-300 very creative individuals. My interest became much more how technology gets used in business. Now I'm teaching in a business school on issues of technology and business.

Gill: It's interesting how you went from mathematics to technology since you weren't an engineering or computer science major.

Erisman: There were no computer science degrees at that time. My PhD was in computational mathematics and I enjoyed doing research in that area. After a few years at The Boeing Company I managed the applied mathematics staff and was then given responsibility for all of technology and mathematics. Developing the R & D in those areas got me interested in all areas of technology.

Gill: You weren't just a techie though, you were a business manager. How did you learn how to manage?

Erisman: Boeing had internal management training programs and also sent me off to a summer executive program for four weeks but a lot of it was learning from mentors and from reading, and from experience and making some mistakes.

Gill: So you have a strong Christian background that is pretty continuous and a long tech/business background. When did these two parts of your life come together and you became more self-conscious about your theology and faith integrating into the way you approach technology and business?

Erisman: After I got my PhD and came to work at the Boeing Company I was thankful to God for my job and considered myself a Christian on the job. But I don't think I consciously linked the two at all. Probably in 1969 or 1970 I discovered the writings of Francis Schaeffer. You, David, were another force in my thinking about these things. Al Greene, the founder of Bellevue Christian School developed a course on

“A Christian Mind in a Secular Age,” which I took. I took the advanced training with him in a mentorship role with about four others. And then I spent time with him one-on-one and that really forced me to start bringing all these pieces together in a conscious way. And then in 1981, I was driving to work and I heard a radio interview with Wayne Alderson (the vice president of a Pittsburgh steel company) who talked about his call to business as a Christian. I read his book, called him on the phone, and we became friends. So by 1981 I came to realize I was in full time Christian service at The Boeing Company and Boeing was providing my paycheck. I thought it was fabulous to explore God’s world, do what he called me to do, and get paid for it!

Gill: When you say you were at full time service at the Boeing Company does that mean you were using every opportunity to convert unbelievers?

Erisman: No. it doesn’t. I know that my staff and everyone in my organization knew I was a Christian. There were lots of opportunities to talk about that. But I think what it really meant was how do I think about developing technology, or God’s world, or managing people, or creating a culture that honored God? I came to realize that being a Christian in business is more than sharing faith, although that also has its importance. It’s more than acting ethically – although it is that. It’s more than treating people well – although it is that. It’s about everything I do. How I do a performance review, how I create technology, how I think about interacting with people. For sure, I’m imperfect. Sin is real and it affects the world out there and it affects me too. All of these things kind of tumble together in an imperfect representation of something God intended to be fully and harmoniously integrated.

Gill: Certainly God cares about the quality of relationship with your employees and colleagues...But would you say that God actually cares about quality airplanes?

Erisman: Absolutely. In fact, I’ve often said that if you read in the first two chapters of Genesis, you’ll see that God created a world that was perfectly provisioned to allow human beings to flourish but he didn’t create a “bicycle bush.” He allowed human beings to develop bicycles for transportation. And similarly, airplanes and computers and all of the things that we have in our world – God has provisioned the world for this, gifted people to do this, and allowed us to enter into this creative work with him.

Gill: So Jesus might not just say “consider the lilies of the field and the birds of the air” but “consider the airplanes that Boeing is making”? Can airplanes in some way glorify God and reflect his design?

Erisman: Sometimes people say “let’s go to the mountains and the streams and look at God’s world.” But I say let’s also look at downtown Manhattan and see God’s workmanship. Scripture is filled with examples of this. One of my favorites is the story of Joseph. At the end of his life, he says to his brothers, you intended to harm me in selling me to Egypt as you did, but God intended it for good for the saving of many people. His running of the “international food company” in Egypt was a call from God. I saw my work at Boeing, and my work where I am now, in exactly the same way.

Gill: Can you give me a specific example of how your approach to management and business leadership was changed by your faith?

Erisman: Let me start with the example that inspired me – Wayne Alderson. He was involved as a management person in a steel company with a huge labor/management conflict. Labor and management conflicts have existed forever but Alderson said, as a Christian, these are not just laborers, not enemy union members, but people made in the image of God, doing the work of the company. Thinking about them that way transformed his management relations and then the whole factory and company. A big

company is not the Body of Christ since all are not Christians. But the image of each member of a body having value and a place of essential importance to the whole is a powerful one and helps us think of God's intention for how people should be valued and work together.

