

Common Grace and the Eucharistic Practice of Hospitality in Strategic Planning

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Much of what is written about faith and business is abstract or generalized and does not address faithful engagement in a specific task or how one develops the know-how to execute it. This article argues that faithful engagement in liturgical worship practices can shape the business practice of strategic planning. It takes a normative approach to the practice of strategic planning that expands the literature on Christian hospitality, thus creating a novel approach to strategic planning and stakeholder analysis. It suggests that the practice of strategic planning should draw people into a community that is characterized by intimate caring relationships and a concern for others, especially those with less power or those who are often marginalized in the process of strategy development. This article also argues that results of such a practice in many ways look similar to the best secular practices because of God's common grace.

Introduction

Unfortunately, it often seems that to be a Christian businessperson means to be a Christian who is also a businessperson. In recent years, positive work has been produced that makes the case for how one might think theologically about business.¹ Nevertheless, this still leaves questions such as: What does a faithful engagement in a specific task or process look like, and how does one develop the know-how to execute it? Just as a cognitive understanding about how to ride a bicycle is insufficient to know how to ride one, so also a cognitive understanding about applying faith to strategic planning is insufficient to know how to engage in strategic planning faithfully. Rather, both skillful bicycle riding and skillful

faith-informed strategic planning result from know-how developed in context through repeated engagement. This article offers a normative approach to the practice of strategic planning that expands the literature on Christian hospitality and is an alternative to the literatures on strategic planning and stakeholder analysis. I argue that faithful engagement in liturgical worship practices can shape the business practice of strategic planning. Based on literatures of the Eucharist and Christian hospitality, I suggest that the practice of strategic planning should draw people into a community characterized by intimate caring relationships and a concern for others, especially those with less power or those who are often marginalized in the process of developing a strategy. I also argue that results of such strategic planning practices in many ways look similar to the best secular practices because of God's common grace.

Common Grace and the Antithesis

For many Reformed Christians, Abraham Kuyper's work on common grace is a reminder that all of life falls under the lordship of Christ and that as Christians they are called to be co-creators with God in all aspect of our lives and in all areas of life. Richard Mouw points out that to understand common grace one must understand Kuyper's thought on creation and eschatology.² Kuyper argued from Genesis 1:28 that humans were to engage in the work of cultural formation as part of the original design of creation. Thus, Mouw states, "as they began to fashion tools and work schedules and patterns of interaction, Adam and Eve would be adding to the original contents of the creation, and eventually, even without the appearance of sin, the Garden would become a City, an arena [of] complex spheres of cultural interaction."³ Areas such as business, art, politics, and science are all part of the original plan. Similarly, in his eschatology, Kuyper describes the redeemed elects' working in the city described in the book of Revelation. There they engage in "new callings, new life-tasks, new commissions.... [Life] will be a full human life which will exhibit all the glory that God in the first creation had purposed and appointed for the same, but which by us was sinned away."⁴

The current reality is that sin has distorted the created order and inhibited human ability to engage properly in cultural formation, while the full coming of the kingdom of God has not yet occurred. God's plans, however, are not thwarted because he extends grace to all.⁵ Common grace is not a salvific grace but rather one that allows believers and unbelievers alike to engage positively in culture formation, often described as having three aspects. First, God's grace restrains sin and protects the created order from the full effects of the fall. Second, God gives talents and insights of varying degrees to the unredeemed and redeemed

alike. Third, believers and unbelievers can act in ways that positively affect the ongoing work of culture-making and can promote human flourishing. Humans are still under the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28 to engage in the good work of culture formation that has as its vision that future city described in the book of Revelation in God's perfect coming kingdom, and God's common grace allows that work to be carried out despite the fall.

