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A Proposition: Faith-Based Competency Project in Accounting

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Abstract

The accounting profession is undergoing a shift with new pathways to CPA licensure that emphasizes professional experience over educational credit hours. This change heightens the need for students to develop not only technical skills but also essential leadership and interpersonal competencies. This paper introduces the Faith Competency Project, a curricular model that integrates the AICPA's Foundational Competencies Framework with biblical principles. Drawing from Scripture and current pedagogical literature, the project aims to prepare students in Christian accounting programs for both professional excellence and ethical leadership in the marketplace.

Keywords: Competencies, skills, faith integration, accounting

A Proposition: Faith-Based Competency Project in Accounting

The Association of International Certified Professional Accountants (AICPA) and National Association of State Boards of Accountancy (NASBA) approved another path towards earning the Certified Public Accountant (CPA) licensure (Strickland, 2025). This new pathway allows candidates to earn a bachelor's degree with two years of professional experience to meet the CPA requirements. This is in contrast with the prior pathways which required either a masters' degree or 30 hours of extra college credits with one year of experience to become a CPA (Strickland, 2025). In over twenty states, the law has already been changed to allow this additional pathway in 2025 (Minnesota Society of Certified Public Accountants (MNCPA), 2025). With the removal of the college credits, new CPAs will be more reliant on the additional year of professional experience to develop the skills accountants need to be successful.

Before this change, new accounting graduates were lacking the skills necessary for the accounting profession, and most of these skills were beyond technical (Kroon & Alves, 2023; O'Dwyer, 2023). What students perceived as skills needed in an entry-level accounting job do not always match up to what employers required (Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008). Recently, the AICPA updated the Foundational Competencies Framework for Aspiring CPAs for new graduates, which listed accounting skills required for one entering the field (AICPA, 2025). This framework divided needed skills into technical and professional skills (AICPA, 2025). The professional competencies included ethical behavior, critical thinking, collaboration, self-management and continuous learning, communication, and business acumen (AICPA, 2025). Current students need to be aware of these skills to prepare themselves for their future careers upon graduation.

Faith integration is imperative in all business disciplines, including accounting. The deliberate integration of faith can assist students in building confidence and understanding of core accounting topics, such as auditing (LaShaw et al., 2016). Yengkopiong (2023) argued that graduates who exemplify servant leadership and biblical stewardship make significant contributions to nurturing ethical cultures and reinforcing institutional trust. Therefore, this paper presents the Faith Competency Project in providing insight into the required skills for the accounting profession and linking those skills to the Scriptures.

Literature Review

The literature review includes prior research related to the skills gap within accounting, the importance of including faith integration in the design, the inclusion of faith integration with building skills, and the development of coursework. By grounding established accounting frameworks in foundational competencies and faith integration, updated curriculum can help prepare students to meet licensure requirements and develop a faith-informed professional identity within the accounting profession.

Skills Gap

Students need to understand the skills required for the accounting profession, beyond merely understanding the technical aspects of the field. For example, the Big Four firms have recently indicated a lack of communication and collaboration skills (O'Dwyer, 2023). Kroon and Alves (2023) also noted the need to increase communication skills for those graduating with an accounting degree. Communication has become increasingly important with the implementation of technology (Tsiligiris & Bowyer, 2021). Perception-wise, Kavanagh and Drennan (2008) found a difference between employer and graduate expectations for an entry-level position. Students were more focused on technical skills and personal skills, such as critical thinking and self-motivation. Employers were more focused on knowledge skills with life experience. The employers desired a higher business awareness with increased ethical understanding and the ability to work with others. Mohammed and Lashine (2003) proposed a strategic plan to help close the gap between acquired and required skills, thus preparing students to work through challenges that may arise in a global business environment. In the accounting curriculum, instructors should work to align the perceptions of students with employers, so they are prepared for their entry-level job.

Faith Integration

Bailey (2012) proposed a critical thinking-based model to guide instructors in designing courses that equip students to independently integrate faith and disciplinary knowledge. Correia et al. (2020) offered empirical evidence that intentional faith integration, specifically through the application of Micah 6:8, positively influenced students' ability to draw on biblical principles when engaging with various dilemmas in accounting. Ethical behavior is one of the professional competencies, and this paper expands the usage of faith integration to apply to the rest of the AICPA framework. These approaches prepare graduates to not only excel in the profession but also carry the light of Christ into the world of work through their integrity, discernment, and witness.

Kirkpatrick and Eason (2020) advanced this conversation by integrating spiritual formation with professional readiness, proposing a framework of gospel-centered standards grounded in both academic rigor and spiritual discipline. Their model positions students as transformational learners whose development is not merely cognitive but shaped by Scripture to enable ethical decision-making. The proposed framework, proposed by Kirkpatrick and Easton (2020) equips future business professionals to engage diverse and dynamic workplace environments with both credibility and Christ-centered purpose.

Faith Integration in Prior Research

Previous scholarship in the Christian Business Academy Review (CBAR) has underscored the importance of developing professional competencies that extend beyond traditional business acumen to include holistic student formation. McMahone (2014) advocated for an expanded view of preparing students for their careers. Their career should build a purposeful life and business success through character and taking faith into the workplace. Windes et al. (2017) identified a set of foundational attributes essential for students entering the modern business landscape, including ethical integrity, critical thinking, team effectiveness, fostering business success through character and faith in realism, and technical excellence. For instance, accounting students must demonstrate mastery of technical competencies to successfully pass the CPA examination, while finance students require a robust foundational knowledge to achieve Certified Financial Planner (CFP) certification or the CFA exam.

Pedagogical Competencies

CBAR scholarship emphasizes pedagogical competencies that align instructional practice with marketplace expectations as well as integrating faith for a more holistic learning experience. These include instructional intentionality and the cultivation of an entrepreneurial mindset shaped by faith-informed values. Black and Smith (2024) argue that effective business education must consider the skills demanded by the market while also teaching students about their personal value systems and worldviews. Complementing this approach, Bovee and O'Brien (2007) propose a transformative pedagogical model that calls faculty to reimagine their instructional roles as facilitators of servant leadership development. By adopting a transformational teaching paradigm, educators can shape not only what students know but also what they become. Teaching includes fostering ethical behavior, critical thinking, collaboration, communication and self-management to prepare graduates for both career success and responsible citizenship. Collectively, these contributions highlight the importance of intentionally selecting pedagogy to prepare students for success in dynamic professional environments while cultivating faithful and purpose-driven leaders.

Accounting education has likewise noted the importance of students learning and assessing their profession-required skills. Butler et al. (2021) created a project where students learned about the Management Accounting Competency Framework developed by the Institute of Management

Accountants (IMA) and assessed their current competency levels. After completing this project, students commented on the requirements for growth beyond technical knowledge in the profession.

Empirical literature in accounting education emphasizes the use of competency-based approaches. Kelly (2017) advocates for integrating leadership formation with accounting ethics education, emphasizing the need for moral courage and ethical reasoning. Building on this, Wolcott and Sargent (2021) call for a pedagogical shift beyond technical instruction toward the cultivation of critical thinking through active learning and reflective practice. Together, these contributions underscore the need to embed profession-required competencies into accounting programs through reinforcing the value of frameworks in preparing students not only to recite accounting standards but to become a more well-rounded person.

Faith Competency Project: Foundational Competencies Framework for Aspiring CPAs

This paper outlines a Faith Competency Project that can be utilized in various ways in accounting courses to teach students about the professional skills required, as well as to incorporate a faith discussion. This paper uses the Foundational Competencies Framework for Aspiring CPAs in its curriculum through use of a competency project (AICPA, 2025). This Framework was developed to describe the skills that a recent graduate would need to develop to be successful in any accounting career path (AICPA, 2025). The Framework includes two categories: technical competencies and professional competencies (AICPA, 2025). This project will focus on only professional competencies, which include ethical behavior, critical thinking, collaboration, self-management and continuous learning, communication, and business acumen (AICPA, 2025). This paper fills a gap in the research by connecting the professional competencies noted by the accounting profession to the Bible. This connection will enable students to learn about what is required for their future careers through a Biblical lens.

In this project, the instructor can discuss the importance of acting ethically in a business setting, explain the AICPA leadership competencies (AICPA, 2025) and connect them to relevant biblical passages. The first leadership competency is ethical behavior, which focuses on one's ability to follow relevant professional codes of conduct, acting in an ethical way in a business setting, and explaining why ethics are important for protecting society (AICPA, 2025). One Scripture that pertains to these considerations is Matthew 5:1-12 (English Standard Bible, 2001/2008). These verses discuss the Beatitudes, which provide ethical guidance for Christians on how they should act, such as desiring to pursue righteousness and striving to be merciful, pure, and peaceful. Another Scripture that can be applied is that of Matthew 22:36-40. These verses suggest that one must first love God and then love thy neighbor, which meets the requirements for all the Ten Commandments. With these verses, students can discuss how the situation relates to the accounting framework and their future careers.

The second competency is critical thinking (AICPA, 2025). Critical thinking encompasses being able to clearly articulate a question, evaluate the data available relevant to the question being asked, apply a thinking process to decision-making, evaluate the alternatives, and communicate the informed solution to the question (AICPA, 2025). Scripture that can be referenced for this competency is Acts 17:10-12. These verses discuss how the Berean Jews applied critical thinking skills to what Paul was teaching in the synagogue to be sure what Paul spoke about was true. These actions led many to believe in Jesus. They were able to ask questions about Paul's teachings, evaluate the teaching based on the data in the Scriptures, and communicate their findings to lead others to believe. Another example comes from Daniel 1:8-20. Daniel employed critical thinking skills with his discussion with the guard to allow him to eat in a way to follow God's law in Babylon. He was able to communicate effectively with the guard, provide a process for the guard to follow to a specific eating plan, compare its effectiveness to those not on the eating plan, and communicate the findings of the eating plan at the end.

The third competency is collaboration (AICPA, 2025). Collaboration is about working with a variety of others and knowing when to lead versus follow (AICPA, 2025). One example of this is Moses and Aaron in Exodus 4:14-16. Moses was afraid to speak, so God made Aaron his spokesperson. Moses was often the leader of the Israelites, but he did not always hold the leadership role; instead, with Aaron as his spokesperson, they had to work together. Another example is seen in the early church, as described in Acts 2:42-47. The early church included people from diverse backgrounds who shared everything. They comprised people from diverse backgrounds who shared their possessions, met together, and praised God. While different, they were connected through a common belief in Jesus. Finally, another example is how Jesus sent out the disciples in pairs as discussed in Mark 6:6-12. These early disciples collaborated to spread the gospel throughout the villages, highlighting the importance of Christians working together.

The fourth competency includes self-management and continuous learning (AICPA, 2025). Self-management is about knowing how actions impact other people, how to respond to others based on their needs, and how to strengthen relationships (AICPA, 2025). One example of this is Abigail's response to David in 1 Samuel 25, which aimed to prevent the bloodshed related to her husband Nabal's actions. Abigail understood how Nabal's actions would lead David to react negatively to harm those connected to Nabal. She also knew how to respond to David to prevent this bloodshed. She was able to strengthen the relationship with David and even became his wife after Nabal's death. Another example is Jesus washing the disciples' feet. In John 13:1-16, Jesus taught the disciples a lesson on how to serve others by taking on the role of a servant and washing their feet. In this case, he was able to take an action that impacted the disciples and provided them with a picture of how to respond to others to strengthen relationships. For example, Jesus' lesson to take on a servant role can be applied in teaching accounting students that servant leadership and implementing self-management skills assist when working with clients from diverse backgrounds.

Continuous learning underscores the importance of lifelong learning in all competencies (AICPA, 2025). Scripture includes many examples of continuous learning. For example, Moses was required to learn over his lifetime as he moved from becoming Pharaoh's son to shepherding in the desert to leading the Israelites to the Promised Land, as described in much of the Pentateuch. In Exodus 33:13, Moses asks God for wisdom, even after the Israelites had escaped Egypt. Another example includes the disciples. In various verses, Jesus used parables to teach the crowd but then provided more explanation to his disciples. Examples include the Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13 and the Parable of the Lost Sheep in Matthew 18. The disciples continued to learn how to follow Christ after his resurrection (Acts 1:6-8).

The fifth competency is communication (AICPA, 2025). Effective communication requires active listening to understand others, proper delivery tailored to the audience, and the choice of language that is most effective. An example of this would be the telling of the Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13:1-23. In these verses, Jesus told a parable to the crowd. Later, he gave more details to the disciples to help them understand why he spoke in parables and described the meaning of the parable. He explained that he was able to discuss more with the disciples because they were more willing to listen. Jesus understood how different groups interpreted and understood his messages and would tailor the message to each audience in a way that was most effective. Another example is Barnabas, who was noted as an encourager in Acts 11:22-24. Barnabas was able to communicate in an uplifting way to the new believers, helping them maintain their faith amid persecution.

The sixth competency is business acumen (AICPA, 2025). This competency suggests that new graduates need to learn to evaluate a business in the context of the broader environment, including its related industry, its geopolitical region, and the overall economy (AICPA, 2025).

Accounting professionals should also know the importance of strategies, goals, and objectives in business performance as well as the role the individual professional plays in developing the objectives (AICPA, 2025). Examples of business acumen in the Bible come from Joseph's ability to plan for years of famine (Genesis 41:41-57), Nehemiah's role to lead others in repairing Jerusalem's walls in fifty-two days (Nehemiah 6:15), and Abraham's management over his possessions, especially when deciding how to resolve the conflict with Lot (Genesis 13). Paul also showed business acumen with his tent-making business that supported his missionary work (Acts 18:3). The summary of the competencies with related Scripture references can be found in Table 1.

For students in Christian accounting programs, the AICPA framework serves as a complementary structure to biblically grounded virtues such as ethical behavior, critical thinking, collaboration, self-management and continuous learning, communication, and business acumen. When coupled with a faith-informed worldview, these competencies not only reinforce technical and interpersonal effectiveness but also cultivate moral discernment, leadership humility, and relational wisdom. This integrated approach fosters the development of accountants who are professionally competent, ethically resilient, and equipped to make meaningful contributions to both organizational success and societal well-being.

Potential Applications

This project can be applied in various ways in the accounting curriculum. This project presents a valuable approach to add faith integration to a discussion board setting. Another option would be to divide up the competencies and have groups make a short presentation on each one. If someone had one class for these presentations, the instructor could highlight the importance of these skills, as identified by Butler et al. (2021), and connect the skills to the Bible. One may also consider assigning students to compare and contrast individuals from the Bible who showed an AICPA competency with others who did not display the competency.

Classes that have potential for this project would be an internship course, an accounting professionalism course, and an accounting ethics course. Students often do not see the value of paying for credit with an accounting internship course, and creating the curriculum can be tricky (McKnight & Watson, 2017). Instead of presenting one large presentation or paper at the end of the course, these required competencies can be discussed throughout the internship. This would enable students to better understand what they are learning in the internship beyond technical knowledge. An example of a prompt for an internship class that could be used for each discussion post is found in Appendix A with a related rubric in Table 2 (based on a 1,000-point course).

Alternative Ideas

This project is very flexible. For example, it could be similarly applied with a different framework, such as those for marketing (American Marketing Association (AMA), 2021), finance (Chartered Financial Analyst Institute (CFA), n.d.), or the US Office of Personnel Management (OPM, n.d.). For example, the AMA framework for marketing requires essential capabilities, which include communication, leadership, critical thinking, collaboration, adaptability, creativity, innovation, influence, and emotional intelligence. The CFA framework for finance suggests personal and business skills beyond technical skills, including collaboration, communication, curiosity, emotional intelligence, leadership, and personal effectiveness. There is an overlap among these business frameworks, allowing for easy transitions for different business disciplines.

Additionally, numerous examples can be found in the Bible. Instead of assigning Bible verses, the instructor can prompt students to find their own connections, as shown in the example in Appendix 1. This action would enable students to think more about Scripture and make connections themselves. Alternatively, the instructor could require different Bible readings to help prepare students for discussions. This project has the flexibility to fit into a variety of accounting courses and modalities in a format that works well for a particular course.

Conclusion

The theme *"Illuminating the Marketplace: Carrying the Light of Christ in a Secular World"* underscores the importance of preparing students to engage in professional environments with both technical expertise and spiritual conviction. Faith integration in accounting education begins with a theological foundation grounded in virtues such as accountability, a faith-informed worldview, integrity, and stewardship. These principles serve as a compass for decision-making, considering today's complex and secular workplace environments.

This paper presents a method for incorporating a project that helps students succeed in a secular workplace, equipping them with the needed skills grounded in Scripture. For example, the accounting profession requires new graduates to have strong communication skills. The employer market requires these skills. The project leverages market-driven skills and connects them to Scripture, showing a way to pursue excellence not only in work but also in faith. Developing the required skills in the accounting profession will become increasingly important with the transition to the 120-hour model, as students with less education will need to develop these competencies in a shorter timeframe than in the past, comparable to that of previous graduates.

The accounting curriculum and faith integration are most effective when pedagogical strategies not only reinforce technical competencies but also foster ethical judgment and faith-informed decision-making. In doing so, accounting programs respond directly to the theme of "…*carrying the light of Christ in a Secular World*" by preparing students to engage the profession with technical excellence, ethical clarity, and witness grounded in Christ. An example of creating this faith in connection to professional requirements is incorporating the Faith Competency Project.

Ultimately, the goal of integrating faith with accounting education is to equip graduates for professional success and to have a kingdom impact. Students who are equipped with both technical knowledge and a Christian perspective and worldview can approach organizational responsibilities, ethical dilemmas, and client interactions with moral conviction and clarity. These outcomes reflect the heart of the conference theme, *"Illuminating the Marketplace: Carrying the Light of Christ in a Secular World,"* by preparing accounting professionals to serve as both competent practitioners and faithful witnesses within secular industries.

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Table 1

Foundational Competencies Framework for Aspiring CPAs with Potential Verses

Competency	Description	Potential Scripture
Ethical Behavior	Follow the AICPA code of conduct Maintain consistent ethics in business Describe the importance of ethics in protecting society	Matthew 5:1-12 Matthew 22:36-40
Critical Thinking	Discussion organizational challenges and questions Evaluate relevant data (quantitative and qualitative) Make decisions through critical thinking process Analyze alternative solutions or responses Present informed decision based on critical thinking process	Acts 17:10-12 Daniel 1:8-20
Collaboration	Work with various stakeholders to achieve innovative solutions Adapt to/from a leadership or team member role based on the situation Facilitate discussions to reach mutual agreements Work to build a diverse and inclusive team	Exodus 4:14-16 Acts 2:42-47 Mark 6:6-12
Self-management and Continuous Learning	Understand how your actions impact others Know how to respond based on others' needs Strengthen relationships to achieve goals Strive for lifelong learning for professional competencies	1 Samuel 25 John 13:1-16 Exodus 33:13 Matthew 13 Matthew 18 Acts 1:6
Communication	Be an active listener to understand information from others Adjust delivery of information depending on the audience Communicate effectively with either technical or plain language where needed.	Matthew 13:1-23 Acts11:22-24
Business Acumen	Analyze a company's connection to the broader environment where it operates Understand the impact of creating business strategies, goals, and objectives Know how individual impacts the business objectives	Genesis 41:41-57 Nehemiah 6:15 Genesis 13 Acts 18:3

Note. Descriptions summarized from the Foundational Competencies Framework for Aspiring CPAs (AICPA, 2025). Bible verses from English Standard Version (2001/2008).

Table 2

Potential Rubric for Internship Discussions

Competency Discussions: Collaboration	**Potential Points**
Initial Post:	
Internship Experience	
Describe collaboration in own words.	5
Describe the importance of this collaboration in your internship. Do you need to use this skill regularly? What is expected of you?	5
Evaluate your current collaboration skills. How would you need to improve if you were hired full-time?	5
List 2 strengths and 2 weaknesses related to your collaboration skills.	5
Faith Integration	
Find a Scripture reference that provides an example of how someone used collaboration.	5
Provide two lessons you learned from this Scripture about how to better improve your collaboration skills.	5
Plan of Action	
List two actions of how you can improve in collaboration through the rest of the internship.	5
Two Replies	
Note something similar to your internship (2.5 points per reply)	5
Note something that is very different from your internship (2.5 points per reply)	5
List another action each student could take to improve (2.5 points per reply)	5
Total Points	**50**

Appendix

Discussion Example for Internship Course

Internship Experience: Relate collaboration to your internship.

- Describe/define collaboration in your own words.
- What role does collaboration play in your internship?
    - Is collaboration important? Do you need to use collaboration on a regular basis? What is expected of you related to collaboration?
- Evaluate your skill level for collaboration. How would you need to improve this skill if you were hired full-time?
- List two strengths and two weaknesses related to collaboration.

Faith Integration: Connect your faith to collaboration.

- Find a Scripture reference that provides an example of how someone used collaboration.
- Provide two lessons you learned from this Scripture about how you can improve your collaboration skills.

Plan of Action: List two actions to improve your collaboration skills throughout the rest of the internship.

Replies (2): In each of your replies, discuss something similar and something different from your experience, and list another action that the student could take to improve his/her collaboration skills.

Biblical and Economic Insights into Tariffs

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Abstract

With President Trump's return to the White House, tariffs have become a major topic of conversation in the news. This paper explores the question, "What should Christians think about tariffs?" by exploring biblical and economic insights into tariffs. To do so, the paper first examines the economics of tariffs, including the impact on trade, the implications of tariffs as taxes, tariffs and cronyism, and the impact of tariffs on the poor. Biblical insights are integrated into the discussion. The paper then looks at the positives of tariffs, including protecting strategic capabilities and promoting a level playing field for competition. The paper concludes with practical suggestions for Christian professors and students to help them approach tariffs from a biblical perspective and carry the light of Christ in the business world.

Keywords: economics of tariffs, biblical insights into tariffs, tariffs as taxes, tariffs and cronyism, tariffs and the poor, tariffs and protectionism, strategic implications of tariffs

Biblical and Economic Insights into Tariffs

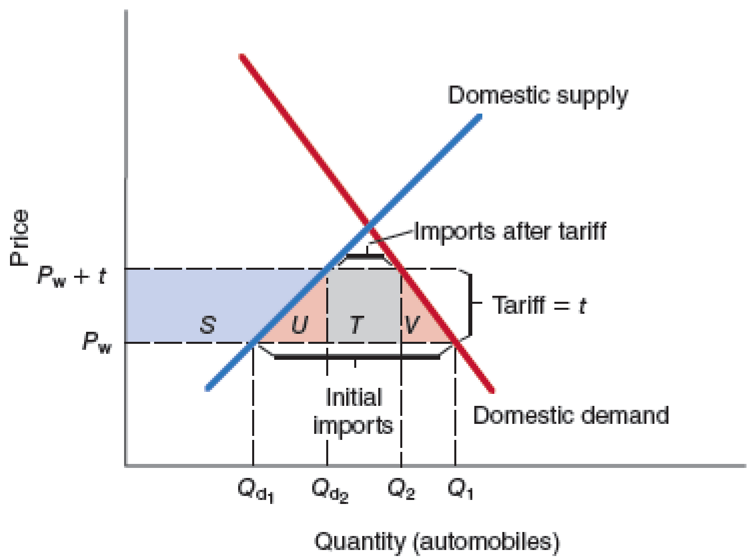
As a finance and economics professor, one of the questions that I have been asked frequently since the re-election of President Trump is, "What do you think about tariffs?" The first few times I was asked this question, I responded in an economically rational way: "tariffs are bad for the economy; they reduce trade and raise prices." Upon reflection, however, two more questions came to mind: (1) What does the Bible say about tariffs, and (2) Are there any good arguments in favor of tariffs? As Christian professors, we have a responsibility to help our students navigate complicated issues—such as tariffs—from a Christian worldview, carrying the light of Christ in a secular world. The purpose of this paper is to examine not only economic insights into tariffs, but also biblical insights, with the goal of furthering our ability to help our students and others who look to us as Christian professors to understand the tariff-happy world of the Trump administration. To do so, the paper first examines the economics of tariffs, including the impact on trade, the implications of tariffs as taxes, tariffs and cronyism, and the impact of tariffs on the poor. Biblical insights are integrated into the discussion. The paper then looks at some positives of tariffs, including protecting strategic capabilities and promoting a level playing field for competition. The paper concludes with practical suggestions for professors and students to help them approach tariffs from a biblical perspective and carry the light of Christ in the business world.

The Economics of Tariffs

Tariffs are "duties imposed by a government on imported or in some countries exported goods" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). A tariff is a tax, and although the Constitution empowers Congress the right to levy taxes (U.S. Constitution, art. 1, §8), Congress has delegated some of this power to the Executive Branch through Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act of 1962 (which allows the President to impose tariffs for national security purposes) and Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974 (which allows the President to impose tariffs due to unfair trade practices) (Carney, 2024). As an example of the economics of tariffs, Figure 1 shows graphically the impact of an import tariff on automobiles.

Figure 1

Import Tariff on Automobiles



Source: Gwartney et al., 2022

Figure 1 shows the domestic demand and supply curves for automobiles, which results in an equilibrium price above the world market price (P_w). With free trade and no tariffs, the world equilibrium price is P_w and the equilibrium quantity is Q_1, resulting in a substantial level of imports ($Q_1 – Q_{d1}$), with Q_{d1} representing the level of domestic production with free trade and no tariffs. The government then decides to impose a tariff (t) on the importation of automobiles. This increases the price to the consumer to (P_w + t), resulting in a decreased equilibrium quantity (Q_2), an increase in domestic production to Q_{d2}, and a reduction in imports to ($Q_2 – Q_{d2}$). The shaded area *S* represents gains to producers from the tariff, while *T* represents tax revenue. Areas *U* and *V* represent deadweight losses to society from the tariff (Gwartney et al., 2022).

There are several implications of Figure 1. With tariffs, a lower volume of trade occurs than with free markets. Due to the higher price with tariffs, consumers purchase less of a good, so consumers lose with tariffs. The cost of tariffs is added to other supply-chain costs, resulting in increased prices for end users (Contractor, 2025). Domestic producers, however, benefit from the tariff, and the government generally receives more tax revenues, although the reduction in overall economic activity mitigates those revenues. Because the overall level of economic activity is lower with tariffs than without, there is a deadweight loss to society along with losses imposed on foreign producers and workers from the tax.

The Impact on Trade

Tariffs negatively affect the economy by impeding free trade. When trade is free, the Law of Comparative Advantage operates to the advantage of society, as argued by Ricardo (1817):

> the availability of goods and services of both of two trading nations could be increased if each country specialised in the products on which they had a relative advantage. If each country did this and imported goods in areas where they were relatively inefficient, the total amount of output available for both countries would be larger than if each country produced everything themselves. International trade was not a zero-sum game. Trade can make both countries richer. (Ricardo, 1817, as cited by Malkiel, 2025, para. 3-4)

Tariffs reduce the benefits of trade and the effects of comparative advantage by restricting the volume of trade; fewer trade transactions take place than would with no tariffs. The Bible speaks to the benefits of free trade. For example, Ezekiel's prophecy against Tyre—the "trading center of the world"—speaks of the wealth that "gateway to the sea" had gained through trade (*New Living Translation*, 1196/2015, Ezekiel 27:2). Tyre had extensive trade with Tarshish, Greece, Tubal, Meshech, Beth-togarmah, Dedan, Syria, Israel, Helbon, Zahar, Kedar, and others (Ezekiel 27:12-25). Trade made Tyre wealthy but also increased the wealth of its trading partners. Ezekiel 27:33 notes that "The merchandise you traded satisfied the desires of many nations. Kings at the ends of the earth were enriched by your trade." In Scripture, active international trade is associated with a healthy economy (1 Kings 4:20 – 5:18; 9:26-27; 10:14-29). Free trade increases the wealth of all, since trade only occurs when both parties believe that they will be better off if trade occurs. Tariffs reduce the volume of trade and thereby decrease the wealth gained through trade.

It is relatively early to estimate the impact of the new Trump tariffs, especially given the court battles surrounding them. However, data is available on the impact of the 2018 Trump administration tariffs. Amiti et al. (2019) studied the impact of the 2018 tariff increases. They found that by December 2018, import tariffs imposed an additional $3.2 billion in taxes and $1.4 billion in deadweight costs to society. They also estimated that the tariffs added one percent to the price of manufacturing in the United States. In addition, Amiti et al. (2019) estimated that $165 billion in trade would be redirected if the tariffs were to continue.

Regarding the second Trump administration tariffs, in February 2025, the Tax Foundation estimated that the tariffs would reduce U.S. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 0.4% over the next 10 years (York, 2025). The tariffs could raise tax revenues by $1.2 trillion over the next ten years, which equates to a tax burden of $830 per household in 2025. The Tax Foundation also estimated a potential loss of 344,000 full-time jobs in the U.S. (York, 2025). Lost jobs are one good example of the deadweight loss to society caused by tariffs.

Implications of Tariffs as Taxes

As mentioned earlier, a tariff is a tax. According to Tucker et al. (2017), taxes, including tariffs, are involuntary transactions; such transactions fail to promote peaceful relations among people and are contrary to God's creation of humankind in his image (Genesis 1:28). Writing in the *Journal of Biblical Integration in Business*, Tucker et al. (2017) explain:

> Because the transaction is involuntary, the coerced may become resentful and bitter. Rather than having a choice about how their money is used, he or she easily gives in to resentment

> and, on occasion, outright rebellion against those making the decisions to coerce taxes out of the taxpayers. (Tucker et al., 2017, p. 10)

Taxes are not free-market transactions, although they can arise out of free-market transactions; the taxes themselves are byproducts of market transactions. This is especially true of tariffs, the costs of which are built into the supply chain. The choice to pay the tax is not usually visible to the consumer; choosing to purchase the item is also choosing to pay the tax.

A tariff is a tax. The Bible has little to say specifically about tariffs. But Scripture has several things to say about taxes which are applicable to tariffs. First, Christians are required to pay taxes that apply to them. Romans 13:6-7 says,

> Pay your taxes, too, for these same reasons. For government workers need to be paid. They are serving God in what they do. Give to everyone what you owe them: Pay your taxes and government fees to those who collect them, and give respect and honor to those who are in authority.

Because tariffs are hidden taxes, the only way to avoid them is to refuse to purchase the product. But tariffs also increase the temptation to avoid taxes by way of black markets (Accounting Insights Team, 2025; "What are the dynamics," n.d.). Given that the United States only has about 26,000 officers in the Department of Homeland Security to enforce customs duties at national borders and seaports and airports, it is likely that international smuggling will increase as tariffs increase (Frum, 2025). Given that black markets are illegal and the Bible calls for fairness and honesty in trade (Leviticus 25:14, Proverbs 11:1), it is difficult to find a biblical justification for tariffs. The Bible's requirement that Christians submit to the governing authorities (Romans 13:1-5) appear to rule out black markets as a tactic for avoiding tariffs.

If taxes become oppressive, people may rebel against them. The Northern Kingdom of Israel's separation from the Southern Kingdom of Judah was largely prompted by King Rehoboam's unwise plans to increase the already burdensome taxes of his father Solomon to oppressive levels (1 Kings 12). When confronted with his subjects' desire for lower taxes, King Rehoboam's older advisors—who had advised his father— recommended that he lower the tax burden. But King Rehoboam's younger advisors recommended that he increase taxes; this led to ten of the 12 tribes of Israel breaking off and forming their own government.

The assumption that people will automatically pay higher taxes cannot be supported either economically or biblically. Tariffs increase taxes, but since tariffs result in a lower overall volume of transactions, less tax revenue is raised than would appear to be the case with a static analysis (which assumes that the volume of transactions does not change as a result of the tariff). In extreme cases, such as in the time of Rehoboam, tax increases may result in a rebellion and a catastrophic reduction in tax revenue. In a democratic society, that "rebellion" could come about through peaceful elections, which constitute a serious change of power; tariffs were a factor in several presidential elections in the 1832-1860 period (Moore, 2011).

One fascinating thing about tariffs is that they appear to shift taxes onto others. For example, a tariff on goods imported from China appears to be a tax imposed on Chinese producers, not on U.S. consumers. The burden of a tax, however, is not determined by the statutory incidence of the tax, but rather on the supply and demand characteristics of the market for that specific product. This almost always means that the actual burden of the tax is shared by the producers and the consumers and that consumers will pay much of the cost of a tariff on imported goods.

Tariffs are one example of attempting to tax those outside of the domestic country; the desire to tax others appears to be a normal human tendency. Matthew 17:24-27 provides an example of this:

> On their arrival in Capernaum, the collectors of the Temple tax[a] came to Peter and asked him, "Doesn't your teacher pay the Temple tax?"

> "Yes, he does," Peter replied. Then he went into the house.
>
> But before he had a chance to speak, Jesus asked him, "What do you think, Peter? Do kings tax their own people or the people they have conquered?"
>
> "They tax the people they have conquered," Peter replied.
>
> "Well, then," Jesus said, "the citizens are free! However, we don't want to offend them, so go down to the lake and throw in a line. Open the mouth of the first fish you catch, and you will find a large silver coin. Take it and pay the tax for both of us.

In the Roman empire, some taxes were imposed on non-citizens while the citizens were exempt from those taxes (The Roman Empire, n.d.). Jesus had Peter pay both of their temple taxes even though they were clearly citizens of the Kingdom of God and should have, in a manner similar to Roman citizens, been exempt from the temple tax; this reinforces the biblical injunction to pay taxes. But this incident also shows that Jesus recognized the tendency of governments to attempt to tax entities other than their own citizens, of which tariffs are a great example.

Tariffs and Cronyism

With tariffs come the temptation of and opportunity for cronyism, where companies collude with government officials to obtain favored status. Corporate financial success becomes dependent on favoritism rather than rule of law and the free market (Whelchel, 2013). When companies use lobbying to obtain protection or favor from the government, it unfairly creates winners and losers (Bradley, 2012). Scripture rejects favoritism and cronyism (Proverbs 22:16, 24:23, Romans 2:11, James 3:17). Adam Smith argued that whenever any subsidy exists (such as a tariff), it is best to assume that cronyism also exists (Brubaker, 2018). For example, Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act—the regulation that allows the executive branch to impose tariffs for national security purposes—includes a process for importers to apply to be excluded from specific tariffs

(Carney, 2024). This process provides opportunities for lobbying and influence peddling and cronyism.

When "government intervenes in economic life"—as with tariffs—"'crony capitalism' is a problem—and the more widespread the intervention, the more widespread the problem (Brubaker, 2018, p. 13). "Smith's insight is that a government of limited and enumerated powers offers the least opportunity for corruption" (Brubaker, 2018, p. 13). Instead, when companies can lobby for tariffs that protect them from competition or against tariffs that negatively impact them, the free market is undermined. Tariffs that result from cronyism are not only "unjust in the sense that they privilege a small group at the expense of the public generally, but they always divert capital investment from more productive to less productive uses, retarding economic growth" (Brubaker, 2018, p. 5).

When tariffs become a policy focus, they "set off a bonanza of trade lobbying and lawyering and create a fertile environment for cronyism and corruption" (Carney, 2024, p. 2). During the first Trump administration, tariffs generated a trade lobbying boom; the number of trade lobbying clients increased more than 50% over the 2016-2019 period (Carney, 2025). According to Carney (2024), President Trump believes that "ambiguity and unpredictability give him an advantage in international negotiations" but it also increases lobbying by domestic companies (p. 5).

Cronyism encourages the inefficient use of resources and is biblically suspect. Crony capitalism leads to concerns regarding fairness, equity, and favoritism. The Bible is clear that favoritism is contrary to God's intent. According to James 3:17,

> But the wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and the fruit of good deeds. It shows no favoritism and is always sincere.

Wise believers should avoid favoritism. Malachi condemned Israel's religious leaders for showing favoritism in how they carried out the Lord's requirements (Malachi 2:9). Proverbs 24:43 declares, "It is wrong to show favoritism when passing judgment." Scripture declares that God himself shows no favoritism (Romans 2:11, Acts 10:34). James condemned his readers for showing partiality:

> My dear brothers and sisters, how can you claim to have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ if you favor some people over others? For example, suppose someone comes into your meeting dressed in fancy clothes and expensive jewelry, and another comes in who is poor and dressed in dirty clothes. If you give special attention and a good seat to the rich person, but you say to the poor one, "You can stand over there, or else sit on the floor"—well, doesn't this discrimination show that your judgments are guided by evil motives? (James 2:1-4)

The Bible's condemnation of favoritism does not mean that tariffs in themselves are evil, no more than taxes in themselves are evil. Tariffs enhance the opportunity to negotiate for protection or exemption, with cronyism as a result. According to Whelchel (2013), "the market has no self-correction mechanism for cronyism, which is why it has such a negative, long-term effect. This is a growing problem that is damaging the free-market economy…and restricting the opportunity for …citizens to flourish" ("Cronyism and the Free Market" section, para. 2).

Impact on the Poor

Tariffs have a more-than-proportional impact on the poor (Perry, 2017; Russ et al., 2017). Since lower-income individuals spend a higher percentage of their income on goods than do higher-income individuals, tariffs affect the poor—especially women and single parents—disproportionately (Russ et al., 2017). Tariffs raise the cost of goods in a disproportional manner, which affects the poor in the U. S. Tariffs also reduce the volume of trade, which impacts workers in other countries. The Old Testament prophet Amos condemned those who "rob the poor and trample down the needy" (Amos 8:4), but hurting the poor is one of the unintended consequences of tariffs.

The Bible often addresses treatment of the poor. God's people were commanded to leave some of the harvest to be gleaned by the poor (Leviticus 19:10, 23:22) and to give generously to the poor (Deuteronomy 15:10-11). They were told to "never take advantage of poor and destitute laborers" (Deuteronomy 24:14). They were required to "pay them their wages each day before sunset because they are poor and are counting on it" (Deuteronomy 24:15). The Psalmist declared, "Oh, the joys of those who are kind to the poor! The Lord rescues them when they are in trouble" (Psalm 41:1). God's people were told to "Give justice to the poor and the orphan; uphold the rights of the oppressed and the destitute" (Psalm 82:3) and warned that "A person who gets ahead by oppressing the poor or by showering gifts on the rich will end in poverty" (Proverbs 22:16). Since the Bible encourages good treatment of the poor, and since tariffs disproportionately impact the poor, believers should care about the negative effects of tariffs on the poor.

Positives of Tariffs

While there are many negative aspects of tariffs, there are also some positives. Even the father of free-market economics, Adam Smith, allowed that there are some circumstances under which tariffs may make good sense: national defense, the encouragement of domestic industry, and to help create a level playing field for competition (Smith, 1981). Teixeira (2025) suggests four different rationales for the adoption of tariffs: protection of infant industries, national security (similar to Smith's national defense), environmental protection, and commercial retaliation. The following sections focus on two of these: national security and creating a level playing field. Why not also discuss protection of infant industries and environmental protection? Teixeira (2025) posits that protection of infant industries may be justified in developing economies, but not in established ones, and since the focus of this paper is on the Trump administration's tariffs in the United States—a developed country—this topic is not covered. And while environmental protection may be a valid reason for tariffs, it does not appear to be a focus of the Trump administration's tariffs.

National Security and Tariffs

Adam Smith agreed that tariffs might be justified "when some particular sort of industry is necessary for the defense of the country" (Smith, 1981, p. 463). Smith "admits that this raises domestic prices to some extent and reduces exports as well but concludes that "defence, however, is of much more importance than opulence" (Smith, 1981 as quoted by Brubaker, 2018, p. 9). Currently, U. S. supply chains for defense products depend heavily on imported products and materials. In 2022, the Department of Defense identified supply-chain challenges in four areas: (1) Kinetic capabilities, such as missile systems and energy weapons, (2) Energy storage and systems, (3) Castings and forgings, and (4) Microelectronics (Securing defense-critical supply chains, 2022). To address these challenges, the Department of Defense report recommended building domestic production capabilities; mitigating foreign ownership, control, or influence; and engaging with partners and allies.

The defense supply chain is vulnerable to hostile action by enemies of the U. S., China in particular (Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2023). According to Danielsson (2023), the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the dependence of the U. S. on semiconductors from Taiwan; that dependence has massive implications for national security:

> Semiconductor supply chain disruptions could also have severe repercussions for U.S. national security and U.S. critical infrastructure. Access to cutting-edge semiconductor technologies is a key driver for the weaponry that the U.S. military needs for its defensive and offensive capabilities. Currently, Taiwan and South Korea account for 100% of installed capacity to mass produce high-end semiconductors at technologies below 7 nanometers (nm), which leaves the supply to the U.S. military vulnerable. In addition, semiconductors serve as crucial components in the communications networks and transportation systems, among others, that underpin U.S. critical national infrastructure. (Danielsson, 2023, p. 1)

Tariffs are one way to encourage domestic manufacturing of defense-critical components. According to Gereffi et al. (2021), protection of pivotal sectors such as cyber defense, communications, and semiconductors may be critical to national security. Tariffs can help make strategic and defense sectors less vulnerable and stimulate investment in strategic industries (Contractor, 2025; Bacchus, 2022). But tariffs can also challenge critical technologies developed through international cooperation with allies by increasing prices of and reducing demand for those products (Santacreu, 2025). And Klomp (2025), in an examination of the impact of the 2018 tariffs on steel and aluminum, found that those tariffs may have hurt rather than helped U. S. defense contractors.

