

## Philanthropy and Profitability

Some time ago I read an article in which philanthropic activity was considered to be the opposite of running a business. Philanthropy (literally the love of humanity) is often viewed as “giving money to good causes.” Philanthropy is much more than that, of course, for any action we take which helps others is included in the definition of the word. Nevertheless, most philanthropy involves giving money to help fellow human beings.

Many philanthropists were at one time successful in business. Quite often a philanthropist has sold his/her business for a very large sum of money, and they commit themselves to philanthropy (giving to good causes) for the rest of their lives. The perspective seems to be that when they were in business, their goal was to make a profit but after they sold their business, their goal was to give that profit away. I think it is often fair to say that running a successful business to make a profit and philanthropy (loving fellow human beings) are seen as incompatible. True, many successful business owners give a substantial amount of money to “good causes,” and we can be thankful for that, but it would seem that the business can only be successful if it focuses on profit rather than philanthropy. It would seem that the common perception is that philanthropy (the love of humanity) is possible because of good business practices, but good business practices don't work well if they have philanthropy built into them.

One example of this separation of business and philanthropy could be found in a seed company which developed a seed with what was called a terminator gene. The terminator gene in a plant resulted in crops (e.g. soybeans) being unable to reproduce themselves. Thus, a farmer who saved some seed from one year to plant the next would be unable to do so, for the seeds he saved would not germinate. This may not have been a big deal for farmers in Canada, but for many subsistence farmers in poorer regions of the world, this was devastating. They are in the habit of saving seed from this year to plant next year, and the added cost of having to buy new seed each year would result in a net loss every year. The company which had developed this terminator gene spoke about its increased profits and bragged about how they were using those profits to help feed poor people, but their boasts seemed hollow. Providing help for farmers who had been impoverished by company policy hardly seems philanthropic.

Another example may be planned obsolescence in many of the products we buy. If we buy a fridge, for example, we can expect that it will run for 5-7 years without defect. When it does break down, we discover that the replacement parts are expensive, and we may even discover that they are unavailable to the consumer and must be installed only by a certified technician. Or, as we may have experienced, parts are glued into place (rather than held in place by screws) so that they cannot be replaced and the consumer must buy a new machine. These are deliberate ploys used by companies to increase sales and thus also profitability. The companies advertise their products in such a way to imply that the consumer will be satisfied with their purchase, but are doing so only to gain a greater market share. Sadly, while the company may be more profitable, humanity does not feel loved.

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As Christians, we are called to love our neighbours as ourselves. (Jesus could well have said that he expects us to be philanthropists, lovers of humanity.) It is a challenge to do so in our current climate, one that seems to be run by profit margins and return on investments. If the principles by which we make decisions are for our own profit and we assuage our guilt by giving to good causes, are we truly obeying Jesus' weighty command? Are we being truly philanthropic? To be philanthropic is to obey the second of the two great commandments (loving our neighbours), and we must ask if we can do that in all areas of life.

I am not a businessperson, so I don't know the challenges of making a business viable in today's economy. Certainly, there must be a way for a business to run on the principle of philanthropy while still being profitable or else God would not call Christians to become businesspeople. Still, even while he issues that call, he does expect that those who heed that call do so against the background of the second great philanthropic command to love our neighbours as ourselves. (Loving our neighbour as ourselves means that we seek to ensure our neighbours have what we provide for ourselves.)

I am not a businessperson, but I am under the obligation to be philanthropic in all areas of my life. That means that my concern for others is at least as great as my concern for myself, and it means that I provide for others what I also provide for myself. That might not pencil out very well, but, of course, God's accounting practices are not always ours. His don't make sense on paper, or so we are told, because we have to look out for ourselves and our own viability and profitability first or else we cannot be philanthropic. Yet, we have to trust that when God says that he will look after us so that we can love others that somehow it will work out. To love our neighbours as ourselves means that everything we do is guided by philanthropy rather than profitability. We love our neighbours, and we leave the profit (that which benefits us) up to God. That must be true not only in business but in our personal lives as well for it seems to be one of the primary ways we respond to God's grace to us.

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