Unbelievers are capable of work that shapes culture in a way that is consistent with the cultural mandate. Believers must discern what is good and must draw on the work and knowledge of believers and unbelievers alike. However, sin corrupts the actions of people, the institutions they form, and the structures of society. While Kuyper was clear about the need for believers to learn and benefit from nonbelievers and not to be surprised by their acts of truth, beauty, and justice, nevertheless, Kuyper also stressed what he called the antithesis. The antithesis is the opposition between what God and Satan would have us do. Mouw notes that in Kuyper's thought active participation in the life of a local congregation was crucial for Christians to be able to discern the antithesis. They are guided by the word of God and his Holy Spirit and grow in wisdom within the context of their local faith communities. They discern what is true, beautiful, and just in part by being engaged in the practices of the church. Such participation helps form them in ways that mark them as different from those who do not. Christians must engage in both Christian and secular practices and discern through the work of the Holy Spirit what thoughts, actions, emotions, and ends are good. To be discerning, according to Mouw, "we need to ground ourselves in the life and thought of that community where the Spirit is openly at work, regenerating sinners and sanctifying their inner selves."⁶

To consider questions of how people are shaped by the practices in which they engage and how they learn to respond to the actions taking place in their environment, I draw on the practice theory of the philosopher Theodore Schatzki. Building on that and drawing on the literature on worship practices and Christian hospitality, I then put forward a normative view of faithful strategic planning and compare that to some characteristics of current best practices. In doing so, I show both points of commonness and antithesis.

Practices

People are engaged in many practices over the course of their lives and even during the course of a day. Practices are sets of doings (including sayings) that frequently involve multiple people and objects over time. Each person's understanding of reality is greatly shaped by his or her engagement in practices.⁷

A simple example of a hiring practice at a fictitious firm might help the reader understand better the nature of practices.

The practice of hiring employees has developed over time at company X and has emerged from the activity of the many people who have engaged in it. When the need for a new person is identified by management, the human resources department (HR) performs a job analysis to determine the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other attributes (KSAOs) needed for the position. People in HR determine how to assess applicants for the KSAOs and design a hiring plan. They validate that candidates have the necessary minimum qualifications and administer any necessary tests. Trained interviewers and the manager of the area doing the hiring meet with the top three to four candidates and hold behaviorally based, structured, and job-related interviews. The interviewers write up their notes and then discuss the candidates' merits and shortcomings based on interviews, tests, and other relevant research. At the end of the discussion, the manager makes a decision with the other interviewers' input.

As the example indicates, practices are context-specific sets of doings that develop over time in a community of practitioners. A practice is partially ordered by a common understanding held by experienced practitioners about what actions to perform and how to do so. Once a job is identified, skillful practitioners of the hiring practice at company X understand that they need to work with Judy in HR to develop a job analysis if one has not been done recently. A practice is also ordered by emotions and moods that should or may be expressed and ends that should or may be achieved.⁸ In company X, skillful practitioners care about the well-being of interviewees as they believe that will help them select people who will be successful. Similarly, they strive toward the end of addressing identified needs in the organization and not just filling a position. In another organization, the hiring practice will look different to the extent that it is ordered by different understandings, emotions, or ends.

People can become more skillful practitioners the more they engage in the particular practice.⁹ At first, they may have limited understanding about how to engage appropriately in the practice or about what acceptable affective behaviors or ends are. A manager new to the hiring practice may become belligerent toward HR personnel who require what he views as unnecessary busy work to figure out what the needs of the job are when all he wants is someone to fill the position immediately. In this case, the manager is not demonstrating the know-how, affective behavior, or knowledge of the appropriate ends that characterize the skillful performance of company X's hiring practice. Because they fall outside of what is acceptable, his actions will draw some form of criticism or ostracism.

As the manager continues to engage in the practice, he learns to perform it more skillfully, not unlike someone learning to ride a bicycle.

People are engaged in multiple practices, which shape their perceptions of reality and signal how they should respond not only in their contexts but also to the actions of others.¹⁰ A manager unskilled in the hiring practice of company X might draw on a parts-ordering practice in which he is skilled as he interprets the environment in an effort to respond appropriately. Thus, he might see an increase in product demand as a signal that the company should hire more people for current jobs, with people being analogous to parts in his mind. By contrast, a skillful manager would assess the needs of the organization, which may lead to a restructuring or to the development of new types of jobs.