Access to strategic defense technology is important to national defense, as the Israelites found out during the early days of Saul's reign as king:

> There were no blacksmiths in the land of Israel in those days. The Philistines wouldn't allow them for fear they would make swords and spears for the Hebrews. So whenever the Israelites needed to sharpen their plowshares, picks, axes, or sickles, they had to take them to a Philistine blacksmith. The charges were as follows: a quarter of an ounce of silver for sharpening a plowshare or a pick, and an eighth of an ounce for sharpening an ax or making the point of an ox goad. So on the day of the battle none of the people of Israel had a sword or spear, except for Saul and Jonathan. (1 Samuel 13:19-22)

When an enemy country controls another country's weapons supply or critical defense components, it is very difficult for that country to provide strategic defense capabilities. Tariffs are one potential way to mitigate that issue.

Creation of a Level Playing Field

On April 2, 2025, the Trump White House declared, "For the first time in decades, the United States will see fair trade as President Donald J. Trump announces tariffs to level the playing field for American workers and businesses (White House, 2025, para. 1). The White House communication cites several studies examining the impact of tariffs during President Trump's first term (Ferry, 2024; United States International Trade Commission, 2023; Scott & Hersh, 2022). Apparently, President Trump—who holds a bachelor's degree in Economics from the Wharton School—believes that tariffs are an effective instrument to help create a level playing field for international competition.

China is one clear example of the need to create a level playing field. According to the Office of the United States Trade Representative (2018),

> China has implemented laws, policies, and practices and has taken actions related to intellectual property, innovation, and technology that may encourage or require the transfer of American technology and intellectual property to enterprises in China or that may otherwise negatively affect American economic interests. These laws, policies, practices, and actions may inhibit United States exports, deprive United States citizens of fair remuneration for their innovations, divert American jobs to workers in China, contribute to our trade deficit with China, and otherwise undermine American manufacturing, services, and innovation. (p. 4)

The Trump administration believes that Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974 tariffs, which are designed to retaliate against countries with unfair trade policies, provide one way to work toward a level playing field. The assumption is that tariffs will make domestic production more feasible and lead to increased domestic production (Contractor, 2025). According to Adam Smith (1981), "The problem is how to determine if retaliation will produce repeal or lead to an escalation of the dispute" (p. 468). Quoting Smith, Brubaker (2018, p. 10) adds, "This is a judgment not of the 'science of a legislator, whose deliberations ought to be governed by general principles' but rather relates to the 'skill of that insidious and crafty animal, vulgarly called a statesman or politician, whose councils are directed by the momentary fluctuations of affairs.'" President Trump is convinced that he can use tariffs and his negotiating skills effectively to help ensure a level playing field. Time will tell if he is right; there are many companies—including Apple, Intel, Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company, Samsung, and LG—actively considering moving production back to the United States to avoid tariffs (Moore, 2025).

Creating a level playing field is consistent with biblical principles. For example, the Bible encourages equal treatment of the rich and poor. In the Old Testament law, God commands believers to be fair and impartial. "Do not twist justice in legal matters by favoring the poor or being partial to the rich and powerful. Always judge people fairly" (Leviticus 19:15). Exodus 23:3 commands, "do not slant your testimony in favor of a person just because that person is poor." God's concern for a level playing field also is found in the Old Testament wisdom literature. Proverbs 22:22-23 encourages a level playing field between the rich and poor: "Don't rob the poor just because you can, or exploit the needy in court. For the Lord is their defender. He will ruin anyone who ruins them." And the New Testament illustrates a level playing field when it comes to giving and receiving, as the Apostle Paul explained in 2 Corinthians 8:13-14:

> Of course, I don't mean your giving should make life easy for others and hard for yourselves. I only mean that there should be some equality. Right now you have plenty and can help those who are in need. Later, they will have plenty and can share with you when you need it. In this way, things will be equal.

While the Bible does not discuss creating a level playing field for international trade or tariffs, its teaching concerning a level playing field for different economic classes and for charitable giving implies that a level playing field is a desirable concept for international trade.

Discussion: What to Think about Tariffs

With President Trump in the White House, tariffs are likely to be an ongoing topic of discussion for the next few years. As Christian professors and students, then, what should we think or teach about tariffs? From an economic perspective, tariffs are generally bad policy. Tariffs result in a lower volume of trade, which hampers the economy and disproportionately harms the poor. Yet tariffs have positives in terms of national security and providing a level playing field for international trade.

Some will approach the topic based on their personal feelings—positive or negative—about President Trump. While President Trump appears to love being the center of attention, it does little good to focus on him. Christians are called to submit to the governing authorities (Romans 13:1) and to pray for those in positions of authority (1 Timothy 2:1-2):

> I urge you, first of all, to pray for all people. Ask God to help them; intercede on their behalf, and give thanks for them. Pray this way for kings and all who are in authority so that we can live peaceful and quiet lives marked by godliness and dignity.

When Christians pray for government leaders, it increases the likelihood that they can "live peaceful and quiet lives." If President Trump's efforts to build a stronger U.S. economy are successful, many will benefit. Jeremiah told the Jewish exiles to "work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare" (Jeremiah 29:7). The welfare of the country is enhanced by a strong economy.

In attempting to strengthen the U.S. economy, it appears that President Trump "sees tariffs as both a tool to expand manufacturing in the United States and as leverage for negotiations with foreign governments" (Harrell, 2024, para. 2). Tariffs disrupt the economy, but President Trump seems to be willing to disrupt the economy in the short term to strengthen it in the long term. According to Harrell (2024), President Trump's willingness to disrupt the economy

> …gives him the potential to bring about the most significant changes to the international trading order since the current liberal global system arose in the early 1990s. He could reshape trade flows in ways that advance the United States' geopolitical position and strengthen its industrial base. But President Trump's disruptive nature is also a great source of risk. If he overplays his hand, he may blunder into tariff wars that do little more than hike costs for Americans. (para. 3)

Can President Trump use the threat of higher tariffs to bring about trade deals that, in the long run, result in lower tariffs? If so, will the benefits exceed the economic drawbacks of tariffs? That might make the disruption worth it in the long run.

In a similar way, the use of tariffs to address national security issues is important to the long-term prosperity of this country. Taiwan is one good example. With Taiwan in China's crosshairs, actions are needed to provide domestic alternatives to Taiwan semiconductors (Jones et al., 2023). While tariffs may contribute to mitigating these supply-chain issues, tariffs are but one component of a complicated set of issues; other actions include "incentivizing onshoring, diversifying its manufacturing base, and making key supply chains more resilient" (Danielsson, 2023, p. 1).

Conclusion

What should Christians think about tariffs? This paper proposes that the use of tariffs is not a black-and-white issue. It is true that tariffs, in general, are bad for the economy. Tariffs reduce the volume of trade, which harms almost everyone except the companies who benefit from the tariffs. Tariffs are taxes and come with the baggage associated with taxes. They are hidden taxes. Tariffs increase the opportunities for cronyism, which at its root is unbiblical. Tariffs disproportionately hurt the poor; since Christians are called to care for the poor, tariffs make that more challenging.

At the same time, tariffs can be an important tool in safeguarding national defense and critical defense-related supply chains. And tariffs may be a tool for providing a level playing field for competition, which increases the volume of trade and benefits nearly everyone other than the companies protected by tariffs.

As shown above, while the Bible has little to say about tariffs in particular, it has much to say about issues related to tariffs. The Bible speaks about the positives associated with healthy international trade. The Bible commands people to pay their taxes, and since tariffs are taxes, Christians must pay them if they buy the products on which the tariffs are levied. At the same time, the Bible warns about the dangers of imposing excessive taxes. Tariffs provide rampant opportunities for cronyism, yet the Bible teaches that Christians should avoid favoritism. The Bible warns about the dangers of enemies controlling the components needed for national security, and tariffs can be a tool to help ensure the availability of those components. And the Bible appears to endorse the concept of creating a level playing field.

The bottom line is that there are pros and cons of tariffs, and while the cons appear to outweigh the pros, the potential benefits of tariffs should not be dismissed. Christians are commanded to exercise sound judgment and discernment and to let their light shine (Proverbs 8:11-13, Matthew 5:16). Tariffs are complicated and having a better understanding both the positive and negative aspects of tariffs can help believers to illuminate the marketplace and carry the light of Christ in a secular world.

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The Entrepreneurial Paul: Seeing Theology and Ministry through the Lens of Effectuation Theory

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Abstract

This study examines Paul's life and ministry through the lens of entrepreneurial effectuation theory to explain the transformative shift in his approach to work post-conversion. Prior to the Damascus road encounter with Christ, Paul operated with a conventional, goal-driven entrepreneurial mindset, employing calculated strategies to persecute Christians. Following his Damascus Road experience, he adopted an effectuation-based framework, characterized by flexibility, resourcefulness, and reliance on available means. This transition aligns with effectuation principles such as the Bird-in-Hand (leveraging existing resources), Affordable Loss (managing risks), and Crazy Quilt (building partnerships). Paul's missionary strategy—adapting to new opportunities, rejecting self-sufficiency, and fostering collaboration—reflects this mindset. The paper explores how his Spirit-led adaptability resonates with modern entrepreneurial models, offering fresh insights into his eschatology and innovative mission tactics. By integrating theological and entrepreneurial perspectives, this analysis illuminates Paul's dynamic leadership and its relevance for contemporary ministry and entrepreneurship.

Keywords: effectuation theory, Paul, entrepreneurship, ministry, adaptability, theology, partnerships

The Entrepreneurial Paul: Seeing Theology and Ministry through the Lens of Effectuation Theory

The Damascus Road represents a radical turning point in Paul's life. It turned the chief persecutor of the nascent Christian faith into its most prolific proponent and preacher (*English Standard Version,* 2001, Acts 9:1-9, 22:6-11, 26:12-18, 1 Timothy 1:12-16). The encounter with Christ also profoundly transformed his theology and worldview. With a new Christocentric lens, he saw that the Old Testament teaches that salvation for Gentiles comes through faith in Christ, not adherence to the Law. His former zeal for Jewish tradition was redirected into a passionate mission to spread the Gospel. This study aims to highlight another less visible yet equally consequential transformation that occurred in Paul's life.

We use the lens of entrepreneurship theory to examine the entrepreneurial aspect of Paul's life. In other words, we are taking a closer look at his *modus operandi* regarding how he made decisions about the future and planned his ministry. This perspective offers unique new insights into Paul's highly effective ministry and unusual life. This paper proposes that the effectuation theory of entrepreneurship helps to explain how Paul's ministry practice radically shifted at conversion and continued to develop over time.

Entrepreneurship Theory: Conventional vs. Effectuation Perspectives

How does the entrepreneur deal with uncertainty and create a new venture? The conventional understanding sees the entrepreneur starting with a calculated predictive model that enables the entrepreneur to build a detailed value proposition paradigm to mitigate uncertainty. Without predictive data and models, the conventional approach looks at the proposed venture with suspicion because, without prediction, the outcomes are not possible to control (Liedtka, 2015; Sarasvathy, 2024).

This conventional approach is essentially a goal-driven approach. The means to achieve the intended goal may already be at hand or might need to be specially acquired to meet the goal of a product, service, or invention. Even new technological advances are factored into the predictive model (Sarasvathy, 2024). Picture a child who desires to build a red house out of Lego™. The child has all the parts for a blue house. Perhaps a little friend playing in the next room has the means to build red walls but no roof parts. Or maybe the means are only at a store or haven't even been invented yet! The red house builder is stuck. He has no chance of success until he acquires the necessary parts to meet his goal.

When we first meet Saul of Tarsus in the book of Acts, he was an intensely focused and goal-driven Pharisee. His specific goal was the punishment of Christ-followers. When he was unable to attain this goal with his given means because he lacked the authority to enter the synagogues and homes to chain the followers of Christ, he asked for letters from the High Priest (Acts 9:2), and the letters became his means. And with those in hand, he set out on his mission with a reasonable expectation that his goal would be fulfilled.

Paul, the persecutor, was taking risks, adapting, collaborating, and fulfilling the characteristics of the conventional entrepreneur driven by a goal. But that all started to change into a new *modus operandi* on the road to Damascus. We say that it *began* to change rather than was *immediately* changed because we see Paul adjusting from the conventional entrepreneurial mindset to a radically different mindset over time. We refer to this new mindset as the "effectuation mindset," based on the effectuation theory in entrepreneurship studies.

Effectuation theory was born out of 45 extended think-aloud interchanges with highly successful entrepreneurs by Saras Sarasvathy. She approached the data collection with the idea that she should let subjects tell their own story rather than start with a prescribed set of questions. She spent two to four hours with each subject. Early in the data analysis phase, she began to discover a surprising trend that many of her entrepreneur interviewees expressed a negative opinion about market research. In the conventional entrepreneurship approach, market research is crucial for predicting consumer behavior, understanding competitive dynamics, and identifying market trends. She realized that entrepreneurs saw *all* predictive elements of the entrepreneurial process as highly suspect. This turned the prevailing entrepreneurial theory upside down. Instead of meticulously collecting predictive data to confirm goals and define products, these entrepreneurs relinquished control of their environment by stepping back from predetermined goals (Sarasvathy, 2024).

The highly effective entrepreneurs embraced three critical assumptions. First, the future cannot be predicted. It is fundamentally unknowable. Second, even though you may know the direction you want the enterprise to take, specifying the specific goals is impossible early in the venture. Third, when amassing data for the entrepreneurial process, it is not feasible to determine what is significant and what is not. These entrepreneurs recognized that the future is impossible to know, predict, and, most importantly, control. One respondent said, "I think predictions about the past are OK. But don't believe anyone who is predicting the future, even when they are talking about what they themselves will or won't do or want or don't want" (Sarasvathy, 2024, 1.1). With this relinquishment of control, Sarasvathy explored how effective entrepreneurs behaved and discovered rules of thumb that guide their entrepreneurial process.

The heuristics of effectuation theory embrace uncertainty. Successful entrepreneurs start by assessing the resources immediately at their disposal, such as knowledge, social networks, and financial capital, and then determine the best possible next step given these resources (Read et al., 2009; Sarasvathy, 2001). Rather than rigidly adhering to a specific goal, entrepreneurs maintain flexibility and adaptability, allowing their objectives to evolve in response to emerging circumstances. This process, often referred to as means-driven rather than goal-driven, contrasts with the traditional causation models, which emphasize careful planning toward a fixed endpoint (Dew et al., 2009). By prioritizing flexibility and improvisation, effectuation creates a more dynamic and resilient framework for understanding the entrepreneurial process, especially in unpredictable environments where change is constant (Wiltbank et al., 2006).

Studies based on Sarasvathy's research show that effectual entrepreneurs are more inclined to leverage contingencies and to view unexpected events as opportunities, thus fostering a model that is responsive rather than prescriptive (Dew et al., 2009; Fisher, 2012). Effectuation theory is transforming entrepreneurship research, as evidenced by the numerous academic studies applying its principles (Alsos et al., 2020). Based on her research, Sarasvathy proposed five heuristics of entrepreneurial effectuation:

- Bird-in-Hand Principle: Entrepreneurs begin by leveraging the resources at their immediate disposal—who they are, what they know, and whom they know—rather than waiting for ideal conditions.
- Affordable Loss Principle: Instead of aiming for high returns, they only commit resources they can afford to lose, minimizing potential downsides.
- Crazy-Quilt Principle: Effectual thinkers form partnerships and collaborate with those willing to commit, creating shared ownership in the process.
- Lemonade Principle: Entrepreneurs embrace surprises and turn unexpected events into opportunities.
- Pilot-in-the-Plane Principle: They focus on actions within their control, believing that the future is shaped by what they do rather than what they predict. This principle empowers entrepreneurs to take charge of their decisions and outcomes, emphasizing proactive agency over reliance on external predictions.

These principles reflect a mindset that values adaptability, resourcefulness, and acceptance of uncertainty. Effectual entrepreneurs embrace the future as unknowable. They build momentum not by having comprehensive plans but by creatively navigating the opportunities that emerge from their current circumstances. Let's return to the playroom where the child wants to build a red house but only has blue Lego blocks. From an effectuation point of view, the child would recognize his available resources and pivot to build something different from the intended red house, perhaps realizing that a blue fort is beftter than a red house anyway.

Paul the apostle had the characteristics of an effective entrepreneur both before and after his conversion. Before his conversion, his life is better understood through conventional entrepreneurship theories. He advanced his life along premeditated plans. He reflects on his goals in Philippians 3:4-6:

> If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

Before meeting Christ personally, his goal-driven and opportunity-seeking behavior were evident in the way he made alliances with Sadducees and meticulously carried out the work of persecution.

We might stop at this point and ask if Paul maintained any goals after the Damascus Road experience, such as eschatological expectations? Effectuation theory distinguishes between a calling and a goal. A calling refers to a life orientation rather than a road map. Think Elon Musk, who expressed the conviction that humanity needs a growing population that is becoming multi-planetary ("Elon Musk," 2018). This is a lofty calling that allows for specific goals to flex in the development of technology.

Paul had a *calling* to be an apostle to the Gentiles in order to bring about the enfolding of all people into the plan of God for the salvation of humanity (Acts 26:17, Romans 15:27, Galatians 2:7-8). But specific goals were not clearly articulated at the outset of his mission. Was his goal to convert

Jerusalem, the center of Judaism, where he had been stationed during his life as Saul, the advancing Pharisee? Was his goal to reach Jews first? Was his goal a particular type of eschatological framework?

Paul did not need a series of specific goals to aim for. His calling was enough. And the goals, such as eschatological scenarios, were flexible. Sarasvathy speaks of the relationship of goals to the means to achieve those goals:

> [It] is not that effectuators don't have goals or should not begin with clear goals. It is just that goals subserve means-driven action. When push comes to shove, effectuators are open to reshaping their goals rather than predicting and pursuing means not within their control. Put differently, effectuators are more tightly tethered to means than to goals, and more attentive to what is possible within their control than what may only be probable due to things outside their control (Sarasvathy, 2024, 2.1.1).

The stronger a person's missional calling is, the more flexible their goals become. The calling gives confidence that the means are at hand, though goals may lack certainty. The singular calling unleashes many possible goals.

I recall a ministry leader who felt a particular calling to fulfill a spiritual need in a community. To pursue the calling, this leader was convinced that specific goals needed to be set and accomplished. However, the congregation lacked the means to achieve its goals. This mismatch between goals and means frustrated the congregation. Because the leader exerted influence over the followers, they were compelled to adopt means to achieve the goals. Eventually, the goals took priority over the calling, and the ministry became inflexible, ultimately foundering. An effectual entrepreneur will consistently ask what means are available and will be open to new goals that might arise from those means. Thus, calling-centered effectual entrepreneurship emphasizes working with the means that God supplies, whereas a goal-driven approach to ministry often becomes locked into an institutional approach.

Leveraging Identity, Knowledge, and Relationship: Bird-in-Hand Principle

This leads us to the first heuristic of the effectual entrepreneur: the Bird-in-Hand Principle. Sarasvathy discovered that effective entrepreneurs start with what they already have, asking three basic questions: Who am I? What do I know? Whom do I know? In contrast to predictions about how people or markets will behave, effectuation begins with the self. Understanding "Who am I?" allows decision-makers to anchor their actions in their identity and intrinsic resources, rather than relying on external resources.

Paul's multifaceted identity—as a Jew, Pharisee, apostle, artisan, and one crucified with Christ—served as a crucial resource for his missionary endeavors. Each shapes his praxis as an entrepreneurial missionary. First, his ethnic identity is rooted in Second Temple Judaism, providing cultural fluency and scriptural depth as a Diaspora Jew. Second, his educational identity is that of a learned Pharisee (Acts 22:3; Philippians 3:5), which equips him with an extraordinary capacity to reinterpret the Scripture through a new hermeneutical perspective centered on Christ (Galatians 3:24). Third, Paul speaks of his vocational identity as an apostle 13 times. In his view, his calling as an apostle is being sent on a mission to Gentiles to witness to the resurrection by teaching, suffering, and building the church (Galatians 1:1, Romans 11:13, 1 Corinthians 9:1, 12:28, 4:9-13, Ephesians 2:20). N.T. Wright sees this apostolic role reorienting Paul's Jewishness toward universal gospel-sharing (2013). Fourth, Paul was a leatherworker by trade, which enabled him to support himself and, more importantly, connect with people across different social classes (1 Corinthians 9:20-22). Lastly, Paul's personal identity as one crucified with Christ is most clearly expressed in Galatians 2:20. Being *crucified with Christ* redefines his self-understanding as participatory in Christ's death and resurrection. Eastman (2017) argues that this kind of relational identity fuels Paul's mission, not as a fixed goal but as a dynamic resource for communal transformation.

The question of "What do I know?" evolves over time as a person's skills develop. Paul's available skills were rooted in his multifaceted identity mentioned above: knowledge of Scripture, fluency in the Greek language and culture, leatherworking expertise, and experience in travel and commerce.

When it comes to "Whom do I know?" the effectuating entrepreneur takes stock of all relationships at hand. Paul experienced a radical change in relationships that accompanied his calling by Christ on the Damascus Road. Sarasvathy qualifies the valuable relationships as those that might support the venture in contextually specific manners. Not every friend is a supporter, and vice versa. Paul had no meaningful relationships in the Christian community when he converted to Christianity. However, he soon became acquainted with Barnabas, some disciples in Damascus, and the Jerusalem Church at the outset of his converted life. Barnabas, in particular, becomes a critical relationship that launches his new entrepreneurial ministry. It was Barnabas who vouched for him when the Jerusalem church was skeptical of his conversion (Acts 9:26-27). It was also Barnabas who brought Paul from Tarsus to Antioch (Acts 11:25-26) and partnered with him on the first missionary journey (Acts 13-14). Paul's relationship with Barbanas was crucial o gain credibility and access to established Christian communities.

When applying the bird-in-hand principle to Paul's ministry, we can see that he operated based on his identity, his knowledge, and the relationships he already possessed. Paul's background as a learned Pharisee and Roman citizen, combined with his profound understanding of both Jewish and Hellenistic cultures, enabled him to effectively reach a diverse audience. He did not wait for perfect conditions but began his mission in synagogues (Acts 13:14-16) and marketplaces (17:17), adapting to each context. His partnerships with individuals like Timothy, Silas, Priscilla, and Aquila

(Romans 16:3-4) reflect a consistent use of his growing network to further his mission. Although Paul did not have gravitas in the community of Christ followers (1 Corinthians 2:1-5) or financial support for his work, he leveraged what he had. His handwork became the staple of his ministry support for the rest of his life (1 Thessalonians 2:9; Acts 28:30). Cadbury asserts that Paul labored to the end, even in Rome to pay for his lodging (Acts 28:30), "Where else did Ephrem Syrus find evidence that at Rome Paul labored with his hands? Μίσθωμα means money paid" (Cadbury, 1926, 322).

Paul used his available means as an artisan to advance his ministry daily. Philosophers often visited and taught in the shops where people worked during the day. It was the only way to have sustained conversations with those who worked for a living (Hock, 1980). A leather shop was a quiet place, ideal for conversation. Socrates, for example, often visited Simon the Shoemaker's workshop to dialogue with merchants and his pupils. While cutting and stitching leather, Paul had opportunities for extended conversations (Humfrey, 2008). Richard Ascough advances that Paul's church, known throughout Macedonia, consisted of leather workers who turned from their gods to the Living God (Ascough, 2000). This first heuristic of effectuation focuses on the mindset of understanding what one already has. The next heuristic deals with what one might lose.

To Live is Christ and to Die is Gain: Affordable Loss Principle

The second heuristic is Affordable Loss, which refers to what the entrepreneur can afford to lose and is willing to lose if the venture fails (Dew et al., 2009). It is an internal decision-making logic that guides how entrepreneurs approach risk and resource allocation by consciously defining and limiting their potential downside at each stage of the entrepreneurial process. Scholars suggest four theoretical perspectives to help explain how this principle of Affordable Loss operate in practice: (1) Loss Aversion, (2) Bootstrapting, (3) Bricolage, and (4) Affect.

First, Loss Aversion describes the psychological tendency for individuals to experience the pain of a loss more intensely than the pleasure of an equivalent gain. This tendency, shaped by factors including age, income level, and domain expertise, significantly influences how entrepreneurs assess acceptable risk thresholds (Johnson et al., 2006). Second, Bootstrapping refers to the extraordinary, often temporary, injection of personal resources at a critical junctures to keep the venture from sinking (Welter & Xheneti, 2013). Third, Bricolage is defined as highly creative or ingenious recombination of existing resources in ways that challenge conventional thinking. This practice involves recognizing and exploiting the latent potential in available means that others overlook (Steffens et al., 2010). A classic example is the cabinet maker's shop, where a maker efficiently uses a screwdriver as a hammer in such a convincing way that the shop invents a screwdriver with a hammerhead placed on the other end. Fourth, Affect refers to the positive feelings that inspire invention as the entrepreneur feels internal pleasure or receives external praise for a creative outcome. This internal pleasure creates a reinforcing cycle of motivation and progress that sustains entrepreneurial efforts (Carver, 2006). These four theoretical perspectives for viewing Affordable Loss are evident in multiple episodes of Paul's entrepreneurial development of the Christ-following communities.

Philippians and 2 Corinthians show Paul's perspective on loss within the context of Christian growth and the advancement of mission. We see Affect ingrained in Paul's embracing of loss. Paul's mindset is shaped by the rhythmic saying that "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). This is an affective statement of loss that places Affordable Loss in the context of the big picture goal of knowing Christ (3:9). Paul was willing to endure significant hardships, knowing he could afford them for the sake of the Gospel (2 Corinthians 11:23-28).

Martina's research ties Loss Aversion to identity aspirations. Because Loss Aversion is a common human condition, the entrepreneur's willingness to accept loss increases legitimacy among stakeholders (Martina, 2020). This solidifies the leader's position as one who *should* be averse to loss yet chooses to *embrace loss*. Scott Yip shows how a Ricourian analysis of identity formation in Philippians cements Paul's position as the leader shaping the identity of the church by expressing his willingness to accept of loss (2023). Paul demonstrates that he is not averse to loss because he has *chosen* to embrace loss. This mindset inspires the Philippians to similarly embrace the loss that Paul and Christ (2:1-11) have experienced on a much deeper level.

Similarly, Paul bootstraps himself in a way that builds his identity as one worthy of Christ-like imitation. He shows that he is 'all-in' at this critical time in the Philippian church's identity formation by not only enduring imprisonment but advancing his mission. This shift from loss to ministry expansion is an inspiration to the Philippian believers. Paul likely plied his trade of leatherwork to endear himself to the captors of the entire Praetorian guard. It is unlikely that Paul is using hyperbole as he speaks of this formidable extension of the Gospel during confinement (1:13). The word would quickly spread that a willing needle and sinew were in Paul's cell. Moreover, as one used to preaching while sewing, the soldiers would have heard of Christ in this leather repair scenario.

Bootstrapping and Bricolage are related to one another in the way that they utilize and challenge social structures. Paul challenged the petty hierarchies in the Philippian church by his creative use of means to support himself, though he appreciated the financial help that the Philippians brought. He knew how to deal with life, whether he had a lot or a little. And creative means of self-support during confinement were known in antiquity, as seen in characters like Odysseus and Joseph in Egypt. Paul's acceptance of physical suffering, imprisonment, and social ostracization aligns with the idea of Bricolage, where the onslaught of troubles was met with the creation of new forms. Paul creatively advanced the Gospel in the socially complex imperial legal system (Rapske, 2004). We have episodes where Paul uses his resource of Roman citizenship, which is detailed in Acts 16:35-40, when Paul shames the Philippian magistrates. However, it was likely that this citizenship strategy was used two other times because he was beaten with rods *three* times (2 Corinthians 11:25) during his missions! Paul creates new avenues for gospel proclamation through the Bricolage of citizenship.

Paul was able to Bricolage and Bootstrap because his identity was in Christ as the center of his political and social world. Paul's view of self, things, people, and mission shows the bedrock value of Christ-first underlying what he could and could not do without:

> Expert entrepreneurs tend to be clearer about their values, viewing preferences as more malleable. Not necessarily because they are better people, but simply because of concrete experiences navigating the prediction-control space. As a result, they also tend to define values more clearly in terms of what they will not do or what is nonnegotiable for them – a set of constraints on action rather than in positive terms that shape specific goals (Sarasvathy, 2024, 2.2.3).

Paul chose to do without physical perks. However, he would not relinquish his values of love for people and slavery to Christ (Philippians 1:1, 1 Corinthians 9). His values were not the typical Roman imperial values of preserving one's honor or advancing self-justice. Instead, the role of Affect seems to consistently allow him to embrace more loss as his love and slavery to Christ developed.

Affordable Loss May Be Less Affordable for Some

Here, we need to express a caveat that has developed over the past few years, calling into question the dogmatic assumptions of effectuation theory in affordable loss. It impacts the possibility of Bricolage and the positive Affective element of Affordable loss. This critique of Sarasvathy advances that in the face of overwhelming academic success and the robust framework of effectuation theory, there is an overestimation of entrepreneurs' ability to gauge what they can afford to lose. Systemic factors—such as socio-economic background, access to resources, and existing networks—can heavily influence what someone can "really" afford to risk. While effectuation provides a valuable model, it may not fully account for systemic constraints that limit the ability of some individuals to act as freely as others (Mansoori, Y., & Lackéus, 2020).

Applying this critique to Paul's context raises questions. Was his apparent ability to sustain significant loss due to effectual thinking, or were there other factors at play? Paul's status as a Roman citizen and his relative mobility within the Roman Empire might have offered him advantages that others in the early Christian community simply did not share. The systemic privileges embedded in his identity may have enabled him to operate with a higher degree of confidence in managing risks. His gift of singleness allowed him great flexibility in what he could afford to lose because he was managing only his own needs rather than those that included providing for his family (1 Corinthians 7). The principle of affordable loss is central to the effectuating entrepreneur's ability to carry out a calling. But looking at the criticism of Sarasvathy expressed by Kitching and Rouse (2020), one should consider that socio-economic limitations affect the scope of the enterprise rather than the mindset, which still may be effectuated rather than conventional (Sarasvathy, 2024).

Flourishing in Partnership: The Crazy Quilt Principle

The Crazy Quilt principle proposes that expert entrepreneurs seek partnerships to bring new funding, fresh ideas, and open new doors. However, the principle also dictates that partnerships should be avoided with those who might not share the mission or excitement for the product, even if the potential partner might have considerable influence in other areas. The Crazy Quilt is built from people already invested in some way with the entrepreneur, the task, or the life circumstances. Time is not spent cultivating relationships where stakeholders have a low buy-in (Sarasvathy, 2024).

How, then, do we reconcile this with Paul's masterful quilt creation that wove together a disparate group of people? He appears to accept pretty much anybody when you look at the surface.

Paul's missionary band included Jews, Gentiles, Men, Women, Slaves, Free, and Rich, Poor. We might say that the only commonality was Christ. However, it appears that for the most part, the majority of Paul's missionary band were also outsiders in some way or another. And they were highly effective at reaching those who were outsiders in an ethnic, social, or circumstantial sense.

The fact that outsiders can most easily adapt to a new idea has been documented in various ways. A striking and unintended illustration is provided in Roger's classic work, *The Diffusion of Innovations,* as an example of the failed diffusion of an idea. But, viewed from the perspective of the Crazy Quilt, it was a resounding success. When Nelida attempts to introduce water-boiling into the Los Molinas, Peru, the ensconced villagers reject it because one boils water only for the sick, not healthy people. One group that she does not fail with is the group of outsiders who have been settled for generations in the village but are still considered outsiders. They are from the higher mountain regions. They are culturally disconnected from those who have authority and power in the social matrix of Los Molinas. Those eleven families that adopted water boiling began to experience the health benefits. Nelida feels a failure as she leaves the village (Rogers, 2003). But was she? This is not true if you consider that outsiders could be the primary target. If her mission were to reach the outsiders, over time, her ideas would prove valid to the villagers, who were the in-group. It might be well after Nelida's campaign finished that the ensconced villagers realized that the outsiders were flourishing and healthy (Pederson, 1998).

Paul collected a band of people who were on the move geographically and emotionally. They were outsiders. Paul's strategy mirrored the inclusive church in Antioch. This *expatriate strategy* involved focusing on individuals who were more receptive to the Gospel message. They had already made the step to becoming outsiders, though they may not have entirely shifted. Paula Fredricksen advances that pagans may have fluidly engaged in multiple religious practices unless they had fully become proselytes to the Jewish religion. Paul pushed back against their becoming proselytes because it was simply impossible for a Gentile to really become a Jew in Paul's eyes. But neither was there a niche for Christ-followers to fit into a non-idol social structure because idolatry was ubiquitous (2017). The church thus became the cultural refuge for outside synagogues and pagan cults. In every society, there are people who don't naturally fit in. They are predisposed to a new community.

Effectuators allow the quilt to self-select (Sarasvathy, 2024). Paul, the effectuator, knew that each stakeholder had an affordable loss threshold. Joining the quilt was a voluntary commitment. And the commitment goes both ways. Paul did not hesitate to move on from partnerships that didn't fully embrace the mission, as evidenced in his visible exits from synagogues after their leaders rejected his Gospel. We also see his intentionality in partnership forming in his removal of Mark from the team (Acts 15:37-41), leaving cities where there was little fruit (such as Athens, Acts 17:32-34)), and denunciations of those who undermined this shared commitment to the mission (such Demas, 2 Timothy 4:9-10).

Thriving in Adversity: The Lemonade Principle

The Lemonade principle is probably the most obvious of the effectuation theory principles. But it is not easy to put into practice. Think of Paul as the weathered, fatigued, scarred missionary. We see him singing during an unjust imprisonment (Acts 16:25), thriving after a shipwreck (28:7-10), or writing that he knows how to get along with much or little (Philippians 4:12).

Sarasvathy illustrates this principle with the example of Amazon, where unexpected customer demand for something more than the world's largest bookstore initially led Jeff Bezos to expand beyond his original product offerings. Rather than being discouraged by the logistical issues, Amazon embraced these "surprises" by increasing its categories. This adaptation to customer-driven surprises allowed Amazon to continually broaden its catalog and market presence (2024).

One lemonade issue that exposes a theological divide is the eschatological question. Was Paul disappointed in the evident delay of the Parousia or not so bothered by it? Effectuation theory reframes this issue into a mindset problem of disappointment vs. opportunity. The theory releases Paul from a rigid eschatological goal. His Jerusalem mission (Romans 15:25-27) was not tethered to an eschatological roadmap, where his specific goals—converting Jerusalem or hastening Gentile inclusion (Romans 11:25-26)—served an imminent Parousia (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17). Viewed through effectuation theory, Paul's actions embrace opportunities that allow for a set of eschatological goals to shift. Paul's evident changing emphasis in his letters regarding end-times is not rooted in the ever-extending deadline (goal) of Christ's immediate return. Effectuation theory supports a different view.

Effectuation theory supports changing plans. The lemons of a "delayed eschaton" are not frustrations to Paul because his vision is the building of a church amid changing goals. This ecclesiological perspective, championed by N.T. Wright (2013) and James D.G. Dunn (1998), align with effectuation as we observe Paul's comfort in ambiguity and prioritizing a present-focused calling over fixed goals. Paul's Gentile mission (Romans 15:27) and unity efforts (15:7-9) reflect a *Crazy Quilt* approach—building a church with available partners (e.g., Priscilla and Aquila, Romans 16:3)—without reference to an eschatological framework that necessitated certain categories of people. Paul's lack of angst, despite unmet expectations (e.g., 1 Corinthians 7:29-31), shows a *Pilot-in-the-Plane* mindset, shaping the *ekklesia* now (Ephesians 4:12-13) rather than rather than adjusting to meet an eschatological goal. End-days passages such as Romans 12:1-2 ("living sacrifices") and Philippians 1:6 ("he who began a good work") suggest Paul's means-driven adaptability fosters a lasting community, not a countdown. Effectuation thus reveals a Paul relaxed in uncertainty, rooted in a calling to unify, not an eschatological fever pitch.

Doing theology from an effectuation perspective aligns with Sarasvathy's call for the social sciences to explore the implications of effectuation (Sarasvathy, 2024). Both Paul's praxis and writings were contingent upon changing circumstances because effectuation is a normal phenomenon in entrepreneurial endeavors. Additionally, understanding theology is an iterative process, learned through lived experience, reflection, and ongoing adjustment to what has been declared true in the Word of God. Was Paul locked into the ticking moments of an impending eschatological consummation? Such angst doesn't match the mindset of the effectuating entrepreneur. If Paul indeed had a conversion to a new mindset regarding his own role in the dynamic of uncertainty, then we need to allow Paul to relax and be comfortable with ambiguity.

From an effectuation theory perspective, Paul's eschatology can be seen as a dynamic, adaptive engagement with the present reality of Christ's resurrection and the transformative power of the Gospel. Rather than operating within the traditional "already/not yet" tension, Paul's focus was on what was immediately observable—Christ's active presence and the emerging community of believers—which he saw as the embodiment of a new creation. In this framework, the kingdom of God isn't a deferred promise marked by an elusive "not yet" but an ongoing, almost fully realized church that is creative and resourceful in response to divine action. Paul's approach thus transcends the conventional eschatological dichotomy, emphasizing that the future of God's kingdom is already being actualized in the present, as believers dynamically co-create the unfolding of God's redemptive plan. This leads us to the final heuristic, the Pilot in the Plane.

Adapting to the Holy Spirit's Guidance: The Pilot in the Plane Principle

An example of the Pilot-in-the-Plane Principle is the tech entrepreneur with limited capital who decides to launch a basic version of an app with core features that can be managed and gradually improved based on user feedback. Rather than predicting market trends, these effectuating entrepreneurs focus on creating controllable, small improvements. In the Spirit of the pilot-in-the-plane, they actively shape their venture's direction, using customer feedback and progressive updates to steer their growth (Sarasvathy, 2024). The Pilot-in-the-Plane principle says that the pilot heads in a direction but is aware that turbulence and wind currents might affect the altitude or route of the Plane. This principle is active in Paul's ministry as he allows his future to be guided by the Spirit. He seems to change plans during a missionary journey to Ephesus as he is prevented by the Spirit from heading in that direction (Acts 16:6-10). His following the wind of the Spirit resulted in the introduction of the Gospel into what is now known as Europe.

The result of this principle of effectuation is the creation of new means and new markets. Paul's ministry offers valuable lessons for modern applications of effectuation theory. To adopt a similar approach, one can begin by identifying current strengths, knowledge, and relationships and using these as starting points for action, much like Paul did when he leveraged his cultural background and network. Embracing the affordable loss principle aligns with sacrificing comfort for meaningful pursuits, while viewing setbacks as opportunities aligns with the lemonade principle. Building partnerships and focusing on what is within one's control can further enhance resilience in life and ministry. Paul's example shows that a mindset willing to adapt and act can be combined with faith in a God whose mission doesn't change.

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Refining Leadership in Business Education:

Transforming Selfish Ambition with Sacred Values

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Abstract

This paper examines the journey from selfish ambition to selfless leadership and how business education can facilitate this transformation by proposing a framework for cultivating ethical, values-driven professionals. It begins with cautionary accounts of prominent business leaders whose unchecked ambition resulted in personal failure and organizational downfall. The discussion then shifts to how sacred values, including Godly self-awareness, humility, service, and sacrifice, can be effectively integrated into business curricula. Drawing from Christianity, the paper provides a biblical foundation for these values and demonstrates their relevance to business leadership. A critical analysis of selfless leadership follows, investigating concerns including the blurring of personal and professional boundaries, risk of burnout and exploitation, perceptions of weakness, and resistance within competitive organizational contexts. The paper presents practical strategies for shifting business students and professionals from self-centeredness to selfless service through assignments and experiences that emphasize character formation. Testimonials of leaders who have transitioned from selfish ambition to selflessness are provide to illustrate the transformative potential of sacred values. This paper concludes by advocating for the intentional integration of sacred values into business education to cultivate ethically ground leadership capable of making a lasting impact on the business world.

Keywords: Selfish ambition, self-centeredness, selflessness, selfless service, servant leadership, sacrifice, sacrificial leadership, sacred values, values-based leadership, ethical leadership, self-awareness, humility, transformational leadership

Refining Leadership in Business Education:

Transforming Selfish Ambition with Sacred Values

In an era marked by widespread corporate scandals, ethical breaches, and a troubling lack of integrity in leadership, the need for the sacred in secular leadership has never been more pressing. As corporate America continues to grapple with the fallout from greed-driven decisions and unethical practices, integrating sacred values into leadership can transform leaders from selfish ambition to selfless service. Sacred values are those that are considered so essential to humanity that they are inviolable and unassailable (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Sacred values - rooted in self-reflection, humility, service, and sacrifice - serve as a guiding compass for leaders, encouraging decisions that prioritize the wellbeing of others and greater good (Philippians 2:3-8, NIV). Leaders who cultivate inner ethical strength are better equipped to navigate complex challenges, inspire their teams, and uphold the values essential for sustainable success in today's business world.

