

Why Business Matters to God (and What Still Needs to Be Fixed)

By Jeff Van Duzer

InterVarsity Press, 2010, 205 pp., paperback.

Reviewed by David W, Gill www.davidwgill.org

Jeff Van Duzer is Dean of the School of Business and Economics and Professor of Business Law and Ethics at Seattle Pacific University. SPU has one of the largest and most successful business schools of any Christian college or university. Their outstanding faculty is engaged in the business education academy in a significant way. Faculty and graduates are also in significant roles in industry at Microsoft, Boeing, and other major corporations in the Seattle area. Perhaps most important, in the context of the Mockler Memo, there is no faculty that works harder and more intentionally at pursuing a biblical Christian view of business than that at SPU. And this missional clarity is due in no small measure to the leadership of Jeff Van Duzer.

Van Duzer confines his attention to business --- for-profit, commercial enterprises active in markets around the world. Drawing on his understanding of the creation, Van Duzer says that “there are two legitimate, first-order, intrinsic purposes of business: as stewards of God’s creation, business leaders should manage their businesses (1) to provide the community with goods and services that will enable it to flourish, and (2) to provide opportunities for meaningful work that will allow employees to express their God-given creativity” (p. 42). Van Duzer considers other purposes such as building relationships and caring for the environment (creation) as significant but not quite at the level of the purpose he summarizes. So too, maximizing profit is an essential though secondary aspect of the purpose of business. Right at the outset then, Van Duzer offers an alternative to the Chicago-school, “market fundamentalism” of Milton Friedman, and more than a few of his Christian acolytes. And frankly, if you want a biblical perspective on the matter you have to go with some version of Van Duzer’s description. There is no way to rehabilitate “the love of money” as the primary, sufficient purpose of life and work after what the Bible has to say about it.

Van Duzer unpacks the character of God’s creativity to provide insights for our own. His chapter on the impact of the “fall” (“Broken”) is a good review of the downside of business though I prefer a tighter, more textually-based, account of how good work and business go bad. Van Duzer next leaps to the End, the eschaton, the coming new heavens and new earth at the end of this history. He worries a bit through the interpretive options of annihilation and adoption of human works. I have never quite understood why my work has less value if somehow it doesn’t survive forever. That has nothing to do with the instrumental/intrinsic value distinctions Van Duzer and others worry about. In any case Van Duzer is a “cautious adopter” --- your good work will probably reappear in the afterlife. Yeah! Then it is on to “redemptive work” as the fourth great theme used to shed light on good business. Van Duzer gets closer to doing this theme justice than have many commentators.

Van Duzer’s chapter applying H. Richard Niebuhr’s tired old Christendom typologies regarding “Christ” and “culture” will be of interest to Niebuhr experts and people who like typologies but it doesn’t seem to me that it sheds any light on either the truths of Scripture or the realities of business. Time to move on people: those five ideal-types are rooted in historical milieux that have not existed for over a century. By contrast, Van Duzer’s final two chapters bristle with relevance, reality, and wisdom: “How Then Should We Do Business?” and “Making it Real.”

Final grade: A- (A minus). Aside from the Christ and Culture excursus and a few thin spots in the theological discussions (not wrong, just thin), this is an excellent book. In fact it is the best book I have ever read providing a coherent biblical perspective on business, right up there in Paul Stevens territory. Thoughtful Christians in business and in business school should devour these chapters and debate their implications. Pastors and seminary professors would be tremendously strengthened in their capacity to understand and support their workplace disciples if they studied Van Duzer’s book.