While a practice tends to be fairly stable across multiple performances, each performance of a practice is a new occurrence and varies from past enactments. Typically this variation has little lasting effect on future performances or how participants understand the ordering of the practice. However, some variation can be sticky and can become part of how the practice is performed in the future.¹¹

One source of variation arises when two or more practices interact. Although an actor may be a skillful practitioner of practice Z in which she is currently engaged, nevertheless, what is signaled for her to do is practice Y. This is to say that people are often engaged in more than one practice simultaneously, which can introduce novelty into one or more of the practices.¹² For example, consider a manager who is hiring a new employee. The manager may engage in a hiring practice involving human resources while also engaging in a friendship practice by inviting a friend to apply and passing along that person's resume. Although it might lead to favoritism and poor performance, this intersection of two practices and the hiring of the friend may also lead to the realization that employees frequently suggest potential candidates who are a good fit for the organization. Employee suggestions of acquaintances have in fact become a common industry practice. The meshing of these two practices and the signaling to perform part of one in the midst of performing the other can lead to a change in how one or both are ordered and performed in the future.

People engage in practices in many different aspects of their lives. For Christians, one of the regular sets of practices in which they engage is that of liturgical worship, and it is to these we turn next.

Liturgical Worship Practices

Christians engage in practices within their faith communities. In particular, people frequently engage in liturgical worship practices. Such practices provide a patterning for how we are to live our lives. In fact, according to David L. Stubbs, liturgy means “the work of the people” and historically denoted “public works” such as “building a bridge.” Instead of being viewed as “a break from the ‘real,’” such practices should be seen as “the most real work that we do.”¹³ It is here we can experience most clearly the pattern of the kingdom of God.

An example here may illustrate the point. The following is based on a summary of patterns in traditional corporate liturgical worship as Dyrness describes.¹⁴ A service begins with a call to corporate worship, an invitation to insiders and outsiders alike to join in the narrative of God’s redeeming love and to be formed over time with repeated engagement toward Christlikeness. After responding with songs of adoration, the people confess their sins and greet one another. This connection is important as they ask for forgiveness and then greet each other in love and reconciliation. Later, participants pray to hear clearly the Word of God preached and to understand God’s acts of love and salvation so that they may be altered in how they approach the world. In the Eucharist, the people receive and are reminded of God’s divine hospitality. In it, the corporate body is spiritually fed and blessed. Just as congregants are called to corporate worship, so, too, are they sent into the world. As they are continuously shaped into Christlikeness, the people, as Christians, are to witness to others, and as Matthew 5:16 instructs, to “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” As with the business-hiring practice, so the liturgical-worship practice is ordered in part by the understanding of those who engage in it, their affective states and behaviors, and the ends toward which they aim.

For some people, the above is not an accurate portrayal of their experience of church liturgy. Their experience might be closer to attending a country club social. They go and are welcomed but not called. They shake hands with others and say hello, but there is no sense of love or reconciliation. They listen to a brief talk that may or may not interest them and engage in a unique ritual that says to them, “I belong,” but do not recognize the alternative reality it reveals. This experience could be because they are on the periphery of the practice and are not skillful practitioners. It could be that their congregations’ liturgical worship practices are more like country club socials. Finally, it may be the case that their congregation has a wide set of understandings, affective behaviors, and

ends that are acceptable and how each engages in their practice only reflects a subset of how it is ordered.

Eucharist and Christian Hospitality

In order to develop more precisely how liturgical worship practices can shape us, I narrow the focus to the Eucharist and Christian hospitality. In doing so, I draw on traditional liturgical worship to put forward a normative understanding of Christian hospitality. Later, I will use this understanding to develop a normative practice of strategic planning. The following does not attempt to unpack all aspects of the Eucharist, instead focusing on how the practice of the Eucharist informs the normative practice of Christian hospitality.

Christian hospitality is perhaps understood best as we engage in the Eucharist, for it sets forth the divine act of forgiveness and reconciliation. Christ loves us and issues an unmerited invitation to join him at the table and into community.¹⁵ We, who were his enemies, are invited to the table to be in communion with him and to eat with one another. Communing with others requires forgiveness and reconciliation; hence, part of the practice of the Eucharist is to examine oneself and to be reconciled to others.¹⁶ Thus, in part, God's hospitality toward us requires from us a response of hospitality and reconciliation toward others.