Integrating sacred values into secular leadership is essential, as secular organizations often prioritize external skills and profitability, potentially overshadowing ethical responsibility.
While secular leadership has historically focused on traits and behaviors (Stogdill, 1974; Bass, 1981) with goals of increasing profit margins and stock prices (Jensen & Meckling, 1976), biblical leadership emphasizes the inner call to steward resources with humility and integrity (Genesis 1:26-28). As corporate scandals and unethical practices continue to undermine trust, leaders must prioritize internal character and moral responsibility to foster ethical decision-making and long-term success.

Integrating Sacred Values into Secular Leadership

The early emphasis on a leader's traits and behaviors as well as profitability has led society down a challenging path. Prioritizing a leader's outward abilities and contributions, while neglecting their inner character, has often fostered selfish ambition (Kellerman, 2004; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002).

When individuals are granted control and authority over significant resources based solely on external achievements, selfishness and ethical egoism can take root (Burns, 1978; Ciulla, 2004). Selfishness, defined as the pursuit of personal advantage without regard for others (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) and ethical egoism, the belief that acting in one's own self-interest is morally justified (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), both erode the integrity and responsibility essential to effective leadership.

Poor leadership behavior often stems from prioritizing personal interests over integrity. Self-serving leadership is characterized by prioritizing the leader's personal interests above the well-being of the organization and its followers, often resulting in abusive behavior and destructive outcomes (Siebert, 2023). A Harvard study examining 36 incidents stated, "The impact of misbehavior on corporate reputation is significant and long-lasting" (Larcker & Tayan, 2016, p. 2). The study goes on to explain that these incidents generated a total of 250 news stories, with media coverage persisting for an average of approximately five years. Additionally, approximately one-third of the companies involved faced further repercussions directly linked to the CEO's actions, and 45% experienced another major governance issue following the initial incident (Larcker & Tayan, 2016). These findings emphasize the profound and enduring consequences of selfish ambition, highlighting the critical need for leaders to prioritize integrity and ethical responsibility to safeguard both their organizations' reputations and long-term success.

In further study, the impact of personal greed is destructive, leading to financial scandals and corporate collapse. Ken Lay of Enron epitomized this downfall, manipulating accounting transactions to hide massive losses in the pursuit of inflated revenues (The CEO Magazine, 2018). WorldCom's Bernard Ebbers served 13 years in federal prison for orchestrating fraudulent accounting practices to boost stock prices (Investopedia, 2013). Investopedia also notes Tyco's Dennis Kozlowski served eight years for his misuse of corporate funds for extravagant personal expenses. Sam Bankman-Fried of FTX, was sentenced to 25 years for embezzling $8 billion dollars from customers (Cogner, March 2024). These examples highlight the dangers of unchecked self-interest in leadership and the need for ethical accountability.

While some leaders may not have faced legal consequences, their leadership decisions have drawn significant ethical criticism. The Dillard Brothers amassed $54 million in earnings over three years while paying employees $10.72 per hour (McIntyre & Calio, 2014). McIntryre and Calio also note Xerox's Ursula Burns faced backlash for earning $13 million annually while overseeing mass layoffs. Adam Neumann of WeWork increased his extravagant spending despite the company losing $2 billion dollars (Thompson, 2024). Peter Hebblethwaite of P&O Ferries was condemned for his callous firing of 800 employees via a three-minute prerecorded Zoom message (McIntyre & Calio, 2014). These examples continue to highlight the boarder issue of ethical neglect driven by selfish ambition.

For these reasons and more, the Bible strongly warns against the pursuit of selfish gain. The Apostle Paul urges "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit" (Philippians 2:3). This awareness necessitates self-reflection, enabling individuals to recognize when their focus on themselves comes at the expense of others. Paul encourages a mindset that seeks the well-being of others (1 Corinthians 10:24). Similarly, James cautions that selfish ambition leads to deception, chaos, and corruption (James 3:14-16). Romans further warns that those who act with self-interest, dishonesty, and unethical intent will ultimately face wrath and judgment (Romans 2:8). These Bible teachings reinforce the dangers of self-serving leadership and the moral responsibility to act on behalf of the greater good of others.

Throughout Bible history, selfish ambition has led to the downfall of even the most capable and powerful leaders. The Bible provides numerous examples of leaders whose pursuit of personal gain resulted in destruction and disgrace. Lucifer's inflated self-worth and selfish ambition turned him from a radiant and powerful angel into God's enemy, sealing his ultimate defeat (Isaiah 14:12-

15, Ezekiel 28:13-17). Saul's greed cost him his throne and eventually his life (1 Samuel 15). King Uzziah's arrogance and selfishness led to his suffering and demise (2 Chronicles 26). King Nebuchadnezzar's relentless pursuit of selfish gain led to his downfall, stripping him of his sanity and status, and leaving him to live like a wild animal in utter humiliation (Daniel 4). Haman's selfish ambition ultimately led to his own execution (Esther 3-7). These sacred stories also serve as timeless warnings about the dangers of self-centered leadership.

Christianity Emphasizes Key Sacred Values

Secular leadership often uses terms like altruism and ethics to define a leader's moral responsibilities. Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines altruism as an unselfish regard for or devotion to the welfare of others, while ethical altruism suggests that individuals have a moral duty to help others, even at the expense of their own self-interest. In contrast, the Bible not only encourages altruism and ethics but requires them for leaders to advance.

Selfless leadership can be defined simply, "less self." In this paper, the term is being explored as an underlying principle or values, not as a leadership style, because it serves as the foundation for approaches like servant and shepherd leadership, etc. It doesn't imply negating one's own needs, such an approach could lead to burnout, but rather encourages focusing less on ourselves and more on others. The Bible acknowledges the human inclination toward sin, including pride and selfish ambition that elevate personal desires above all else, even God. In response, the Bible calls individuals to overcome greed and selfish ambition, emphasizing self-reflection, humility, service, and sacrifice for the well-being of others, as Scripture recognizes these inherent tendencies and urges selfless leadership to rise above them.

Paul offers clear guidance, urging believers to self-reflect and avoid acting out of "selfish ambition or vain conceit." He writes "Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others" (Philippians 2: 3b-4). He exhorts individuals to serve and sacrifice by prioritizing the well-being of others and acting on their behalf. Overcoming selfish desires to consider and meet the needs of others is a profound act of service and sacrifice. For leaders especially, the call to self-reflection and selfless action is unmistakable.

Paul then exalts Jesus Christ as the ultimate example of a leader who overcame selfishness to serve others. He describes how Jesus, in self-reflection, chose not to seek His own advancement but to fulfill God's purpose, humbling Himself, serving, and ultimately making the greatest sacrifice - His own life. Through His example, Jesus reveals both the necessity and the path for transforming selfish ambition into selfless service.

While this passage highlights Jesus' selflessness, other scriptures further emphasize the self-reflection, humility, service, and sacrifice required to overcome selfish ambition. One striking example is in His temptation in the desert, where he resisted using his power to avoid service and suffering (Matthew 4). Described in Mark 10:45 as one who "did not come to be served but to serve, and give his life for many," Jesus embodied true selflessness. He also demonstrated servanthood by washing His disciples' feet at the Last Supper (John 13:1-5), modeling the humility of true leadership. Additionally, he taught that greatness is found not in self-promotion but in serving others above one's own interests (Matthew 23:11). Through His actions and teachings, Jesus set a profound standard for selfless leadership.

The Bible offers a powerful framework for living selflessly, emphasizing the importance of humbly seeking the well-being of others. The Bible encourages selflessness by urging people to prioritize others' needs and not just our own needs (1 Corinthians 10:25). It calls for a shift in the heart, steering away from natural inclinations of selfishness toward a heart of selfishness (Psalm 119:36). Furthermore, the Bible suggests that by seeking the good of others, evil can be avoided (1

Thessalonians 5:15). Leaders can cultivate a life that reflects self-reflection, humility, service, and sacrifice by embracing these sacred teachings.

Many biblical leaders exemplified the shift from selfish ambition to selfless service. The Apostle Paul transformed from a prideful spiritual elitist to humbly referring to himself as the "least of these" (Ephesians 3:8, 1 Corinthians 15:9). Joseph, once boastful of his multicolored coat and dreams of ruling over his brothers, was humbled through slavery and captivity, ultimately rising to become Pharaoh's most trusted leader (Genesis 37:3-8, 23-28, 39:1-20, 40:15, 41:41-46). David, who initially acted out of selfish ambition by taking a man's life to take his wife, later evolved into a humbler and morally steadfast servant of God (2 Samuel 11-12, Psalm 51). These examples highlight that the integration of sacred principles – such as self-reflection, humility, service, and sacrifice – into secular leadership is essential for leadership effectiveness.

Critiques of Selfless Leadership

Understanding the critiques of selfless leadership is essential for effectively coaching leaders toward less self-centered and more service-oriented leadership. The concerns include the blurring of boundaries, risk of burnout, the vulnerability of exploitation, perceived weakness, and/or limitations of cultural context, slower decision making. Addressing these factors is essential to establishing credibility when advocating for selfless leadership.

While noble, selfless leadership may be perceived as lacking clear boundaries, increasing the risk of burnout. A strong outward focus can blur professional lines, leading to confusion about roles and expectations. Laub (1999) notes that servant leaders may struggle to balance their desire to serve others with the need to uphold healthy organizational structures. Similarly, Cloud (2013) warns that leaders without defined boundaries may take on excessive responsibility and avoid difficult conversations, making themselves vulnerable to emotional and physical depletion. Van Dierendonck

(2011) adds that consistently prioritizing others' needs over one's own can leave selfless leaders at risk of exhaustion and diminished effectiveness.

Selflessness in leadership can sometimes be perceived as a weakness, creating the potential for the leaders to be taken advantage of or viewed as lacking strength. Leaders who prioritize service may be seen as too "soft" or lacking a leadership presence (Eva et al., 2019). Greenleaf (1977) emphasizes the importance of discernment, urging servant leaders to be wise in recognizing when their approach may be misinterpreted as ineffective. In highly competitive organizational environments, these perceptions can pose significant challenges to a leader's influence and effectiveness.

Northouse (2021) suggests selfless or servant leadership styles may not fit with organizations requiring rapid decisions or directive approaches. Because serving others emphasizes collaboration and empowerment, decision-making tends to be more consensus-driven, an approach that can present challenges in high-stakes or fast-paced organizational cultures. Certain cultures expect leadership to be autocratic or assertive and selfless leadership may be countercultural and even counterproductive. Recognizing the challenges of selfless leadership is essential to ensure it is practiced with wisdom, balance, and effectiveness in diverse organizational contexts.

Practical Strategies for Transitioning from Selfish to Selfless Leadership

Business programs can proactively address critiques of selfless leadership by openly engaging with key values and intentionally designing programs that cultivate Godly self-awareness, humility, serving others, and sacrificial leadership. By embedding these values into course content, assignments, and online and in-person classroom culture, business programs can equip students with the mindset and practical tools to lead with integrity. Given findings that theological studies courses alone are insufficient to improve ethical development (Brock, 2022), instilling values is an essential next step. This following section outlines practical strategies for integrating these principles into leadership development.

Godly self-awareness is developed through Godly self-reflection, feedback, and accountability. Parolini (2012) explains Godly self-leadership as the most significant aspect of leading well. It can be intentionally cultivated in business programs through a holistic approach that includes devotions and prayer, authentic role modeling within a safe learning environment, assessments, guided journaling, coaching and mentoring relationships, and the use of case studies that highlight the contract between self-awareness and self-deception (Barton, 2008; Cloud, 2013; Parolini, 2012; Parolini, 2018; Scazzerro, 2017; Willard, 1999). Depending on the student's developmental stage or age, business programs can establish clear expectations around key areas of growth in Godly self-awareness and hold students accountable to these standards as part of their leadership formation.

Humility is fostered through feedback, accountability, and strengthening empathic listening skills. Kegan (1982) explains that personal development occurs within community, where individuals gain awareness of their blind spots through honest feedback and supportive relationships. Business schools can provide formative feedback through instructors, mentors, coaches and even peer-feedback through intentional opportunities and team assignments while putting the appropriate structures in place to assure depth of feedback (Ashkanasy & Dasborough, 2003; Owens & Heckman, 2012; Parolini, 2018; Parolini, 2023). Humility deepens when students are held accountable for their actions and interpersonal behavior (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). Empathy fosters humility by redirecting attention away from self toward others, encouraging perspective taking and relational sensitivity. Greenleaf (1977) emphasizes that empathy not only strengthens relationships but also invites vulnerability, an essential component of serving others. By integrating feedback, accountability, and empathic listening into business education, schools can cultivate humility and ethical character in business professionals.

Business education can foster a mindset of service and sacrifice in students by intentionally integrating these values into the curriculum. Parolini (2012) describes transformational leadership as casting a collaborative vision, while genuinely caring for people, ultimately guiding individuals to prioritize the collective good over personal gain. To reinforce these principles, group activities and team assignments can be redesigned to emphasize service-oriented values. For instance, incorporating team agreements that highlight shared responsibility and mutual respect, or assigning peer coaching roles that focus on listening, reflecting, and encouraging group success over individual achievement, can help to instill these transformational qualities.

The willingness to engage in sacrificial service begins with a foundation of clearly defined values and purpose. Business education can cultivate this mindset by guiding students through assessments, reflective exercises, and journaling that clarify their core purpose. When students internalize a purpose that extends beyond personal gain, they are better equipped to consider the needs and well-being of others, even at personal cost. Fostering sacrificial service involves teaching students to prioritize group success, make values-based decisions, and act with responsibility rather than defensiveness. Ultimately, this approach prepared business professionals to lead sacrificially, with a commitment to serving others.

Navigating the Challenges of Overcoming Selfish Ambition

Recognizing the key challenges that business students face in overcoming selfish ambition allows business education to more intentionally address these areas through the learning process. Common obstacles include cultural and organizational norms that reward ego-driven success, fear of losing influence or recognition, unresolved issues of insecurity or identity, and a lack of confidence (Barton, 2008; Northouse, 2021; Owens & Hekman, 2012; Parolini, 2018; Scazzero, 2015, 2017).

Addressing these gaps is essential for developing future generations of leaders, particularly as many students today struggle with a heightened sense of entitlement and/or ambition (Express Employment Professionals–Harris Poll, 2025).

Business education can help students overcome selfish ambition by reframing influence as service and stewardship, promoting honest self-reflection and confession, modeling vulnerability and humility as strengths, fostering accountability and relational support, and examining case studies of leaders who served and sacrificed for the greater good (Lencioni, 2002; Matthew 20:26-28, Philippians 2:3). It is vital that business faculty model these values to help business students internalize them as essential to their professional leadership. When instructors lead with humility rather than selfish academic pride, they create an environment that fosters this type of learning environment and student engagement (Corriere, 2024; Ducharme, 2025; Krumrei-Mancuso et al., 2019; Owens & Hekman, 2012).

While students will face cultural and organizational pressures that reward ego-driven success, alongside personal struggles with fear of losing recognition or influence, unresolved identity issues, and low confidence, business educators can create a supportive environment that encourages students to address these challenges with honesty, reflection, and growth. To help students grow in self-awareness, humility, service, and sacrifice, business school instructors must model these values themselves, offering a different approach to societal norms and fostering authentic character development through example.

Testimonials of Leaders who Overcame Selfish Gain

To illustrate what this kind of transformation looks like in practice, this section highlights the stories of four influential leaders whose lives reflect the journey. Chuck Colson overcame self-deception through the development of Godly self-awareness. Cheryl Bachelder confronted and moved beyond fear in her pursuit of humility. Ken Blanchard intentionally embraced service to counter ego, and John Perkins modeled sacrifice in place of selfish ambition. These powerful examples demonstrate the profound impact of cultivating self-awareness, humility, service, and sacrifice, values that are essential for shaping current and future business professionals.

Metaxas (2013) recounts the extraordinary gifts of drive and intelligence of Chuck Colson, traits that, at their worst, manifested as ruthlessness and deep self-deception during his accent to political prominence under President Richard Nixon. Colson's unchecked ambition and lack of self-awareness contributed to one of the most infamous political downfalls in American history, transforming him from Nixon's go-to-guy to his scapegoat. Colson led himself and others into moral and legal corruption. As his world unraveled, he experienced a strong sense of isolation and despair, which led him to reach out to Tom Phillips, the CEO of Raytheon, who had once offered him spiritual support. Through Phillips' encouragement and a personal encounter with God, Colson confronted the self-deceptions that had governed his life. This turning point marked the beginning of a new journey, one grounded in integrity, spiritual awakening, and a commitment to selfless service over selfish ambition.

Popeyes CEO, Cheryl Bachelder (2015), transformed the company's culture and performance by adopting a leadership approach rooted in service to franchisees. She reflects in her book that she used to live out of fear of failing and looking weak, this led to a powerful need for control. Yet when she surrendered her fear and began to listen more, serve more, and trust more, she found the courage to honor God and people. That's when her leadership turned around. In her book, Bachelder recounts her journey from fear-driven control to a posture of humility, where listening and elevating others became central to her leadership.

Ken Blanchard transitioned from ego-driven management to a model of servant leadership. He shares how he once felt the need to be the smartest person in the room, craving recognition and success (Blanchard, 2005). Over time, however, he came to see that leadership wasn't meant to revolve around him. His discovery of the servant leadership example of Jesus became a turning point, shifting his focus from self-promotion to empowering others. This realization reshaped his leadership style from ego-driven management to a leadership style that serves others.

John Perkins shares his journey from selfish ambition to a life devoted to the transformation of his community. Initially driven by a need to prove himself, to both the world and himself, Perkins (2018) later realized that true leadership in God's economy is marked by suffering, sacrifice, and service to others, which moved him beyond the anger that once fueled his ambition. He then embraced a restorative, community-centered model of leadership, rooted in personal sacrifice for the good of others.

Conclusion

To prevent the pitfalls discussed earlier, including scandals fueled by selfish ambition, breaches of integrity, ethical lapses, misuse of funds, lack of accountability, and excessive self-centered and irresponsible corporate spending, it is essential for business education to proactively address these issues. Modernizing curricula to emphasize and include the development and modeling of Godly self-awareness, humility, service, and sacrifice on behalf of others can equip future business professionals to navigate these complex challenges with integrity and humility in organizations. By integrating these sacred values, business programs can cultivate leaders who prioritize the greater good over personal gain, ultimately helping to restore trust and uphold ethical standards in the business world.

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Applications for Virtual Desktop Infrastructure (VDI) in Adult and Graduate Studies with a Focus on Christ-based Illumination in a Secular World

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Abstract

In today's evolving technical frontier, Christian-based institutions face a dual challenge: staying technologically competitive while remaining spiritually grounded. While adult and graduate learners increasingly engage in hybrid and online education, the need for scalable, secure, and flexible IT solutions becomes paramount. Virtual Desktop Infrastructure (VDI) offers a flexible solution to varying demands, enabling equitable access to computing resources regardless of location, equipment, or Operating System used by remote students. However, the implementation of VDIs must move beyond technical efficiency through the reflection of a Christ-centered mission. This research offers methodologies that the VDI can serve as a technological tool and a spiritual platform, illuminating the marketplace by equipping students to carry the light of Christ into secular industries. Institutions can foster spiritual formation alongside professional development by integrating a faith-based pedagogy with modern computing practices. This research further highlights how VDI solutions support digital equity, enhance instructional delivery, and enable deeper engagement with a biblical worldview in technology-driven business courses, and further addresses the growing need for Christian influence in a global workforce that continues to increase in secular mindset. Ultimately, this work demonstrates how thoughtful technology adoption can become a means of ministry, preparing students to lead with integrity, faith, and grace in the marketplace. Finally, this research seeks to address how Christian-based institutions can implement Virtual Desktop Infrastructure (VDI) solutions to promote equitable, scalable learning through spiritual platforms that foster faith formation to prepare students to lead with integrity in an increasingly secular workforce.

Keywords: virtual desktop infrastructure (VDI), Christian higher education, online learning, digital equity, faith-based pedagogy, spiritual formation, biblical worldview, marketplace ministry, global workforce, integrity in leadership

Applications for Virtual Desktop Infrastructure (VDI) in Adult and Graduate Studies with a Focus on Christ-based Illumination in a Secular World

Modern computing requires adaptive thinking in an era where technology presents strengths and challenges. As the shift toward hybrid and online learning models in higher education continues to accelerate and grow in enrollment, there remains a need for scalable, secure, and cost-effective IT solutions. While the Virtual Desktop Infrastructure (VDI) offers a promising approach to meet these demands, those demands require adaptability from colleges and universities. In contrast to traditional students who have access to computer labs and classroom settings with various applications and software solutions, the demand is more complex for adult and graduate learners who require flexible access to computing resources. Traditional undergraduate, on-campus students are afforded the luxury of standardized lab equipment. However, online students often struggle with various systems and software that are incompatible with classroom requirements. According to Educause (2021, 2023), student device use shows a clear pattern of laptops remaining the dominant tool for coursework (falling in the 76–81% range for students), desktop systems account for roughly 15–18%, and smartphones are used as secondary devices. Additional findings point to modest tablet use, given that Chromebook devices offer cost savings. As a reflection of technological improvements, the introduction of new hardware and operating system changes presents significant challenges. For a specific example, Microsoft's Trusted Platform Module (TPM) 2.0 is required by newer CPU designs, thus limiting older PC upgrades to Windows 10 or 11, depending on the age of the microprocessor chip. Furthermore, according to Microsoft (2025), support for Windows 10 will end in October 2025. Apple's transition to M1/M2/M3 processors prevents native Boot Camp installations of Windows, requiring virtualization for software compatibility (Apple, 2023). Additionally, although extended to 10 years in 2023, Chromebook Auto-Update Expiration (AUE) policies continue to leave older devices without critical updates (Google, 2023). Additional resource constraints suggest that barriers, such as 4GB RAM machines and devices with ≤64GB embedded MultiMediaCard (eMMC) storage, often found in core compact systems (Chromebook, Microsoft Surface Touch, etc.), frequently struggle with multi-tab learning management system (LMS) work, video conferencing, and proctoring software. In contrast, 8 GB RAM and solid-state storage are now considered a practical baseline (EDUCAUSE, 2021). To further complicate access, many industry-standard programs for IT, cybersecurity, and data science utilize SQL Server, VMware, or forensic toolkits that are traditionally Windows-based applications. This lack of platform compatibility creates additional hurdles for students using MacBook or Chromebook, as these devices cannot natively install Windows-based applications and must rely on virtualization or cloud-hosted VDI to participate fully in coursework (Apple, 2023; Google, 2023). These limitations underscore the need for student device environments (Windows, macOS, ChromeOS), highlighting the importance of heterogeneous course design that accounts for proper RAM, external storage, browser compatibility, OS limitations, and update policies to support online learners.

This research presents a leveling approach to standardizing applications, benefits, and limitations of VDI implementations in online adult and graduate education. More specifically, from a pedagogical standpoint, this research provides faith-based integration, transformative learning, and vocationally aligned stewardship, and applied technology to encourage servant leadership in student populations. Further, the methodology of VDI implementation focuses on integrating application software to produce more sophisticated and complex integration, rather than installing software applications. A presentation on VDI integration and use will also be provided to attendees.

Literature Review

VDI enables students to access labs and applications anytime, anywhere, and on any device, thereby removing the constraints of physical computer labs. This 'always-up' approach fosters greater engagement, especially among commuter or non-traditional students, which has been described as a 'game changer' at adopting institutions. Students can use inexpensive devices, such as Chromebooks, to run high-end software via VDI, thereby lowering barriers and supporting enrollment growth. By exposing students to virtual labs with industry-standard tools, VDI bridges the gap between theory and practice, preparing learners for job readiness and competitiveness in modern IT fields.

Virtual Desktop Infrastructure: Equal User Access

Most technological solutions, such as software application subscriptions, equipment costs, and warranty services, are standardized with fixed costs. However, these costs can be mitigated through proper planning and the use of Virtual Desktop Infrastructure (VDI) within college and university settings, where technical courses require varying software development environments. Hennick (2024) presents the transformative role of Virtual Desktop Infrastructure (VDI) in higher education, emphasizing the capacity to democratize access to computing resources to provide support for flexible learning environments. Hudson County Community College implements a VDI approach to address student inequities in technology access, particularly for those unable to afford high-end devices. Furthermore, Nutanix (2023) reports that Hudson County Community College serves over 13,000 students annually, and the VDI rollout was designed to ensure that students with limited budgets, who can afford low-cost smartphones and Chromebooks, still have access to the same advanced applications as their peers, who can afford high-end devices. Proposedly, this balance significantly reduces barriers to course completion. By leveraging cloud-hosted environments, the institution ensures that students can engage with resource-intensive applications from any location or device, aligning with the broader push for digital equity.

While cost presents as the motivator for VDI-based solutions over physical labs due to the cost of hardware, etc., there are more compelling reasons for access. Based on cursory research, students in technical degree programs studying online, a reasonable estimate for more cost-effective solutions is:

- Mac users: ~ 25-40%
- Chromebook users: ~ 1-5% (often toward the lower end)

This lack of access is significant because it suggests that up to 45% of students interested in enrolling in online technology programs may be unable to participate due to connectivity or resource limitations.

Leveling the Field

As VDIs continue to evolve, emerging trends offer valuable insights into roles that enhance accessibility, flexibility, and remote learning in higher education starting with a reasonable start with Letsch (2017). Following the Letsch source review, three sources present a curated selection of recent publications that serve as stronger, more current replacements for the Letsch source, given the evolution of technology. Each source highlights key findings related to the impact on university environments, particularly in the context of post-pandemic digital transformation and the growing demand for scalable, secure, and location-independent access to computing resources through VDI solutions.

Lestch (2017) highlights the growing adoption of VDIs in higher education to enhance accessibility, flexibility, and equity in digital learning environments. By centralizing computing resources on secure servers, VDI allows students to access powerful software and applications from any device, regardless of their physical location or hardware limitations. Specifically, Lestch emphasizes scalable and secure IT solutions that support hybrid and online learners to reinforce notions that VDIs not only address logistical challenges but also offer more inclusive and mission-driven educational models. For Christian-based institutions, this technology provides a platform to integrate spiritual formation with professional development, ensuring that students are equipped both technically and spiritually to engage with a rapidly evolving, secular workforce.

While Lestch provides some foundational applications of VDI, technology has undergone dramatic changes in the last eight years. While not surprising, given that essential employees remained in corporate and organizational offices to maintain and support critical systems, Hennick's (2024) findings reinforce Lestch's (2017) argument by demonstrating how the adoption of VDI accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic and has remained a staple in higher education, enabling continued remote access. Hennick emphasizes that VDI is no longer just a technical upgrade but a strategic shift toward inclusive and flexible learning environments. Likewise, Hennick supports the idea that VDI helps institutions meet students where they are. Specifically, geographically and technologically, to remove barriers to access.

Rather than hosting VDIs within the local infrastructure, Hu (2024) presents a discussion on replacing physical computer labs with cloud-based VDIs, providing concrete and recent examples of how universities are transitioning from traditional lab designs to cloud-based virtual desktop environments. Hu outlines the benefits of this shift to include reduced maintenance, streamlined licensing, and improved flexibility for students to access resources at any time and from anywhere. Beyond, while also acknowledging the challenges, such as initial setup complexity and infrastructure demands. Using cloud-based solutions complements Lestch's (2017) broader claims by offering a detailed, technical case study that illustrates how VDI is being practically implemented to support modern educational needs but typically at more reduced cost options.

Watson (2025) effectively underscores the predicted growth and institutional investment in VDI, adding substantial weight to the argument that VDI is far more than a niche or temporary solution. Watson's article continues to be modified to compile trend data and market projections that show VDI becoming a core component of hybrid and remote learning strategies, with increasing demand for secure, scalable access across diverse devices and user models. Watson's insights align with and extend Lestch's (2017) earlier work by demonstrating how the educational and technical value of VDI continues to mature into a strategic necessity for institutions. Watson's data-driven approach provides the kind of quantitative validation that strengthens the case for VDI as a long-term investment in higher education infrastructure.

Shaping Faith and Culture

Barna (2025) identifies twelve emerging trends poised to reshape American faith and culture, offering critical insights for Christian-based institutions navigating the intersection of spiritual formation and technological advancement. Particularly, as the growing disenchantment with traditional higher education intensifies, Barna predicts that this dissatisfaction will lead to declining enrollment and increased interest in alternative delivery models, with a shift toward cost-effective trade schools and technology training centers. Barna's further emphasis on adapting educational practices to reflect market changes and the evolving needs of adult and graduate learners. Finally, Barna emphasizes the urgency of reinforcing a biblical worldview amid rising secularism and syncretism, underscoring the importance of intentional spiritual engagement in all areas of life, including education. For institutions integrating VDIs, supporting the notion that technology can be a conduit for academic excellence and spiritual mission to equip students to carry faith-based values into increasingly secular professional environments.

Faith and Integration

A biblical worldview influences the use of technology by elevating ethical standards in IT practice by emphasizing honesty, accountability, and stewardship before God, particularly in areas such as AI and data usage. It also fosters healthier collaboration through virtues such as humility, compassion, and servant leadership, resulting in more supportive and people-centered workplaces.

In innovation, Christians may see creativity as a gift of God, channeling technical solutions toward stewardship and service rather than disruption for its own sake. Religious commitment has also been correlated with stronger academic performance, conscientiousness, and perseverance, highlighting that worldview formation has a measurable impact on student success.

As Christian-based institutions adopt advanced technologies such as cloud-based solutions and sandbox simulation environments to meet the evolving needs of adult and graduate learners, it becomes increasingly important to consider student spiritual formation. In a world where digital innovation outpaces moral reflection, Christ-centered education offers a unique lens through which to evaluate and implement these technological advances. Christ-centered education provides a distinctive perspective through which to assess and integrate technological advancements. Rather than treating technology as a neutral tool, this perspective reframes its use as a vocation of service and responsibility. Three guiding principles illustrate this approach:

1. Servant leadership redefines how technology is deployed in the classroom. In a VDI environment, the primary concern is not prestige or efficiency, but service designed to ensure that even the least-equipped student can fully participate. When Christian institutions model this posture, graduates learn to exercise technological authority not for self-advancement but to lift others.
2. Stewardship appears in multiple forms. Material stewardship attends to sustainability, reducing redundant hardware and consolidating server loads to minimize waste. Intellectual stewardship ensures that access to advanced software and resources is equitably shared, reflecting the biblical call to hold resources in common. Spiritual stewardship recognizes that identity is not grounded in digital performance but in the imago Dei, reminding learners that technological proficiency should never eclipse human dignity.

3. Ethical decision-making calls institutions to examine not only whether a tool works but also whether these tools align with biblical values. To represent a specific example, proctoring software that misidentifies students of color may function effectively from a technical standpoint, but it fails ethically. By contrast, technologies that cultivate creativity, collaboration, and responsibility serve the broader telos of human flourishing envisioned in Scripture.
4. Christian institutions can extend beyond evaluation to prophetic imagination. For example, a university could design a "VDI Sabbath mode" that powers down non-essential services on a weekly basis, teaching students the rhythms of rest, stewardship, financial accountability, and overall accountability in work and life. Access logs might be reimagined not only for compliance but also to identify when a student is disengaging, prompting pastoral care. Ethical "sandboxes" could allow students to test how malware or algorithms behave, paired with biblical reflection on justice, mercy, and human impact. These innovations demonstrate that Christ-centered education is not only reactive to technological change but proactive in shaping technology as a means of grace rather than control.

Furthermore, while industry provides codes of conduct that align with moral standing, these requirements can offer a flexible moral framework. Beyond any ethical dimensions, pedagogical formation, and technical implications specifically used in the digital classroom, educators must consider that the industry's best practices don't always align with faith-based expectations. An exploration of how VDIs can be leveraged to enhance academic access and flexibility, illuminate faith-based values in a Christ-centered educational landscape, and bridge the gap between technological advancement and spiritual formation. Many of these practices can be implemented in a secular environment, provided critical thought and organization are applied to move beyond moral and ethical positioning. Applications for AI will also be presented.

Christian Higher Ed Challenges and Approaches

Core Challenges

Teaching students to adopt a biblical worldview is a normal part of the liberal arts tradition in Christian Colleges and Universities. However, when considering tech-based programs, most practitioners are well-versed in their craft yet lack the experience of a faith-based approach to course delivery. Likewise, cost-prohibitive solutions for delivering solution-oriented, applied current technologies into classroom settings.

For business and technology programs, integration is a two-fold problem:

- The inability of Christian schools to utilize cutting-edge technology to send students into the workforce with current skills, and
- Colleges lack the ability to integrate a biblical worldview into technology-based courses.

The VDI as a Teaching Tool

VDI implementation is not a new concept in higher education or industry. In addition to platforms like Practice Labs, which deliver lab-based activities for simulation and training, institutions are increasingly using cloud-hosted sandboxes to run cybersecurity exercises, virtual machine clusters to teach networking and server administration, and software streaming to provide students with on-demand access to specialized applications, such as CAD, data analytics, or digital forensic analysis. These approaches expand hands-on learning opportunities while reducing the need for costly, device-specific installations. These types of simulations and training provide access regardless of the device or operating system. Lack of access equates to lack of student learning opportunities. Likewise, many other methods for using pre-developed sandboxes exist to challenge the conventional classroom setting, whether in online or brick-and-mortar format offerings. For example, to run ethical hacking simulations that pose a threat to active systems, such as rootkits, malware, trojans, and worms, among others. Likewise, using digital forensics for locating artifacts in a lab setting on home systems may be troublesome due to large image (file) size or an incompatible Operating System (OS) in simulation when running macOS versus Microsoft Windows environments. VDI integration provides access to these more complex solutions.

To embrace current technology, courses are continually adapted to integrate the aspects reflecting market change. For example, WordPress is used in 43% of global webpage development (Ciorici, 2025). As a result, moving from basic webpage development using standard tools such as HTML code to WordPress not only prepares students for the latest tools in technology but also allows them to integrate more complex solutions through adaptation. Specifically, the use of AI-based solutions to enhance course activities means actively integrating artificial intelligence tools and platforms into the teaching and learning process to improve engagement, efficiency, and educational outcomes.

Rather than devoting teaching time to coaching students on how to code, Computer Information Technology (CIT) courses implement more creative solutions by asking AI to generate HTML, CSS, and PHP coding solutions that can then be tested for implementation as an integrated suite. The focus then moves from focusing on learning a tool to implementing solutions in more integrated solutions.

Demonstrations will be provided for the following scenarios:

- DEN 430 creating pipelines to build applications in the VDI to create SQL Server, Apache,
    - Create the data sets to enter into Airflow as a form of integration. By taking big data sets and integrating (loading) them into the VDI to produce more sophisticated applications, rather than the simple task of installing software applications and writing coding solutions.
- CIT415A Web Development – traditionally, teaching students to hand-code HTML, CSS, etc.

    - This course uses WordPress as a sophisticated website delivery mechanism beyond a text generator for static webpage design. We can add code, and WordPress can process that code beyond standard webpage generation methods.
- CYS-535 Digital Forensics
    - This course uses AccessData's Forensic Toolkit (FTK) to search for digital artifacts that point toward online behavior and potential threat behavior identification.
- CYS-565 Malware Analysis
    - This course uses a sandbox vulnerable website to identify, test, and deliver threats through payload delivery-based activities.

In these cases, the paradigm shift moves from teaching core concepts to reflections on teaching how technology is leveraged in higher education. Embracing VDI solutions elevates the Christian college's CIT program to be more competitive and aligned with current industry trends to eliminate "20th-century thinking. (Hennick, 2024)

The College of Business and Technology focuses on the following:

- Problem: The School of Business has over 70 different desktops. Overhead for maintenance is labor-intensive to build and tear down the VDI desktops.
- Solution: We built courses into the following groups as identified in the Appendix A.

Desktops are categorized into two types for the VDI interface.

1. Static desktop – DEN 220 carve out a portion of a massive server time slice and lock it in for the duration of the class
2. Dynamic desktop – must save data off the (4 classes) server-based resources with all the apps
    - Student Desktop - Serving applications (1 desktop)

Global IT Workforce

According to JetBrains (2024), in a targeted sector where the global population of software developers was estimated to be approximately 25.5 million in 2020. India and China represent 6.8 million workers and represent 26.7% of the workforce, yet Christians only comprise a small fraction of those countries' populations, with China at 5% or less and India ranging from 2–5%. When considering the makeup of the information technology (IT) workforce, well over half of the global IT workforce is non-Christian, primarily drawn from the largest sectors in Asia, where Christianity is a minor religion (Hackett et al.; Smith et al, 2025). Given these limited Christian-based trends among employees, there is a growing need to increase the number of faith-based professionals across all tech sectors. Unfortunately, because India and China account for more than one quarter of the world's 25.5 million software developers, these demographics have very small Christian populations (2–5% in India and less than 5% in China), which significantly impacts the global technology workforce. As noted, a biblical worldview fosters honesty, stewardship, accountability, and collaboration in IT contexts.

While the U.S. seeks to actively address this deficit as part of a broader global movement to integrate ethical and spiritual values into technological innovation, utilizing VDI can help advance this goal by offering tech-neutral solutions that reduce bias and promote equitable access for all users, regardless of their background. In regions where Christians are a minority, biblical worldview perspectives are often absent, underscoring the need for Christian higher education to strategically utilize tools like VDI to expand access, train students on low-cost devices, and prepare graduates who can integrate faith into their technical practice. In an industry shaped by secular assumptions, every faith-driven graduate emerging from Christian-based programs has the potential to exert outsized influence, ensuring that technology development is guided not only by innovation but also by integrity, responsibility, and service. A more faith-based, technology workforce fosters stronger ethical standards, collaboration, and diversity of thought. While research suggests that about 1% of Americans under 30 hold a biblical worldview, and that religious commitment is linked to higher achievement, perseverance, and stewardship that prioritizes human dignity and justice, these narrowly focused representatives offer a foundation toward meeting the growing need for faith-based professionals in technology sectors providing individuals who can integrate ethical convictions with innovation in ways that reflect spiritual integrity and societal impact.

Beyond the global workforce, Hackett et al (2025) report that the proportion of non-Christians in tech has been increasing over time, mirroring global demographic shifts. Many countries have experienced a decline in Christian affiliation over the past decade. For instance, in 2020, the U.S. public Christian population decreased from nearly 78% in 2010 to nearly 64% in 2020, and these numbers continue to trend downward.

To sum up, by placing the numbers into definable terms from a global standpoint, well over half of the IT workforce is non-Christian. In India and China, which account for more than a quarter of the global developer population, over 90% of professionals are non-Christian. In the United States, surveys of tech professionals show that about half identify as atheist or agnostic, which is far higher than the general population, making Christians a clear minority in this sector. Among future pipelines, only 28% of STEM students in the UK identify as Christian, and in India, approximately 98% of IT students are non-Christian. These trends underscore the urgency for Christian higher education to equip graduates who can carry their faith into industries where biblical perspectives are underrepresented.

School of Business Adult Population

Students in Business and Technology programs engage in tech use daily. As a result of embracing technology, students are now encouraged to use artificial intelligence (AI) as AI blends into the digital classroom. Likewise, serving the student population in a Christian-based University requires students to be trained in a biblical worldview in alignment with the mission statement. However, there are indications that tech-based companies are primarily secular, and research suggests tech-based fields tend to have fewer Christians or a faith-based workforce. According to Hackett et al. (2025), from 2010 to 2020, Christians in the European workforce dropped from 25.8% to 22.3%, resulting in Christian disaffiliation in Western Europe and a 14% drop in Christians in the U.S., with the U.S. being the world's second-largest number of religiously unaffiliated population after China. Within the tech force,

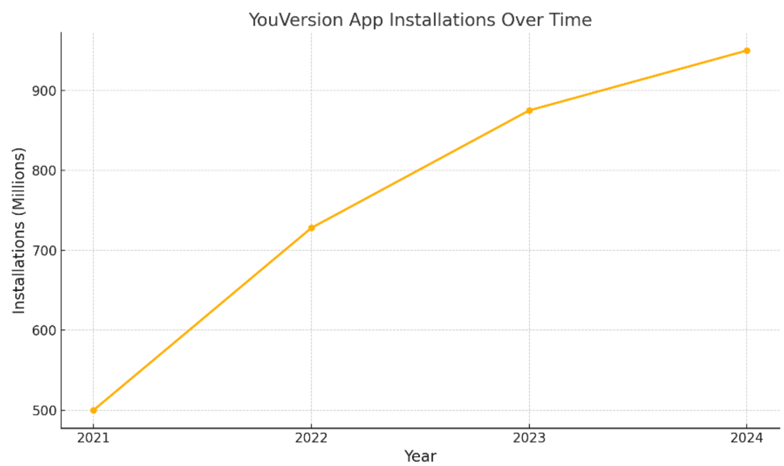
While there is limited direct data on the number of faith-based individuals working in technology fields, several recent reports and articles provide insight into related trends, suggesting a high demand for biblical worldview integration. Here are three categories for review:

1. **Faith and Technology Integration**: Baptist & Reflector (2025) highlights how faith communities, particularly churches, increasingly adopt AI and digital tools. While this article doesn't quantify how many tech professionals are faith-based, it illustrates a growing comfort and engagement with technology among faith leaders and communities by presenting the percentage of Americans using ChatGPT increased from 2023 around 18% to over 40% last year. Integration aspects include administrative tasks, creating content, deeper community engagement, and research and planning.
2. **Digital Faith Engagement**: According to Church Tech Today (2025), there has been a significant rise in digital Bible engagement and spiritual curiosity in 2025. Platforms like YouVersion saw record-breaking usage, suggesting that many individuals, including those in tech-savvy demographics, are actively engaging with faith through digital means. The range post-pandemic shows application installations over time, increasing in Figure 1.
3. **Cultural Trends**: Research from Barna and CRC indicates that faith plays a significant role in American life, even as cultural and technological landscapes evolve. While this doesn't

directly measure faith among tech workers, it supports the idea that faith remains influential across various sectors, including tech.

