



## Management and the Gospel. Luke's radical message for the first and twenty-first centuries

José-Luis Fernández-Fernández

To cite this article: José-Luis Fernández-Fernández (2019): Management and the Gospel. Luke's radical message for the first and twenty-first centuries, Journal of Management, Spirituality & Religion, DOI: [10.1080/14766086.2019.1627732](https://doi.org/10.1080/14766086.2019.1627732)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14766086.2019.1627732>



Published online: 05 Jun 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## BOOK REVIEW

**Management and the Gospel. Luke's radical message for the first and twenty-first centuries**, by B. DYCK, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2013, 302 pp, € 98, 79, ISBN 978-1-137-28088-6

*Based on the narrative of St. Luke the Evangelist and within the framework of Palestine in the First Century, what does the life and doctrine of Jesus of Nazareth say to companies, economic organizations and managers whose objective, in the twenty-first century, is to produce goods and/or provide services?*

This is the research question of this excellent book, published in 2013. It is an eloquent essay, as well as a very systematic and elaborate monograph. For this reason, I begin by unreservedly recommending it to anyone interested in an innovative approach to company and organizational management, complementary to the traditional approach.

The study of the connections between spirituality, religion and management is certainly not new. It constitutes a vigorous line of research that deserves to be taken further. It is from this perspective that the book needs to be approached. A good book can open up new interests, give rise to hitherto unasked questions, and can stimulate reflection in all who read it. In short, it makes you think.

This is the virtue of this work: that it makes the reader think and makes us take a stance, not so much in favor of, or against what is expressed, but, above all, regarding partial and controversial aspects of the book. These nuances provide the fertile soil for intuition to take root and to help the reader in constructing and reworking his or her ideas.

In the following sections, I present an account of the book's structure and content. I also highlight some questions of interpretation, drawing attention to certain viewpoints that could be considered differently to the one presented by the author. This is not to invalidate anything Dyck says, but rather to qualify it. It is an attempt to open up other possibilities to Dyck's reading of the Gospel according to St. Luke.

In this book, the author situates the Gospel of St. Luke at the intersection between institutions and the Christian religion, bringing together both the theory and practice of business management. Dyck takes us back to the venerable pages of Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*. As this will be the *leitmotiv* (core) of Dyck's book, a more detailed explanation of *Weberian* analysis is appropriate here.

According to Max Weber, the secular asceticism of Protestantism was not at all prone to consumption, much less the consumption of luxury goods. However, it came to consider the search for wealth and the profit-making motive as a divine precept. The incessant pursuit of one's profession was deemed to be a superior form of asceticism and an expression of true faith. This made it a powerful lever of capitalism, as the repudiation of consumption coupled with the rational search for profit, could result in the increase of capital through savings. This capital however, could not be spent but rather had to be invested. That is the origin of *homo oeconomicus*, according to Weber.

However, these ideals did not hold up in the face of wealth's temptation and its secularizing and paradoxical action. The preoccupation with riches ended up killing the ethical spirit that had driven the conduct. One begins in poverty and ends with riches, but the increase in wealth may well decrease religious sentiment as well as ethics. When the

religious root of the primitive *ethos* loses the sap that created wealth from frugality and work, it becomes pure *utilitarianism*, capable of legitimizing hard, and at times, unjust laws.

In the end, we are confronted with the Weberian metaphor that motivates Dyck's research: an unprecedented accumulation of wealth creates an ethic that imprisons people in an "iron cage". Once this cage is empty of spirit, because capitalism no longer needs religious support, we see how *individualism* and *materialism* flourish, while "*specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart*" proliferate. The question then is who/what will fill that void and bring back those ethics and spirit in the future. The alternatives seem clear, at least, in Weber's opinion: either there will be a wave of mechanized petrification and a violent struggle; or there will be a rebirth of old ideas and ideals, hand in hand with new prophets.

In this book, Dyck seeks to offer tips for advancing along this second path. He carries out a rigorous analysis of *New Testament* narrative "to describe what management theory and practice looked like in the first century, to use this lens to examine what the Gospel of Luke says about management, and then to draw out implications for today" (p. 3). The book, in short, offers a novel reading of the *New Testament* and attempts to provide moral foundations for modern business and organizational practices.

Dyck divides his study into five parts. The first three chapters -*Introduction*- give us a good overall view of the book's contents. It begins with an overview of the work, followed by a first approximation of Luke's text -*A short introduction to the Gospel of Luke*- as well as his reasons for undertaking this study. According to Dyck, the frequency with which "economic" concepts appear in the Lucan evangelical text would appear to render it most suitable for issues relating to management. The third chapter of the introduction provides information on the growing role of managers as well as the nature of economic organizations in Palestine in the first century.