To understand the Eucharist, we must understand the context of the Last Supper. Meals were times marked by hospitality, and this connection is evident in the New Testament in such passages as Matthew 25:31–46; Luke 10:39–42; 14:12–24; 15:22–32; 16:19–21; 17:7–10; John 21:1–14; Acts 4:32–35; Romans 16:23; Hebrews 13:1–3; 1 Peter 4:9; 1 John 3:16–18; and 3 John 5–8. Eugene Peterson argues that we learn from the Eucharist and from Scripture the importance of regularly eating meals together with family, friends, and others as acts of hospitality.¹⁷ Hospitality is not about abstractions or efficiencies, but is about knowing others well and being known well by them. Preparing meals and eating them gives us time to know others and to be known. Such hospitality is intimate and caring. Engagement in the Eucharist shapes us and counters practices that would detach us from others for the sake of efficiencies.

The Eucharist can also shape how we utilize power. In the Eucharist, all-powerful God invites us into relationship, and we likewise are to do so with others. This extends beyond the Lord's Table and into the world. Those with power must seek out those who are marginalized.¹⁸ Historically this often meant hospitality to the stranger.¹⁹ In Luke 14:12–14,

[Jesus] said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Theologian Miroslav Volf asserts that this passage implies “that hospitality at its best should not be part of the economy of exchange among equals or with superiors, but instead be part of an economy of donation to the destitute and weak.”²⁰ As God has shown us and as we practice it in the Eucharist, hospitality is not about reciprocity or taking, but rather about serving others and inviting them into community.

As we are invited into true community marked by love, we recognize that the kingdom of God has not yet fully come. Liturgical worship practice, including the Eucharist, provides insight into the coming kingdom. According to James K. A. Smith, to the extent that it is rightly ordered,

the Eucharist is just a macrocosm of what the church is called to be as the new humanity: a community that gathers, irrespective of preferences, tastes, class, or ethnicity, in order to pursue a *common* good.... As a school for learning to love our neighbor, and thus becoming reconciled, [the Eucharist] is also a school for learning to love our enemies—the most scandalous element of renewed community in the kingdom come.²¹

So while we live in the time in between—the already but not yet of the kingdom of God—by engaging in the practice of the Eucharist, we are formed as people in community in ways that reflect the kingdom to come.

The Practice of Strategic Planning

Leaders of an organization initiate the practice of strategic planning to guide it toward the leadership’s desired outcomes. This practice facilitates the analysis of the environment, participation by relevant actors, and development of integrated activities to carry out its plans.²² How people enact this practice, however, varies across firms, with differences in the breadth of participation, diversity of views, environmental scanning, analysis, and planning horizon.

Some Christians might wonder if the manner in which the Eucharist shapes our hospitality has any bearing whatsoever on the practice of strategic planning. Strategic planning, after all, typically involves the few, the privileged, and the

powerful. Widows and orphans (at least the economically disadvantaged ones) do not compose the typical set of decision makers and key influencers. However, the practice of hospitality requires Christians to look for opportunities to engage in it and to draw others into community. How people practice hospitality can be shaped by their engagement in the Eucharist. As they interact with their environment and the interwoven practices in which they might be engaging at any point in time, an action may be signaled that is part of the practice of hospitality. While they may not be “widows and orphans,” the people with whom Christians are interacting in a business context have also been created in the image of God. Further, there are power differences among people within organizations, and not all firm executives, managers, or other employees will have the same amount of power, with CEOs generally having the final say in major strategic decisions. Meanwhile, various internal and external stakeholders of the firm bring different perspectives to a situation and have different needs and resources. *I argue that the liturgical worship practice of the Eucharist, which shapes how Christians do hospitality, can shape the practice of strategic planning and the engagement with those with greater or lesser power and those who in some ways might be considered “the other.”*

Christians are called to be ready to engage in hospitality even at the most unexpected times and in the most unexpected circumstances. To practice hospitality is a daily sacrifice to invite others into community and to know them and be known by them in an intimate way.²³ Research into the Eucharist and Christian hospitality provides insight into what might signal that a person should engage in an act of Christian hospitality. Through such signaling, the practice of hospitality shapes other practices as Christians engage them. Hospitality is a practice ordered by ends that demand that we care about others and the development of real relationships, especially with those who are different or who have less power. Firms have many stakeholders who are impacted by the strategic decisions a firm makes. Hospitality dictates that the concerns of stakeholders be known. More than that, it demands that stakeholders be known. Hospitality is not a stakeholder analysis, but rather community building marked by intimate caring relationships.