Figure 1

Application Installations 2021-2024



AI Implementation in Faith-based Activities

In the AI infancy, most users utilize AI like a web browser, given they don't fully understand the capabilities, limitations, and underlying mechanisms of AI. In general, AI integrates deep learning, neural networking, and aspects of big data to enable machines to perform tasks that typically require human intelligence, such as pattern recognition, decision making, and experiential learning. In an interview seeking opportunities to better serve Christ in business and technology, Matt Engle (2025) of Gloo joined the School of Business Dean and Directors in late July 2025, where Matt, along with the rest of the team, presented their experiences and methods of AI use.

Rather than simply using AI for traditional practices to develop research, Matt referred to Microsoft's Copilot as a "professor in your pocket" that encourages deeper engagement and reflection on specific research concepts. Beyond merely using AI as a simple tool, AI can be utilized to deeply integrate a faith-based, biblical worldview for healthier rituals that disrupt traditional practices. Matt's approach addressed not only business models but also methods for incorporating

AI into faith-based implementations for church growth, community outreach, and ministry as a decentralized church-based approach into areas of organizational leadership. One such venture was a transforming project in Jacksonville, FL, where big data was leveraged along with social capital to successfully reduce divorce filings by 33% as a service to the community through church-driven activities. Utilizing AI in non-traditional methods presents powerful opportunities to develop solutions outside the box. Matt presented the notion that the current trends in AI use and implementation of applying predictive modeling and data analytics to varying student retention, where he discovered patterns of retention beyond traditional academic metrics that predicted success in Alumni outcomes. From a Christian perspective, he used these types of tools to apply theory and logic. More to follow on this topic.

Conclusion

By enabling access to complex, resource-intensive development environments through the support of advanced simulations, cross-platform compatibility, and real-world application development without the limitations of local, student-owned hardware. Coupled with the adoption of current technologies like WordPress and AI-driven tools, instruction now moves beyond foundational skills toward applied, solution-oriented learning. As a result, the educational focus transitions from teaching isolated technical skills to fostering critical thinking, adaptability, and innovation—skills essential for navigating the evolving demands of the digital workforce.

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Appendix A

Virtual Desktop Designation by Course

Couse	**Desktop**	**CSC-220A**	Student Desktop	**ISM-440A**	Student Desktop
ACC-		**CSC-240A**	Student Desktop	**ISM-464A**	ISM-464A
375A	Student Desktop	**CSC-242A**	Student Desktop	**ISM-491A**	ISM-491A
ACC-		**CSC-245A**	Student Desktop	**MGT-**	
403A	Student Desktop	**DEN-**		**270A**	MGT-270A
BUS-270A	Student Desktop	**220A**	DEN-220A	**MGT-**	
BUS-392	Student Desktop	**DEN-**		**491A**	MGT-491A
CIS-101	Student Desktop	**320A**	DEN-320A	**MGT-520**	MGT-520
CIS-201	Student Desktop	**DEN-**		**MGT-560**	MGT-560
CIS-326	CIS-326	**330A**	DEN-330A	**MGT-561**	MGT-561
CIT-101A	Student Desktop	**DEN-**		**MIT-501**	Student Desktop
CIT-200A	Student Desktop	**430A**	DEN-430A	**NPM-**	
CIT-220A	CIT-220A	**EAG-560**	Student Desktop	**455A**	Student Desktop
CIT-270A	CIT-270A	**EAG-610**	Student Desktop	**NWK-**	
CIT-326A	CIT-326A	**ISM-270A**	Student Desktop	**220A**	NWK-220A
CIT-405A	Student Desktop	**ISM-312A**	ISM-312A	**NWK-**	
CIT-415A	CIT-415A	**ISM-316A**	ISM-316A	**320A**	NWK-320A
CIT-426A	CIT-426A	**ISM-330A**	ISM-330A	**NWK-**	
CIT-430A	CIT-430A	**ISM-410A**	ISM-410A	**420A**	NWK-420A
				NWK-	
				440A	NWK-440A
Couse	**Desktop**	**Couse**	**Desktop**	**SYS-330A**	Student Desktop
CIT-440A	CIT-440A	**ISM-426A**	ISM-426A	**SYS-430A**	Student Desktop

Appendix B

Alternative Keywords

virtual desktop infrastructure, vdi, flexible education, online learning, Christian-based institutions, faith-based pedagogy, hybrid and online education, digital equity, spiritual formation, technology integration, biblical worldview, professional development, remote learning, secure IT solutions, marketplace ministry, Christ-centered mission, instructional delivery, global workforce, secular industries, modern computing practices, spiritual platform, technological tool, integrity and faith in leadership

Illuminating Secular Workplaces: How Theological Sensemaking Carries the Light of Christ into Organizational Psychology

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Abstract

In an era where secular organizational psychology operates with worldview blindness toward religious meaning-making, this paper explores how Christian employees effectively illuminate secular marketplaces by carrying the light of Christ through distinctive theological sensemaking frameworks. While organizational psychology has extensively mapped workplace psychological capital antecedents, it systematically overlooks the illuminating meaning-making systems that shape how two-thirds of American workers interpret their professional lives in secular contexts. Through examining how Christian theological beliefs about divine providence, vocational calling, and eternal perspective function as light-carrying frameworks, this theoretical contribution develops ten formal propositions linking theological worldviews to workplace psychological resources. These propositions suggest how Christians carry the light of Christ through cognitive and motivational mechanisms that may provide alternative pathways to hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism. These processes may be more enduring than intervention-based approaches because they are embedded in transcendent meaning systems that illuminate divine purposes even in hostile secular workplace environments. Biblical examples demonstrate how theological sensemaking has historically functioned as in secular marketplace environments. This theory-building contribution advances Christian engagement with organizational psychology by identifying faith-based antecedents to psychological capital while providing testable propositions.

Keywords: psychological capital, theological worldview, sensemaking theory, religious beliefs, workplace behavior, Christian business, organizational spirituality

Illuminating Secular Workplaces: How Theological Sensemaking Carries the Light of Christ into Organizational Psychology

Consider how theological beliefs might uniquely contribute to workplace psychological capital development. When a Christian executive faces devastating quarterly losses, their hope may derive not primarily from identifying multiple recovery strategies (as secular psychological capital theory suggests) but from confidence in divine providence - the belief that God orchestrates circumstances for ultimate good (Romans 8:28). This theological foundation potentially provides a different pathway to hope: certainty about ultimate outcomes despite unclear immediate solutions. Similarly, a Christian manager's continued investment in employee development during hostile takeovers might reflect vocational calling beliefs - understanding work as participation in God's purposes rather than mere economic activity. This theological framework may generate efficacy through connection to divine empowerment and eternal significance, supplementing traditional self-efficacy sources like past performance or social modeling. These examples illustrate how Christian psychological capital development may operate through distinctive theological sensemaking processes that parallel but differ from secular intervention-based approaches. Rather than building hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism through cognitive techniques and goal-setting exercises, theologically informed development embeds these resources in transcendent meaning systems.

In a secular organizational world operating with "worldview blindness," Christian employees possess distinctive light—theological sensemaking frameworks that illuminate workplace challenges in ways traditional psychology cannot perceive. When 65% of the workforce identifies as Christian (Pew Research Center, 2021), a substantial portion brings theological beliefs into secular marketplaces. While Christians vary significantly in their theological understanding, denominational background, and level of faith commitment, those who actively integrate biblical worldviews into their professional lives may draw upon beliefs about divine providence, vocational calling, and eternal significance that could constitute an alternative psychological capital system operating beneath secular organizational theories. Yet organizational psychology, operating from secular assumptions, remains largely blind to how this light functions professionally.

The puzzle: while organizational psychology has thoroughly mapped psychological capital antecedents (Luthans et al., 2007), it overlooks the theological sensemaking systems through which Christians interpret their professional experiences in secular workplaces. This represents more than academic oversight—it constitutes worldview blindness, missing how Christ's light operates through distinctive psychological processes in marketplace settings.

Sophisticated psychological capital formation models have emerged through goal setting, cognitive restructuring, and social learning—valuable, empirically supported approaches (Luthans, Youssef-Morgan, & Avolio, 2015). Yet this research remains blind to possibilities that theological frameworks might provide more enduring, powerful workplace psychological resources. It's like mapping artificial lighting while ignoring the sun. The implications are profound for understanding how Christians carry light into secular workplaces. Psychological capital theory emerged from positive psychology's recognition that human strengths drive organizational outcomes (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). But what if the cognitive frameworks that sustain hope during chaos, enable efficacy under pressure, breed resilience during setbacks, and maintain optimism in uncertainty aren't manufactured through intervention programs but emerge naturally through theological sensemaking—the process by which Christians interpret professional experiences through biblical worldviews?

Such a perspective suggests that for substantial portions of the Christian workforce, theological assumptions about providence, purpose, and permanence may fundamentally shape psychological capital development through distinctive sensemaking processes. Theological beliefs, unlike personality traits or learned competencies, are embedded in comprehensive worldviews providing both cognitive frameworks and divine light for navigating secular workplace darkness (Pargament, 1997). Christian interpretation of workplace adversity draws on individual faith plus centuries of theological reflection, biblical wisdom, and spiritual practices functioning as naturally occurring psychological capital interventions while simultaneously carrying Christ's light into secular organizational contexts. Yet while faith-work integration has become popular in management literature, most research treats religion as a motivational add-on rather than a fundamental light-carrying system illuminating secular workplace realities (Miller & Ewest, 2013). This limited conceptualization is reflected in current measurement approaches, which assess generic spirituality rather than investigating specific theological constructs carrying divine light into secular marketplace contexts (Lynn, Naughton, & VanderVeen, 2009). This measurement gap highlights the need for more nuanced theoretical approaches that recognize how alternative interpretive frameworks may generate psychological resources through mechanisms that secular intervention models have not yet mapped.

The proposed conceptual model emerges from recognizing that sensemaking isn't worldview-neutral (Weick, 1995). For Christian employees, providence beliefs may uniquely illuminate hope by offering certainty about ultimate outcomes despite unclear immediate pathways. Vocational calling convictions may enhance efficacy by connecting individual capabilities to divine purpose and equipping (Dik & Duffy, 2009). Understanding work through an eternal perspective may strengthen resilience by providing value systems that transcend temporal setbacks. This theoretical approach suggests theological beliefs constitute alternative pathways carrying Christ's light into secular workplaces through distinctive psychological capital development. While secular interventions build psychological resources through cognitive techniques and goal setting (Luthans, Avey, Avolio, Norman, and Combs, 2006), theological sensemaking provides more illuminating foundations by embedding resources in transcendent meaning systems reflecting divine light, even in secular organizational darkness.

Defining the Population: Active Christian Workplace Integration

This theoretical framework applies specifically to Christians who actively integrate biblical worldviews into their professional lives. Not all who identify as Christian engage in the theological sensemaking processes described here. The framework is most relevant for believers who:

- Maintain regular spiritual practices (prayer, scripture study, worship participation)
- View their work as vocational calling rather than merely economic necessity
- Consciously interpret workplace experiences through biblical principles
- Participate in faith communities that reinforce theological frameworks

Theological sensemaking varies across Christian traditions—Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant denominations emphasize different aspects of faith-work integration. However, the core mechanisms proposed here (providence interpretation, calling orientation, eternal perspective) appear across traditions, though expressed through different theological vocabularies and practices. This framework does not assume uniform theological sophistication or maturity but rather proposes that among Christians who actively engage their faith in workplace contexts, these sensemaking processes operate to varying degrees.

The propositions developed here are most applicable to what might be termed "actively integrated" Christians—those for whom faith significantly shapes professional identity and decision-making—rather than to nominal believers for whom Christian identity remains primarily cultural or social. Having defined the population to which this framework applies, we now examine how current psychological capital theory overlooks theological mechanisms.

Literature Review

The Architecture of Psychological Resources

Psychological capital represents a compelling discovery in organizational psychology: certain positive psychological states can be measured, developed, and leveraged to enhance workplace performance (Luthans et al., 2007). The four-component architecture—hope, efficacy, resilience, optimism—emerged from research demonstrating these psychological resources predict job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and performance while buffering stress and turnover (Avey, Reichard, Luthans, & Mhatre, 2011). This architecture was constructed almost exclusively from secular psychological frameworks. Hope draws from Snyder's (2000) goal-setting theory, efficacy from Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory, resilience from positive psychology adaptation research (Masten, 2001), optimism from Seligman's (1998) explanatory style work. Each represents sophisticated psychological science—yet each reflects particular cultural lenses potentially missing how other meaning-making systems generate similar psychological resources.

Theological Antecedents to Psychological Capital: Alternative Pathways

The four-component psychological capital architecture emerged from secular frameworks, yet organizations are puzzling phenomena where meaning-making occurs through diverse cognitive lenses. What happens when the sensemaker brings theological interpretive resources to workplace ambiguity? The following sections explore how three core theological beliefs may generate psychological capital through mechanisms parallel to but distinct from conventional interventions.

Hope Through Providence Beliefs. Consider hope, defined as goal-directed energy plus pathways thinking (Snyder, 2000). This cognitive formulation captures important psychological processes but may overlook how theological frameworks generate hope through different mechanisms. Christian employees facing career uncertainty might derive hope not from identifying multiple goal pathways but from trusting divine providence to provide right pathways at right times. Research on religious coping demonstrates that individuals who engage in collaborative religious coping—viewing God as an active partner in problem-solving—maintain hope through perceived divine involvement rather than through identifying personal agency pathways (Pargament et al., 1988). This trust in divine timing and guidance reflects what Park (2005) describes as meaning-made through religious frameworks, where uncertainty itself becomes meaningful as part of God's providential plan rather than a problem requiring multiple solution pathways.

Biblical narratives illustrate this providence-based hope across millennia. Joseph's declaration—"You intended harm, but God intended good" (Genesis 50:20)—reveals hope sustained not through enumerating escape strategies but through confidence in divine orchestration of outcomes. This pattern appears in empirical studies of Christian professionals who report that providence beliefs buffer against career anxiety by providing certainty about ultimate outcomes despite immediate ambiguity (Nash & McLennan, 2001).

Providence beliefs may also enhance resilience through similar mechanisms. When setbacks are interpreted as purposeful elements in divine plans rather than random misfortunes, individuals maintain psychological resources through meaning-preservation rather than through cognitive restructuring of failure experiences (Pargament, 1997). The conviction that "all things work together for good" (Romans 8:28, New International Version) provides a stable interpretive anchor even when environmental cues become ambiguous under stress.

These theological mechanisms suggest a distinctive pathway to psychological capital:

> **Proposition 1:** Divine providence beliefs will be positively related to workplace psychological capital, with stronger relationships for resilience and hope than for efficacy and optimism.

Rationale: Providence beliefs provide meaning-making frameworks helping individuals interpret workplace setbacks as purposeful rather than random, while offering confidence in divine guidance and ultimate outcomes (Bonanno, 2004; Krause, 2005). The differential prediction—stronger effects on hope and resilience than efficacy and optimism—reflects that providence beliefs specifically address uncertainty and adversity interpretation rather than competence assessment or general expectations.

Psychological outcomes—sustained motivation and positive expectations—may be identical between secular and theological hope, but underlying cognitive processes operate through faith-based rather than goal-based sensemaking. This represents an alternative pathway rather than a replacement, as some Christians may draw on both theological and secular mechanisms synergistically.

Efficacy Through Calling Beliefs. While Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory positions self-efficacy as belief in one's capability based on mastery experiences, social modeling, and physiological states, theological frameworks suggest an additional source: divine calling and equipping. The concept of vocational calling—understanding work as participation in God's purposes rather than mere economic activity—has received increasing scholarly attention (Dik & Duffy, 2009), yet its relationship to psychological capital components remains underspecified. Calling beliefs operate through distinctive mechanisms. When Christians understand their work as divinely appointed, they interpret their capabilities differently than secular self-efficacy frameworks suggest. Rather than deriving confidence solely from past performance or peer comparison, believers may draw on theological convictions about divine gifting and empowerment. Paul's assertion "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13) represents not mere positive thinking but a fundamental reorientation of competence attribution—capability flows from divine empowerment rather than exclusively from personal capacity.

Empirical research supports this distinctive pathway. Studies of Christian professionals reveal that those who experience strong vocational calling report higher work engagement and job satisfaction independent of traditional self-efficacy sources (Duffy et al., 2018). Calling beliefs also enhance hope through providing transcendent purpose that sustains goal-directed energy even when immediate pathways appear blocked. Nehemiah's declaration—"The God of heaven will give us success" (Nehemiah 2:20)—exemplifies hope rooted in calling rather than strategic analysis. However, calling beliefs may relate less strongly to resilience and optimism. Resilience addresses recovery from setbacks, while calling primarily addresses motivation and competence during active pursuit. Similarly, optimism involves generalized positive expectations, whereas calling provides specific confidence about divinely-appointed work rather than broad life outcomes.

These mechanisms suggest:

> **Proposition 2:** Vocational calling beliefs will be positively related to workplace psychological capital, with stronger relationships for hope and efficacy than for resilience and optimism.

Rationale: Calling beliefs connect work to transcendent purposes and emphasize divine gifting, providing both motivational resources and competence confidence particularly enhancing goal-directed thinking and self-efficacy (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997; Dik et al., 2012). The differential prediction reflects that calling specifically addresses work motivation and capability assessment rather than adversity recovery or general outlook.

Resilience and Optimism Through Eternal Perspective. Seligman's (1998) explanatory style work positions optimism as cognitive interpretation of events along permanence, pervasiveness, and personalization dimensions. Theological frameworks add a fourth dimension: eternal significance. When Christians evaluate workplace experiences through eternal perspective—asking "Will this matter in eternity?" or "How does this advance God's kingdom?"—they introduce temporal framing that secular optimism constructs don't capture.

This eternal perspective operates distinctively in generating resilience and optimism. Paul's sensemaking during imprisonment—"Our light and momentary troubles achieve eternal glory far outweighing them all" (2 Corinthians 4:17-18)—reframes temporal adversity through transcendent outcomes. This isn't denial of present difficulty but recontextualization within larger timescales. Research on Christian professionals documents this pattern: those who maintain eternal perspective report sustained motivation during career setbacks by interpreting temporal failures as temporary within eternal trajectories (Nash & McLennan, 2001).

Eternal perspective particularly enhances resilience by providing value systems transcending temporal concerns. When career setbacks are evaluated against eternal purposes rather than immediate career trajectories, believers maintain psychological resources through meaning-preservation. The conviction that present suffering produces eternal weight of glory provides interpretive stability even when circumstances deteriorate.

This perspective also supports optimism by anchoring positive expectations in divine purposes rather than circumstantial analysis. While secular optimism requires identifying reasons for positive outcomes, theological optimism draws on promises about God's ultimate purposes prevailing. This doesn't eliminate temporal pessimism about specific situations but provides meta-optimism about ultimate outcomes. However, eternal perspective may relate less strongly to hope and efficacy. Hope requires pathway identification, while eternal perspective provides outcome certainty without specifying mechanisms. Similarly, efficacy addresses capability for specific tasks, whereas eternal perspective addresses ultimate meaning rather than immediate competence.

> **Proposition 3:** Eternal perspective beliefs will be positively related to workplace psychological capital, with stronger relationships for optimism and resilience than for hope and efficacy.

Rationale: Eternal perspective provides value systems transcending temporal concerns, supporting positive expectations based on divine purposes while reducing anxiety about career outcomes (MacArthur, 1998; Stevens, 1999). The differential prediction reflects that eternal perspective specifically addresses adversity interpretation and outcome confidence rather than pathway generation or capability assessment.

Having established how three core theological beliefs provide alternative pathways to psychological capital's four components, we now examine how these alternative pathways intersect with conventional psychological capital development.

The Intervention Paradox

Religious worldviews offer precisely this comprehensive framework, though the relationship between theological and secular psychological capital development remains complex. For some Christians, psychological capital flows primarily from theological convictions about God's character, human purpose, and eternal significance, reinforced through regular spiritual practices rather than formal interventions. For others, theological frameworks may work synergistically with secular approaches—workshop-based development enhanced and sustained through ongoing spiritual practices that function as continuous reinforcement mechanisms. This suggests theological sensemaking may operate both as an alternative pathway and as a sustaining system for conventionally developed psychological capital."

Faith-Work Integration: Missing the Light-Carrying Connection. Growing faith-work integration literature documents positive relationships between religious commitment and workplace outcomes. Recent meta-analyses confirm that religious employees demonstrate higher job satisfaction, stronger ethical commitment, and greater organizational citizenship behaviors (Penger & Žnidaršič Kranjc, 2022; Walker & Smither, 2022). Yet most research treats these as correlational puzzles rather than exploring underlying sensemaking processes explaining them. The missing piece: understanding how religious beliefs function as cognitive frameworks shaping workplace interpretation and response. When Christian employees interpret difficult bosses as patience development opportunities, view mundane tasks as God service, maintain hope during organizational change by trusting divine purposes—these aren't religious overlays on secular work experiences but fundamental sensemaking processes (that is, how individuals interpret and create meaning from their experiences) determining psychological capital and workplace effectiveness while carrying Christ's light into secular contexts.

Sensemaking as Light-Carrying

Ancient Light-Bearers in Hostile Marketplaces

Sensemaking fundamentally concerns how individuals construct meaning from ambiguous situations (Weick, 1995). For Christians who actively integrate their faith into professional life, theological beliefs provide primary cognitive frameworks through which workplace experiences are interpreted. Beliefs operate as illuminating templates, automatically structuring how events are understood and responded to while carrying divine light into secular organizational contexts. The most compelling evidence for how Christians carry light into secular workplaces comes from examining how illuminating cognitive processes operated across centuries in hostile marketplace environments. Biblical narratives document sophisticated examples of God's people carrying divine light into secular organizational contexts through theological sensemaking, transforming career disasters into divine opportunities while illuminating kingdom purposes in marketplace settings.

Joseph's Providence Illumination (Genesis 37-50). Joseph's career reads like carrying divine light into increasingly dark secular contexts: family betrayal leading to human trafficking, sexual harassment in Potiphar's household, wrongful imprisonment, and colleague betrayal. Yet Joseph engaged providential illumination—carrying divine light into apparently dark workplace disasters by interpreting them as purposeful elements in God's larger plan. His declaration—"You intended harm, but God intended good to accomplish what is now being done, saving many lives" (Genesis 50:20,)—reveals sophisticated light-carrying transforming workplace betrayal into divine preparation while illuminating God's purposes in secular Egyptian governmental contexts.

Nehemiah's Calling Illumination (Nehemiah 1-6). Nehemiah carried vocational light into overwhelming secular challenges, abandoning Persian government security to carry divine light into impossible infrastructure rebuilding while facing hostile secular stakeholders. His understanding of divine calling carried him through secular project management challenges: 'The God of heaven will give us success' (Nehemiah 2:20), demonstrating how theological conviction illuminates divine purposes rather than relying solely on technical expertise.

Paul's Eternal Perspective Illumination (2 Corinthians 4:16-18). Paul carried divine light into hostile secular workplace contexts involving dangerous travel, physical assault by secular authorities, repeated imprisonment, and consistent opposition. His sensemaking carried divine light into secular marketplace darkness through eternal perspective illumination: "Our light and momentary troubles achieve eternal glory far outweighing them all. We fix our eyes not on seen but unseen, since seen is temporary, unseen eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

Seven Elements of Theological Sensemaking

Examining contemporary Christian workplace experiences and biblical narratives reveals systematic frameworks paralleling Weick's seven organizational sensemaking elements yet operating through fundamentally different mechanisms. This parallel structure suggests theological sensemaking constitutes a complete *alternative* psychological system rather than religious overlay on secular processes.

Scriptural Anchors vs. Reference Points. Where Weick's framework relies on environmental cues providing context, theological sensemaking draws on scriptural anchors providing stable interpretive frameworks. Biblical principles like "all things work together for good" (Romans 8:28) function as reference points remaining constant despite chaotic circumstances, unlike environmental cues becoming ambiguous under stress.

Spiritual Identity Formation vs. Identity Construction. Weick describes identity construction based on roles, experience, organizational position, noting identity plasticity. Theological sensemaking operates through spiritual identity formation where core identity is anchored in God relationship as divine children, called servants, and kingdom citizens. While this spiritual identity can provide stability across workplace circumstances for mature believers who actively cultivate their faith, it is not immune to challenge, doubt, or erosion. Biblical narratives acknowledge seasons of identity crisis even among the faithful (Psalms 42-43), and spiritual formation literature recognizes that faith identity develops through stages of growth, plateau, and sometimes regression (Fowler, 1981). Nevertheless, for Christians who maintain active spiritual practices and community engagement, this theological anchor point offers a more enduring reference point for workplace identity than role-based identities that shift with organizational changes.

Divine Coherence vs. Plausibility. While Weick's framework seeks coherent, credible accounts enabling action—good enough narratives making sense to organizational stakeholders—theological sensemaking pursues divine coherence through alignment with divine purposes and biblical truth. However, this theological evaluation still occurs within social contexts. Faith communities provide the necessary social validation for theologically-coherent interpretations, offering collective discernment about whether workplace experiences align with biblical principles. Thus, theological sensemaking replaces one form of social acceptability (organizational plausibility) with another (faith community confirmation), recognizing that humans need social support for maintaining any meaning-making framework.

Faith Community Discernment vs. Social Interaction. Weick emphasizes collective sensemaking through organizational dialogue seeking socially acceptable accounts aligning with organizational culture. Theological sensemaking operates through faith community discernment seeking wisdom through prayer, scripture study, counsel from mature believers, helping discern divine will through spiritual maturity.

Providential Participation vs. Enactive Environment. Most striking difference: Weick asserts sense maker authors environment—individuals create reality through interpretation and action. Theological sensemaking operates through providential participation, believing God authors ultimate outcomes while humans are called to participate in divine purposes, partnering with God's providential work rather than creating their own reality. However, this describes an aspiration rather than a guarantee. Believers frequently act inconsistently with their faith commitments, pursuing personal agendas rather than divine purposes. The theological framework provides guidance for interpretation, but human agency includes the capacity to resist or ignore that guidance. What distinguishes theological sensemaking from Weick's enactive environment is not that believers always align with God's purposes, but rather that they interpret their experiences through a lens acknowledging God's sovereignty even when their own actions fail to reflect faithful obedience.

Sacred Narrative Integration vs. Retrospection. Where Weick describes retrospection as recalling past solutions and moments of socialization, theological sensemaking operates through sacred narrative integration. Research on religious meaning-making demonstrates that believers routinely connect current experiences to biblical narratives and sacred texts when interpreting life events (Pargament, 1997; Park, 2005). Qualitative studies of Christian professionals reveal patterns of interpreting workplace challenges through biblical archetypes—viewing difficult supervisors through the lens of Pharaoh or Nebuchadnezzar, understanding career setbacks as parallel to wilderness experiences, or framing ethical dilemmas using narratives like Daniel's refusal to compromise (Nash & McLennan, 2001). This sacred narrative integration extends beyond individual biblical stories to encompass church history, personal spiritual journeys, and denominational traditions, creating what McAdams (2006) describes as 'redemptive narratives' where present difficulties are interpreted as meaningful chapters in ongoing divine purposes rather than isolated workplace problems.

Eternal Perspective Maintenance vs. Temporal Continuity. Weick (1995) emphasizes that in organizational sensemaking, it is 'more important to keep going than to pause' (p. 55), prioritizing continuous action over extended reflection. Theological sensemaking operates through eternal perspective maintenance, evaluating temporal work through eternal significance while maintaining faithful engagement with immediate responsibilities. This dual orientation is evident in Pauline theology, where believers are instructed to work 'as unto the Lord' (Colossians 3:23), transforming mundane tasks into eternally significant acts of worship. The eternal perspective framework has been documented in studies of Christian professionals who report using criteria like 'Will this matter in eternity?' or 'How does this advance God's kingdom?' when making workplace decisions (Nash & McLennan, 2001). This doesn't paralyze action through excessive spiritual contemplation but rather provides an evaluative lens that can sustain motivation during discouraging circumstances by connecting present work to transcendent purposes (Dik & Duffy, 2009).

Theoretical Propositions: The Illuminating Alternative

Having established how theological beliefs provide alternative pathways to psychological capital's core components (Propositions 1-3 developed above), this section presents seven additional propositions addressing comparative effects, moderating conditions, and mediating mechanisms.

> **Proposition 4:** Christian employees will demonstrate higher levels of workplace psychological capital compared to secular employees, with differences mediated by theological sensemaking processes.

Rationale: Theological worldviews provide comprehensive meaning-making systems generating psychological resources more effectively than secular cognitive frameworks alone (Pargament, 1997).

Proposition 5: The relationship between theological beliefs and psychological capital will be moderated by the strength of religious conviction, with stronger beliefs associated with greater psychological capital benefits.

Rationale: Cognitive resources require genuine belief to produce psychological benefits, suggesting nominal religious commitment may not activate theological sensemaking mechanisms (Koenig, King, & Carson, 2012).

Proposition 6: During periods of workplace uncertainty, organizational change, and career transitions, Christians who engage in theological sensemaking will demonstrate higher psychological capital compared to non-Christians facing similar circumstances.

Rationale: Theological frameworks that emphasize divine sovereignty and providential control may provide distinctive sensemaking resources during ambiguous situations where secular frameworks offer limited guidance (Weick, 1995). This comparative advantage should be most evident during high-uncertainty periods when conventional cognitive techniques for maintaining hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism face the greatest challenge.

Mediation Propositions

Proposition 7: Perceived vocational calling will mediate the relationship between theological beliefs and psychological capital, particularly for hope and efficacy components.

Rationale: Calling experiences translate abstract theological beliefs into concrete work-related meaning and motivation, serving as key mechanisms through which faith influences workplace psychology (Duffy, Dik, Douglass, England, & Velez, 2018).

Proposition 8: Spiritual practices (prayer, scripture study, worship) will mediate the relationship between theological beliefs and psychological capital resilience.

Rationale: Regular spiritual disciplines function as continuous psychological capital interventions, maintaining and renewing psychological resources during workplace challenges.

Proposition 9: Religious community support will mediate the relationship between theological beliefs and psychological capital, particularly during workplace challenges.

Rationale: Faith communities provide social resources supporting psychological capital development and maintenance through encouragement, practical assistance, and accountability (Ellison & George, 1994).

Proposition 10: Meaning-making processes will mediate the relationship between theological beliefs and psychological capital, with different meaning-making patterns for different theological domains.

Rationale: Cognitive processes through which individuals interpret workplace events using theological frameworks serve as primary mechanisms linking religious beliefs to psychological outcomes (Park, 2010).

Implications and Future Directions

Research Directions: Testing the Propositions

Validating this framework requires a multi-stage research program addressing measurement, comparison, mechanism testing, and boundary conditions.

Stage 1: Measurement Development. Before testing relationships, reliable measures of theological sensemaking are essential. Existing religiosity scales (e.g., Lynn et al., 2009) measure generic faith commitment but don't capture the specific cognitive processes proposed here. New measures should:

- Operationalize the three core theological beliefs (providence, calling, eternal perspective) as workplace-specific cognitions
- Include behavioral indicators (e.g., "When facing setbacks, I look for what God might be teaching me") rather than just belief endorsement
- Validate across Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox traditions to ensure construct validity

- Establish discriminant validity from related constructs (general religiosity, trait optimism, hope)

Stage 2: Testing Core Relationships (Propositions 1-4). Propositions 1-3 predict specific patterns in how theological beliefs relate to psychological capital components. Cross-sectional surveys of Christian professionals could:

- Test whether providence beliefs correlate more strongly with resilience/hope than efficacy/optimism (Proposition 1)
- Examine whether calling beliefs show predicted pattern with hope/efficacy (Proposition 2)
- Assess whether eternal perspective associates most with optimism/resilience (Proposition 3)

Proposition 4's claim that Christians demonstrate higher psychological capital than non-Christians requires matched comparison groups controlling for demographic and occupational factors.

Stage 3: Moderation and Mediation Testing (Propositions 5-10). These propositions specify mechanisms requiring more sophisticated designs:

Proposition 5 (conviction strength moderation): Survey design with sufficient variance in religious commitment to test interaction effects.

Proposition 6 (uncertainty context): Longitudinal study tracking employees through organizational change, comparing psychological capital trajectories between Christians and non-Christians.

Propositions 7-10 (mediation): Multi-wave longitudinal designs establishing temporal precedence. For example, testing Proposition 7 requires: Time 1 (theological beliefs) → Time 2 (perceived calling) → Time 3 (psychological capital). Experience sampling methods could capture real-time sensemaking during workplace challenges.

Stage 4: Intervention Research. If correlational studies support the framework, experimental designs could test whether theological formation enhances psychological capital:

- Does faith-based professional development improve psychological resources compared to secular interventions?
- Can spiritual practices maintenance effects be demonstrated experimentally?
- Do theological sensemaking principles augment conventional psychological capital training?

Stage 5: Boundary Conditions and Generalizability. The framework requires testing across:

- Christian traditions with different theological emphases
- Cultural contexts (Western individualism vs. collectivist expressions)
- Occupational sectors where faith integration faces different challenges
- Career stages (early career vs. established professionals

Methodological Challenges

Researchers should anticipate several difficulties:

- Social desirability bias in self-reported religious beliefs
- Selection effects (do psychologically healthy people maintain faith, or does faith build resilience?)
- Longitudinal attrition in studies of religious populations
- Defining appropriate comparison groups for Proposition 4

Practical Applications (Contingent on Empirical Support)

Only after empirical validation should practical applications be developed. Potential applications would include faith-integrated leadership development, marketplace ministry programming, and Christian business education—but these await evidence that the proposed mechanisms actually operate as theorized.

Theoretical Contributions

If empirically validated, this framework would contribute to organizational psychology in three ways:

Extending Psychological Capital Theory. The framework identifies faith-based antecedents to psychological capital, potentially expanding understanding beyond conventional intervention-based approaches. Current psychological capital research focuses almost exclusively on secular cognitive mechanisms, overlooking how theological worldviews might provide alternative or complementary pathways to workplace psychological resources.

Bridging Sacred and Secular Scholarship. The framework demonstrates how religious beliefs can be examined through established psychological theories without reducing theological concepts to purely psychological constructs. By maintaining both theological integrity and psychological rigor, it models integration across traditionally separate domains of inquiry.

Specifying Testable Mechanisms. Rather than documenting correlations between religiosity and workplace outcomes, the framework proposes specific sensemaking mechanisms through which theological beliefs might influence psychological capital. These ten propositions move beyond "Does faith matter?" to "How might faith operate psychologically?" providing testable predictions about when, how, and for whom theological sensemaking influences workplace resources.

Conclusion

The Significance of Carrying Light

This theoretical framework addresses fundamental challenges facing Christians in secular workplaces: how to carry Christ's light effectively into organizational contexts operating from secular assumptions while maintaining both authentic faith expression and professional effectiveness. For two-thirds of the American workforce identifying as Christian, theological beliefs provide primary illuminating frameworks through which workplace experiences are interpreted and responded to in secular contexts.

The framework suggests psychological capital may be more deeply illuminated by divine light than previously recognized. While secular interventions attempt building psychological resources through cognitive techniques and goal-setting exercises, theological sensemaking may provide more enduring illumination because it embeds resources in transcendent meaning systems reflecting divine light even in secular organizational darkness.

Understanding theological sensemaking has significant practical implications for how Christians carry light into secular organizational contexts. Rather than viewing religious beliefs as irrelevant to secular workplace effectiveness, we might discover faith-informed sensemaking provides distinctive psychological resources illuminating both individual flourishing and organizational success while serving as powerful witness to divine light reality in marketplace contexts.

The ultimate question facing Christian business scholars isn't whether theological beliefs illuminate secular workplace psychology—biblical evidence suggests they have for millennia. The question is whether we'll develop frameworks sophisticated enough to understand how carrying Christ's light into secular contexts advances both kingdom purposes and organizational effectiveness in ways serving divine glory while contributing to human flourishing.

In the end, theological sensemaking may offer Christians, Christian owned businesses, and the Christian Business Faculty Association something we've long sought: a deeper understanding of how divine light shapes secular marketplace dynamics, how kingdom purpose drives professional performance in hostile contexts, and how transcendent commitments create workplace resilience that endures while carrying effective witness across circumstances, cultures, and centuries. The framework suggests that for Christian employees, psychological capital flows from deeply held convictions about ultimate reality that illuminate divine purposes even in secular workplace contexts. Understanding these convictions and their illuminating implications may provide Christian business educators, leaders, and practitioners with new insights into how divine light shapes workplace motivation, professional resilience, and kingdom-oriented flourishing while serving as effective witnesses in secular organizational environments.

Through continued theoretical development, empirical investigation, and practical application informed by the CBFA community, the intersection of faith and secular work represents a promising frontier for understanding how Christians can effectively illuminate marketplace darkness while maintaining both authentic discipleship and professional excellence. The framework presented in this paper provides foundations for this continued exploration while demonstrating potential for Christian scholarship to illuminate both organizational science and kingdom purposes in ways serving divine glory and advancing human flourishing in secular workplace contexts where Christians are called to carry Christ's light as salt and light in a dark world.

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Wise as Serpents and Innocent as Doves: Should Christian Organizations Engage Through Social Media?

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Abstract

This paper examines social media engagement for Christian organizations through a biblical lens, using the Imago Dei framework (i.e., humans were created for relationship with God and others and to rule over creation) to explore how social media use affects our ability to be the humans God created us to be in this world. Drawing on empirical research, whistleblower testimony, and leaked internal documents, we explain how social media companies employ sophisticated psychological manipulation techniques to maximize engagement and advertising revenue at the expense of authentic human connection and autonomous decision-making. We then discuss how social media holds up to Paul's framework for "disputable matters" from Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8. We conclude that while social media is not inherently evil, its current design creates systemic barriers to fulfilling our God-given call as humans. This research provides a distinct Christian theological framework for evaluating social media engagement strategies.

Keywords: Christian organizations, social media, digital theology, collective action problems, algorithmic manipulation, disputable matters

Wise as Serpents and Innocent as Doves: Should Christian Organizations Engage Through Social Media?

> The story of Babel is the best metaphor I have found for what happened to America in the 2010s, and for the fractured country we now inhabit. Something went terribly wrong, very suddenly. We are disoriented, unable to speak the same language or recognize the same truth. We are cut off from one another and from the past (Haidt, 2022, p. 1).

From the beginning of time, humans were created in the image of God, in his likeness. What does that mean exactly, and how should it govern a believer's life? In the only conversation had by the Holy Trinity in the Bible, God declares that humans were designed for relationship in the likeness of the Holy Trinity, to have a unique relationship with God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit. In addition, humans were intended to have a relationship with each other. The second purpose of humanity is to rule over creation. This is the most fundamental summary, derived from a conversation of the divine, of who we are and why we are here.

Jesus, quoting Deuteronomy, confirms the importance of relationship: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (New International Version, 1973/2011, Matthew 22:37-40). This simple theological framework is how all believers should approach their humanity, work, pleasure, and relationships. Even as the created world has evolved, what it means to be human hasn't changed. Whatever humans have faced since creation should have and should always be filtered through the question – "How does this help me fulfill my God-given purpose on this earth?"

Indeed, the general public only recently started questioning the benefits (and learning the dangers) of social media (SM). *The Social Dilemma* (2020) gained a significant following by providing tech industry whistleblowers a platform, and Jonathon Haidt's *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (2024) summarized research and exposed the "unintended" effects of SM on American society. While the data presented is primarily correlational, there can be no doubt that the rise of SM as a cultural influence has coincided with extreme negative outcomes for individuals, the church, and society as a whole. As Chris Martin states in his book *Terms of Service* (2022), Silicon Valley geniuses have dedicated their lives to manipulating the natural flaws in our psychology. Numerous psychologists, behavioral economists, and consumer behavior researchers have worked to expose these psychological flaws, often unwittingly assisting SM companies in their exploitation. However, what makes these technologies truly dangerous is their scale (billions of users in some cases) combined with the data capturing and data processing capabilities built into these systems.

Many of us no longer have a frame of reference for what life was like without SM. It is nearly impossible to make a reasoned argument that the pervasive nature of this technology hasn't affected what we think and, more importantly, how we think. Social media taps into our emotional reward centers using the most fundamental biblical and psychological concept, that man was not created to be alone. While theologians may contend that man is seeking a relationship with God, even secular theorists acknowledge that individuals have a basic psychological need for relationship with others (see, Deci & Ryan, 2012; Fiske, 2018; Kirkpatrick & Epstein, 1992; Maslow, 1969).

