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# A first-century “lens” for modern managers

## A lot happens when we understand Luke’s “oikos” not as a household, but as a kind of company

by Elden Wiebe

**Management and the Gospel: Luke’s Radical Message for the First and Twenty-First Centuries.** By Bruno Dyck (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 302 pp.)

This is a profound book. It will engage you, enlighten you, challenge you, confront you, maybe even anger you, but ultimately, whether you agree with its conclusions or not, it *will equip* you to better exercise your faith as you daily make governance and policy decisions, manage and operate your business, or simply go to work and do your job.

*Management and the Gospel* provides solid ground on which to stand as you put your faith into practice in the marketplace. It is not a quick-read “airport book” that will be done by the end of your three-hour flight. It will not give you a “top 10” list of key engaging-your-faith-in-the-workplace success factors supported

by anecdotes. This book is meaty, well-researched and deeply thoughtful. But don’t let that scare you off — it is still very accessible. The author has crafted the book in digestible chunks with frequent brief summaries that will help readers move through and connect the ideas.

At its heart, *Management and the Gospel* is counter-cultural. Management scholar Bruno Dyck seeks to transform current business practices by drawing on the wisdom of “a new prophet” (to use the phrase of Max Weber, one of the most influential management thinkers). This “new prophet” is Jesus, whose ideas and words have the power to reshape how we conceive the important tasks of managing and doing business. Dyck does so by striving to understand the biblical text, in particular the Gospel of Luke, in a holistic manner — that is, in its literary and historical context.

This approach leads Dyck to some startling conclusions. For example, a favorite parable for Christian business people is the Parable of the Ten Minas (Luke 19:11-27). The meaning of this parable is very clear from a 21st century perspective. Managers who use money to make more money are examples of faithful servants who will be rewarded by the Lord. The one who doesn’t put his money to work to earn more (the third manager in the parable) is unfaithful and will be punished. This fits our society’s current capitalist orientation quite happily, and we assume that we “get” the parable.

But do we? When interpreting the Bible, it is very easy for us to utilize our current understandings as the basis of interpretation; hence the assumed support of capitalism in the parable mentioned above. While the case can be

### **Excerpt:**

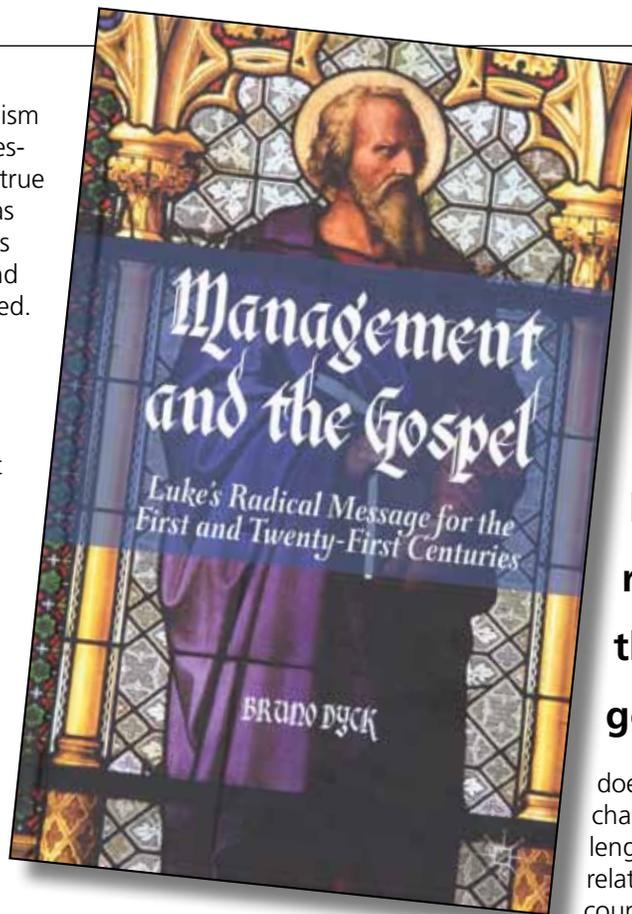
“Unfortunately, the word *oikos* is usually translated as ‘house’ or ‘household’ in contemporary translations, and thus *oikonomia* becomes ‘household management.’ This misleading translation of *oikos* may be the single most important reason why modern interpreters of biblical writings generally overlook their implications for management. Understandably, twenty-first-century readers think of ‘house’ in terms of their own biological families and homes. Unlike the first century, the modern idea of a ‘house’ would seldom include a multinational organization that maximizes its profits with dealings in distant markets. Nor does the modern idea of a ‘house’ include a business organization that produces goods and services, nor would it even include small-scale agricultural or fishing companies. In short, the word ‘house’ makes virtually invisible the goods and services producing function of the first-century *oikos*, and as a result modern readers become ‘blind’ to the organizations that produce goods and services in biblical times. More to the point, it makes readers blind to the fact that the Gospel of Luke says a lot about how to manage organizations producing goods and services.” — *Bruno Dyck in Management and the Gospel*