For business people, the idea that a church practice can shape strategic practice may be perceived as a radical and naïve attempt to force church practices into an area where it simply will not work and does not belong. Self-interested behavior often seems to be the norm in business schools and in business practice.²⁴ To practice hospitality seems to invite others to take advantage of one’s gullibility. As stewards of God’s resources and as agents responsible for the livelihoods of many people, the executives of a firm must show caution as some, in fact, may attempt to take advantage of the firm. Nevertheless there is considerable evidence

that many of the actions that the practice of hospitality demands in the context of the practice of strategic planning are also beneficial to the sustainable success of a firm. Through God's grace, there is a measure of commonness between what Christians have been instructed to do and what has been found to be good for business. While I weave evidence from scientific research in to demonstrate commonness, the following description of the practice of strategic planning is normatively based on the eucharistically informed practice of Christian hospitality. While some of the understandings, emotions, and ends that order the practice of strategic planning described here and that of secular best practices overlap, there are distinctions in which the antithesis can be seen.

Perhaps the best place to begin a description about the practice of hospitality in the context of the practice of strategic planning is with the most powerful person in the organization, the CEO. A CEO is the final decision maker of an organization and wields considerable power.²⁵ As such, a CEO is a central player in the strategic planning of a firm and is well situated to practice hospitality. In making a firm's strategy, CEOs involve the members of the top management team to varying degrees. There are different reasons for why CEOs may limit the involvement of other executives, such as the need to respond quickly in dynamic and uncertain environments, an effort to minimize organizational politics, or the desire for control. In some firms, there is little participation. The CEO alone, or perhaps with one or two others, makes key decisions. When such centralized decision making is the case, the top management team members involved in the decision tend to be similar to the CEO, both demographically and in their viewpoints.²⁶

While hospitality may be most closely associated with reaching out to the poor or the stranger, it does not exclude inviting the powerful, such as managerial elite, into community. The practice of hospitality, which calls for the development of relationships characterized by knowing and caring for others, may be enacted as the CEO engages in strategic planning. While executives of a firm have considerable power, they are dependent on the chief executive and thus hold less power. To practice hospitality, the CEO must engage the top managers as human beings created in the image of God and not as tools to be used in some efficient manner. To intentionally develop community among the top managers, the CEO must spend time with them, and they with each other, to know one another and to build trust. While this is done in part outside of the practice of strategic planning, it is not done so exclusively. Including top managers in the practice of strategic planning allows the CEO to mentor them, to understand their perspectives and needs and the perspectives and needs of those they represent (e.g., strategic business units) or the external stakeholders to whom they are connected (e.g., VP of Sales

connected to customers). These top executives bring varied perspectives based on their functional areas and past experiences, and their inclusion increases the likelihood that the perspectives of more stakeholder groups will be considered and incorporated into a strategic plan. In particular, it is important that views held by a minority of executives are expressed in an atmosphere of trust and respect. Further, hospitality is not a unidirectional practice. The practice of hospitality toward peers and the CEO should also be signaled (at times) for top management team members when they are engaged in strategic planning. Such meshing of hospitality with strategic planning begins to create a community of hospitality.

The research on strategic planning and decision making brings to light common ground between secular best practices and those shaped by Christian practices. It shows that a diversity of perspectives,²⁷ the generation of multiple alternatives,²⁸ and an atmosphere of trust²⁹ can lead to decisions that are better for the organization's financial well-being. Wider involvement by top management diversifies the perspectives being considered³⁰ and improves the resulting quality of the decision.³¹ Rather than stifling them, firms can benefit from encouraging views held by the minority.³² In fast-moving industries, CEOs often do not include others for the sake of making quick decisions. However, research has shown that firms can generate fast decisions that are of higher quality by involving a wider set of top managers instead of relying on spontaneous decisions by one individual.³³