As Christians, we know that Imago Dei is at least partly reflected in the people who surround us, and that is what we are truly seeking. The relational rewards provided through SM are predicated on quick and easy interactions, and these technologies condition a normative state of ersatz connection on a scale that is impossible to achieve offline. Much like the natural craving for sugar that can cause individuals to devour desserts, neglecting more nutritious foods (as evidenced by the current epidemic of type two diabetes), SM has been designed to manipulate the natural structures and reward systems in our brains, usurping our autonomy and free will so absolutely that we are oblivious to the process.

From a Christian perspective, Jesus famously sent his disciples out amongst the wolves, and SM can be viewed as the 21st century wolf's lair. However, is it even possible to relate like Jesus through SM? Are we doing God's work if we simply abandon those who choose to be online? If we are charged with being as wise as serpents and innocent as doves, is it even possible to be wise or innocent in our current SM environment? The absence of scholarly academic papers that tackle the integration of SM into the Christian life is puzzling.

The purpose of this paper is to consider how SM was built to exploit our God-given desire for relationship and how it can thwart our ability to be the humans that God created us to be. Specifically, we will investigate the role that social media plays in loving God (with all our heart, soul, and mind), loving others (as ourselves), and ruling over the created world. Using this biblical framework for humanity, the following pages will summarize what we know about how these technologies' design and discuss elements Christian organizations should consider when contemplating SM use. Leaders of Christian organizations (i.e., organizations with a Christian mission) must understand the true costs of both engaging in these online spaces and leading others to interact there.

We Are Created for Relationship

A core component of humanity is that we can have a deep meaningful relationship with the Creator of the universe. God says, "let us make mankind in our image" (Genesis 1:26). The "us" referenced here is the Holy Trinity, and Jesus prays in the book of John that our relationships will mimic the relationship that exists amongst Father, Son & Spirit. In fact, God so desires to have an intimate relationship that He sent His Son to die so that His Spirit could dwell in each believer. We were created to live life with God by giving him all our affection, attention, and devotion. We are not to have any other gods before Him; He is to be the most important thing in our lives. So, how does SM help or hinder this God-given purpose?

In addition to having a relationship with our Creator, we are to have deep relationships with other humans. Jesus is clear; we love others in the same way Jesus loved us (John 15:12). We are called to selfless, sacrificial love for humanity. These relationships would be full of service, forgiveness, compassion, encouragement, and acceptance. Jesus prayed that believers specifically would be unified in their fellowship with each other, and that this would be a testimony to the unbelieving world. With this purpose in mind, we should consider what role SM plays in helping us build sacrificial, unified relationships with others.

Social media was initially marketed as a tool to strengthen relationships. However, the explosion of loneliness, discontent, perceived isolation, and suicide documented in both academic papers and books like *The Anxious Generation* strongly suggest that what contemporary individuals are using for social connection is worse than ineffective; it is harmful. Not only does SM provide a watered-down version of relationship, it satiates individuals' conscious demand for authentic connection with others and God, as they don't fully process that they no longer interact with either. Much like "soma" in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World,* the counterfeit connection provided in these venues satisfies our conscious cravings for relationship, preventing behaviors that would result in authentic relationship, but do nothing to truly connect individuals with each other or with God. The following sections will explore why individuals are attracted to SM and the role it has in our relationships with God and others.

Social Media Is All About the Self

Despite its initial promise to connect, SM has become a morass of self-presentation and social comparison (Vogel et al., 2014). Hollenbaugh (2021) recently reviewed published research on self-presentation through SM, and she indicated three key findings. First, SM provides the "affordances" of anonymity, persistence, and visibility to users. Second, the behavior of other users (i.e., likes, comments, tags, etc.) moderates users' online impression management. Finally, users manage their impressions differently on disparate platforms. Instead of presenting a genuine version of the self, the variety of SM platforms encourage users to be chameleons who can change their colors depending on who is populating a platform with them.

Many users spend significant time cultivating their online image in an effort to justify their existence or worth, and the online presentation of self has taken priority over the offline. Where Christians are taught to focus on others, the SM landscape paradoxically encourages inward focus, because we fixate on others' opinions and approval. More than just navel-gazing, many of us have been programmed to actively groom our online images through these sites even though the Lord calls us to "do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit" (Philippians 2:3).

The focus on the self is the root of both social media's unprecedented growth as well as its conflict with Christian principles. **"**For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people" (Romans 16:18). What may begin as an effort to relate to the "Imago Dei" in others, quickly turns to social comparison (Bonfanti et al., 2025), narcissism (Casale & Bianchi, 2022), and procrastination (Anwar et al., 2022; Hinsch & Sheldon, 2013). The hard work of relationship is replaced with clicks and swipes and a dopamine rush of self-indulgence. Social media has become a tool for indulgence, which is directly at odds with our God-given purpose (i.e., loving God and others). Instead of worshiping God, we worship eudaemonia or our well-being and happiness. As Mark Lockwood (2016) summarizes the theology of Luther, the holy trinity is replaced with the idol of me, myself, and I, which makes us anxious, afraid, and mentally exhausted. Reading between the lines, one may see SM as a harbinger of the end times. Paul warns us in 2 Timothy 3:1-5:

> But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God— having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people.

If SM doesn't directly drive the outcomes listed in 2 Timothy, it is undeniable that SM platforms have created outlets where these behaviors both flourish and are celebrated.

Social Media Allows Us to Seek Our Own Truth Over God's Truth

The main way we love God with all of our heart, soul, and mind and love others is that we obey what God tells us to do (John 14:15). If we genuinely love him, we will let him be Lord over every aspect of our lives. Jesus summarizes by saying, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), and we have relationship with the Father by following Jesus and accepting the gospel. However, "social truth" contends that reality is neither fixed nor objective; rather, it is determined based on what a society chooses to believe, and this perspective has a long history (Partridge, 1936). Through this lens, there is no natural law to be studied, there is no biblical mandate, there is only what each society determines to be true. Tradition, authentic science, and the scientific method are increasingly friends of Christianity and biblical truth as the writings of contemporary apologists like J. Warner Wallace and Lee Strobel attest. However, as a postmodern worldview displaces the scientific method and a focus on uncovering natural law, feelings and narrative have taken ontological and epistemological precedence.

Social media has facilitated the rise of the narrative through a pseudo "social scientific" lens. If I can find others to validate my perspective, then my perspective must be valid, right? Social media algorithms, sometimes selecting comments or posts from billions of users, can find perspectives that agree with me regardless of what I believe. Instead of providing varying information from a wide range of users, SM can limit the possibility that I am faced with the discomfort of a diverging view. Instead of looking to God's truth and natural law, I can look to the self and those who will tell me that I am right and that my feelings are valid.

Divergent views are uncomfortable (Festinger, 1957), and SM algorithms manage these to limit but not necessarily eliminate exposure to them. In this way, SM exacerbates confirmation bias or "the predisposition to only consume the news, or what appears to be news, that confirms our pre-existing attitudes and beliefs" (Ling, 2020, p. 596). Most SM platforms primarily show you "takes" that fit with yours, but they occasionally include conflicting voices that are generally not well reasoned. Studies have shown that SM feed algorithms drive time on the platform and increase uncivil content, which serves to increase ideological isolation (Guess et al., 2023). These systems typically display information and "takes" consistent with the poles (strongly agree/strongly disagree), not the nuances of an argument. This is an intentional effort to drive outrage and minimize the ability to process an opposing view which results in a polarized society. This process keeps you engaged on the site and thereby makes you more valuable to the SM provider. The echo chambers cultivated by social media's focus on cultivating users' engagement and time on the platform drive individuals to seek social truth and eschew biblical truth.

Unfortunately, the addictive nature of SM keeps users engaged, which leaves less time spent in the truth of God's Word (John 17:17). The average person spends 2.5 hours on SM a day (Dixon, 2025) with teens spending nearly 5 hours per day (DeAngelis, 2024) while the average Christian spends less than 30 minutes reading the Bible. This means that younger generations are much less likely to see that the concept of social truth directly conflicts with the teachings of the Bible. God tells us in Isaiah that "For my thoughts are not your thoughts; neither are your ways my ways" (Isaiah 55:8). Jesus teaches us in the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount that his way and his truth is often the opposite of societal views. Likewise, in Romans 12:2, Paul urges us, "Do not be conformed to the patterns of this world but be transformed by the renewing of our mind"; it is hard to imagine that he was referring to something other than social truth.

Social Media Is a Collective Action Problem

It is no surprise that the most influential documentary on SM is called *The Social Dilemma*, and this term is a synonym for a collective action problem. A collective action occurs when a group of people work in concert to accomplish a common goal. A collective action problem occurs when an individual's self-interest leads him to ignore a common goal and behave in a way that advances his personal goals at the expense of the collective. What makes SM unique is the fact that individuals unknowingly work against their self-interest to attain dopamine hits and quick shots of ersatz connection at the expense of both the community's goals and what is best for them. Recent research (Bursztyn et al., 2023) found that college students would pay $40 or $50 per month to use SM platforms like TikTok and Instagram. However, these college students valued these same platforms negatively (-$28 and -$10) if others (collective action) did not use them. In other words, they would happily pay for this technology not to exist. In one journalist's words, "The relationship he has uncovered is more like the co-dependence seen in a destructive relationship, or the way we relate to addictive products such as tobacco that we know are doing us harm" (Martin, 2024).

Even though most users of SM (believers and non-believers) are aware of the negative effects of SM, many resist disengaging with these platforms. Driven by addiction, fear of missing out (FOMO), customer identification, or ministry/community involvement, SM has become ubiquitous and therefore a necessity in the minds of many. Paul tells us that when we go along with what everyone else is doing, because that's the habit of the culture, we will no longer be able to discern God's will in our life (Romans 12:2), and, as will become clear later in this paper, it is hard to imagine a more invasive driver of conformance than SM. However, when we resist cultural patterns and fill our minds with God's truth, we will be transformed and understand God's will.

We Are Created to Rule and Reign Over All Created Things, Including Technology

Depending on the translation, we were created to "rule", "reign and govern", or have "dominion" over and subdue what God created. We are charged to be stewards of the world, and God uses the terms "work/serve/minister" and "keep or guard" (Genesis 2), which are the same Hebrew words used in Numbers to describe Levitical priests' duties. We are intended to care for God's creation, and this is a form of worship. We get to serve God by making stuff out of His stuff (i.e., technology, like the ark). Through Imago Dei, we were made to be creative just like our Creator, and he gave us the ability to work and utilize all creation. Therefore, just as we rule over the plants and animals of this world, we are also called to rule over the technology of this world. We are to subdue it in a way that helps us love God and love others. However, the 21st century world has been turned on its head as one simply needs to observe a group of teenagers huddled and fixated on their phones or felt the irresistible urge to view a notification to feel that something is wrong. In effect, technology is ruling and reigning over us. Because few understand why social media was created or how it works, Christian organizations who use SM likely don't fully understand what we give up when we delegate our socialization to these platforms. The next section will focus on how these platforms are designed and explain the horror that SM has become.

Social Media Controls the Content You Post

Like Tom Sawyer convincing children that whitewashing was an elite privilege, SM companies have convinced Western culture that SM presence is essential for legitimacy and fulfillment. Users are compelled to consistently update their profiles, with many believing online reality supersedes their offline life (Kruzan & Won, 2019). The content created by individuals and organizations becomes an irresistible lure for others to associate through screens, which both supplants and minimizes face-to-face interaction. However, once created, users lose control of the content they generate as the SM platforms determine display location, timing, and audience. For example, Facebook long ago abandoned chronological display for AI-driven curation, with no obligation to present user-generated content honestly or fairly. Even content intended for "friends" isn't protected as SM platforms control the visibility, timing, and sequencing of all posts.

Our seemingly innocuous or even faith-focused comments, once posted, can be weaponized for manipulation without our knowledge as producers. Content can become ammunition for manipulators without the creator's control over usage or contextual presentation. SM platforms can modify content created by users through clickbait headlines designed to generate engagement and advertising revenue regardless of accuracy, a deceptive practice that thrives in SM environments (Mayrhofer et al., 2019). As we'll describe below, algorithmic and AI management enable companies to nudge users toward desired behaviors with potentially horrifying consequences. This design can work against the goals of Christian individuals and organizations, especially those that promote the attractive messages of redemption, salvation, and forgiveness, as these messages can be hijacked and perverted by SM to harm. This "twisting of our words" is not unlike how ignorant and unstable people distorted Paul's letters (to their destruction) (2 Peter 3:16). Since we know best how to attract others like us, Christian's sentiment and emotions can be weaponized to manipulate others who relate to posts about our Christian walk, struggles, and victories.

Social Media Controls What You See and How You See It

Not only does SM control how your posts are displayed, but it also controls what you see from others. Any user of SM has probably noticed his "feed" contains an increasing percentage of seemingly random items, like advertisements and other sponsored content. Often, this "non-friend" content resonates with our thinking and perspective. Astute users understand that these sources appear random because we lack access to the algorithms that determine the content and order we see. For Christians, the lack of control over what we see or hear on our feeds is a huge problem, leaving our minds and hearts unguarded.

How do SM companies decide what should be in our feed? The simple answer is by collecting data on us and using what they learn from this data to keep us engaged for as long as possible. Apart from George Orwell's depiction of "Big Brother" in 1984, it is difficult to envision a way for any entity to collect as much data about a person as the current digital landscape allows. Social media information generation is a "black box" that even SM employees don't understand. These systems do more than track whether you click on a post, simply read the headline, or scroll right past. The Cambridge Analytica scandal revealed that platforms can predict beliefs, preferences, and moods through scrolling behavior alone—tracking headline pauses, contemplation time, and reactions to similar content without requiring clicks, likes, or retweets. These extensive tracking capabilities were revealed a decade ago, but information collection has almost certainly become more efficient and invasive since then. Table 1 describes the bare minimum of both personal and behavioral data tracked by Facebook/Meta along with what can be predicted with this data.

Table 1

Documented Tracking and Prediction Capabilities of Facebook/Meta

Personal Data	*Source/Revelation*	*Behaviors*	*Source/Revelation*	*Predictive Capabilities*	*Source/Revelation*
Real name, email, phone number	Cambridge Analytica whistleblower testimony (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018)	Likes, comments, shares, reactions	Facebook's data download tool analysis (Hill, 2018)	Political affiliation and voting likelihood	(Grassegger & Krogerus, 2017; Kosinski et al., 2013)
Date of birth, location, relationship status	Academic research (Williams and Yerby, 2019)	Pages visited, time spent on posts	Internal Facebook documents (Horwitz & Seetharaman, 2021)	Sexual orientation	Academic research on digital footprints (Kosinski et al., 2013)
Photos with facial recognition data	FTC settlement documents (FTC, 2019)	Friend interactions and messaging patterns	Facebook Papers investigation (Haugen, 2021)	Intelligence and academic performance	Academic studies on social media intelligence (i.e., Stachl et al., 2017)
Contact lists (including non-users)	Facebook's own transparency reports (Meta, 2024)	Ad clicks and shopping behavior	Wall Street Journal Facebook Files (Wells et al., 2021)	Mental health conditions	Depression prediction research (Eichstaedt et al., 2018)
Device information and IP addresses	Academic studies on data collection (Bashir et al., 2018)	Search history within platforms	Meta's own privacy policy disclosures (Meta, 2023)	Relationship stability and breakups	Relationship prediction studies (Backstrom & Kleinberg, 2014)
Biometric data (voice prints, facial data)	Illinois biometric privacy lawsuit (Nguyen, 2018)	Cross-platform tracking	Academic research on web tracking (Englehardt & Narayanan, 2016)	Income and socioeconomic status	Socioeconomic prediction research (Lambiotte & Kosinski, 2014)
Location data (even when "off")	New York Times investigation (Valentino-DeVries et al., 2018)	Political preferences and engagement	Academic studies on political targeting (Baviera et al., 2025)	Drug and alcohol use patterns	Substance use prediction research (Jose et al., 2022)
Data from connected apps	Wall Street Journal health data investigation (Schechner & Secada, 2019)	Emotional state inference from posts	Facebook emotional contagion study (Kramer et al., 2014)	Purchase Intent and consumer preferences	(Bucklin & Sismeiro, 2009, Lambrecht & Tucker, 2013).)

Social media feed algorithms read this information, analyze it in real time, and use it to drive time on the platform by feeding content that appeals to users. Song (2022) describes how SM is designed by the same behavioral psychologists who design casinos and other addictive technologies. By watching our behaviors on SM, they know exactly what types of content (e.g., a story about identical twins) and behavior (e.g., clicking "like") will trigger our brains' reward systems to release dopamine. This physiological response is what keeps us engaged with endless scrolling as we succumb to our pleasure-seeking, often without awareness of the consequences. Song describes that addiction is created through "micro-moments" of "habitual, automatic, and compulsive" behavior. Users consistently underreport their platform usage, indicating either widespread unconscious engagement or a social desirability bias that drives understatement of a behavior that they know is harmful. SM is tapping the same physiological response that keeps people addicted to gambling, heroin, and video games, and for Christians, this raises serious concerns. Paul warns in Titus 3:3 about being "enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures," and social media's addictive design directly conflicts with serving Christ.

Social Media Manipulates Us for Their Profit at Our Peril

Their Profit

Social media's addictive design didn't happen by accident. SM is designed to manipulate our thoughts, feelings and actions. While SM platforms are proprietary "black boxes" and SM companies don't share specific data on processes, Table 2 depicts data leaks, whistleblower testimony, and court documents that provide some insights into the design of these platforms. The Bible tells us that no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister, and that the Lord will punish all those who commit such sins (1 Thessalonians 4:6). Nonetheless, SM is built on psychological principles that nudge our thoughts, feelings and behavior in specific directions. For example, psychologists recognize that information order influences processing, memory, and reactions. Specifically, recency bias weighs recent information more heavily, while primacy bias emphasizes first encounters (Kahneman et al., 1982). Nudge theory leverages these and other psychological biases to drive attitudes and behaviors (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009), using effects like anchoring bias, availability bias, representativeness bias, status quo bias, and loss aversion to influence decision-making while maintaining the illusion of personal choice.

Table 2

Social Media Manipulations

Year	Entity	Venue	Key Points	Takeaways	Cite
2015 - 2018	Cambridge Analytica	Facebook	Used a combination of personal information, likes and dislikes, friend networks, and behavioral information to manipulate voting behavior.	SM companies track copious data and this data can be used to drive outcomes.	Meredith, 2018
2019-2021	Pegasus Software	Lawsuit from WhatsApp	Third party stole data from WhatsApp and sold it	Data is not only tracked and capable of manipulating behavior, but it is also vulnerable.	Hoskins & Gerken, 2025
2021	Francis Haugen, Facebook Data Scientist	Congression al Testimony	Facebook knows it is harming the vulnerable. The company specifically targeted young users despite Facebook knows that it spreads misinformation. Engagement algorithms are largely responsible for misinformation spread. "Facebook exploited teens using powerful algorithms that amplified their insecurities,"	SM companies are aware of their capabilities and using them to manipulate the young.	Ortutay and Klepper, 2021
2019-2025	State TikTok Lawsuits	Various state and federal courts	Employees understand that their product harms people. The product is designed to cultivate compulsion. There is an "arms race" to get kids' attention early. Push notifications are used to activate users, and the right content at the right time keeps them scrolling.	5 categories of harm are identified: 1. Addiction 2. Depression, and suicide 3. Porn, violence, and drugs 4. Sexual exploitation 5. TikTok knowledge	Haidt & Rausch, 2025
2022-	Nasca Family Lawsuit	Various state and federal courts	Teenager commits suicide by stepping in front of a train after bein prompted with TikTok videos of other train suicides as he walked by train tracks.	These platforms know where you are and what you attend to. This allows them to cultivate your thoughts and behaviors.	Chiu, 2025

Social media platforms exploit these psychological principles to keep users engaged and maximize profit. Social media companies succeed by cultivating the time users spend on their platforms. The higher the engagement, the more advertisers are willing to allocate to gain access to us. As whistleblowers in the 2020 documentary *Social Dilemma* noted, “you are a product” when you consume a free product on the Internet; SM is designed to “sell us” to advertisers.

Social media platforms were designed to excel at user segmentation and manipulation while functioning as lead-generators, connecting sellers to potential buyers through targeted user positioning so accurate that it commands premium pricing. SM uses control of content to create behavioral chains favoring platform and advertiser objectives. As segmentation and tracking market change represent two of marketing's core principles (Palmatier & Crecelius, 2019), SM wields disproportionate influence in contemporary marketing. These platforms employ sophisticated analysis techniques like sentiment analysis, which determines user moods (Drus & Khalid, 2019), allowing SM companies and advertisers to exploit mood-dependent purchasing and consumption patterns (Gardner, 1985). SM directs merchants to consumers who have specific profiles and emotional states, cross-referencing user data with friend networks to triangulate true sentiment. For example, Facebook employs "Ad Targeting" that allows advertisers to specify which demographics will see their ads and "Ad Delivery" that uses AI to determine content order and presentation without input from the advertiser (Ali et al., 2019). Machine learning models analyze vast datasets to "identify patterns, predict user behaviors, and make real-time adjustments to ad placement and content delivery" (Nayyar, 2024, p. 1746a). In addition, SM platforms conduct virtually unlimited real-time A/B testing on users to verify and dial in their understanding of our preferences and interests under the guise of providing relevant content. By controlling context and leveraging knowledge of past A/B tests and behaviors, SM companies can drastically improve advertiser success rates because they know us better than we know ourselves.

Our Peril

While these techniques have led to SM companies earning more than $234 billion in ad revenue worldwide in 2024 (140% increase over five years), platform users are paying the cost (Statista, 2024). Research shows that SM use is strongly correlated with mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, insomnia, and stress, with serious implications for suicide, especially by teens

(Zubair et al., 2023). Diffusion on SM is driven primarily by emotion (Brady et al., 2017), and this is especially true concerning negative emotions aimed at an opposing group (Rathje et al., 2021). SM drives engagement by purposely increasing uncivil content and fostering ideological isolation (Guess et al., 2023). Therefore, one of the main goals of SM is creating divisiveness, which directly opposes the unity for which Jesus prayed (John 17:21). In addition, research now shows that SM decreases trust while increasing polarization and homophily (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023), and the more that a person uses SM, the lonelier they feel (Roberts et al., 2024).

The human brain's malleability makes it susceptible to environmental influence, and SM use also likely alters the structure and ability of the human brain to engage in social processing. Studies have outlined the detrimental effects of GPS use in the general population when compared to taxi and ambulance drivers. These professionals constantly engage in mental routing, resulting in higher hippocampal activity (Maguire et al., 2006). While rates of Alzheimer's have tripled in the general population, they have remained stable in professional drivers (Nichols et al., 2016). Emerging AI research reveals parallel patterns: employees outsourcing critical thinking to these services lose complex information processing abilities within months (Kosmyna et al., 2025; Lee et al., 2025). Observing today's teenagers huddling over their phones makes it clear that their social abilities are not up to par, reinforcing statistics reported in numerous academic papers (i.e., Hinsch & Sheldon, 2013) and through books like *The Anxious Generation* (Haidt, 2024). In summary, we can no longer relate to each other, and SM has played a large role in this.

Discussion

Mark Zuckerberg's 2012 Facebook IPO promise to "rewire the way people spread and consume information" proved prophetic. Jonathan Haidt notes:

> "In the 10 years since then, Zuckerberg did exactly what he said he would do. He did rewire the way we spread and consume information; he did transform our institutions, and he pushed us past the tipping point. It has not worked out as he expected" (Haidt, 2022, p. 3).

This systematic rewiring has transformed society with consequences even the creators didn't anticipate. A shocking 63.9% of the world's population uses SM; many do so with seemingly innocent objectives to stay connected with friends and family or to spread organizational information. Unknowingly, we have created a monster. SM platforms now possess unprecedented power to shape individual behavior and broader social dynamics through user segmentation and information control. This paper examines the effect this has on Christians' ability to live out their God-given purposes: relationship (with God and others) and dominion (ruling over creation, including technology). Once you consider SM's design and effect, it becomes clear that SM fundamentally conflicts with both purposes by stunting our relational growth while reigning over us.

As believers, we know we should not be yoked to, enslaved by, or worship anything other than God. Yet, users of SM are likely unknowingly addicted to these platforms. The simple solution is to stop engaging in the addictive behavior, but that likely does not get to the heart of the matter. One must consider why a believer engages in SM in the first place. Is it possible that SM is being used to fill a God shaped hole in our lives? If this is the case, it is likely that the Lord is putting that longing in your heart, and He wants to meet that need in a new way through prayer and Scripture, not a cheap imitation. He promises that we will find Him when we seek Him with all our heart (Jeremiah 29:13). Perhaps SM is the first place we go to when we need advice, recommendations, or opinions. However, the Lord is clear and tells us "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you" (James 1:5). In many ways we use SM as a replacement for the Lord, and we should be seeking and engaging with Him rather than engaging with digital platforms. Anything that we put in God's place is an idol, and the

Bible warns against valuing idols. The point is that being connected in the digital space leaves less room for connection with others and the Lord. He should be Lord of our SM usage, just as He should be Lord over every other aspect of our life.

Just as we love the Lord by putting Him first in our lives, one of the most important ways we love others and testify to the world is by being unified in Spirit. In fact, Jesus prayed for all believers before he left earth, and the one thing that He prayed for is that believers would be united, just as He and the Father were united. Unity is how the world would know that Jesus was sent by the Father. Unity and oneness amongst believers are a great witness to the world. Paul reiterated this point by imploring the Philippians to be "like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind" (Phil 2:2). Unfortunately, SM is designed to highlight differences, dissension and disagreements amongst believers (and non-believers) as tribalism drives SM engagement. Even if Christians strategically and consciously posted and commented to portray unity, SM controls what is seen on feeds to drive engagement through dissension and division. SM is designed to accomplish the very opposite of what Jesus prayed for and the very thing that He said would make the world believe in Him. "I urge, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause division and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them" (Romans 16:17).

If that is not reason enough for a Christian organization to reconsider its use of SM, consider the way content is curated for SM feeds. It would be one thing if we could program our SM to only deliver edifying content that is useful for building up God's kingdom. Christians are called countless times to guard their hearts and minds by limiting exposure to certain types of information and situations. The Bible is very specific about what we should think about to encourage peace in our lives – "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things"

(Phil 4:8). Much of the content displayed on social feeds would not meet Paul's test for the types of things that should be occupying our minds. SM floods users' minds with the false, dishonorable, demoralizing, unjust, impure, ugly, scandalous, and unworthy of praise. It is no surprise that SM users have historically high levels of anxiety.

Paul cautioned Timothy– "For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear" (2 Timothy 4:3). Social media is inundated with beliefs that are contrary to a Biblical mindset. But Christians continue to flock to SM sites because AI controls SM and it knows how to feed our itching ears and fleshly desires. Over countless hours, these sites have watched how each individual scrolls and clicks, learning each individual's passions and interests. Over time, the platform learns exactly "what our itching ears want to hear", using it to manipulate our thoughts and behaviors. These interests and desires might appear harmless: travel, fashion, sports, friends' posts. However, these things represent discontent, idols, and jealousy. Paul goes on to warn that eventually, when people continually surround themselves with what "their itching ears want to hear", they will turn their ears from the truth.

There is no clear teaching against the use of SM in the Bible. However, engaging in SM impedes our ability to perform our God-given duties. Can you be on SM and engage with the Holy Spirit at the same time? Of course. Is God sovereign over Satan, sin, and SM? Yes. Can He use for good what Satan intends for evil? Absolutely. However, SM is what many would consider a "disputable matter", and we are called to discern the Lord's will through His indwelling Holy Spirit. In 1 Corinthians 8 and Romans 14, Paul makes a case for Christian liberty with respect to the consumption of food that has been offered to idols. Though he offers some points of advice in handling these types of "disputable matters" that are helpful for consideration in this context: 1) whatever you do, do it for the Lord 2) do not judge others 3) make up your mind to not be a stumbling block to others 4) make every effort to do what leads to peace and mutual edification. Below, we conclude by discussing how Christian organizations should think about SM through Paul's disputable matters framework.

Conclusion

First, can you use SM exclusively for the Lord? There is no doubt about this, and it is likely that most Christian organizations view this as the primary driver of their SM participation. However, based on what we know about how these systems were designed and how they generate income, is this likely? We know that individuals and organizations who create content for SM no longer control this content once it is posted, and SM companies can use content at their discretion to accomplish their goals. The intentions of the user have zero impact on how this content can be used. Christian organizations can create "lures" for their constituencies that attract them to these sites. Most Christian organizations have a presence on SM (Ahman and Thoren, 2021) and back in 2018 84% of protestant pastors claimed to use Facebook as their primary online communication tool (Smietana, 2018). Parents likely view organizational use as an endorsement of these platforms allowing or even suggesting that their children subscribe to stay in touch with a specific youth group, college, or Christian high school group. As such, Christian organizations have contributed to normalizing the myth of SM as a positive social influence, and we have led many down the road of loneliness, isolation, and exposure to concepts that directly conflict with a biblical life.

Second, can you not judge others in SM? While this is possible, judgment, contrast, and tribalism are the primary mechanisms through which SM drives engagement and generates profit. It is crucial that we acknowledge the difference between judgement and discernment. While these platforms are built to stimulate contrast, they are also built to suppress discernment through algorithmic and AI management. These systems "imagine and construct knowledge that does away with self-reflection, judgement, communicative rationality, and critical knowledge" (Fisher, 2021,

p. 6). Exposure to SM has the capacity to "replace more and more everyday human judgements (and it) will undermine our capacity for judgement making" (Eisikovits & Feldman, 2022, p. 196). Conflicting views suggest that algorithmic and AI-driven SM merely mediate our thinking in that we interpret the world through the lens of our SM experiences (Longo, 2025), but does this align with biblical principles? Christians must seriously consider the dangers that arise from allowing an entity to control the information that you consume when they have an incentive for you to consume unbiblical thoughts and ideas. Jonathan Haidt's (2022) title *Why the past 10 years of American Life have been uniquely stupid* is his politically correct attempt to explain how Americans have seemingly lost the ability to comprehend simple concepts in an age of algorithmic and AI-driven SM. Ten minutes of thought will likely expose dozens of issues that are culturally accepted today but conflict with biblical principles, and most of these have flipped in the SM age. SM has contributed to our inability to discern God's will as we are bombarded by competing views that are designed to change our behaviors (Greene et al., 2022).

Third, does posting something on SM cause others to stumble? For example, when a church posts information about its youth group on Instagram, are they encouraging the youth to engage in unhealthy behavior by allowing Instagram push notifications on their phones and periodically scanning their Instagram feed? Can this be viewed as a stumbling block when we understand that the SM company has no obligation to use our post as we intended and SM incentives are, at best, aimed at maximizing engagement with the platform? Christian organizations have a responsibility to not lead other Christians into situations where biblical principles are perverted. When we understand how our actions can draw and lure others, SM can be a gateway to all manner of stumbling. Jesus often used hyperbole to drive home his points, as in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5), when he told us that if our eye causes us to stumble, we should gouge it out and if the hand causes us to sin, we should cut it off. However, when Jesus says in Luke 17 that "it would be better for them to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around their neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble," it is unclear whether this is hyperbole or a literal statement. Since the research outlined in *The Anxious Generation* makes it clear that "little ones" are suffering the most from SM, might we be better off casting these platforms into the sea?

Fourth, Paul tells us that when in doubt, we should do what leads to peace and builds others up. We have yet to see a view that SM is primarily used for edification, and we have also not seen a recent argument that SM is an instrument of peace and unity, but the opposite view is prevalent. In summary, while we can intend our SM activity to glorify God, SM companies and AI control our content, and content is often placed adjacent to or as a foil for material that does not glorify God. While it may be possible not to judge others on SM, this is a primary function of SM design, and content pushed to us through SM can thwart our ability to discern God's truth. There is little doubt that our posting on SM can lead others, especially younger people, to stumble, and few view SM as a place where edification is a primary result. As such, SM fails all four tests of Christian liberty.

We have shown how SM's purpose, design, and effect hinder us from loving God and others and ruling over creation, but it is also interesting to note that SM plays a role very similar to Satan in the garden of Eden. Satan immediately brings confusion, doubt, division, manipulation, deception, and lies that lead to horrible consequences for Adam and Eve – expulsion from the garden, sin, and death. God intended the garden to be a place where relational connection could grow, but Satan infiltrated it, using his manipulation and deception to steal, kill and destroy. The comparison to SM is striking. SM is not inherently bad; it's amoral. However, Mark Zuckerberg admitted that Facebook's original mission, "to connect and share with the people in your life," is no longer the company's focus (Jones, 2025). Like the garden (and many things of this world), Satan has infiltrated it, making it a dangerous place for believers and unbelievers alike.

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The Underpinnings of Nostalgia and How They Relate to Marketing: A Christian Analysis

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Abstract

Papers previously presented at CBFA and/or published in *JBIB* have examined the need to evaluate common marketing practices and approaches through a Christian lens. Although several marketing communication tactics have been evaluated through a Christian lens, the use of nostalgia in marketing communication has not yet been subjected to this type of analysis. The focus of this paper is to start an assessment of the use of nostalgia in marketing communication. It begins with a brief review of the use of nostalgia in marketing communication. It continues with a discussion of origins of the power of nostalgia (the qualities of nostalgia that make it a successful marketing communication tactic). Finally, the appropriateness of appeals to nostalgia in marketing communications is raised.

Keywords: marketing, nostalgia, fear, longings, Christian business practices

The Underpinnings of Nostalgia and How They Relate to Marketing:

A Christian Analysis

Papers previously published in *JBIB* have examined the need to evaluate common marketing practices and approaches through a Christian lens (e.g., Burns & Fawcett, 2012). Although several marketing communication tactics have been evaluated through a Christian lens, the use of nostalgia in marketing communication has not yet been subjected to this type of analysis. The focus of this paper is to start an assessment of the use of nostalgia in marketing communication. It begins with a brief review of the use of nostalgia in marketing communication. It continues with a discussion of origins of the power of nostalgia (the qualities of nostalgia that make it a successful marketing communication tactic). Finally, the appropriateness of appeals to nostalgia in marketing communications is raised.

Nostalgia

Nostalgia involves a yearning for the past – a yearning for the "good old days" (Bansal, 2022). It is a hunger for the familiar based in happy memories (real or imagined) of the past (Alkhafagi, 2023) that invokes feelings of social connectedness and well-being (Lasaleta et al., 2014).

Nostalgia often plays a role as individuals deal with the unpleasantries in their present lives. Recalling happy memories from the past can be a way for individuals to escape present-day unpleasant or unstable realities and provide a way to lessen the stress associated with current life (Kim et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2023), providing a means to lessen or avoid negative emotions and existential threats, and resulting fear (Ju et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2023). Nostalgia also increases feelings of social support and reduces feelings of loneliness (Ju et al., 2016) by binding individuals to others with similar pasts or similar presents (Cross 2015). By recalling a better "past," it brings a sense of meaning and stability back to one's present life (Alkhafagi, 2023). The past that is recalled can be real, imagined, or it can be reconstructed consistent with the song "The Way We Were" which includes the line "Can it be that it was all so simple then, or has time rewritten every line." (Indeed, neuroscience suggests that one's memory memories are "reconstructed" each time they are recalled, suggesting that memories may or may not reflect reality (Xue, 2022). Consequently, Cross (2015) views nostalgia as a yearning for a past that wasn't there). Consequently, nostalgia can produce a powerful hold on individuals' imaginations given the positive and soothing feelings it can generate and the negative feelings it can overcome. It is not surprising, therefore, that nostalgia has grabbed the attention of marketers.

The role of nostalgia in marketing has been studied in marketing literature for some time. At last count, more than 150 empirical studies examining the role of nostalgia in marketing had been published (Srivastava et al., 2023). By appealing to nostalgia, marketers can seek to associate their products with individuals' happy states of mind – nostalgic appeals in marketing can lead to nostalgic feelings toward a product (Rana et al., 2021), an association that can result in the happy feelings being transferred to the product (Bansal, 2022). Consequently, a product can become viewed as the means to acquire the happy feelings with which it is associated. As would be expected, research suggests that the association of a product with nostalgia can lead to enhanced purchase intensions (Cho et al., 2021). Furthermore, Xia et al. (2021) observed that nostalgia is a unique emotion that motivates purchase intention. Indeed, research also suggests that appeals to nostalgia can lead to purchases by weakening the desire for money (Lasaleta et al., 2014). Consequently, empirical studies have demonstrated that the use of nostalgia in marketing communications is effective at positively impacting a product's success (Muehling et al., 2004) by connecting with individuals positively on an emotional level (Merchant et al., 2010).

Arguably, the use of nostalgia by marketers is simultaneously becoming easier and more effective as a marketing tactic. Technology has made appeals to nostalgia easier to employ (Cross 2015) and is being further facilitated through advances in AI. Through the Internet, for instance, individuals have ready access to things that remind them of the past. Furthermore, the higher rate of change seen in fashion, trends, and life in general lowers the amount of time between today and a time in the past that was different. Consequently, one does not need to look as far into the past to pursue nostalgia. Finally, the increasing levels of stress encountered today from such issues as world events, affordability, etc. have fostered an environment conducive to individuals seeking nostalgia as an escape.

Consistent with many other successful marketing strategies, the success of nostalgia as a marketing strategy has its basis in individuals' identities. The happy feelings produced through nostalgia influence individuals by affecting their opinions of their self-identities (Ju et al., 2016). Nostalgia bolsters individuals' self-identities by lessening the negative effect of threats imposed by their current environment – it returns individuals to a time (real or imagined) of greater self-certainty where their identities are not subject to the threats of today. Indeed, the power of nostalgia is particularly evident during times of great stress (O'Reilly et al., 2023) and has been shown to be able to increase happiness and shield one's self-identity from negativity in these situations (Zhou et al., 2022). Building and/or maintaining one's identity has been shown to be a driving force behind much consumer activity (Paterson, 2006) and nostalgia appears to be able to be used to play a role in the process. Cross states "because of the way that nostalgia intertwines with our sense of self, it will always be ripe for exploitation" (2015, p. 150).

Given the centrality of one's identity, maintaining one's identify in the face of challenges arising from an unpleasant and unstable reality is an important undertaking. Nostalgia can be a very important component of this process. Nostalgia can be a way for an individual to consolidate their identity when it is under threat. With the importance of maintaining an identity, when one's identity is threatened, often a dominant response is fear (Cooley, 2004). One of the primary appeals of nostalgia is its ability to temporarily assuage this fear. Hence, nostalgia can play a significant positive role vis-à-vis one's self identity and reducing fear. Given the role of nostalgia in mitigating fear, a brief exploration of fear is appropriate.

Fear

Fear is common today. Many view Western society to be characterized by increasing threats and uncertainties, resulting in widespread fear (e.g., Bauman, 2001; Vail, 1999). Fear has seemingly infiltrated many areas of life. Be it physical fear (e.g., fear of health problems or fear of lack of safety), social fear (e.g., fear of job or friend loss), or existential fear (fear of diminished self-identity), fear has become an all-too-uncommon fact of life as Nouwen states "most of us people live in the house of fear most of the time" (1986, p. 15). Nouwen illuminates this point by listing some of the "what-if" statements that affect us:

> What am I going to do if I do not find a spouse, a house, a job, a friend, a benefactor? What am I going to do if they fire me, if I get sick, if an accident happens, if I lose my friends, if my marriage does not work out, if a war break outs? What if tomorrow the weather is bad, the buses are on strike, or an earthquake occurs? What if someone steals my money, breaks into my house, rapes my daughter. Or kills me? (1986, p. 16-17).

What is fear? Fear is a response to threat and uncertainty (Smith & Lazarus, 1993). It consists of three dimensions: an evil or a threat to be avoided, a feeling of pain or dread, and a future dimension involving what might be (Hood, 2004). In other words, fear can be a powerful emotion emanating from the apprehension of possible loss from either physical, social, or existential origins. Although fear can be a temporary state resulting from specific circumstances viewed as threatening, for many, fear exists as a continuous state (Vail, 1999). In its continuous state, fear can be described as the following:

> In fear we are overwhelmed by something outside ourselves or by something we believe may damage or destroy us. What is feared defines for us the very opposite of all that we will or

> choose or desire, and for that reason it is the negation of our own self-understanding. With fear we are the victim or potential victim of something coming toward us in the world, something that undermines, for at least the moment, our capacity to think of ourselves as agents (Fisher, 2002, p. 15).

Fear is not necessarily a negative emotion. Fear can protect from undertaking inordinate amounts of risk or from exposure to excessive degrees of danger. Fear can also be an effective motivator, prompting action to prepare for the future. Fear, however, can also produce numerous undesirable results. Fear can make individuals upset and angry, it can lead to darkness and depression, it can result in isolation and despair, and it can represent a direct threat to one's identity (Nouwen, 1986). The negative aspects of fear are those that are most manifest on Western society today.