made that capitalism arose out of Protestantism, it is also true that capitalism has long since shed its Christian roots and become secularized. To remedy these problems, Dyck focuses on the Gospel of Luke, which is the most relevant gospel for the issues of money and management. Not only does he dig deep into this gospel, but he digs deep into the historical milieu of the first century. Together, this provides a first-century “lens” by which to interpret and understand what Jesus communicates regarding money and management.

Three concepts are particularly important. First, “*oikos*,” usually translated “house” or “household,” is better understood much broader as encompassing many people (not just a family) and being a unit that produces goods and services. Luke has much to say about how to manage an “*oikos*” — a goods/services producing organization.

Second, “*chrematistics*” deals with finances/money. Using money to facilitate the trade of goods and services, referred to as “natural chrematistics” or “sustenance economics,” is contrasted with using money to make money, referred to as “unnatural chrematistics” or “acquisitive economics.” It turns out that Luke also has a lot to say about money and how it is used.

Third, *patron-client relationships* dictated how management was in fact practiced. For the most part, through these relationships the patron gained control over the client and created greater wealth disparity between rich and poor. In contrast, another form of relationship — *benefaction* — was characterized by patrons helping others without demanding anything in return. Luke’s Gospel has



over 200 allusions to these two fundamental relationships between the “*oikoi*” of patrons and those of clients, and again a great deal to say about how to manage these relationships.

Going back to the Parable of the Ten Minas, as Dyck places it within its first-century

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context, we now see that this parable seems to mean something quite different. It appears that the third manager is actually the faithful one since he challenges the exploitive nature of his master’s “*oikos*,” he

does not use money to make more money (i.e. he challenges “acquisitive economics”), and he challenges the typical exploitive nature of patron-client relationships. In other words, this parable is actually counter-cultural, challenging exploitive behavior prevalent in the first century, and by extension the same exploitive behavior in our 21st century as well. Our society’s profit maximizing capitalist orientation is now perhaps not quite as happy!

At this point it is worth saying that *Management and the Gospel* is not an anti-capitalism diatribe, but rather seeks the re-formation of capitalism through the gospel message. This book is about putting faith to work, not only in terms of personal piety but also in addressing and changing systems and structures that lock us into the service of Money rather than God.

In this way, the book is also surprisingly practical. Dyck shows how to apply a four-phase model of change which is derived from the “Journey Narrative” in Luke (Luke 9:51-19:40). He also illustrates how some business leaders have intuitively used this model to facilitate astonishing changes in their businesses. Finally, Dyck also links the conclusions of the study with current business practices and management scholarship. For example, he addresses (1) how to manage relationships within organizations (dealing with organizational structures, employee motivation and leadership), (2) how to manage money (dealing with economics, finance and accounting), and (3) how to manage relationships between organizations (dealing with marketing, supply chain management and strategy). All in all, you will have tools, and by faith the courage, to make a difference in your workplace, and even in our society. ♦

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