The literature on strategic decision making also provides some support for how involving a wider set of the top managers limits some negative outcomes. Centralized decision making where few are involved can lead to political behavior as executives form coalitions against one another in an effort to gain power. This behavior breeds distrust and division in the executive ranks and can hurt the firm's performance.³⁴ By demonstrating concern for the well-being of other executives and seeking to draw them into community where they have a voice in shaping the firm's direction, CEOs lessen the likelihood of toxic organizational cultures that are marred by broken relationships. Additionally, wider involvement of executives in strategic planning can limit the opportunity for a few executives to engage in self-serving or illegal behavior by controlling information and decision making.³⁵

Just as CEOs should practice hospitality in a way that shapes the practice of strategic planning, so too should other managers. The practice of hospitality should occur at all levels of an organization and should shape organizational practices and culture. Executive teams working on strategic plans, like other teams working on nonroutine tasks, should engage in rigorous discussions to generate and select from different alternative solutions. Referred to as cognitive conflict, this behavior leads to decisions that fit with organizational objectives if done with respect and trust.³⁶ However, heavy cognitive conflict can lead to

relationship conflict, animosity, divisions, and worse decisions.³⁷ Because it is based on caring relationships with others, hospitality could mitigate the negative consequences of cognitive conflict.

Hospitality also requires that executives include in the practice of strategic planning those areas of the firm that can either produce the implementation of strategic initiatives or be significantly affected by them. They need to be included as it involves what work is done, how it is done, and by whom. Thus, key middle managers should be engaged by more senior management and asked for information and suggestions. These middle managers can in turn involve others, as is allowable or makes sense. There will be times when this type of cascading involvement across layers of communities is not feasible (e.g., due to time sensitivity) or prudent (e.g., potential acquisition of another firm that if leaked might trigger a bid by a competitor). Still, the practice of hospitality invites others into relationship. Thus, even when their suggestions are not utilized, more senior management should let those who have played a role in developing the strategic plan know what was done, and why, out of respect despite its requiring resources and time to do so. While organizations must be good stewards of the resources with which they are entrusted, hospitality does not arise from a logic of efficiency but of caring, which requires time.

The involvement of middle management by senior management as part of hospitality may pay dividends for the organization through God's common grace. Middle managers bring insight to the practice of strategic planning by identifying strategic threats and opportunities they are uniquely positioned to see because they are both close to the internal day-to-day action and connected to the external environment. Their position in the firm also allows them to generate useful ideas.³⁸ Further, involving middle managers in the practice of strategic planning increases the likelihood that they will support their firms' strategic goals.³⁹

A firm's strategic plan has implications for stakeholders beyond those employed by the firm; hence affecting suppliers, contractors, customers, the community, and others. It is not possible to engage in hospitality in an intimate way with every individual who is a stakeholder, yet that does not abrogate a Christian's obligation to seek to be hospitable. To practice hospitality, firms must develop relationships in which their agents understand in a rich way their stakeholders and how the firm can positively affect them. The hospitable relationship should foster trust on both sides as each seeks to understand the other. In business, often one side is vulnerable to exploitation by the other.⁴⁰ Hospitality precludes taking advantage of such vulnerability. This commitment to the relationship will sometimes mean forgoing short-term opportunities that come at the expense of the other. This is not to say they should ignore structural shifts within industries,

but rather that firms should work together to benefit one another. The practice of hospitality in interactions with external stakeholders helps shape their role in a firm's strategic planning. By incorporating stakeholders into its planning, the firm seeks to help the others thrive. For example, a supplier to the focal firm might experience cost increases that place upward pressure on its prices. A typical response might be for the firm to look for a new supplier with a lower price. However, a firm that has a hospitality-shaped practice of strategic planning can be much more transparent. That business can share its objectives and invite the key managers at the supplier with whom its managers have developed strong relationships to help them think creatively about the firms' strategies. This is done in the context of the supplier's sharing goals as an organization. Even while developing its strategy, the focal firm is practicing hospitality by caring about the welfare of its supplier and the people who work there and inviting them to take part. Such an approach may create opportunities that continue to benefit each other without breaking trust with other stakeholders.