An important question is: "Why is there so much fear, particularly in the postmodern West?" Contrary to what may be depicted on the evening news, most in Western society today live in safety, with relatively little risk of becoming the victim of physical crime. Furthermore, even with the present economic uncertainty, most are clearly relatively affluent with very little risk of experiencing poverty. (Actually, if poverty is viewed globally or temporally, arguably most living in poverty in Western society tend to be doing quite well in comparison). Seemingly, however, many live in a cloud of fear, constantly fearful of what may happen.

> Without realizing it we become anxious, nervous, worrying people caught in the questions of survival: our own survival, the survival of our families, friends, and colleagues, the survival of our church, our country, and our world (Nouwen, 1986, p. 19).

Although fear can arise for numerous physical and social origins, fear arising from threats to one's identity is of the utmost concern. The effects of physical threats and many social threats, although they may represent serious situations with significant potential harm, often have limited effects on one's self identity. Existential threats, however, possess the potential to directly negatively affect one's identity or one's very personhood, making the threat much more personal and salient, permitting it to overshadow other forms of fear.

The effect of fear on the lives of individuals is much more than simply a feeling – fear has the power to exercise extensive control over individuals. The avoidance of situations or individuals associated with fear can be a great motivator. Individuals are often motivated to do whatever they reasonably can to avoid experiencing fear. Hence, fear can wield significant power over the choices made by individuals. Furthermore, individuals who are in the position to affect the fear levels of others can likewise wield significant power. Individuals who can raise the "what if" questions such as those listed above in such a way to entice others to consider them can find themselves in the position to directly affect the choices and decisions others make. A foundational way that fear affects individuals, therefore, is the power it can exercise – fear has the power to affect, or even control, the choices and decisions that are made (Nouwen, 1986). Indeed, in attempts to avoid the situations that are feared, individuals become bound to the individuals who raise the questions. Fear, therefore, can exercise a significant degree of control over individuals, affecting not only their mental states, but the choices and decisions they make, including those in the marketplace.

Consequently, fear affords the individuals who are willing to exercise it a significant amount of power over others. Indeed, by raising the specter of fear, individuals can often be relatively easily enticed to make choices they perceive as being able to avoid the possibility of harm (real or imagined) and reduce their level of fear (Nouwen, 1986). This reality can easily be seen when one views the messages conveyed in advertising. Many ads directly appeal to fear to motivate individuals to consider or purchase their products. Past research examining the use of fear appeals in advertising, however, has tended to downplay or even deny the effectiveness of fear appeals in affecting the marketplace choices of individuals (e.g., Werder et al., 2007). The fear appeals which are studied, however, tend to be overt and negative in orientation. Appeals to fear, however, need not be negative or need not overtly involve "fear-mongering." Advertisements can be positive (and seemingly empowering), but whose goals are to raise the issue of fear covertly in the minds of the target audience. In other words, such "advertising takes part in training its target audiences an elaborate allegorical scheme that requires a deep understanding of its hidden messages" (Santana & Erickson, 2008, p. 53). Be it ads for skin care (you are getting old), automobiles (need for influence), or diet plans (need for acceptance), the ads clearly focus on fear but do not do so overtly. These ads are able to successfully appeal to fear to drive the behavior of targeted consumers, arguably permitting businesses to exercise a significantly large degree of power over consumers.

Through their communications, marketers, therefore, can raise consumers' fear level and they can purport to be able to alleviate this fear through the purchase of their products. Nostalgia can play a role in this process. Given nostalgia's ability to alleviate fear and improve well-being, if only for a temporary time, appeals to nostalgia can be used by marketers to increase the attractiveness of their products to consumers. Nostalgia presents a way for individuals to escape from fear and the unpleasantries of life by reverting to an earlier less stressful, more certain time (that may or not have existed). (It should be noted that when using nostalgia, marketers are freed from the need to establish fear. For most, the fear arising from their present realities is sufficient for them to realize the "value" of nostalgia and the need to pursue it).

Before continuing, is fear of earthly things a legitimate trait of individuals who call themselves Christians? John states "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love" (*The Holy Bible: New International Version,* 1984, 1 John 4:18). Indeed, various forms of "Do not be afraid" appear throughout the Bible in a number of situations and circumstances. The context is not simply not to be afraid, but not to be afraid based on the context – "It is I; don't be afraid" (John 6:20).

Jesus offers peace in the midst of an anxious world (Nouwen, 1986). Nevertheless, Christians do very often face fear (Burton, 2022). Unfortunately, the self-exalting spirit of the world has widely permeated the Western church. Is generating fear, then, an appropriate strategy for Christian marketers?

The appropriateness of the use of appeals to nostalgia will be discussed later. First, better understanding of how nostalgia operates is needed. To do so, it will be necessary to understand the role of individuals' longings and how they relate to fear to empower nostalgia.

Longings

Fleming (1995) suggests that much of individuals' existential fear has its basis in longings. Continuous fear results from apprehension over the realization that our most inmost longings may not be realized via earthly means.

> In every person is a vague sense that something is missing. Built into the very constitution of our being is some unshakable – though indistinct – awareness of something we've almost known. We feel the loss of what was meant to be. ... We can't adequately define our longings, but we can't deny them either. We call them by different names, attribute them to various sources, and try to alleviate them in a multitude of ways (Fleming, 1995, p. 18).

The longings are for a place where true personhood can be experienced within an environment of perfect love and peace. Fleming (1995), Kirk (2010a), and Nouwen (1986) call this longing a "longing for home." This longing is universal and has been widely recognized in literature. In Herman Hesse's *Steppenwolf*, for instance, the Steppenwolf states "a secret yearning for something homelike drives me" (Hesse, 1963, p. 32). Buechner (1979), Lewis (1956), and Rawlings (1967) make similar claims. The yearning for something different or something more pervades literature, from the Wizard of Oz (Baum,1899) to Barbara Kingsolver's novels (Bouma-Prediger & Walsh, 2008) to the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) or the plight of Gomer (Hosea). Similarly, Robin

Williams in the film Patch Adams, states:

> All of life is a coming home. Salesmen, secretaries, coal miners, beekeepers, sword swallowers, all of us. All the restless hearts of the world, all trying to find a way home. It's hard to describe what I felt like then. Picture yourself walking for days in the driving snow; you don't even know you're walking in circles. The heaviness of your legs in the drifts, your shouts disappearing into the wind. How small you can feel, and how far away home can be. Home. The dictionary defines it as both a place of origin and a goal or destination. And the storm? The storm was all in my mind. Or as the poet Dante put it: In the middle of the journey of my life, I found myself in a dark wood, for I had lost the right path. Eventually I would find the right path, but in the most unlikely place (as cited in Kirk, 2010a).

Indeed, Bouma-Prediger and Walsh (2008) suggest that themes of home are prevalent in all literature. The longings represent the human condition: "unsatisfied, restless, driven by some sense that life is better on the other side of the fence" (Fleming, 1995, pp. 37-38) (or "over the rainbow" as in the film version of Wizard of Oz).

What is the source of these desires? Fleming believes that longings have a legitimate source and focus – "our longings are meant to keep us searching. If longings exist, that which will fulfill them must exist ... there must be more" (1995, pp. 21-22). A problem is that individuals often do not truly search to understand the nature of the longings. As C. S. Lewis states "what does not satisfy when we find it, was not the thing we were desiring" (1981, p. 127). "For God does not create a longing or a hope without having a fulfilling reality ready for them. But our longing is our pledge, and blessed are the homesick, for they shall come home" (Nouwen, 1986, p. 53). Longing, therefore, contains a sense of lost and of hope – an awareness that things are not right, but that they can be (Kirk, 2010b).

The home that is longed for is not here, yet it still calls. As Fleming states "the home I seek is not here. ... I can't describe this home, but the seeds of recognition are planted within me" (1995, p. 22). Augustine recognized this longing – "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you" (Augustine, Book 1). The Preacher in Ecclesiastes states "He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end" (Ecclesiastes 3:11). We cannot fathom eternity, but we know that there is something more than what we see – our home. "No matter how perfect our circumstance, how perfect our home here on earth, we realize that no home here fits the shape of our yearning" (Fleming, 1995, pp. 24-25). The longing can only be met in Him who Haggai called "the desired of all nations" (Haggai 2:7). Indeed, Jesus speaks of "His Father's house" being prepared for us (John 14:2-3). He offers us a house in the midst of our material life – "Remain in me, as I also remain in you" (John 15:4). Hence, home is not a place, but a relationship and involves turning away from fear (Nouwen, 2009). Home is a relationship with God (Kirk 2010c). "My Father will love them, and We will come to them and make our home with them" (John 14:23). The exiled Somalian writer Nuruddia Farah suggests that this is the story of literature.

> It began with the expulsion of Adam from paradise. What, in fact, writers do is to play around either with the myth of creation or the myth of return. And in between, in parentheses, there is that promise, the promise of return. While awaiting the return, we tell stories, create literature, recite poetry, remember the past and experience the present. Basically, we writers are telling the story of that return – either in the form of a New Testament or an Old Testament variation on the creation myth. It's a return to innocence, to childhood, to our sources (Gass, 1990, p. 4).

Although the totality of the relationship cannot be experienced in this world, a taste of this relationship can be gained through the Spirit (Kirk, 2010d). What does this "taste" look like? Nouwen (1986) suggests that it encompasses intimacy, fecundity, and ecstasy. Each will be briefly explored.

Implied in the use of the term "home" is a sense of belonging – a sense of rest (Bouma-Prediger & Walsh, 2008). We say, "I wish I were home." We refer to death as "going home." The intimacy associated with "being home" goes without question, even as the nuclear family is undergoing change and redefinition by some. Home involves community – it is a "placed belonging" (Bouma-Prediger & Walsh, 2008). Fear, however, is the opposite of intimacy. "Fear makes us move away from each other to a 'safe' distance ... fear does not create a space where true intimacy can exist. Fear does not create a home" (Nouwen, 1986, p. 30). Instead, fear is driven out by pure love (I John 4:18).

Fear also thwarts fecundity (being fruitful) (Nouwen, 1986). Fruitfulness is a life characterized by the fruits of the spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) manifest through choices and activities. It is inherently marked with vulnerability, gratitude, and care (Nouwen, 1986). Hence, a fruitful life is characteristic of individuals filled with love, not fear. Individuals governed by fear cannot open themselves in the ways necessary to lead a fruitful life. A fruitful life requires one to view resources as gifts to share, not as items to hoard. Instead of fruitfulness, fear drives us either toward sterileness or toward productivity as we attempt to protect ourselves from the world around us. In other words, fear produces two temptations – give up on hope (sterileness) or try to create our own hope (productivity) (Kirk, 2010b). Sterileness consists of withdrawal – withdrawal from the others and their needs, and withdrawal from God. Productivity, however, appears to be the opposite, where the focus of life is on the production of outputs, or products – a focus on output, not fruitfulness. Interestingly, although the outcomes seem so different, they are both driven by the desire for control – the desire for control in face of a future characterized by fear. Each will be briefly discussed.

The sterileness of modern life is well documented (e.g., Putnam, 2000). In the face of fear, individuals withdraw from others. Life becomes one of isolation. Indeed, Kondro (2010) refers to the present generation as the "Eleanor Rigby" generation where individuals deny their longings and live a life of emotional, if not physical separation. Interestingly, this orientation is similar to that espoused by Buddhist philosophy. Is the elimination of longings possible or preferable? Most argue that the answer is "no." In C. S. Lewis' *Till We Have Faces*, Psyche states "It was when I happiest that I longed the most" (Lewis, 1956, p. 74). Similarly, Fleming states "Our longings are not a curse. Their pestering persistence is an evidence of supreme possible good. Our longings are meant to keep us searching. ... Our longings come not for our misery but for our good" (1995, pp. 21-22).

Fear can also lead to productivity, not in the sense of accomplishment, but in the sense of activity. Being productive involves producing output or products, but for the sake of producing. It involves a primary focus on producing – becoming successful on the job, buying new cars, houses, vacations, and the like. "When logic demands that we ask ourselves hard questions about the nature of our longings, we often redouble our speed toward the futile goals" (Fleming, 1995, p. 20). This is the foundations of many of the "isms" that we experience today, including materialism, workaholism, and sex addictions. These activities, however, lead to little besides momentary pleasures (Ecclesiastes 1:3) and the need for larger "barns" (Luke 12:18) (or, houses or storage facilities). The focus of "more" is viewed by many as one of the primary characteristics of this age (e.g., Holt, 2002). This focus on productivity is characteristic of living in fear, not of living in love. Products provide the means to attempt to protect ourselves from fear – their accumulation is driven by fear (e.g., our material needs are more likely to be met and material goods are viewed as less likely to disappoint). Relationships are sacrificed on the altar of productivity (Burns and Warren, 2009). This is not to imply that productivity is inherently bad. Indeed, we have been commanded to "go forth and multiply" (Genesis 9:7). When the focus of life is productivity primarily for protection from threats, however, fear reigns. Consequently, life "degenerates into commerce, a continuous buying and selling of goods, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual goods" (Nouwen, 1986, pp. 70-71).

Finally, Jesus connects joy, or ecstasy, with intimacy and fecundity (Nouwen, 1986) – "I have told you this so that My joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." (John 15:11). Joy is a quality which is not determined by our situations (St. John 2009) – "no one will take away your joy" (John 16:22). "Living in the house of God is living in a state of constant ecstasy, in which we always experience the joy of being alive" (Nouwen, 1986, p. 88). Clearly, however, we live in a relatively joyless world (Scitovsky, 1992). This is not surprising since joy and fear are not compatible. Instead, we begin an endless quest for temporary happiness as a substitute for joy. "This happiness is as contrived as the good meal given to a man on death row before his execution. It tastes good but does not keep him alive" (Nouwen, 1986, p. 97).

> Many people hardly believe anymore in the possibility of a truly joy-filled life. They have more or less accepted life as a prison and are grateful for every occasion that creates the illusion of the opposite: a cruise, a suspense novel, a sexual experience, or a few hours in a heightened state of consciousness. This is happiness in the house of fear, a happiness which is 'made in the world' and thus is neither lasting nor deeply satisfying (Nouwen 1986, pp. 97-98).

In summary, we often find ourselves "restless, driven by some sense that life is better on the other side of the fence" (Fleming, 1995, p. 38). So, we often find ourselves driven to seek fulfillment of our longings via means which cannot satisfy. "Driven by an undefined hunger, we fall into two tragedies. We can seek wildly and indiscriminately tasting every fruit, or we can retreat into dreams, enjoying phantom princes and missing the real thing" (Fleming, 1995, p. 70). These substitutes, however, are unable to fulfill – "good times and good circumstances cannot fill our yearning. Incredible as it sounds, the good life stirs the fires of longing as powerfully as hard times, because we have not yet found what we are longing for" (Fleming, 1995, p. 39).

> The tragedy is that we are so possessed by fear that we do not trust our innermost self as an intimate place but anxiously wander hoping to find it where we are not. We find to find that intimate place in knowledge, competence, notoriety, success, friends, sensations, pleasure, dreams, or artificially induced states of consciousness. ... It requires discipline to come home and listen, especially when our fears are so noisy that they keep driving us outside of ourselves (Nouwen, 1986, pp. 38-39).

This is where the power of nostalgia comes into play. In many instances, nostalgia can play the role of offering a "false home." It offers temporary escape and relief from one's situations and allows them to experience a very small taste of "home," albeit a false one. Instead of a "true" home, nostalgia can only provide a very temporary alternative. Nostalgia can provide a substitute home based on one's real or imagined past.

Given our life in a world marked by sin and depravity, it is arguably not possible to live a life free of fear in ourselves. God alone is able to provide to provide a "true home" free of fear or as Kirk (2010b) states "He has chosen to bring home to us." "Jesus, in whom the fullness of God dwells, has become our home" (Nouwen, 1986, p. 37) – the "true home" that we long for.

The opposite of home is homelessness (Bouma-Prediger & Walsh, 2008). Indeed, Costa refers to a "creeping dread of homelessness" in society (1998, p. 10). Homelessness, in this sense is not a lack of a physical residence – it is not finding the true home. An outcome of this homelessness is a "rootless monoculture of commercial expectations and products" (Berry, 1993, p. 22) with nostalgia becoming a primary tool to cope.

In summary, much of the appeal of nostalgia is how it can act as a substitute home. It can provide a very temporary relief to the stress of daily life and a brief protection for one's identity from threats, but it fails to provide anything long-term. Instead, of finding home in a relationship with God and looking forward toward a new heaven and a new earth (Psalms 16:5-6), nostalgia looks at the past. Nostalgia presents a counterfeit solution. This is the reason that nostalgia tends not to be viewed in a positive light in the Bible. With the exception of appeals to remember God (e.g., Psalms 77:11) and one's spiritual heritage (e.g., Nehemiah 8), nostalgia is often referred to in a negative light. The best examples include the warning in Ecclesiastes 7:10 "Do not say, 'Why were the old days better than these?' For it is not wise to ask such questions." Such a focus on the past does not just limit one from appreciating the present, but it sets up an often glorified view of the past as the goal for the future – a longing for a future with God is replaced with a longing to relive one's past. Numbers 11 also warns about romanticizing the past. To dwell on the past is to yearn for something that may not have actually existed and which one cannot we can never attain or reattain. Instead, our home is in heaven with eternal pleasures in the presence of God (Psalms 16:11).

Consumer Decision Making

So, how does nostalgia or our longings for home relate to consumer decision making? The fact remains that in an affluent postmodern consumer culture, the marketplace is viewed to be the primary (if not the only) vehicle through which needs and wants are satisfied and identity is attained and retained. This is also true for human longings. In this culture, the "true home" has been rejected by most and substituted with consumption choices and activities, or as Cooley states "greed constitutes desire gone amok" (2004, p. 40). The sterileness or emptiness proposed by Buddhism involves a denying of the undeniable longings that we possess. Although many have tried or are trying various aspects of Buddhism with hopes that doing so will provide fulfillment of their longings, this approach does not succeed – indeed, it cannot. The inability of productivity to provide fulfillment, however, is often harder to see. When fulfillment is not gained through productivity, a common response is to view the cause of the lack of satisfaction is an insufficient level of productivity – a little more income, a few additional possessions, or maybe a new place of residence will bring fulfillment. Productivity may provide momentary increases in happiness, but the longings remains unmet. Maybe a little more is needed – at least, that is advertising says.

> What makes "adverteasing" so seductive is the repeated promise yet inevitable denial of fulfillment. Signs evoke real satisfaction only to "reveal" another sign that defers gratification. If the sign is always a sign of a sign and never the real thing, there is no end to the excessive quest for satisfaction (Taylor, 1993, p. 207).

The outcome is the all-supremacy of income. In fruitless attempts to gain income to achieve fulfillment for our longings and to eliminate fear, productivity is the approach taken by many to life. In the process, money becomes the primary aim in life (He who dies with the most toys wins). It is interesting that the Bible refers only to two possible masters – "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money" (Matthew 6:24). Hence, the *Bible* recognizes the power of money and what it can buy has over individuals. Yet, "What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul" (Mark 8:36)?

With the failure of productivity (quantity of goods) to meet our longings for home, an alternative that is often also pursued is the mix of goods acquired and the meaning associated with them. As discussed above, nostalgia, expressed through goods associated with one's past, is often pursued as an alternative. The power of nostalgia is the short-term benefits it often can provide. It can provide a short-term relief to various stresses and, more importantly, it can provide short-term protection from the threats to one's identity. However, similar to illicit drugs, its effects are limited and it does nothing to address individuals' true longings.

The lure of the taste of a substitute home can be a great motivator and, also similar to illicit drugs, can produce a kind of a high as the stresses and threats of life are briefly lessened. The draw of products associated with one's past can become great, leading to product loyalty. Indeed, some individuals have abandoned much of their life to follow bands associated with their youth in an attempt to maximize nostalgia or the "false home" experience.

> People – some percentage of us – on some of those occasions when we feel out-of-sorts, or nervous, or anxious, or frustrated, seek relief, or escape, in some activity that we enjoy. The activity is not instrumental in dealing with the event or circumstance that has upset us, but it may help to deal with the unpleasant feeling we are experiencing. Producers are interested in providing goods/services that are helpful under these circumstances, and, in our competitive system, individual producers – of candy, ice cream, detective fiction, movies – want their brand to be selected by such people on such occasions. One way producers can attempt to secure this objective is to create an association between their brand's name and some feature of the targeted occasion so that when the circumstance occurs in real life, the target may think of using the brand in question (Fennell, 1987, pp. 98-99).

As defined by the American Marketing Association, marketing is the "activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large." As such, marketing is the social science focused on developing and providing desired offerings (products). To succeed in marketing, therefore, marketers must understand their customers, particularly their motivations, for making choices in the marketplace. Should marketers make any distinction between the type of wants and needs consumers are seeking to satisfy and whether they are successful in meeting them? "If life's slings and arrows have hurt you and this is one of those times when you feel that indulging yourself may ease the pain, think of enjoying our brand" (Fennell, 1987, p. 99). Many consumers come to the realization that the sheer quantity of goods acquired, however, is insufficient to meet one's longings. Indeed, if one examines popular music over the past 75-plus years, this is a very common theme. Although the author is not aware of an empirical accounting, seemingly after love songs ("silly" or otherwise) and breakup songs, songs dealing with the inability of goods to provide satisfaction is the theme of many of the most popular songs regardless of time or music genre.

As a substitute, nostalgia is pursued by some as an alternative. This can also be seen in popular songs. Be it "Old Days," "Those Were the Days," or "Yesterday" as just a few examples, nostalgia pervades the minds of many individuals today and, consequently, is a common language as nostalgia has became a substitute for our longings for home. As a result, as discussed above, nostalgia has become a longing the marketers can speak into. Via nostalgia, marketers can picture their products as being able to satisfy individuals' longings as a way to overcome negativity resulting from their needy state. Unfortunately, it is not able to deliver.

> Even life's pleasures bring the feeling of pointlessness; they are here for a moment and then gone. At best they have "liftoff" power, but no staying power, or, to use a different analogy, they are like periodic flashes of lightning on a dark road, with no guiding power (Zacharias, 1990, p. 88).

Nostalgia provides short-term benefits. It can increase one sense of meaning and stability to one's life while providing an escape from such present-day unpleasantries and providing a way to lessen the stress associated with current life. Most importantly, it can provide a relief from fear, albeit only temporarily. Nostalgia is incapable of satisfying our inmost longings – it provides only a short-term escape from our fear, if that. Consequently,

- Is providing an alternative counterfeit focus for one's longings for a permanent home with God a viable strategy for marketers, particularly those who are Christian?
- Would providing an alternative, counterfeit focus for one's longings for a permanent home

with God act as a hindrance for individuals in finding their true home?

- Is using appeals to nostalgia a viable strategy for use by Christian marketers?

These and related questions appear to be very important questions for future research.

Conclusions

This paper addresses several fundamental issues by examining the use of nostalgia in consumer behavior. In doing so, the prevalence of fear in Western society is examined, including its cause and its effects on consumer activity. The paper contends that continuous state fear arises from our longings – our longings for "home." Consumer activity is pictured as arising primarily from individuals' search for a means to alleviate fear through a search for a substitute home as opposed to a search for their real home.

The contentions raised in this paper also provide additional insight into the function of consumer activity and role of marketing. If individuals are focused on nostalgia and manifests it through consumer activity with a hope that such activity will satisfy their longings, will nostalgia further blind individuals to the true nature of their longings? In other words, will individuals seeking nostalgia be less likely to seek and find their "true home?" Or, do marketing activities inhibit individuals' abilities to find "home?" Similarly, by promoting nostalgia, are marketers involved in providing individuals with alternatives to "home?" (It is interesting to note the of anecdotal stories of some individuals finding "home" when faced with the sudden loss of everything earthly that they had built their lives upon, such as the loss of their profession and/or possessions).

The metaphor of home appears to act as a metanarrative in the *Bible* – "home lost" through the fall and "home found" through redemption – "we end where we began" (Kirk, 2010b). What should be the focus of marketers when faced with this reality? Should the efforts of marketers be focused first and foremost on helping individuals seek and find "home" or should it be on providing alternatives to "home?" Kirk states "So much of our day is spent trying to navigate the waters between God's gift of a glimpse of home and the counterfeit that robs us of life" (2010b). Is this navigation made more difficult by marketing activities? As marketers, should we focus on providing individuals with counterfeits?

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Synchronicity: The Power of Bringing Human Interactions to Online Learning

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Abstract

Online students are struggling today with many of the same challenges that remote workers face. People fail to interact with other people, with two-thirds of remote employees feeling that their peers have the greatest impact on helping them stay connected and engaged in their work (Pearson, 2023). To bring more interaction to remote work environments, the National Institute of Health has called on companies to create synchronous channels that imitate spontaneous, in-person "watercooler conversations" (National Institute of Health, 2021). This might include virtual coffee breaks (informal video calls), daily check-ins (formal team video chats), and the use of collaborative tools. Research and experience have shown that universities may want to follow suit and prioritize adding synchronous moments into asynchronous online learning. Teaching students how to stay connected in a remote world is a key part of their learning process and career preparation. Adding a human connection also opens the door for building relationships, sharing faith in Christ, and showing the love of God to our students. This paper presents research on the importance of adding human connection points within asynchronous online courses (synchronicity). It offers three strategies to create these synchronous moments to transform the online experience of students, building relationships and reflecting Christ's love.

Keywords: asynchronous, synchronous, synchronicity, human interactions

Synchronicity: The Power of Bringing Human Interactions Online

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

-John 13:34-35 (*New International Version*, 1973/2011)

Love one another. Sounds simple enough. However, like most of our call as believers in Christ, we take so much for granted. Loving people who love us is easy. Loving our family is easy. However, how do we love our students? When we teach class in person, we love our students through the relationships we build with them. Our love becomes a part of how we interact with them. We show our students love in our conversations, the support we show them, the mentoring we give them, and the time we invest in their lives. It is impossible to show love without a human connection without first building a relationship. This seems simple when we see people in person, but it becomes more complicated when we teach online.

This has been an ongoing issue in the workforce with the increase in remote work. Companies are struggling to find ways to add human connections for remote workers. People fail to interact with other people, and two-thirds of remote employees feel that their peers have the greatest impact on helping them stay connected and engaged in their work (Pearson, 2023). To bring more interaction to remote work environments, the National Institute of Health has called on companies to create synchronous channels that imitate spontaneous, in-person "watercooler conversations" (National Institute of Health, 2021). This might include virtual coffee breaks (informal video calls), daily check-ins (formal team video chats), and the use of collaborative tools. As professors work to prepare students for their future careers, it is important to follow suit and prioritize adding synchronous moments into asynchronous learning. Teaching them how to stay connected in a remote world is a key part of their learning process and career preparation.

Changes in Higher Education

There have been many changes in higher education over the last 33 years (Pearson, 2018). Much of this change has involved technological advancement, further pushing us away from our students and making genuine social connections more difficult. However, if professors are proactive, they can use technology—even generative artificial intelligence (AI)—to make new human connections and preserve the essence of teamwork and camaraderie in this digital age (Piscione & Drean, 2025). It is important to start by defining the terms asynchronously and synchronously. "Asynchronous course delivery refers to delivering course material in a way that is not bound to a particular time. Course content and assessments delivered asynchronously leave it up to the students *when* they participate in your class" (University of Pittsburgh, n.d.). This is what most people think of when they think of online learning, and this is what the typical online course looks like. According to the University of Pittsburgh (n.d.), "Synchronous course delivery refers to delivering course material to students at a particular time, all together. Course content and assessments delivered synchronously require students to participate in their class at a particular set time or window of time." Asynchronous courses have added flexibility, and students work independently. However, much is lost in the asynchronous process, especially a human connection. According to Johns Hopkins University (2022):

> A drawback of asynchronous classes is the lack of live group discussion. It does not lend the opportunity for the student to engage in a 'classroom environment' or practice their presentation skills. It can leave the student feeling alone on their journey to a master's degree. There are message boards and other types of discussion platforms, but live conversation and verbal exchange are not central parts of asynchronous courses.

The reality is that many students are drawn to online courses for their flexibility; when a course is fully asynchronous, learners can engage in its content whenever it works best for their schedule (Boyles, 2023). Therefore, adding synchronous moments to these courses must be performed effectively and efficiently to add value for students. However, synchronous time is valuable—it can be quite inconvenient for online students to meet at a specific time each week when they expect complete flexibility.

Research supports the inclusion of synchronous elements, such as weekly Zoom team discussions, in asynchronous courses, and the findings indicate that learning outcomes improve (Martin et al., 2020). According to research by *Educause,* "students who participated in any amount of synchronous sessions performed better in the course" (Martin et al., 2020, p. xx). Adding synchrony can also have a positive effect on cognitive processes, encourage peer engagement, promote positive attitudes, and improve retention (Martin et al., 2020). Most students (more than 50 percent, according to one study) also favor some use of synchronous events in their online courses; they find value in real-time sessions for things such as office hours, guest lectures, exam reviews, orientations, and team projects (Martin et al., 2020). This may seem to contradict the flexibility they desire in asynchronous courses, and the challenge going forward is to find a balance between flexibility and human connection in online courses.

Traditionally, asynchronous courses rely on online discussion boards for peer and professor engagement. For example, students post their answer to specific content questions by Thursday and then reply to two of their classmates' posts by Sunday. Then, faculty can engage in those discussions and provide insight as well. However, while this format is good for collaboration, traditional discussion boards are not a human connection tool (Pearson, 2023). These discussion boards have also become more ineffective with the progression of generative AI. An increasing number of undergraduate and MBA students are simply using AI tools such as ChatGPT to write their initial discussion posts and reply to their classmates (Cline, 2023). This has turned the activity into a copy-and-paste assignment, which negates the learning process and further removes any human connections. There is a gap in the research on making human connections in asynchronous courses. However, much of the recent research shows that, whether in remote work or asynchronous courses, the human connection is still a critical part of the environment

Faith in Christ and the Human Connection

As university professors, it has always been important to build relationships with students to show care beyond the classroom. Research has shown that building meaningful human connections between professors and students is crucial for fostering academic success, emotional well-being, and long-term personal development (Ferlazzo, 2018). When professors engage with students at the human level—through empathy, active listening, and genuine interest—it creates an environment of trust and support. This connection helps students feel seen and valued, which in turn enhances their motivation and engagement in the learning process (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). Palmer (2007) stated that as teachers encourage human connection, the benefits are seen by students academically and emotionally. This has also been shown to cultivate compassionate, thoughtful students who value relationship building in their future careers and communities (Palmer, 2007).

The Bible and Intentional Relationships

The value of close, intentional relationships is modeled by Jesus throughout scripture. Although He ministered to large crowds, Jesus intentionally chose just twelve disciples with whom he built close relationships (Mark 3: 13 - 14). He invested deeply in a small group, demonstrating the power of personal mentorship. This approach reflects Cuseo's (2007) findings that students thrive when they receive individualized attention and are known by name, not treated as anonymous faces in a crowd.

The Bible and Human Connection

According to Felten and Lambert (2020), human relationships are at the heart of transformative education. Their research revealed that students thrive academically, emotionally, and socially when they are deeply connected with professors, mentors, and peers. One of the most consistent messages in Scripture is that we were created for a relationship with God and with one another (Genesis 2:18). God tells us that "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18). This foundational truth highlights that human flourishing depends on connection. Like Felten and Lambert (2020) suggested, that students cannot thrive in isolation, the Bible teaches that we are incomplete without meaningful community. Ultimately, building relationships through teaching affirms what Scripture has long taught: true transformation happens in the context of relationships.

The Bible and Emotional Connections

Hagenauer and Volet (2014) stated that the emotional dimension of teaching is just as important as the knowledge-transfer aspect of the job. As faculty invest emotionally in their students, this emotional engagement has been shown to be central to meaningful, effective teaching (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). God's Word also reflects this. We were created by God, in His image, as emotional beings. Scripture consistently presents leaders, including teachers, as those who are not only responsible for truth but also care deeply for those they guide. In 2 Corinthians 6:11–13, we read, "We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you… open wide your hearts also" (New International Version, 2011), which reflects the kind of emotional openness and vulnerability that Hagenauer and Volet (2014) described as critical for authentic teacher–student relationships.

The Bible and the Courage to Teach

In one of his seminal books, Palmer (2007) discussed the courage it takes to be a teacher. Palmer stated that teaching is an act of identity, one that requires deep self-reflection, courage, and authenticity. Rather than separating who we are from what we teach, Palmer (2007) urged educators to bring their whole selves into the classroom—heart, mind, and soul. What Palmer (2007) described is reflected in Proverbs 4:23, which states, "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it" (New International Version, 2011). Palmer (2007) argued that effective teaching flows from the teacher's inner life. Palmer (2007) also stresses the importance of authentic relationships and vulnerability in teaching, stating that true learning happens in communities built on trust. This is mirrored in Paul's approach to ministry and teaching in 1 Thessalonians 2:8, which states, "Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well" (New International Version, 2011). Palmer's (2007) insights confirm that teaching is a sacred calling that reflects the heart of the Bible. Teaching is a profession rooted in love, authenticity, courage, and deep care for others. This is the foundation for integrating humanity through synchrony in online courses. Rooting our teaching in love, authenticity, faith, and deep care for others is a calling and is accomplished only through bringing a human connection to online courses.

Three Ways to Bring Human Connection to Online Courses

There are many ways to add a human connection to online courses, but it is important to balance the flexibility of asynchronous learning with the value of adding synchrony. Students desire flexibility in taking courses online, and adding human connection points while maintaining that benefit is no small feat. The techniques presented here are simple to understand and easy to implement; however, they can have a profound effect on students' connections, as well as their academic growth and retention (Senter, 2023). This paper presents three methods of adding synchrony to online courses: (1) faculty-led Zoom discussions; (2) recorded peer discussions; and (3) integrating *Breakout Learning*, which is scalable, student teams, AI-evaluated discussions, and case analyses.

Faculty-Led Zoom Discussions

In a study by *Educause*, they reported that "students rated 'I connected with my professor as the course went along' as statistically significantly higher in the course with the synchronous component ($p < .05$)" (Snyder & Garner, 2020). Their research revealed that students believed that synchrony was a positive addition:

- "Having a real-time meeting with the class gave me a chance to speak to classmates that I have been learning with for over a year."
- "I loved this experience. It was like being in the classroom, and I was able to ask questions and get to know classmates. Real-time feedback was essential to my learning."
- "Since I am learning online, the live, synchronous time gave me a learning opportunity a bit closer to the traditional classroom experience."
- "I thought it was a great aid for clarifying the content and bouncing ideas off the instructor. She was able to show us screenshots of tables to make the assignment easier."

  (Snyder & Garner, 2020)

The evidence is overwhelming; the human connection is a critical part of learning. One technique is to offer an optional, faculty-led, optional, online discussion via Zoom or Google Meet during specific weeks of the semester (i.e., weeks one, three, six, nine, and 12). This gives the students an opportunity to connect with each other and to connect with the professor on a real-time basis. Faculty can provide a Zoom link on the Learning Management System (LMS) and send a reminder announcement on Monday of those weeks. It is a predictable time, which makes planning easier for students. To incentivize attendance, it works well to allow this live discussion to replace one weekly assignment for students who attend and actively engage. This could be a small homework assignment, an online discussion forum, or a reflection paper. Another recommendation is to record these live sessions and post the recording link in a class announcement for any student to watch if they choose. These chats can become a simple way to add synchrony to online courses, and some positive feedback from students includes the following:

- "Your commitment to fostering student engagement and active learning in the course was evident through the interactive [live] online discussions."
- "The Zoom discussions truly encouraged a positive atmosphere and motivated me to participate and dive into the material on my own."
- "I love the weekly [live] discussion and get to explain what I've learned in my own words. This always truly engages me."
- "I love seeing that I've gotten the opportunity to teach my classmates something through my perspective, and I always remember things I've learned from the perspective of these [online] meetings."

(IDEA course evaluations, 2025)

During this live one-hour discussion, it works well to spend the first ten minutes catching up on how things are going with the students. This chit-chat time is actually very important and imitates the conversations that typically occur at the start of an in-person class. This is where the connection starts and where the relationship begins. Next, spend time going over the assigned discussion questions for that week. These are listed on the LMS under the assignment and are connected to the learning outcomes for the current week. Students are encouraged to preview these questions before the meeting and prepare for in-depth discussion. To support student success in the course, it works well to conclude each Zoom session with a five-to-10-minute open forum and prayer time. This is where students can ask questions about assignments or course material and ask for prayer requests. It is powerful to close each synchronous discussion with prayer and ask God to bless your students and their learning and growth. Although the course content is very important to cover, it is during the relaxed conversation times at the start and end of Zoom that it truly works to build relationships and show love. This is where real social connections are made.

An *Educause Review* article noted that students who participate in any number of synchronous sessions perform better in their courses (Martin et al., 2020). Therefore, even optional synchronous discussions such as these can provide significant benefits to student learning. In my experience, giving students the opportunity to discuss course material and have casual conversations deepens their engagement and learning.

Recorded Peer Discussions

Synchronous moments do not necessarily have to include the professor. Another method of adding synchrony to online classes involves assigning students to teams of five to six and then having them meet as a team once a week to record their own Zoom discussion. It works well to have these recordings last from twenty--25 minutes. Post the weekly discussion questions on your university LMS, usually about ten--12 in-depth discussion questions. These questions can also include applications in students' work and life situations. Application and personal example questions make learning deeper and have been shown to increase retention and growth (Marlett, 2024). "Research has consistently shown the positive impact of performance-based assessments on student learning and engagement" (Marlett, 2024). According to research by Gulikers et al. (2004), when faculty engage students in authentic assessment tasks, this leads to deeper learning and better knowledge transfer to real-life situations. Using discussion questions that are relevant and applicable has been shown to be linked to increased student motivation (Gulikers et al., 2004). In another seminal study, Wiggins and McTighe (2005) reported that "when students see the relevance of their learning through authentic tasks, they are more likely to be engaged and invested in their education."

It works best to assign a team leader to set up Zoom sessions, record the sessions, lead the discussions, and then submit the video link through the LMS for the faculty to view and grade. It is also recommended to provide step-by-step instructions on how to do this to avoid any miscommunication. Another recommendation is to review Zoom etiquette with the class so that their recordings are professional in format and style. Some recommendations include the following:

- Mute your microphone when you aren't speaking.
- Be mindful of background noise and distractions around you, as much as possible.
- We can adjust your camera and lighting so that we can see your face well.
- Dress like you are coming to the classroom—no jammies, please.
- Multitasking should be avoided, and attention should be focused on the class.
- Enjoy a beverage but hold off on having lunch or that snack.
- Remember that you are always on the camera. Need to yawn, sneeze, blow your nose, or do something you don't want us all to see? Mute your audio and blank your video for a moment.
- All the comments and discussions should be respected by the instructor and fellow students.
- Don't be a zoom-hog. Be considerate in not talking over people and give everyone a chance to speak.
- Add something about the instructor's expectations of using Zoom's chat function.
  (Indiana University Bloomington, 2025)

The grading rubric is shared with the students to achieve predictable grading. An individual score based on each student's (1) introduction, (2) camera, (3) level of engagement, (4) level of critical thinking, and (5) professional level of discussion is standard.

This option retains tremendous flexibility, as the team has seven days (a week) to find approximately thirty minutes to meet together online to record their weekly Zoom discussion. This method also encourages community among students and gives them an opportunity to build relationships with each other, teamwork and leadership skills, and to more deeply engage in the course content. Assigning these peer-recorded discussions can be a very powerful synchronous strategy to add a human connection to online courses and, in doing so, reflect the love of Christ.

AI-Supported Synchronous Learning

Instead of worrying about students using generative AI in online courses, there are ways to embrace this new technology to encourage engagement and connection. One method is to integrate platform breakout learning, which facilitates student-led small-group discussions or case analyses that are then evaluated by AI.

> We developed a platform that uses AI to evaluate and moderate small group discussions. Students join online meetings with their assigned groups for peer-to-peer conversations. Every discussion begins with a scenario that sets up a conversation that the students will have. We then take the transcript of that conversation and run it against the grading rubrics you approve. This AI-powered analysis directly demonstrates student progress toward your learning objectives. (Breakout Learning, 2025)

It works well to assign students to teams of five or six and selects a team leader to oversee the team. One can choose a course-related topic or case from the Breakout Learning catalog. You create your class in Breakout, get a link for that specific class, and share the link with your students through your university LMS. Students register through that link, pay $10 each, and register for the session you have chosen. It works well to give teams three to four weeks to complete the prework and discussion recording. This provides flexibility for their schedules. Students begin with prework assignments—reading a chapter, a magazine article, a case study, or watching a video—which they complete on their own (EdTech Digest, 2024). Students then log into breakout rooms with their teams at a prescheduled time to discuss the material. During these breakout discussions, AI transcribes the conversation and evaluates the quality of student contributions on the basis of a rubric. It works well to share that rubric with students prior to their recorded discussion so that they are aware of how they will be graded (EdTech Digest, 2024). The Breakout Learning rubrics were all developed with academic experts collaborating with the company (EdTech Digest, 2024). The hundreds of cases in the Breakout Learning catalog continue to grow, which makes it fairly easy to find case studies that apply to specific course learning outcomes (Breakout Learning, 2025). Students tend to appreciate the flexibility and simplicity of the platform. Some of the benefits include:

Why Students Love It

- Learn through discussion—it is their preferred way to learn.
- Actionable feedback on critical thinking, collaboration, and communication skills is vital for both academic success *and* the future workplace.
- Connecting meaningfully with peers, building a genuine community, and pushing back against the loneliness and isolation sometimes felt in online environments.

