

Business Ethics: Making a Life, Not Just a Living

Written by Administrator

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Ahner, Gene (2007). *Business Ethics: Making a Life, Not Just a Living*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

This book is from an author with thirty years' experience as an executive and corporate officer, *Business Ethics* addresses students and those engaged in business to help them understand their work as an integral form of human development as well as an authentic Christian vocation.

Gene Ahner teaches philosophy, theology, and ethics at Catholic theological Union and Dominican University in Chicago, Illinois. He has been an executive in an electronics firm and is now an executive of a manufacturing company.

Here is an excerpt from the Introduction of the book:

“When I was asked recently about how long I had been working on this book, I answered, without much hesitation, a lifetime.

Some forty years ago I began my professional career teaching the abstract and somewhat esoteric disciplines of philosophy and theology to college and graduate students. While the teaching was satisfying enough, I felt a personal need to move beyond the academic world and enter into the “real” world. What better way than to enter the world of business. What could be more real than business!

For the past twenty-eight years that decision has led me from being a personnel administrator to a director of human resources to an officer of a public corporation to the corporate secretary of a board of directors—and back to being a teacher of college and graduate students! The circle is complete, except it looks more like a spiral. While business is indeed about the specific and the concrete, it is also about purpose and meaning. And that brought me back to philosophy, ethics, and, ultimately, to theology.

There is a tension here that is usually relieved by focusing totally on one or the other extreme—either business or ethics. When I would tell anyone I was writing a book on business and ethics, I would usually be greeted with a laugh or a flip remark about oxymorons.

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Business, by its nature, is about the nitty-gritty, the day-to-day struggle of making something very specific with a group of people who may hardly know one another, for a customer who may be far away and who has at least some idea what he wants, and for a predetermined amount of money. It is messy, full of approximations, if not actual mistakes, and riddled with ambiguity and all sorts of mixed motives. The problem comes when it is considered to be only that. On that showing, business is “just business,” driven by impersonal “market forces,” “competition,” and “bottom-line profitability.”

On the other hand, academic types, whether philosopher, theologian, or moralist, tend to keep their distance from the inner workings of business precisely because it is so messy, so ambiguous, and, to most people in academics, so far removed from their own interests. The result is a lot of general pronouncements that may be true but have little direct impact on concrete business operations. Christianity itself is much better at pronouncing on the generalities than giving directions on the specifics. On that showing, there is much talk about “justice and peace,” “equality and fairness,” and lofty moral principles. [...]” (pp. xi-xii)