When external stakeholders are routinely involved in a firm's strategic planning and expect to be treated fairly based on past experience with the firm, they may be more likely to share sensitive information about their utility function as they trust that the focal firm has their interests in mind. Developing strong relationships with external stakeholders reduces uncertainty in the focal firm's environment and creates stronger allies. Harrison et al. theorize that having a reputation as a firm that treats "all stakeholders with honesty and respect," and not just those that hold significant power, a firm may enjoy a competitive advantage by working closely together and generating novel alternatives that are mutually beneficial.⁴¹ While the research in this area is still developing, there is growing evidence that there are economic returns to positive stakeholder relationships. Choi and Wang, for example, found that positive relationships with such stakeholders as employees, customers, and the community helped firms with strong financial performance maintain their competitive advantage. Such connections also allowed firms that had performed poorly to improve their financial results.⁴² Thus, there is a commonness between the normative practice of hospitable strategic planning and some characteristics of a well-executed strategic planning practice.

Nevertheless, the antithesis is also present. As Volf notes, hospitality is not about reciprocity where one gives in order to receive or to control others.⁴³ The examples above of secular best practices are frequently pursued because they work and not because they are normatively good. As a result, while some aspects of a hospitable practice and a well-executed one may look similar, others will not. For example, when one firm acquires another, one of the first actions often undertaken is to make staffing cuts. By removing people from the payroll quickly,

the acquisition is more likely to pay for itself. By contrast, Milt Kuyers of GMK Companies takes a different approach to reducing headcount at acquired firms that shows how hospitality has influenced his strategic planning and acquisition practices. After identifying those not needed in an acquired firm, he provides them with a new, full-time “job.” Instead of being fired immediately, these employees work regular hours trying to find a new job. This approach provides them with salary and benefits so they can focus on their new task and includes a structured environment to minimize despair or apathy if they do not find a new position quickly. It also provides them with credibility in the eyes of potential employers since they can avoid the stigma often associated with unemployed applicants. While this approach might benefit his firm’s bottom line on occasion, it is done because he cares about strangers in the acquired firm.

As is the case with many examples of biblical hospitality, Milt Kuyers is giving from his own resources in the privately held GMK when he shows hospitality to those whose positions have been eliminated. This differs from the situation in a publicly traded firm in which the CEO only controls but does not own the firm’s resources. When resources used to show hospitality belong to others (e.g., shareholders), then such actions must be transparent as part of the strategic planning practice. Thus, a publicly traded firm could institute an acquisition strategy similar to the one described above, working with key shareholders to put specific policies in place for acquisition evaluation and integration. Even when there is conflict among the interests of the different stakeholder groups, the executives and others involved in the strategic planning should care for one another and seek to understand the different perspectives and needs, including the perspectives and needs of those who have limited power.

Conclusion

By engaging in a faithful liturgical worship practice of the Eucharist, Christians are formed into Christlikeness and experience a patterning of life that has as its aim those patterns of life of the kingdom of God. Engaging in the Eucharist shapes both the extent to which hospitality opportunities are signaled and how we are to practice hospitality. Such practices of hospitality demand that we care for those around us and draw people into community, especially those with less power or who are different from us. Christians are to be salt and light to the world, and, as Kuyper asserted, we are formed by actively engaging in faithful Christian community and its practices. The practice of strategic planning greatly influences the lives of those it touches inside and outside of the firm and as such should be shaped in part by the practice of hospitality.

A common grace framework allows Christians to see a commonality between the actions of those who would engage in a hospitality-shaped practice of strategic planning and characteristics that lead a firm to financial success. Christians are able to engage with believers and unbelievers alike to build together on the commonness and to challenge together misconceptions about what characterizes a good practice of strategic planning, such as who is involved in the planning⁴⁴ and which stakeholders are relevant.⁴⁵ Hospitality builds community through care and intimate relationships that create trust. Such healthy relationships have been shown to lead to creativity, higher-quality decisions, healthier cultures, and better performance. Thus, business people, Christians and non-Christians alike, are able to understand the benefits of a hospitality-shaped practice of strategic planning.

As they go out into the world and engage in the practice of strategic planning, Christians are able to engage with believers and unbelievers alike to build on the commonness. They can develop more hospitable strategic planning practices in an effort to fulfill the cultural mandate through a pattern of activity that seeks to reflect the coming kingdom of God.

Notes

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