Why Educators Love It

- Gain unprecedented insights into student understanding and group dynamics, such as being a fly on the wall in every single discussion.
- Access robust, objective data on individual and group performance, clearly demonstrating progress toward your learning objectives.
- See *how* students are engaging, collaborating, and thinking critically about the material, going beyond simple completion data.

(Breakout Learning, 2025)

Using breakout learning to add synchrony to online classes enables human connection in a way that fosters real-time collaboration, deepens student engagement, and builds a stronger sense of community. By creating structured yet flexible opportunities for students to interact, solve problems, and reflect together, human connections are added in a way that bridges the gap often experienced in online learning environments. In summary, integrating breakout learning makes online classes more dynamic, personal, and human-centered.

Making Online Learning Human-Centered

Technology can easily push us away from our students unless faculty proactively find ways to maintain strong human connections, especially in online courses. By adding synchronous moments to your online courses, you can enable your students to foster stronger connections with their professor, their peers, and their university. It can increase students' online learning from a purely transactional experience into one that is transformational. It can help create relationships and help the educator extend beyond delivering content. The professor is preparing graduates for the realities of their careers, many of which involve remote, independent work. The challenge of maintaining meaningful connections in these environments is just beginning.

According to Gray (2025) and the National Association of Colleges and Employers, while 96.3% of recent college graduates believe that communication is a critical skill they need in their career, employers report that only 53.5% of them are actually prepared to communicate professionally. Universities may be the missing link in this preparation. Integrating human connections into online courses can close the communication gap and increase students' career readiness, which starts with adding humanity to online learning through synchronicity.

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CTRL + ALT + ENGAGE: Rebooting Online Learning with AI

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Abstract

Online education has significantly expanded global access to learning, offering unprecedented flexibility and connectivity. However, despite rapid growth and widespread adoption, ensuring meaningful student engagement remains challenging. Artificial Intelligence (AI), including generative technologies, adaptive systems, and AI-driven communication tools, presents promising solutions to enhance engagement in online courses. Yet, caution is warranted, as indiscriminate use of AI tools risks diminishing genuine human interaction, potentially fostering isolation rather than community. This challenge is particularly salient for Christian educators, who hold a stewardship responsibility to illuminate the marketplace of ideas with Christ-centered truth and virtue, carrying the light of Christ into educational contexts.

This paper addresses a critical gap in existing literature by exploring how AI can intentionally and biblically nurture meaningful student engagement in online college courses. Grounded in the biblical stewardship principle and virtue formation frameworks derived from Philippians 4:8, the authors introduce the ENGAGE framework (Exact, Noble, Genuine, Admirable, Gracious, Exemplary). Distinct from existing approaches, this practical, virtue-driven approach provides educators with actionable strategies to thoughtfully integrate AI tools, reinforcing spiritual authenticity, cognitive rigor, relational depth, ethical integrity, emotional empathy, and disciplined mastery.

Keywords: generative AI, online education, pedagogy, student engagement, Christian higher education, stewardship, biblical integration, virtue formation, virtue-driven pedagogy, ENGAGE framework

CTRL + ALT + ENGAGE: Rebooting Online Learning with AI

Online education has opened doors for learners around the world, offering flexibility, accessibility, and innovative ways to connect. Recent data illustrate its remarkable growth: in the fall of 2021, 61% of undergraduate students (9.4 million) were enrolled in at least one online course (National Center for Education Statistics, Undergraduate Enrollment, 2023). By 2022, 54% of college students (approximately 10.1 million) took at least one online class; 26% were learning exclusively online (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Globally, online education has surged more than 900% since 2000, becoming the fastest-growing segment in education (Oxford Learning College, 2022).

Despite this rapid expansion, a critical question persists: Are students really learning, or just logging in? At the heart of this question is student engagement, which encompasses what students do, think, and feel while learning (Fredricks et al., 2004). Cultivating meaningful engagement in virtual environments remains challenging. A recent, systematic review of 18 studies (2019–2024) found that while online platforms can enhance academic performance, major engagement issues remain, particularly isolation and reduced interaction with peers and instructors. The review concluded that effective solutions require better digital tools and more active instructor presence (Hollister et al., 2022).

Artificial intelligence (AI), including generative AI, chatbots, and adaptive feedback systems, has been increasingly explored as a potential solution to the engagement challenge. Systematic reviews and empirical studies suggest that AI tools can support academic performance through personalized learning pathways and timely, adaptive feedback across disciplines (Lee & Moore, 2024). However, this promise comes with caution. While Garcia et al. (2025) emphasize theoretical models supporting student engagement, other scholars explicitly caution that AI tools substituting rather than complementing human interaction can reduce emotional and social engagement, fostering isolation (Al-Zahrani, 2024; Lai et al., 2024). Thus, a thoughtful reboot of online learning is required, one that carefully integrates AI tools to enhance, not diminish, human interaction and connection. As AI continues to transform the landscape of higher education, Christian faculty must thoughtfully steward these tools in ways that illuminate the marketplace of ideas with Christ-centered truth and virtue, carrying the light of Christ into educational contexts.

This tension underscores a gap in the literature: while AI may improve access and efficiency, few studies have explored how it intentionally can be used to nurture engagement in online college courses, particularly from a biblical perspective. This is a crucial gap for Christian educators, who are called not only to deliver content effectively but also to cultivate the spiritual, cognitive, social, and emotional growth of their students. This paper addresses that gap by asking: How can AI be used in online college courses to enhance engagement in a biblically faithful manner?

To answer this question, the paper begins by framing the issue of AI in online learning as a matter of stewardship, emphasizing the responsibility of Christian educators to use emerging technologies intentionally and with discernment. It then explores the dimensions of student engagement to clarify how AI can specifically enhance these aspects in online college courses. Next, the paper critically reviews current AI applications within each dimension, considering scholarly evidence regarding their effectiveness and potential limitations. Finally, the paper proposes the ENGAGE framework as a practical guide for Christian educators to intentionally design online courses that integrate AI in ways that holistically nurture student engagement consistent with biblical virtues.

Literature Review

Stewardship

As Christian educators consider the use of AI in online learning, stewardship remains a central biblical principle. Biblically, stewardship is a call to faithfully care for what has been entrusted to us, recognizing that God is ultimately the owner of everything (New International Version, 2011, 1 Peter 4:10). Monsma (1986, p. 19) applies this stewardship principle to technology in general, emphasizing that technology is fundamentally "a distinct human cultural activity…". Dyer (2011) underscores this view by suggesting that digital stewardship is the intentional, ethical, and relational use of technology for human flourishing. It involves purposeful, culturally embedded activities grounded in accountability to God and care for His creation.

Technological tools are not inherently good or evil, but they often carry built-in value systems that must be discerned and redeemed by their users, thereby reflecting the values and intentions of those who wield them (Dyer, 2011). For example, Barnhart and Turner (2024) recognized that AI systems can reflect both human and system-level biases, which require intentional human oversight to bring them in line with God honoring outcomes. Locke (2024) further suggests that this oversight of AI be carried out with the goals of humble accountability and spiritual restoration, as exemplified in Psalm 51. In step with Locke (2024), Gaudet and Ogden's (2024) framework reinforces the need for the redemptive use of technology by viewing AI through the lens of Creation, Fall, and Redemption. They argue that AI should serve as a tool to build relationships, restore connection, and support the holistic growth of students, not replace or diminish what makes learning deeply human. Thus, used wisely, AI can align with the cultural mandate (Genesis 2:15) to cultivate creation and serve others.

Moreover, Dyer (2010) highlights the special place of communication media within technological stewardship. Communication technologies, including AI tools used in online education, require careful consideration because they profoundly shape human relationships, interactions, and cultural practices. Though these technologies may not directly transform natural creation physically, they impact student engagement, social connectedness, and spiritual wellbeing.

This nuanced view complements Gaudet and Ogden's (2024) framework, providing a clear, practical lens for evaluating AI in terms of its ability to redeem or restore human relationships.

Recent scholarship underscores the growing attention that Christian educators are giving to the stewardship of AI in academic settings. For example, Leo and Delano (2024) describe a staged approach to introducing AI in an undergraduate course, intentionally guiding students from early exposure to independent use of AI, while grounding the process in ethical reflection and biblical values. In that vein, Christian educators must select and use AI tools intentionally to encourage holistic student development and relational connection rather than mere efficiency or convenience. When stewarded well, AI can support student flourishing by personalizing instruction, allowing educators to focus on mentoring and presence. However, if used uncritically, AI can displace human connection, diminish relational learning, and undermine the educator's role. Biblical stewardship of AI in an online learning context thus involves moving beyond either embracing or rejecting AI outright. Rather, it demands careful discernment and intentionality, ensuring that technological activities align with God's purposes for flourishing.

Genuine stewardship, however, reflects the steward's internal virtues and character rather than the mechanical use of technology. Proverbs 4:23 underscores this principle by emphasizing that we must diligently protect our hearts as our values shape every action we take, including the way we employ AI tools. Paul further emphasizes intentional virtue formation as fundamental to faithful stewardship in Romans 12:2, instructing believers toward active inner transformation. Likewise, Galatians 5:16 explicitly urges believers to cultivate virtues intentionally through reliance on God's Spirit. This active dependence on the Spirit directly fosters virtues such as patience, kindness, and self-control. Practically applied, these virtues become essential for shaping compassionate and effective stewardship of AI tools, particularly in cultivating meaningful student engagement in online educational settings.

Therefore, virtue-focused stewardship must guide the application of AI tools in online educational settings. However, virtue-focused stewardship does not automatically translate into practical strategies to enhance student engagement. To bridge this gap, we next explore key dimensions of student engagement, identifying ways that prior research has shown how AI tools can be used to reach deeper student engagement and holistic growth.

Factors of Student Engagement in Online Learning

Fredricks (2004) categorized student engagement broadly into behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions. In the context of Christian higher education, this framework can be expanded to include social engagement and spiritual engagement (Bergdahl & Hietajärvi, 2022; Gaudet & Ogden, 2024; Maddix & Estep, 2010; Viana, 2025). Understanding student engagement through these five dimensions provides a clear framework that guides Christian educators in stewarding AI technologies. Next, we briefly describe each dimension of engagement and discuss how AI tools have been used to support each dimension, while noting concerns about their implementation.

Behavioral Engagement

Behavioral engagement involves observable student actions such as attendance, active participation, and assignment submission (Fredricks et al., 2004). However, maintaining consistent behavioral engagement presents notable challenges. For example, students frequently struggle with absenteeism and persistence (Fredricks et al., 2004; Garcia et al., 2025).

AI-enhanced educational technologies, such as Intelligent Tutoring Systems (ITS), have shown to significantly enhance behavioral engagement (Garcia et al., 2025; Lee & Moore, 2024; Nguyenet al., 2024). For example, AI-driven platforms such as Gradescope facilitate timely and personalized feedback, encouraging consistent assignment submission, punctual attendance, and sustained participation in learning activities (Nguyen et al., 2024). However, these tools may emphasize task completion over genuine intrinsic motivation, potentially neglecting deeper relational aspects crucial for sustained engagement (Liu et al., 2025).

Cognitive Engagement

Cognitive engagement refers to students' intellectual investment, critical thinking, reflective practices, and deep processing of course content (Fredricks et al., 2004). Challenges often arise from superficial learning strategies that prioritize rote memorization over deep understanding, inadequate use of self-regulated learning strategies, and instructional tasks that do not encourage higher-order cognitive engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004; Garcia et al., 2025).

AI-driven technologies, such as adaptive learning platforms and analytics can significantly enhance cognitive engagement (Garcia et al., 2025; Nguyen et al., 2024). For example, Nguyen et al. (2024) highlight that these systems can dynamically generate tailored, instructional content, challenging practice scenarios, and reflective simulations. These AI-enhanced methods support authentic intellectual engagement, helping students develop deeper cognitive processing, reflective thinking, and genuine mastery. However, reliance on AI-generated resources may inadvertently hinder original intellectual inquiry and creative problem-solving, potentially leading students toward passive consumption of content (Fan et al., 2024).

Emotional Engagement

Emotional engagement refers to students' affective reactions toward their educational experiences (Fredricks et al., 2004). Fostering emotional engagement can involve significant struggles, such as alienation, boredom, anxiety, and frustration (Fredricks et al., 2004; Garcia et al., 2025).

Integrating emotionally intelligent technologies such as GenAI-driven chatbots, has been shown to support joyful, low-stress learning experiences that enhance emotional engagement, sometimes even more effectively than traditional teacher-led approaches in language learning (Li &

Chiu, 2025). This finding seems to address Lai et al.'s (2024) concerns about weakened emotional perception resulting from decreased face-to-face interaction. Nevertheless, Yoo et al. (2025) found that although users value the emotional support offered by chatbots, they distinctly recognize their limitations compared to genuine human empathy.

Social Engagement

Social engagement involves meaningful interactions, communication, and the sense of support and inclusion experienced by students during academically oriented learning activities within online learning communities (Bergdahl & Hietajärvi, 2022). However, encouraging social engagement online presents significant challenges, such as a reduced sense of social presence and belonging (Bergdahl & Hietajärvi, 2022; Garcia et al., 2025). Additionally, social interactions online do not necessarily translate into academically meaningful collaboration (Bergdahl & Hietajärvi, 2022).

AI-enhanced tools offer practical solutions to these challenges. For example, peer-matching algorithms and AI-enhanced discussion forums promote community-building and academically purposeful collaboration (Borup et al., 2025; Garcia et al., 2025; Nguyen 2024 et al.). However, interactions driven by AI chatbot algorithms, despite their perceived emotional responsiveness, may result in relationships that feel authentic yet remain fundamentally superficial (Zhang et al., 2025).

Spiritual Engagement

Spiritual engagement encourages students to conduct purposeful reflection, ethical decision-making, and active participation in their spiritual growth (Maddix & Estep, 2010; Wilhoit et al., 2009). Effective spiritual engagement also encourages personal transformation and character formation (Porter et al., 2019; Wilhoit et al., 2009).

Despite its importance, fostering spiritual engagement online presents unique challenges, such as superficiality in spiritual connections (Viana, 2025). Recent developments in AI, such as personalized learning interactions and adaptive experiences, provide promising opportunities to overcome these challenges (Nguyen et al., 2024). Such capabilities are reflected in AI-driven platforms like Faith Forward and Hallow, which deliver adaptive devotional content, personalized ethical reflections, and scenario-based spiritual prompts. Nevertheless, AI-driven education might become overly individualized, thereby risking the loss of essential relational depth vital for authentic spiritual development (Papakostas, 2025).

ENGAGE Framework

The literature clearly identifies both significant potential and critical concerns associated with integrating AI into online education, and addressing these concerns demands a thoughtful, biblically grounded approach. The literature also shows that Christian educators must ground their use of AI in virtue-focused stewardship to navigate these challenges responsibly. The challenge then is to cross the chasm between theoretical construct and practical strategies. To help bridge this gap, we propose the ENGAGE framework, as shown in Table 1, to provide a practical guide for Christian educators to thoughtfully integrate AI tools in a biblically consistent fashion.

The foundation of the ENGAGE framework is based on the biblical principle found in Proverbs 4:23 that we should, "guard [our] heart, for everything [we] do flows from it." In other words, our actions are driven by the virtues we hold dear. This is also why Romans 12:2 urges us toward intentional, transformative thinking that aligns our hearts and minds with the virtues that bring God glory. Philippians 4:8 aligns this intentional formation of the heart and mind ("think about such things") with the concept of stewardship by identifying specific internal virtues (i.e., whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable) that should guide external behaviors (Proverbs 4:23). While many scriptures highlight specific virtues (e.g., Romans 12:2, Galatians 5:22–23), Philippians 4:8 uniquely provides a cohesive set of virtues that holistically aligns with the dimensions of student engagement. Moreover, this biblical guidance complements existing scholarly frameworks (Gaudet & Ogden, 2024; Schuurman & Huyser-Honig, 2024) offering educators tangible standards to intentionally cultivate.

Drawing directly from this verse, each ENGAGE attribute, Exact, Noble, Genuine, Admirable, Gracious, and Exemplary, corresponds explicitly to the biblical virtues of Pure, Noble, True, Admirable, Lovely, and Right. This alignment underscores that each dimension of student engagement should embody standards of excellence and praiseworthiness, consistently reflecting Christ-centered values. The following sections will explore each attribute, illustrating how AI-enhanced technologies can be stewarded in biblically consistent ways.

Table 1

ENGAGE Framework

ENGAGE Attribute	**Biblical Virtue (Philippians 4:8)**	**Critical Considerations**	**Strategies for Resolution**
Exact	Pure	Risk of superficial spirituality; maintaining genuine emotional depth.	Supplement AI reflection tools with regular human mentoring, pastoral guidance, and authentic community interaction.
Noble	Noble	Over-reliance on external compliance rather than intrinsic ethical responsibility.	Use AI alongside intentional ethics discussions and human-led mentoring sessions, reinforcing intrinsic values over mere compliance.
Genuine	True	Risk of passive content consumption; diminished	Balance AI-generated content with tasks requiring original

		independent intellectual inquiry.	thinking, reflective analysis, and creative problem-solving.
Admirable	Admirable	Potential superficiality in AI-mediated relationships and interactions.	Integrate synchronous instructor-led sessions to foster deeper relational connections, alongside AI-driven interactions.
Gracious	Lovely	Substitution of authentic human empathy and emotional support with virtual comfort.	Complement AI emotional support tools with consistent opportunities for interpersonal emotional support, peer groups, and counseling services.
Exemplary	Right	Emphasis on academic precision over moral discernment and ethical reflection.	Include intentional ethical reflection components, discussions, and community-based applications alongside adaptive AI learning systems.

Exact (Pure)

The virtue "Pure," aligned with "Exact" in the framework, requires sincerity, authenticity, and transparency. From a biblical standpoint, purity necessitates genuine motivations and authentic self-examination (Matthew 5:8).

While AI-driven platforms such as Reflexion, Riff, Soul Machines, and devotional apps like YouVersion and Pray.com facilitate structured, personalized reflection, without virtue-focused stewardship, these technologies risk fostering superficial emotional experiences due to their inherently impersonal nature. To counter this risk, educators must ensure that their integration of AI tools genuinely deepens students' spiritual integrity and emotional authenticity. AI tools should function solely as a supplementary tool enhancing reflection while human mentors, educators, and peer communities remain the primary agents of spiritual guidance and emotional support (Wilhoit et al., 2009; Maddix & Estep, 2010). For example, educators or mentors could hold virtual small-group or one-on-one follow-up sessions after students engage with prompts generated by AI-driven platforms.

Noble (Noble)

The virtue "Noble," aligned with “Noble” in the framework, emphasizes integrity, ethical responsibility, and disciplined honor. Biblically, nobility represents integrity, honesty, and ethical communal accountability foundational to Christian communities (Ephesians 4:25).

While AI tools like Turnitin, Grammarly, SafeAssign, Honorlock, Proctorio, and Academic Integrity Chatbots may cultivate these noble behaviors, it remains essential for Christian educators to actively reinforce noble virtues through intentional integration strategies. Given the potential for AI tools to overly emphasize external compliance, Christian educators must ensure that their approach to integrating AI tools cultivates intrinsic honor and ethical responsibility. One approach is to pair AI-based integrity tools with reflective ethical discussions. Rather than only detecting and punishing plagiarism, educators could require students to reflect on why integrity matters in discussion forums, thus providing the communal accountability that the Noble virtue requires.

Genuine (True)

The virtue "True," aligned with the ENGAGE attribute "Genuine," signifies intellectual authenticity, rigorous scholarship, accuracy, and reflective inquiry. Biblical teachings reinforce the intrinsic value of truth, wisdom, discernment, and intellectual rigor as critical elements of faithful living and ethical responsibility (John 8:32; Romans 12:2).

While AI technologies such as Gradescope, Packback Questions, Elicit.org, Consensus.app, and Scholarcy facilitate engagement through authentic intellectual exploration (Bond et al., 2020), their effectiveness depends significantly on educators' intentional integration. To avoid passive content consumption, educators must ensure that students are genuinely engaging with content and guide students to critically evaluate underlying assumptions within AI-generated content. For example, educators should confirm that AI-generated insights do not undermine students' abilities to think independently, communicate deeply, or engage thoughtfully with complex ideas (Engler, 2025).

Therefore, educators should deliberately balance AI-generated content with open-ended tasks requiring original intellectual inquiry, creative problem-solving, and reflective analysis. For instance, when AI tools provide personalized summaries or synthesized study guides, educators should ask students to critically evaluate these summaries by cross-referencing them with scholarly literature, analyzing underlying assumptions, identifying biases, and reflecting upon them from a biblically informed worldview.

Admirable (Admirable)

The virtue "Admirable" aligned with “Admirable” in the framework emphasizes relational respect, commendable behavior, and community-oriented interaction. Biblically, admirable behaviors reflect relational trust, mutual respect, and communal unity foundational to Christian fellowship (Hebrews 10:24–25).

While platforms like Packback, Harmonize.ai, Perusall, and CircleIn actively support collaborative interactions, Christian educators must integrate regular synchronous, instructor-led discussions with asynchronous AI-driven exchanges to address concerns regarding superficial interactions (Martin et al., 2024). For example, AI-enhanced forums and peer-matching algorithms could support asynchronous collaborative discussions among students. Educators should complement these asynchronous discussions by facilitating periodic, live, virtual sessions to reinforce authentic relational connections.

Gracious (Lovely)

“Lovely," corresponding with the ENGAGE attribute "Gracious," epitomizes empathy, compassion, relational warmth, and emotional support. Biblically, lovely virtues reflect Christ-like compassion, empathetic sensitivity, and mutual encouragement vital for authentic Christian community (Ephesians 4:32).

While AI tools such as Woebot, Replika, Wysa, Canvas Chatbots, Motimatic, and Microsoft Viva Insights provide real-time, empathetic support, educators must ensure that reliance on AI tools does not diminish genuine human empathy or replace dependence on God. Following Engler’s (2025) relational emphasis, to preserve authentic human fellowship and community, educators must be guard against the temptation to substitute virtual comfort for embodied relationships. For instance, AI-driven emotional check-ins could initially identify students who experience heightened stress or isolation. Educators or designated mentors would then follow up with identified students through personal outreach, mentoring, or counseling referrals, ensuring a primary emphasis on genuine empathy and compassionate care.

Exemplary (Right)

The virtue "Right," aligned with the ENGAGE attribute "Exemplary," underscores disciplined pursuit, rigorous ethical correctness, mastery-oriented learning, and precision. Biblically, the attribute of being "Right" embodies disciplined intellectual rigor, ethical accountability, and diligent effort reflective of divine creative order and moral standards (Colossians 3:23).

While adaptive learning technologies like Cerego, Realizeit, ALEKS, Cognii, and Coursera AI Labs facilitate personalized instruction, precise assessment, and mastery-oriented feedback, educators must thoughtfully address potential caveats around achieving academic precision without deeper moral discernment. Educators should design AI-enhanced adaptive learning environments to include explicit opportunities for ethical reflection, critical discussion, and community-based application (Fu & Weng, 2024). Such balanced approach ensures students develop not only cognitive precision and disciplined study habits, but also moral discernment. Ethical discernment can be integrated by combining AI-personalized learning with reflective exercises, such as interactive, scenario-based modules that present students with authentic ethical challenges related to their disciplines. In addition, educators should structure peer discussions or instructor-guided sessions to critically examine decisions and their broader implications. Furthermore, educators should engage students in community-based projects requiring the practical application of learned concepts, cultivating intellectual rigor, ethical accountability, and diligent effort.

Implications, Future Research Directions, and Conclusion

This paper provides several practical implications for educators seeking to thoughtfully integrate AI into online learning environments, particularly within Christian educational contexts. The ENGAGE framework offers educators a structured and virtue-driven approach to fostering holistic student engagement through AI-enhanced pedagogical practices. Practically, educators can apply the framework to design curricula, develop course materials, and strategically integrate AI tools to ensure alignment with biblical virtues and holistic student development.

Future research should focus on conducting longitudinal studies and experimental designs that measure student engagement across behavioral, cognitive, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions. Researchers might consider using mixed-method approaches, including quantitative measures (e.g., engagement scales, academic performance metrics, retention rates) and qualitative assessments (e.g., student reflections, interviews, focus groups) to capture comprehensive insights into the framework's effectiveness and areas needing refinement. Ultimately, continued research will ensure the ENGAGE framework develops to meet emerging educational challenges while maintaining fidelity to its biblically grounded stewardship principles.

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Recent Graduates from a Four-Year Accounting Program's Perceptions of Preparedness for the Workforce

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored recent accounting graduates' perceptions of workforce readiness, focusing on the alignment between academic preparation and the demands of professional accounting roles. Using narrative inquiry, the study examined graduates' experiences across four key areas: technical competencies, soft skills, critical thinking, and self-efficacy. While participants reported feeling confident in their technical knowledge, many expressed concerns about gaps in communication, technological fluency, and opportunities for practical application. Self-efficacy emerged as a critical factor influencing readiness, with experiential learning—such as internships, simulations, and mentorship—identified as essential for building confidence and real-world preparedness.

Thematic analysis revealed three primary areas for curriculum enhancement: deeper integration of applied technical training, expanded use of accounting technologies and data analytics tools, and increased access to experiential learning. Graduates also emphasized the importance of professionalism, collaboration, and ethical reasoning as core components of career success. These findings align with existing literature and competency frameworks, such as those from AICPA and CGMA, which advocate for a more holistic approach to accounting education.

This study offers actionable recommendations for curriculum design and highlights the need for accounting programs to evolve alongside industry expectations. Addressing the identified gaps can strengthen student outcomes and better equip graduates for success in a rapidly changing profession.

Keywords: accounting education, workforce readiness, recent graduates, curriculum development, experiential learning, self-efficacy, critical thinking, soft skills, technological competencies

Recent Graduates from a Four-Year Accounting Program's Perceptions of Preparedness for the Workforce

Recent concerns in the accounting profession highlight that many new graduates enter the workforce lacking foundational knowledge, hands-on experience, and exposure to current technologies and trends (Alshurafat et al., 2021; Hora et al., 2020; Jackson et al., 2022). These gaps have contributed to higher turnover rates and challenges in finding qualified, workforce-ready professionals (Jackson et al., 2022). While numerous studies evaluate accounting education programs from institutional or employer viewpoints (Chankseliani et al., 2021; Elo et al., 2023), few capture the qualitative perspectives of students themselves (Seidel, 2019). This study addresses that gap by exploring how recent graduates perceive their own readiness. Soft skills—such as communication, adaptability, and critical thinking—remain areas where graduates often feel underprepared (Asonitou, 2021; Hunter et al., 2023). Although employers have traditionally cultivated these skills, undergraduate programs are increasingly seen as responsible for their development. Some institutions even require personality assessments to evaluate soft skills for admission (Cronin, 2024). Framed by Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory and using narrative inquiry (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), this study investigates how graduates' beliefs about their capabilities shape their workforce confidence, offering valuable insights to help accounting programs better align with evolving professional demands.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative study aimed to explore recent graduates' perceptions of their readiness for entry-level roles in accounting.

Research Questions

This study used narrative inquiry to explore the self-perceived readiness of recent graduates from four-year accounting programs as they entered the workforce. The focus on graduates' perspectives provided a unique perspective on workforce readiness that complemented but differed from traditional studies relying on employer feedback or quantitative assessment. Through semi-structured interviews, this study sought to address specific aspects of graduates' experiences and identify perceived gaps in the preparation provided by their academic programs. To accomplish the goal of addressing the perceived gaps in preparation, the following research questions were used to guide this study:

RQ1. Do undergraduate accounting graduates perceive they were adequately prepared for entry-level accounting roles?

RQ2. How do graduates' levels of self-efficacy influence their perceptions of their readiness for the workplace?

RQ3. What perceptions do graduates have about the role of soft skills and critical thinking in their academic training and its impact on their readiness for professional roles?

RQ4. What curriculum-related enhancements should be made to prepare better accounting undergraduate students for the workforce?

The four research questions were designed to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the perceptions of accounting graduates concerning their workforce readiness, going beyond technical proficiency to include soft skills, self-efficacy, and curriculum effectiveness. By focusing on skill-specific competencies and broader themes of self-confidence and adaptability, these questions provide a framework for identifying actionable insights that could inform curriculum design and professional training practices.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by four interconnected frameworks, each addressing different facets of workplace readiness in accounting graduates. The first two frameworks—the CGMA Competency Framework (Abdul Hamid et al., 2016) and the AICPA Core Competency Framework

(Terblanche et al., 2023)—provided foundational insight into the skills expected of accounting professionals. These include not only technical knowledge but also broader industry awareness and essential soft skills. Research has shown that today's accountants must excel in communication, teamwork, problem-solving, conflict management, and critical thinking (Dolce et al., 2019). These two frameworks helped evaluate how well accounting programs align with current industry expectations and whether graduate feedback supports adjustments to better prepare students for the profession. The third guiding model was Paul and Elder's Critical Thinking Framework (2019), which offered a lens to examine the reasoning and decision-making abilities of new professionals. Prior research has identified critical thinking as an area where many new accounting graduates feel underprepared (Papageorgiou, 2023), making this framework essential to the study. The final framework was Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy, which explores how belief in one's abilities influences behavior and decision-making. Self-efficacy plays a critical role in how confident graduates feel in navigating the workforce and pursuing professional challenges (Beatson et al., 2021).

Together, these four frameworks enriched the study's narrative inquiry approach, offering a comprehensive structure to analyze how recent accounting graduates perceive their preparedness. By integrating industry standards, cognitive development, and personal belief systems, the study gained deep insight into where educational programs succeed—and where they may fall short—in equipping students for today's dynamic accounting landscape.

Limitations

Several limitations shaped this qualitative study. First, participants were limited to CPAs working in public accounting, excluding corporate accountants and other career paths within the profession. This decision was intentional due to the current CPA shortage and aimed to better understand contributing factors. Second, participants were recruited from a single professional organization in the Southern U.S., using purposive and snowball sampling. This limited geographic and economic diversity, as membership required payment. Third, participant bias was possible, as individuals may have shared experiences they believed the researcher wanted to hear. To mitigate this, confidentiality was emphasized, and participants were encouraged to share both positive and negative experiences. Fourth, self-reporting posed limitations in memory recall. To address this, only recent graduates (within three years) were included. Lastly, the sample lacked demographic diversity—most participants were White women from six academic programs. Reflexivity was employed to acknowledge the researcher's potential biases and positionality throughout the study.

Sampling Procedures and Data Collection Sources

This study used a qualitative narrative inquiry approach to explore accounting graduates' perceptions of workforce readiness. A semi-structured interview guide was developed, as no previous qualitative research addressed this topic. Sixteen open-ended questions aligned with four research questions and focused on participants' undergraduate experiences. Purposeful sampling connected the population to the study. Data analysis followed an inductive approach, allowing themes to emerge directly from participants' narratives about their preparation through accounting degree programs.

Participants and Research Setting

Ten participants were interviewed using a semi-structured format via Microsoft Teams. Each participant selected a convenient location, typically at home or in their office. Interviews were scheduled for 30–40 minutes, with actual durations ranging from 15 to 50 minutes and an average length of 31 minutes. A brief technical issue affected one interview, where the recording began after demographic questions were asked. Saturation was determined when no new themes emerged during the final interviews (Guest et al., 2020). The semi-structured approach allowed for flexibility, encouraging participants to share openly while maintaining alignment with the study's research questions.

Findings

This study builds on prior research examining accounting graduates' workforce readiness, including studies by Alshurafat et al. (2021), Banasik and Jubb (2021), Bowles et al. (2020), Kotova et al. (2021), Phan et al. (2020), Twyford and Dean (2023), and Viviers et al. (2022). These studies, primarily quantitative in design, explored areas such as education gaps, employability skills, and self-efficacy. Unlike previous studies, which focused largely on measuring competencies and preparedness through quantitative or mixed methods, this study adopted a qualitative narrative inquiry approach to explore the lived experiences of 10 recent accounting graduates. Through semi-structured interviews, participants shared how their undergraduate education shaped their confidence and perceived readiness for entry-level accounting roles. Although limited by sample size, geographic scope, and the use of self-reported data, the study employed strategies such as reflexivity, bracketing, and member checking to support trustworthiness. Ultimately, this research contributes a deeper, student-centered perspective to the conversation on how accounting programs can better prepare graduates for the workforce.

Practical Assessment of Research Questions

This study contributes to the literature in two ways. First, it is the most in-depth qualitative study since Seidel (2019) to explore accounting graduates' perceptions of workplace readiness. Unlike Seidel's focus on internship experiences or prior quantitative studies that measured competencies through surveys, this research offers narrative-driven insights into how graduates perceive and apply their readiness. It adds depth to findings from studies like Kotova et al. (2021) and Viviers et al. (2022), which identified self-efficacy as a factor in career success but lacked detail on how educational experiences shape that self-efficacy.

Second, the study reinforces established concepts—such as the importance of self-efficacy, critical thinking, and soft skills—while offering new insight into gaps in experiential learning and curriculum alignment. Consistent with Alshurafat et al. (2021) and Bowles et al. (2020), participants described deficiencies in both technical and interpersonal preparation. However, this study extends those findings by emphasizing the need for practical learning opportunities and stronger development of adaptive, real-world skills.Ultimately, the findings support the need for curriculum improvements that integrate technical training with interpersonal and applied skill development. Doing so can help undergraduate accounting programs better prepare graduates for the evolving demands of the profession.

Research Question One

This study explored whether recent accounting graduates felt prepared for entry-level roles, addressing gaps highlighted in the literature. Research has consistently pointed to deficiencies in soft skills, critical thinking, and experiential learning within accounting education (Asonitou, 2021; Jackson et al., 2022; Phan et al., 2020). While technical skills are often well-covered, programs tend to underemphasize real-world application and adaptive competencies (Dolce et al., 2019; Hunter et al., 2023). Despite frameworks like the CGMA and AICPA emphasizing soft skills and practical training, curricula frequently prioritize theory over experience (Terblanche et al., 2023).

Three themes emerged: (1) lack of workforce readiness, (2) lack of content coverage, and (3) lack of relevance. Although participants felt confident in their technical knowledge, most struggled with applying it in dynamic settings, such as client interaction or adapting to new technologies. This finding expands on prior studies by identifying underrepresented curriculum gaps, including limited internships, simulations, and case-based learning opportunities.

Unlike broader trends, participants emphasized the disconnect between academic preparation and current industry needs (Bowles et al., 2020; Twyford & Dean, 2023). These findings suggest that accounting programs must enhance experiential learning, integrate advanced technologies, and develop soft skills to improve graduates' real-world readiness.

Theme One: Lack of Workforce Readiness. Seven of 10 participants (70%) reported curriculum-related deficiencies in preparing for real-world accounting roles. While the remaining participants did not cite curriculum gaps directly, they emphasized the need for better career readiness support, such as interview training and learning from mistakes. Common concerns included weak CPA exam preparation, limited software training (e.g., Excel, QuickBooks), and a lack of practical application opportunities.

These findings align with prior research that critiques accounting education for underemphasizing workplace-relevant training and experiential learning (Abdul Hamid et al., 2016; Chankseliani et al., 2021). Participants expressed frustration with the disconnect between academic content and the application-based nature of the CPA exam, echoing concerns raised by Jackson et al. (2022) and Phan et al. (2020).

The lack of exposure to accounting software supports findings by Alshurafat et al. (2021) and Twyford and Dean (2023), who highlighted the need for more hands-on experience with industry tools. Participants also emphasized the value of real-world learning, such as internships and case-based assignments—findings consistent with Bowles et al. (2020) and Dolce et al. (2019). Overall, this study reinforces the urgent need for curriculum updates that integrate technology, experiential learning, and CPA exam preparation to better align with professional demands and career success.

Theme Two: Lack of Coverage. Participants identified gaps in the breadth and practical focus of coursework, particularly in taxation and auditing. Several noted that their programs emphasized complex computations over real-world knowledge, such as tax form usage, compliance protocols, and auditing tools. This aligns with Phan et al. (2020), who found that overly theoretical curricula limit students' ability to apply their knowledge in practice. Alshurafat et al. (2021) and Jackson and Meek (2021) similarly highlighted how insufficient training in tax and audit practices leaves graduates underprepared for workplace expectations.

Turner and Tyler (2023) emphasized that accounting programs often lack adequate instruction on key standards like GAAP and IFRS—critical knowledge for tax and audit roles. This concern was echoed by Viviers et al. (2022), who found that students often struggle to translate academic content into professional skills. Participants in this study also cited limited exposure to tools such as CaseWare, SAP, and UltraTax, reinforcing the need for experiential learning. Suggestions included workshops, compliance case studies, and hands-on auditing projects to bridge the gap between coursework and career readiness. Expanding the practical focus of taxation and auditing curricula can better equip graduates to meet industry expectations and address competency gaps identified in both this study and prior research.

Theme Three: Lack of Relevance. Participants frequently expressed that their coursework felt disconnected from modern accounting practices. Many were frustrated by instruction in outdated methods—such as manual calculations and paper tax returns—which no longer reflect current industry norms. As Alshurafat et al. (2021) noted, automation and specialized software have made traditional techniques largely obsolete. This disconnect left participants feeling unprepared for technology-driven roles, where tools like tax software, data analytics platforms, and real-time reporting are standard.

One participant noted spending extensive time on theoretical learning with little exposure to practical tools. This concern aligns with Jackson et al. (2022), who emphasized the need for curricula that integrate modern technologies like cloud-based systems and data visualization. Participants also reported discomfort with tasks central to accounting, such as using advanced Excel functions, navigating automated audits, and identifying appropriate tax forms.

The lack of curriculum relevance not only undermined participants' confidence but also reinforced a broader perception that accounting programs fail to reflect workplace realities. Consistent with findings by Dolce et al. (2019) and Phan et al. (2020), this study highlights the need for updated pedagogies that blend theory with real-world tools to better prepare graduates for today's technology-intensive accounting environment.

Bridging the Gaps in Accounting Education

To address the workforce readiness gaps identified by participants, accounting programs should adopt three key strategies: enhance CPA exam preparation, modernize curriculum content, and expand experiential learning. First, aligning coursework with the CPA Evolution framework and integrating CPA-focused modules can better prepare students for certification and professional roles (Wiley, n.d.). Partnerships with CPA review providers and mentorship from professionals or alumni can build exam confidence and performance (Owusu et al., 2019). Second, curricula must modernize by incorporating technology tools (e.g., QuickBooks, SAP, Tableau) and emerging topics like blockchain, AI, and data analytics. Real-world applications, guest lectures, and industry projects ensure that content remains relevant and prepares students for evolving workplace demands (Alshurafat et al., 2021; Jackson et al., 2022). Third, experiential learning—such as internships, simulations, and mock audits—allows students to apply theoretical knowledge in practice. Programs like Deloitte internships and Chattahoochee Technical College's accounting simulation course provide valuable hands-on training. Mentorship programs, like those offered by AICPA and the Big Four, improve self-efficacy, job placement, and professional development (LinkedIn, n.d.; Owusu et al., 2019). Collectively, these strategies create a holistic educational experience that bridges academic preparation with professional expectations, ultimately equipping graduates with the skills and confidence needed to succeed in entry-level accounting roles.

Research Question Two

This study's second research question explored how recently graduated accounting students perceive the role of self-efficacy in their readiness for entry-level roles. Bandura (1977) defines self-efficacy as one's belief in their ability to succeed in specific tasks. Research has shown that higher self-efficacy enhances confidence, job performance, and the ability to apply theoretical knowledge in practice (Beatson et al., 2021; Donald et al., 2019). Educational experiences like internships, simulations, and mentorships significantly contribute to self-efficacy (García & de los Ríos, 2021; Pereira & Sithole, 2020), while limited real-world exposure can diminish it (Viviers et al., 2022).

This study contributes to the literature by emphasizing the connection between self-efficacy and perceived readiness—an area less explored in prior research. While most studies focus on technical skills or employer expectations, this research highlights the internal confidence that supports graduates as they enter the workforce. Participants identified a curriculum gap in fostering internal confidence alongside technical skills. Strategies like reflective assignments, peer collaboration, and professional mentorships can enhance adaptability and resilience (Beatson et al., 2021). Simulations and team-based projects were also recommended to support self-efficacy development. By integrating these strategies, accounting programs can better prepare students to navigate complex professional challenges with confidence and competence.