When we had to do some painful layoffs at Boeing, my boss simply told me "cut your workforce by this much." I could have just handed it to my management staff to do the layoffs, but I said I wanted to talk to every single person to be laid off. We set up and funded a job placement center to help people find other positions. We made calls outside the company to find positions for people. It really did affect the morale of the group and I think it was positive in that way. There were difficult periods where it became clear to me that instead of hiding in my office I would meet anyone who wanted to in a large theater we had. I'd invite people to bring their lunch in and said you can ask me anything you want and I will answer to the best of my ability. The rumors and the things people imagine are always worse than the truth. And by telling the truth and being open and listening it actually changed the culture and the environment.

Gill: Okay what about technology? Not just the end products but the technology process itself: does your faith give you a different perspective or make you ask different kinds of questions about it?

Erismann: Creating technology is a very innovative process. And in that sense, God modeled this process in the first two chapters of Genesis and commissioned man and woman to enter into this with him. God giving Adam the responsibility to name the animals was a kind of scientific work of observing, understanding, and classifying the world. Technology is about thinking about these various pieces of creation and what you can make and how things can come together in an exciting way. I can remember the joy of solving a very challenging problem in mathematics, and "feeling God's pleasure" in the accomplishment. Of course, we're on the other side of Genesis 3 and now in the world of sin, so these technologies can be used for good or for evil. In reviewing our research projects we always said "what are the possibilities from this that could really help us?" --- and then we would also say, "what could this do to us that might be negative?" So this is a perspective that welcomes the positives of Creation and yet is realistic about the negatives of the Fall.

Gill: These days, post-Boeing, you're traveling all over the world giving talks on integrating faith at work. Our churches are full of business people --- and our businesses are often salted with Christians. Do you see Christians in business getting interested in integrating their faith and work? And do you see pastors and churches supporting this kind of movement?

Erismann: I see more of that happening for sure. Fifteen years ago or so, a lot of Christians that I knew in business would say "I've never heard a sermon on work." That's still true to some extent but I think less and less. But we need to go beyond the mere mention of this integration. We need to drive this into all corners of our lives, including our work, and that's one of the things that has driven me since I left The Boeing Company. Scripture is very clear that we have one life to live and we live it for God. Bringing that together both at the church and at the workplace is very important.

I had a wonderful experience in Nepal. A pastor had opened up his church to allow us to do a workplace seminar. Then the pastor said to the congregation, tell me what you learned? A woman raised her hand and said "I was in business until I became a Christian. When I became a Christian, I dropped out of business because that was a dirty thing -- and as a Christian I didn't want to be unclean. I have learned from this seminar that I can be in business as a Christian, I've already formulated my new business plan and I just can't wait to get started." I was in Africa talking with a group of pastors and one of them said to me, "I get what you're saying about this workplace stuff -- but tell me which is more important: to teach people about Jesus so they can go to heaven when they die? Or to teach about full life discipleship like

you've been talking about?" And I said, well, I used to work for The Boeing Company, and that question would be like asking "which wing of the airplane is more important for flight? The left wing or the right wing?" in fact they're both important and we have to hold them both. We make a mistake when we say with two things one of them must be more important than the other. We have to hold them together. Remember that in the great commission of Matthew 28, Jesus says go into all the world and make *disciples*, not just "converts."

Gill: What do you think are the biggest obstacles/barriers to individual workers, business people, making progress on this? And what are the biggest barriers to pastors getting more involved in thinking about the workplace lives of their members of their churches?

Erismar: I think there are several things for workers. One is lack of knowledge. People are not aware of seeing their work as a call from God. They somehow believe that our work is a result of sin and thus we just have to get through it. I have also seen some Christians who seem to like the separation. They can do what they like in their business world and give God the day on Sunday. Then I have noticed, including in myself, that though God has given me this work to do, the faith integration remains at a high level. It somehow doesn't include the details of performance management, completing a job on time, creating a great marketing campaign, etc. This is why I have so greatly enjoyed the Theology of Work Project where we are writing the commentary on the Bible. In every book of the Bible we find instruction, guidance, and direction for our daily work.

For pastors, I believe there are very different issues. Many pastors have not spent time in the marketplace, and have no personal experience in a world that looks very different from their own. They have had little or no training in seminary on God's view of daily work. And they can get overwhelmed with the tasks of being a pastor: counseling, teaching, raising funds, raising up volunteers, managing a staff. It is natural for each of us to get caught up in getting our own work done. For a pastor, this might mean an inward focus on keeping the church going well, losing sight of the role of the church in preparing people to live out their lives in the work that God has given them.