Theme One: Core Functions. Self-efficacy significantly influenced how graduates perceived their readiness to perform essential accounting tasks such as financial reporting, auditing, and taxation. Participants who had intensive technical preparation expressed greater confidence in applying these skills professionally, aligning with the CGMA and AICPA competency frameworks (Terblanche et al., 2023; Turner & Tyler, 2023). However, participants noted that when coursework lacked practical application—such as using accounting software or completing real tax forms—they felt underprepared. One participant described feeling "uncertain and overwhelmed" when encountering unfamiliar workplace tasks. These findings reinforce Asonitou (2021) and Phan et al. (2020), who stressed the importance of aligning academic training with real-world demands. This study adds to the literature by showing that technical competency alone is not enough; self-efficacy, shaped through applied learning, is critical for workplace confidence.

Theme Two: Research. Participants emphasized the role of self-efficacy in performing analytical and research-based tasks, including interpreting data and addressing regulatory issues. Graduates who engaged in critical thinking and case-based learning felt more prepared to navigate complex problems, reflecting prior research by Dolce et al. (2019) and Wolcott and Sargent (2021). Conversely, those without exposure to research-focused coursework reported low confidence in these areas. One participant recalled feeling "lost" when asked to justify a financial recommendation, a gap tied to limited critical thinking training. This aligns with Viviers et al. (2022), who noted that insufficient emphasis on analytical skills can hinder readiness. Integrating problem-solving projects and research assignments into accounting programs can help develop self-efficacy in analytical roles.

Bridging the Gaps in Self-Efficacy Development in Accounting Education

To strengthen self-efficacy and readiness, accounting programs should increase practical learning opportunities, such as internships, simulations, and case studies (García & de los Ríos, 2021; Twyford & Dean, 2023). Structured reflection (e.g., journaling, debriefing) can help students internalize growth (Pereira & Sithole, 2020). Constructive feedback is another essential strategy; participants reported that timely feedback built their confidence—a finding echoed by Beatson et al. (2021) and Donald et al. (2019). Mentorship from professionals also supports skill development and enhances student confidence (LinkedIn, n.d.).

Incorporating challenging problem-solving tasks can reinforce technical and adaptive skills (Asonitou, 2021; Phan et al., 2020), while peer collaboration prepares students for team dynamics in the workplace (Dolce et al., 2019; Jackson et al., 2022). These strategies collectively empower students to build confidence, think critically, and engage effectively in professional accounting roles.

Research Question Three

This study examined how recent accounting graduates perceive the influence of soft skills and critical thinking on their readiness for professional roles. As the profession grows more complex, skills like communication, teamwork, and analytical reasoning are now just as vital as technical expertise (Dolce et al., 2019; Wolcott & Sargent, 2021). While most programs emphasize technical content, graduates must also be equipped to communicate findings, collaborate effectively, and apply critical thinking to real-world financial scenarios (Phan et al., 2020; Turner & Tyler, 2023).

Theme One: Professionalism. Professionalism emerged as a critical theme, with five participants highlighting the importance of ethics, punctuality, and accountability. These priorities align with CGMA and AICPA frameworks, which emphasize ethical conduct and sound judgment (Terblanche et al., 2023; Turner & Tyler, 2023). However, six participants reported their programs lacked opportunities to apply professionalism in realistic contexts. Instead, they relied on internships and mentorships to develop these competencies. This gap underscores the need for scenario-based learning to help students practice ethical decision-making and navigate workplace challenges (Asonitou, 2021; Jackson et al., 2022).

Theme Two: Communication. Eight participants stressed that communication—both written and interpersonal—is essential in their current roles. Graduates noted the importance of explaining financial information to non-accountants and collaborating with team members. Those with strong communication training felt more confident, while others felt underprepared, particularly in teamwork and client interactions. Participants suggested more structured group projects and presentations during their academic experience. These findings reinforce prior research advocating for role-plays, public speaking assignments, and client simulations to build real-world communication skills (Asonitou, 2021; Jackson et al., 2022; Terblanche et al., 2023).

Theme Three: Critical Thinking. Critical thinking was also pivotal. Participants shared that tasks like evaluating tax strategies or identifying discrepancies required adaptive, analytical thinking. Yet many reported their programs focused on rote learning rather than problem-solving. This led to uncertainty when facing complex or fast-paced decisions in the workplace. Active learning strategies such as simulations, auditing exercises, and case-based learning were recommended to bridge this gap. These methods allow students to practice applying knowledge in unpredictable scenarios, which research shows improves decision-making and adaptability (Phan et al., 2020; Jackson et al., 2022; Wolcott & Sargent, 2021).

Bridging the Gaps in Soft Skills and Critical Thinking Development in Accounting Education

To better prepare graduates for the demands of the accounting profession, academic programs must intentionally develop soft skills and critical thinking alongside technical competencies. One effective strategy is integrating professionalism training into the curriculum through experiential learning. Rather than relying solely on lectures about ethics and accountability, programs should embed real-world scenarios—such as ethical dilemmas, role-playing exercises, and case studies—that mirror workplace challenges. These opportunities help students practice decision-making, manage client relationships, and navigate professional expectations with integrity, aligning with recommendations from Asonitou (2021) and Jackson et al. (2022).

Communication is another essential area for development. Students must be prepared to explain financial information to non-specialists, collaborate on teams, and maintain clear written and verbal correspondence. Assignments such as client reports, presentations, and group projects build these skills and foster professional confidence (Asonitou, 2021; Dolce et al., 2019). As AI-generated communication becomes more common, students must also learn to evaluate content critically to avoid miscommunication. Cross-functional collaboration and peer feedback reflect workplace dynamics and enhance interpersonal development (Jackson et al., 2022).

Critical thinking should be developed through active learning strategies like case-based learning, simulations, and problem-solving exercises. These approaches help students analyze data, assess risk, and make informed decisions in complex accounting scenarios, fostering adaptability and analytical rigor (Phan et al., 2020; Wolcott & Sargent, 2021). Mentorship and experiential learning opportunities—such as internships and job shadowing—allow students to apply classroom knowledge in real-world contexts. These experiences build confidence and provide professional insight. Programs like Deloitte's internship model emphasize the value of mentorship in reinforcing learning and workplace preparedness (Deloitte, n.d.; Donald et al., 2019).

Finally, incorporating reflection and feedback across the curriculum allows students to internalize their growth. Journaling, debriefing, and constructive feedback from instructors and peers help students recognize progress and build self-efficacy (Pereira & Sithole, 2020). By embedding these elements into accounting education, programs can more effectively bridge the gap between academic preparation and professional success, ensuring graduates are equipped with the technical, interpersonal, and cognitive skills needed to thrive.

Research Question Four

As the profession evolves in response to technological advancement, globalization, and increasing regulatory complexity, accounting programs must adapt to meet the changing needs of the workplace (Turner & Tyler, 2023). Research has long identified critical gaps in communication, adaptability, critical thinking, and practical application (Asonitou, 2021; Jackson et al., 2022; Phan et al., 2020), all of which continue to affect how graduates perceive their readiness for entry-level roles.

The CGMA and AICPA frameworks emphasize aligning education with both technical and interpersonal workplace demands (Terblanche et al., 2023). While traditional curricula remain strong in foundational knowledge, they often fall short in preparing students for the interdisciplinary and technology-driven nature of modern accounting (Viviers et al., 2022). This study builds on existing research by identifying three key themes—technical, technological, and experiential—that should shape curricular improvements.

Theme One: Technical. Graduates underscored the importance of strong technical foundations in areas such as financial reporting, auditing, and taxation. Participants who felt confident in their abilities credited well-structured coursework and applied learning experiences. However, 80% identified gaps in advanced tax topics, industry-specific practices, and emerging regulatory areas. Many also noted the lack of opportunities to apply technical knowledge, such as through mock tax returns or audit simulations. These findings echo Phan et al. (2020) and Terblanche et al. (2023), who advocate for curricula that balance theoretical rigor with real-world application. Enhancing practical technical instruction will not only boost students' readiness but also increase their confidence in applying their knowledge on the job.

Theme Two: Technological. Participants consistently expressed feeling underprepared for the technological tools and platforms they encountered in the workplace. Although some had minimal exposure to tools like Excel or QuickBooks, most felt they lacked adequate training in data analytics, AI, and cloud-based systems. This finding supports research by Alshurafat et al. (2021) and Asonitou (2021), who emphasize the urgent need to integrate technology throughout accounting curricula. Participants recommended dedicated coursework in accounting software, data visualization, and automation, as well as collaborative, hands-on projects using industry tools. Programs that implement these enhancements—such as requiring students to use Tableau for data analysis or SAP for processing transactions—can better prepare graduates for the digital transformation of the profession (Phan et al., 2020; Terblanche et al., 2023).

Theme Three: Experiential Learning. Experiential learning emerged as a vital component in bridging academic knowledge and professional application. Participants who had access to internships, simulations, and mentorships reported higher confidence in workforce transitions. Yet, these opportunities were not consistently available. This gap reinforces calls in the literature for hands-on experiences as essential to developing both technical and soft skills (García & de los Ríos, 2021; Jackson et al., 2022). Participants recommended expanding access to internships, embedding simulations into coursework, and incorporating case-based learning to mimic professional scenarios. Examples include simulations replicating client audits or compliance reviews. Reflective practices—such as journaling or post-internship debriefs—can further solidify learning and self-efficacy (Pereira & Sithole, 2020; Lin et al., 2024).

Bridging the Gaps in Curriculum Enhancements for Workplace Readiness

To better prepare accounting undergraduates for the workforce, curriculum design must evolve to address identified gaps in technical training, technological competency, and experiential learning. First, programs should strengthen technical instruction by going beyond foundational concepts like financial reporting and auditing to include advanced topics such as forensic accounting, industry-specific regulations, and international standards. While accrediting bodies such as the AACSB and ACBSP ensure consistency in core content, programs must also offer applied experiences that help students translate theory into practice. Activities like mock tax return preparation, simulated audits, and industry case studies give students practical opportunities to develop job-ready skills while boosting their confidence and readiness (Phan et al., 2020).

Second, programs must embed technology training into all aspects of the curriculum. The increasing reliance on platforms like SAP, QuickBooks, UltraTax, Tableau, and cloud-based systems demands a shift from occasional exposure to integrated, hands-on use. Rather than treating technology as an add-on, students should be expected to complete projects that involve processing transactions, visualizing financial data, and using automation tools to solve accounting problems. These experiences not only build technical fluency but also enhance students' adaptability in rapidly evolving, digital-first workplaces (Alshurafat et al., 2021; Terblanche et al., 2023).

Finally, accounting programs should expand experiential learning opportunities to ensure students engage with real-world scenarios before entering the profession. Structured internships, simulation-based coursework, and mentorship programs help bridge the gap between classroom learning and workplace application. Collaborations with industry partners—such as firms co-developing simulations or offering project-based internships—can enhance authenticity and job alignment. In addition, incorporating reflective assignments (e.g., post-simulation debriefs or internship journals) helps students internalize their growth and strengthens self-efficacy (Pereira & Sithole, 2020). By designing curricula that integrate advanced technical instruction, technological proficiency, and experiential learning, accounting programs can produce graduates who are not only competent but also confident and adaptable—ready to meet the demands of an increasingly complex and dynamic profession.

Summary

Findings revealed that while graduates generally felt confident in their technical competencies, they noted significant gaps in critical thinking, communication, professionalism, and technological fluency. Self-efficacy emerged as a crucial factor influencing perceived readiness, with experiential learning—such as internships and simulations—playing a key role in building confidence. Additionally, the study highlighted distinctions between online and on-ground learning modalities, reinforcing the importance of accessible, hands-on technological training across formats.

Participants offered clear suggestions for curriculum improvement, including increased integration of experiential learning, soft skills development, and training in industry-relevant tools and software.

These insights hold important implications for the future of accounting education. Academic programs must evolve to better mirror the dynamic needs of the profession, emphasizing applied learning, digital literacy, and interpersonal competencies. Future research could build on these findings by incorporating employer perspectives, examining underrepresented student experiences, and conducting longitudinal studies to track outcomes over time.

In summary, this study contributes to a growing body of research on workforce readiness in accounting. By acting on these findings, educators and institutions can better equip students to enter the profession with confidence, adaptability, and a strong foundation for success. Closing the gap between academic preparation and professional expectations will not only support student success but also strengthen the accounting profession in an era of rapid technological and global change.

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ABSTRACTS

Accounting

Games, God, and Faith Integration in the Workplace: A Literature Review and Exploratory Journey

David Bedinghaus, *Oral Roberts University*

This paper examines using workplace gamification to integrate faith, helping Christians shine the light of Christ through a clear sense of progression. It proposes the Octalysis gamification framework to develop faith integration strategies. A literature review of faith integration and gamification is conducted, suggesting gamification as a creative tool for faith-based institutions to prepare students to live out their faith in the workplace aligned with the Great Commission.

Breaking Barriers and Building Effective Mentoring Relationships in Public Accounting: A Biblical Approach (Research Incubator)

Nelson Mlotshwa, *St. Mary's College*

Mentoring has received considerable attention in management and public accounting research in the last few decades. Literature highlights the positive effects of mentoring on job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and employee retention, among other desirable outcomes. On the other hand, some research provides evidence of challenges and barriers to effective mentoring. While secular literature has made important contributions on mentoring and its impact on employees and organizational outcomes, scant evidence exists of attempts to explore this issue from a biblical perspective. This study explores how mentors can adopt biblically sound principles to overcome barriers, foster relationships, and "silently witness."

Christian CEOs and Corporate Tax Avoidance

Dongye Song, *Calvin University*
Debra Snyder, *Calvin University*

We study whether, and through what channel, a Christian CEO affects corporate tax avoidance. Using graduating from a Christian college as a proxy for CEO religiosity, we provide evidence showing that a Christian CEO leads firms to engage in less corporate tax avoidance, and the effect is weaker when the firm operates in a sin industry. In addition, we provide limited evidence of the influence of a Christian CEO on corporate tax avoidance for big firms.

Christ-Centered Mentoring: How Small Faith-based Business Schools Can Sustainably Improve the Quality of Ethical Decision-Making by Future Business Leaders

Michael Ross, *Asbury University*
Alesha Graves, *Asbury University*

This paper examines mentoring's role in developing organizational leaders, focusing on moral development and ethical decision-making. It considers how mentorship-driven faith integration can differentiate small Christian business schools by strengthening students' ethical decision-making. Building on an empirical study at a Northwestern U.S. Christian business school, the paper explores a mentorship-driven modification to the faith-integrated accounting curriculum. It hypothesizes that mentored, faith-integrated curricula will yield stronger ethical decision-making than non-mentored ones and proposes directions for future research.

The Value Relevance of Accounting Information: Influence from Economic Conditions (Research Incubator)

Jaime Grandstaff, *Dallas Baptist University*
Lee Dunham, *Creighton University*

In this study, we examine the impact of economic conditions on the value relevance of accounting information. Using 589,343 firm-quarter observations over the years 1974–2018, we evaluate the research question using regression models. By reviewing the interaction of macroeconomic condition measures with earnings, the book value of equity, and cash flows from operations, the results show that the economic environment significantly affects the value relevance of accounting information. More specifically, we find that as the economy is improving the value relevance of earnings increases, while the value relevance of book value and cash flows decreases.

Choosing Technology Projects: Theory and Practice

Santhosh Abraham, *Union University*
Eric Bostwick, *University of West Florida*

Educators face conflicting stakeholder pressures related to artificial intelligence (AI) in higher education, and these perspectives are constantly changing. To allow educators to develop a rational, rather than reactionary, AI strategy, we intersect three educational theories to support the use of AI-enhanced assignments. In addition, we describe a four-step process for integrating AI-enhanced assignments into courses, demonstrate this process, and summarize the reflections of both students and faculty. We find that the intentional use of AI not only improves student learning but also enhances the soft skills that employers want, benefiting students from their first day on the job.

Economics

Case Study: The Far Reach (Research Incubator)

Kent Saunders, *Anderson University*

This paper will provide a case study and teaching notes for a Faith & Co. documentary titled "The Far Reach." The documentary portrays an alliance between Greg DuMontier, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes in Montana, and Fred Billings. Together, they aspire to use the resources God has entrusted to them to develop the Tribes' agricultural economy, foster sustainability, improve their food supply, and nurture the Tribes' connection to their land.

The Kingdom of God - A Radically Countercultural Economic System

James Jones, *Sterling Investment Advisors*

This paper explores how Christian economics education can integrate faith with professional practice by envisioning the Kingdom of God as a real economic system. It advocates using allegory—especially *Utopia reimagined: An allegory of capital and conscience*—to help students critically evaluate economic principles, wrestle with ethical dilemmas, and imagine a society governed by agape love, not self-interest.

Entrepreneurship

Rooted in Purpose: Entrepreneurial Stewardship and Market Creation in a New World Winery (Best Paper Award Winner)

Miriam Cavalcanti Junqueira, *LeTourneau University*
Allan Discua Cruz, *Lancaster University*

This study examines a faith-driven East Texas vineyard cultivating a new regional wine market in a culturally unfamiliar and ecologically uncertain context. It reveals how Christian values, particularly stewardship, inform long-term investment in land, relationships, and community by viticultural entrepreneurs. Employing ethnographic methods, the research uses stewardship, trust, and identity theories to explain consumer trust building via product quality, relational marketing, and values-based storytelling. Preliminary findings show stewardship fosters landscape preservation, innovation, and identity formation. This work extends entrepreneurship theory by positioning stewardship within values-guided ventures, offering insights for rural enterprise, faith-integrated strategy, and place-based identity.

Ethics

Sustainable AI Ethics in the Workplace: A Faith-Based Perspective

Ben LeVan, *Charleston Southern University*
Emory Hiott, *Charleston Southern University*
Darin Gerdes, *Charleston Southern University*

This paper defines what sustainable AI is, highlights ethical challenges of AI, and offers faith-based guidance for organizations adopting or expanding AI use. Biblically based strategies are proposed that promote ethical stewardship, AI practices that honor creation, community, and future generations.

AI Ethics: The Challenges of Developing Learner Centric Critical Thinking while Maintaining Moral Autonomy (Panel)

Kirk Mensch, *Palm Beach Atlantic University*
James Barge, *Mount St. Joseph University*
Michael Kolta, *Palm Beach Atlantic University*
Mark Taylor, *Calvin University*
Trish Elliott, *Palm Beach Atlantic University*

The rapid integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into society raises pressing concerns, particularly in higher education as generative AI (GenAI) expands into administration, ERP systems, curricula, syllabi, faculty development, and research policies. This panel will explore current challenges across education, human development, philosophical and theological ethics, and moral psychology. Discussions will address the development of ethical AI and its implications for the human condition, with particular attention to education and medicine. By engaging multiple perspectives, the panel aims to illuminate pressing ethical questions and foster dialogue on responsible implementation of AI in academic and societal contexts.

What We Owe to the World: Toward a Theory of the Just Price (Research Incubator)

Jooho Lee, *Pepperdine University*

Most theories of the just price assume that what buyers and sellers owe each is a kind of equality. But the just price is less a fixed point and more a vector. Prices communicate information about supply and demand of resources and direct their production and consumption. This article will argue that the just price is that which will promote the common good by directing market participants to make more or less goods available within their community.

Faith Integration

My Journey Toward Faith Integration in Business: A Memoir

Michael Cafferky, *Southern Adventist University*

This memoir traces the author's journey from pastoral ministry, executive leadership, and higher education, exploring how an understanding developed regarding the integration of faith and business. Through story and theological reflection, the narrative reveals how the Bible came to serve not only as moral guidelines, but as the governing dynamics of business.

Beyond CSR to an Economy of Communion

Andrew Gustafson, *Creighton University*
Celeste Harvey, *College of St. Mary*

Catholic Social Thought (CST) provides rich resources for developing Christian Business Education—more in line with Christian values and concerns than the dominant generic CSR or stakeholder approaches. After providing some criticisms of CSR, the traditional 'model' for socially concerned business practices, I will provide some concrete examples and pedagogical resources for sharing CST business applications.

Barriers Faced by Christians Living their Faith at Work:
An Exploratory Investigation (Research Incubator)

Joe Ricks, *Xavier University*
Richard Peters, *Paul Quinn College*

Although people of faith make up over 2/3 of the adult U.S. population, there are legal issues and long held perceptions that faith and the workplace don't mix. There is significant literature on legal issues and how Christianity and work can co-exist, however, the literature is scant regarding barriers, factual or perceived, Christians face in the workplace. This paper presents findings from an exploratory investigation of the perceived barriers for Christians to live their faith at work.

Faculty Use of Faith Integration Methods (Research Incubator)

Benton Jones, *Bryan College*

This study explores how Christian business faculty integrate faith in their classroom instruction, building on Roller's (2017) article, which identified 21 methods. Faculty have been surveyed to determine how and how often each of these methods is being used in the classroom. The results of this study will be shared with a view toward determining what questions to ask next to better inform faith integration training and resources.

Forming Hospitable Hearts Through AI: A Framework for Navigating AI Affordances for Developing Christian Cultural Intelligence

Suraj Sharma, *Calvin University*
Peter Snyder, *Calvin University*
Sophia Zhang, *Baylor University*
Rachel Hammond, *Calvin University*

Christian higher education seeks to form students' desires and loves toward God's kingdom. As artificial intelligence (AI) technologies become more commonly used, Christian educators must discern how these tools can serve the biblical mandate to love one's neighbor through hospitable intercultural engagement. This paper proposes a framework for integrating AI affordances within Christian cultural intelligence (CQ) development and addresses significant concerns and challenges while promoting Christian formation goals.

Methods and Types: Sharpening Pedagogical Integration using Integration Types

Carston Hennings, *Point Loma Nazarene University*

This paper seeks to bridge the literatures of faith integration types and faith integration pedagogies by applying Hennings' adaptation of Frei's typology of theology to Roller's list of 21 faith-learning integration methods. It argues that understanding the type of integration one aims to pursue can sharpen the selection, design and delivery of pedagogical methods.

Assessment of Faith-Based Goals in Christian Higher Education (Research Incubator)

Wlamir Xavier, *Lipscomb University*

This research proposal introduces the concept of Christian Higher Education Institutions (CHEIs) and seeks to understand how faith-based goals (FBGs) are assessed and their effect on CHEIs' performance. The methodology is described as a literature review complemented by secondary data analyses. From a theological perspective, the study will investigate whether CHEIs can be considered a persona and can be accountable for facilitating or deterring the shalom. Additionally, this research intends to suggest a framework to evaluate FBGs and recommend resource allocation policies and practices to advance FBGs in CHEIs.

The Strength of Faith of Graduates of an Evangelical Christian University
and the Status of Their Faith Post-Graduation

Laureen Mgrdichian, *Biola University*

The evangelical Christian university (ECU) seeks to prepare men and women of faith for careers in the world in addition to deepening the faith foundation of each student's walk with God. While there are studies evaluating the faith of students while attending an ECU, there is a void of research that follows alumni to identify the strength of their faith 10 years after graduating. The main purpose of this research is to identify factors that might contribute to young adults, who graduated from an ECU, living a fruitful and God-honoring life in the years post-graduation.

Finance

Biblical Financial Wisdom for Our Business Students (Research Incubator)

Paul Babin, *Covenant College*

The Bible has much to say about money. This paper attempts to answer the question "which biblical financial principles are most important for today's college students" – from the perspective of our students' elders. It summarizes a class assignment in Principles of Finance at a Christian liberal arts college. Business students met with mature Christians, asking for three "biblical financial principles that today's college students should learn." The results are tallied by concept and by verse and organized into a summary for use in future classes.

Leveraging Student Managed Investment Funds for Global Impact (Research Incubator)

Philip Swicegood, *Wofford College*
Lori Chambers, *Hope Global Investments*
Patrick Stanton, *Wofford College*
Amanda Olsen, *Wofford College*

Student managed investment funds (SMIF) have become increasingly popular in business schools as an experiential way for students to learn about investment practices, but more can be achieved with SMIFs, particularly for institutions wishing to expose their students to faith driven investing and poverty alleviation. This paper introduces a means of leveraging traditional student managed investment funds into sustainable high impact funding conduits for micro-credit initiatives, thus introducing students to doing well and doing good.

The Impact of College Major on Homeownership: Illuminating How Business Degrees and Student Debt Shape Alumni Outcomes

Roy Chan, *Lee University*

This longitudinal study examines how college major influences homeownership, considering salary and student loan debt as mediators. Using the College and Beyond II Alumni Survey (2021), logistic regression was applied to 2,286 students who graduated in 2009–2010, representing a 10-year follow-up. Results show that business administration and management graduates have homeownership rates comparable to peers in STEM and health fields. Student loans are linked to higher likelihood of homeownership, though larger repayment amounts reduce rates among business graduates. The study applies Becker's (1993) human capital theory and discusses policy implications. Open to all; no prior knowledge required.

Higher Education

Between Tradition and Transformation: Closing the Curriculum–Industry Gap in 21st-Century Business Education (Research Incubator)

W. Clarke Griffin, *Concordia University-Wisconsin*

This paper explores transformation in business curriculum design, particularly within Christian higher education. Drawing from both Scripture and current literature, it examines how business schools can faithfully steward curriculum. The analysis identifies four central themes: (1) curriculum innovation, (2) rethinking the business school model, (3) student job-readiness, and (4) experiential learning. Each theme is considered through a biblical lens, with an emphasis on vocational preparation, faithful stewardship, and servant leadership. The paper concludes with practical questions for business school leaders and outlines future research opportunities, including empirical studies on curricular redesign, alumni outcomes, and employer-aligned competencies.

International

Christian Integration and Business Study Abroad (Panel)

Larry Locke, *University of Mary Hardin-Baylor*
Marty McMahone, *University of Mary Hardin-Baylor*
Adina Scruggs, *Bryan College*

Studying abroad provides an opportunity for transformational experiences for college students. For Christian business students, it can also provide an opportunity to carry the Gospel to new communities, and encounter the Gospel being practiced in other cultures. Despite the benefits, the percentage of university students who participate in study abroad is less than 1%. What are the roadblocks for Christian universities that want to participate in study abroad and how can they successfully overcome those obstacles? In this panel discussion, participants will learn how to structure, finance, and lead study abroad opportunities for their institutions and their students.

Information Systems & Analytics

How Can Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning Contribute to Preventing and Fighting Corruption from a Christian Perspective: Evidence from Brazil (Best Paper Award Winner)

Samuel Mamede, *Taylor University*

This paper explores how AI and ML can contribute to anti-corruption efforts when shaped by Christian ethical principles, which emphasize justice, stewardship and integrity, based on the analysis of corruption cases identified through AI/ML in the Brazilian reality. Through the results of the algorithms estimated on 82,624 federal audit analyses, and by applying regression analysis suggest that cities with lower percentages of Christians tend to experience higher incidences of corruption.

Leadership

The Graying of Academia: A Biblical and Servant Leadership Perspective (Research Incubator)

Kathleen Patterson, *Regent University*
Jane Waddell, *Regent University*

This presentation looks at the graying of academia as more faculty members choose to delay retirement, continue working, and are vibrant in the academy. Robert K. Greenleaf (1998), who is best noted as the Father of Servant Leadership, called aging the ultimate test of spirit. This presentation looks at the graying of faculty members through a biblical and Servant Leadership lens and provides insight into higher education. We share insights that we (the Faculty Senate) learned from anecdotal conversations with our colleagues, such as the role of the dean, the commitment to the mission of our university, and financial considerations.

Exploring Strategic Philanthropy in Christian Family Firms:
A Metaphorical Approach (Research Incubator)

Randall Zindler, *Lancaster University*
Allan Discua Cruz, *Lancaster University*

Family businesses provide an ideal setting to explore the relationship between a Christian worldview and philanthropy. This offers a unique opportunity to study how they approach strategic philanthropy, which aims to address the root causes of social and ecological issues. This paper examines this phenomenon, exploring how family firms integrate their core values and beliefs to drive systemic change. Through the metaphor of a tree, it examines the role of a Christian worldview in influencing a long-term, values-driven approach. The study aims to explore how philanthropic efforts may progress from benevolence into a powerful force for lasting positive impact.

Unpacking 'Calling': A Starting Point to Find Meaning
in a Secular Work World (Research Incubator)

Mary Ann Harris, *Bethel University*

In this paper on calling, the author discusses the importance of discovering your call and identifies the many facets of the origin and application of the concept. This work considers faith considerations as well as secular ideas, discussing the relevance of the term and its ability to change lives for the worker as well as those who are in their midst in a professional or personal setting. Ultimately, the goal will be to research this concept more fully with Christian University students and alumni to better understand knowledge of the concept and ways individuals apply it to their lives.

Management

A Conceptual Framework for Breaking the Dependency Trap through Automotive Care

Hyeong-Deug Kim, *The King's University*

This study examined the effect of dependency in the context of the Automotive Care Program, which provides services to people who are economically unable to repair vehicles. Semi-structured interviews and document analysis were used to understand the dependency of the program's participants, and both self-determination theory and asset-based community development model were employed for theoretical reasoning and practical recommendations. The results of this study provide a viable framework to build competence, foster autonomy, and cultivate learning communities to retore dignity and to overcome negative dependencies, which can be also applied in other contexts such as other charity programs.

Leading with Light: A Virtuous Business Model for
Christian Leaders in Secular Markets (Research Incubator)

Mojisola Amosun-Ogunmola, *Indiana Wesleyan University*
Erica Garcia-Thomas, *Indiana Wesleyan University*

This working paper explores how Christian leaders can illuminate secular marketplaces through the Virtuous Business Model (VBM), a biblically grounded leadership framework integrating integrity, justice, and humility. Drawing on theological ethics and real-world examples, we invite feedback on curriculum design, case study expansion, and empirical development of faith-work integration tools.

Marketing

Can Christians Be Successful in Sales Without Compromising Their Faith? (Research Incubator)

Greg Smith, *Gordon College*

Christians historically have struggled with the perceptions that are associated with careers in marketing and sales namely that, particularly in sales, one must use deceit, withhold key information, or outright misrepresent goods and services to be successful. This paper seeks to not only confront those perceptions but argue that Christians who utilize biblical principles can be as successful, if not more, than their secular counterparts.

Using Personality Profile Assessments in the Classroom and Beyond: Useful Practices to Engage in Business Courses

Denise Murphy-Gerber, *Geneva College*
Curtis Songer, *Geneva College*

This paper provides a comprehensive guide to five popular personality assessments. In addition, it discusses the criteria for evaluation of the assessments, the pros and cons of each, how to use the assessments in the classroom, and where to go to obtain them. The assessment tools reviewed include MBTI, The Big Five, CliftonStrengths, DiSC, and Enneagram. The paper will explain why each is popular, ethical considerations and customization, as well as their classroom application.

Marketing Professionals' Native Advertising Ethical Evaluation: Does Recognition Matter? (Research Incubator)

Kristen Roberson, *Freed-Hardeman University*

This study explores how marketing professionals evaluate the ethics of native advertising, with and without disclosure recognition. Surveying 121 participants using the Multidimensional Ethics Scale, it finds that ethical judgments vary based on disclosure recognition and are influenced by traits such as moral philosophy, age, and gender. Results highlight the ethical ambiguity surrounding native advertising.

From Just Weights to Just Algorithms: A Biblical Comparison of Justice in Traditional and Digital Commerce

Tetyana Khramova, *The King's University*

This paper explores how biblical principles of "just weights and measures" apply to algorithms in e-commerce. It explores a theological framework grounded in transparency, impartiality, data stewardship, and covenantal accountability. By comparing traditional and digital commerce, it proposes principles for "just algorithms" that honor human dignity and promote equitable exchange.

Operations Management

Using Lectio Divina as Contemplative Pedagogy in a HyFlex Operations Management Class

Matthew Boyne, *Point Loma Nazarene University*

In a HyFlex teaching modality, with students attending either in person, via Zoom or asynchronously, the need for student focus on the moment with clear connection to learning outcomes and assessments is needed to counteract the time-space differences. By integrating Lectio Divina as contemplative pedagogy with technology, the distractions of technology can be overcome as students individually reflect but respond as a learning community of practice.

Research

Man Versus Machine: Analyzing a Christian Worldview Topic with AI Thematic Analysis

Joseph Snider, *Indiana Wesleyan University*
Reuben Rubio, *Indiana Wesleyan University*
John Theoharis, *Belhaven University*

The advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in research has expanded into qualitative studies and now claims to be able to generate a thematic analysis using supplied files as a knowledge base. AI tools were assessed to determine if they can create a credible thematic analysis for qualitative research studies and, if so, what are the advantages and disadvantages of doing so. Generative AI tools were used in the study (ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, Llama, Boodlebox).

Journal Editors' Panel on Implications for Practice (Panel)

Jason Stansbury, *Calvin University*
Andy Borchers, *Lipscomb University*
Mellani Day, *Colorado Christian University*
Robert Holbrook, *Ohio University*
Marty McMahone, *University of Mary Hardin-Baylor*

The "implications for practice" in a journal are potentially valuable for making a Christian cultural contribution. This panel will review the literature on the strengths and weaknesses of "implications for practice," and then ask editors of several peer-reviewed journals for their observations on what authors should and should not do to make their "implications for practice" excellent.

Strategy

AI Adoption and Use: Responsibilities of Business Education in Leadership

Mellani Day, *Colorado Christian University*

This paper explores the accelerating adoption of generative artificial intelligence (AI) and its implications for businesses and business education. While AI presents opportunities for enhanced efficiency and innovation, its rapid spread, particularly among knowledge workers and small to medium enterprises, necessitates careful consideration. Emphasized is the crucial role of leadership in understanding and navigating AI adoption through strategic implementation and change management.

TEACHING TALKS ABSTRACTS

Ethics

Promoting the Ethical Use of Artificial Intelligence

Robert Roller, *LeTourneau University*

To help promote the effective and ethical use of AI, last fall I developed an assignment in our Business Ethics course wherein students must use AI to write a paper but then must use critical thinking skills to critique the paper (without using AI to write the critique). The assignment worked so well that I am using it again this fall in Business Ethics. This teaching talk describes the assignment, its implementation, and the results.

Faith Integration

Profit and Purpose: Helping Freshman Business Students Recognize that a Business can Earn Profit and Further God's Kingdom

Emily Eaton, *Palm Beach Atlantic University*

This Teaching Talk will discuss a method used to help freshman business students recognize that living out Christian faith and business effectiveness can, and should, connect. Through classroom conversation and an assignment, students are encouraged to consider how they can make an impact in God's Kingdom, while earning a significant profit.

Illuminating Business Statistics: Faith Integration through Online Forums

Tetyana Khramova, *The King's University*

This session shares a model for integrating Christian faith into Business Statistics using online forums. The approach invites students to explore topics like truth, integrity, and God's order in statistics. Two forum formats—topic-aligned and character-building—are compared, along with facilitation styles and group work. The model is inclusive of diverse worldviews and addresses challenges posed by generative AI, offering a replicable strategy for faith-informed teaching.

Human Resource Management

Beyond the Whiteboard: Creating Experiential Learning Spaces in
Human Resource Management (HRM)

Rachel Hammond, *Calvin University*

This session presents an experiential Human Resource Management assignment where students design a real-world training program, bridging theory and practice through collaboration, reflection, and practical application.

Information Systems & Analytics

AI-Assisted, Not AI-Generated: Designing Assignments in HR Management
That Leverage AI Without Losing Student Voice

Melinda Rangel, *Tabor College*

This session will explore a framework for designing assignments that encourage responsible use of AI. Participants will learn how to design assignments by asking WHAT do you want students to know about AI, how do students work WITH AI, and how do students work WITHOUT AI to protect learning. Discussion will focus on incorporating safeguards to ensure soft skill learning is not lost. Real examples from Human Resource Management will be provided, including assignment guidelines and rubrics.

Student Analytics Project: Find and Analyze Your Own Data

Eric Bostwick, *University of West Florida*

The session will present a data analytics project in which students: 1) Find their own data, 2) Identify their own analysis objectives and questions, 3) Prepare a data analysis strategy, 4) Create visualizations to support their analyses, often using interactive dashboards, and 5) Present their findings via pre-recorded presentations. The project has been used for five semesters in a fully online, 7-week, graduate data analysis course with self-reported student improvement that is both practical and statistically significant.

Leadership

Leadership in Action - Beyond the Classroom

Curt Beck, *Concordia University*

Leadership is cultivated through active engagement, not lectures alone. The Collegiate Leadership Competition (CLC) founded in 2015, provides a structured, experiential framework for developing essential leadership skills—ethical decision-making, collaboration, and conflict resolution. Described by students with one word - growth - CLC transforms theory into action. Join the Teaching Talks session to explore how to integrate CLC into your institution's leadership programming.

Calibrating the Heart: Leadership Lessons from an 18th Century Pirate

Chris Langford, *University of Mary Hardin-Baylor*

What does an eighteenth-century pirate with a broken compass have to do with modern Christian leadership? Actually quite a lot. Using the example of Captain Jack Sparrow's self-focused behaviors and reliance on a mystical compass that points towards what he desires most in the world, this teaching talk discusses activities introduced in a Christian leadership course to help students better understand how leaders often find themselves adrift in the marketplace relying on a compass that has become morally mis-calibrated.

Escape the Ordinary: Using Escape Rooms as Capstone Learning Activities

Robert Holbrook, *Ohio University*

This talk introduces escape room-style activities as engaging capstone experiences to boost student collaboration and reinforce course content. The activity includes three levels, each linked to a course chapter, with progressively challenging problems leading to a final escape challenge. Fact sheets guide problem-solving and serve as study aids for final exams, where some escape tasks are reused. Bonus points can incentivize participation. A sample activity will be shared, and support is offered for faculty interested in implementing this interactive learning strategy.

A Spin on the Spaghetti Tower Challenge

Emily Eaton, *Palm Beach Atlantic University*

The Spaghetti Tower Challenge is a common tool to teach teamwork. However, this Teaching Talk will discuss a new spin on the challenge to teach management students the differences between conformity and deviance on a team. This talk will also discuss how believers must navigate conformity to Christ and deviance to the world to be a light in the darkness. Plus, it is the in-class activity that they'll be writing rave reviews about on their course evaluations.

Bringing Project-Based Learning to the "Soft Skills" Classroom

Roger Bingham, *Liberty University*

Creating the "real world" in a soft skills course is challenging. Project-based learning can transform your course into a high-impact, real-world experience that benefits students and community partners. You can boost team building, increase student confidence, foster a heart for serving others and strengthen career skills by providing value-added service to local nonprofits through project-based learning. Student outcomes include improved teamwork and communication, increased confidence in leadership roles, and exposure to nonprofit operations and challenges. Enhanced broader educational goals are career readiness, civic engagement, and faith-learning integration.

Experiential Learning: A Philippians 2 Learning Journey in the Age of AI

April Rowsey, *Union University*

As AI reshapes business, human skills like empathy and perspective-taking are more vital than ever. This Teaching Talk shares a classroom activity where students "walk in someone else's shoes," taking on roles like a single mother or disabled worker. Grounded in Philippians 2:3–5, it invites students to reflect on unseen workplace burdens. One student shared, "Managers need to get curious." The experience fosters Christlike leadership rooted in humility and compassion.

Marketing

Prayerful Pop-up Shop Teaching Talk

Anna Walz, *Grand Valley State University*

A semester-long project in which students plan, execute, and evaluate a week-long pop-up shop competition on campus.

Teaching – Graduates & Adults

Integrating Christian Business Ethics in Doctoral Education:
Cultivating Faith-Informed Leadership in Secular Contexts

Stacey Duke, *Oklahoma Wesleyan University*

This presentation will share key strategies for facilitating these conversations, examples of student growth, and evidence of practical application in the workplace. It will also address the urgent need for authentic connection and ethical leadership development in today's digitally driven, often impersonal, learning environments. Attendees will walk away with tools to cultivate integrity, community, and biblically grounded leadership within their own doctoral programs.

Teaching – Traditional Undergraduates

Understanding Ourselves and Others: 16 Personalities in Action

Kimberly Lowe, *Grand Valley State University*

This group activity uses the 16 Personalities framework to help students build self-awareness, empathy, and teamwork skills. Through sharing results, comparing traits, discussing real-world scenarios, and reflection, students explore how personality similarities and differences affect group dynamics. The activity fosters constructive dialogue and helps students develop emotional and cultural intelligence, enabling them to engage in more effective and respectful collaboration.

Illuminating Business Learning: Bridging the Technology Gap in the Accounting Classroom

Joseph Schools, *LeTourneau University*

As digital tools reshape the business landscape, many accounting and business courses remain anchored in traditional lectures and paper-based assignments—leaving students underprepared for technology driven workplaces. This Teaching Talk shares practical strategies for integrating accessible tech tools into undergraduate business and accounting instruction, helping educators "carry the light" of innovative practice into the classroom.

Integrating AI into Finance Education: Lessons from the Classroom

Todd Chesebro, *University of Mary Hardin-Baylor*

In this talk, I will share how I have integrated AI tools into two key courses: Principles of Finance (a junior-level requirement for all business majors) and Investment Analysis (a senior-level capstone for finance majors). I will demonstrate how platforms like ChatGPT and Copilot have helped personalize learning, simulate real-world financial scenarios, and support students in mastering complex concepts like the time value of money, investment analysis, and ethical decision-making.

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Michael Crawford, *Indiana Wesleyan University*
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Brad Gatlin, *John Brown University*
Rachel Hammond, *Calvin University*
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Kevin Hughes, *Mount Vernon Nazarene University*
Kirk Jackson, *Southern Nazarene University*
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