Part II - "*Problem recognition: How interpreting Luke via a First-Century management lens challenges the conventional interpretations of two key management parables*"- again consists of three chapters. In the fourth chapter, Dyck offers "*an important organizing framework*" which serves as a lens to understand what was implied by management when Luke wrote his Gospel. There were three basic dimensions to management: (1) managing relationships *within* organizations (*oikonomia*); and as Dyck tells us, Luke mentions the term *oikonomia* or its variants "more than fifty times"; (2) managing money (*chrematistics*), according to Dyck, the concept of *moneis* is mentioned in Luke a little more than a hundred times; and (3) managing relationships *between* organizations (*benefaction/patron-client relationships*). Dyck identifies some two hundred allusions to this third dimension in Luke's Gospel.

Dyck accepts this tripartite scheme without further examination and goes on to apply it to the passages and *pericopes* of Luke's Gospel, bringing a *new message or a new version of old ideas*, as Max Weber suggested, to the managers of capitalist and globalized companies in this volatile and uncertain 21st century. Or we might deem it a new spirit, a new way of approaching the ethical dimension of organizational management.

Chapter Five analyzes two of Luke's classic passages and in a *peculiar* and somewhat *heterodox* manner; thereby rendering it vulnerable to cross-examination. The first is where Jesus tells the *Parable of the Shrewd Manager*, whom he seems to praise, not so much for swindling his master but rather that having been expelled and unable to earn a living in any other way, he knew how to play his cards cunningly.

For Dyck, the key to the praise lies always from the view provided by his *hermeneutical glasses*- the disloyal administrator through whose actions is contributing to *reducing the gap between rich and poor* ... (!). Dyck himself acknowledges in a footnote the possibility that

a more direct interpretation could be posed to his contrived exegesis: “Jesus would like it if everyone was shrewd for Godly purposes like this manager was shrewd for his self-serving purposes” ... “However”, adds Dyck, “if Jesus had wanted to make this point, surely he could have done so in a less awkward manner” (p. 232). It is taken for granted, without adequate justification, that in this parable we are facing one of the so-called *ipssisima verba Domini*, and hence the reader may judge the strength of Dyck’s argument for themselves.

Chapter Six analyzes the *Parable of the Ten Pound* from Lc 19, 12–27. The story is as follows: Before leaving on a journey, a man gives ten pounds to each of his servants. Upon returning home and checking his accounts, he finds that the first of his managers has multiplied the initial sum entrusted to him and as a reward is given the governorship of ten cities. The second is likewise made the governor of five cities. But the third manager who had buried the money given to him and returns the same amount to his master is not given any rewards. On the contrary, his share is handed to the first manager.

Dyck points out how this passage has often been studied by those who want to integrate Biblical studies with management sciences, perhaps because its interpretation seems consistent with the praxis and theoretical *paradigm* of modern-day management. However, we come to a *very different conclusion from the usual one*, the latter being derived from the idea of diligence and corresponding recompense and honor for successful and efficient management. For Dyck, the true hero would be the third manager, because *he would not have wanted to enter the financial economy nor defend the use of money for exploitative acquisitive economic purposes*.

The above paragraphs illustrate the tone of the book, the lights and shadows that remain after it is read. I will dispense with questioning each of the remaining parts and chapter and allow you, the reader do to so. However, I will touch on aspects that are dealt with in the remaining four parts of the book.

Part III – is entitled: “*Action response: Performing a comprehensive examination of passages in Luke related to each of the three dimensions of the First-Century management lens*”. Part IV is dedicated to offering “*New way of seeing: Management, the Kingdom of God, Salvation, and the Holy Spirit*”. Chapter Ten focuses on 21 passages in which *The Kingdom of God* (KOG) is spoken of ... not without first making a *curious* comment that, instead of speaking of *The Kingdom of God* (KOG), it would be more appropriate to refer to it as “*the managerial character of God*” (!). Part V –Chapters 13–15- is entitled: “*Institutional change: A four-phase ‘how to’ process model for putting into practice management principles described in Luke*”. It may be deemed to have a practical character, since it unfolds in four steps –1° *Problem recognition*; 2° *Action response*; 3° *Changed way of seeing*; and 4° *Institutional change*- the process of implantation of the systems and structures of *The Kingdom of God* (KOG). Dyck applies this analytical process to the narrative pattern of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem. Finally, one could say of Part VI –Chapters 16 to 18- that it is somewhat heterogeneous in its conception. Possibly it could not have been otherwise, since it seeks “*Implications for Twenty-First century management theory and practice*”.

In any case, progressing through the book makes it clear that there are certain key concepts in Luke’s message that can have both theoretical and practical applications in 21<sup>st</sup>-century business management. To echo Dyke’s messages, first, that goods and services providers should respect people’s dignity. Second, that money should be utilized to nurture communities in line with the practices of sustenance economics, and external relationships should be characterized by benefaction. Moreover, it could be said that for Luke, the Kingdom of God is often enacted and manifested in organizations and that salvation often involves being freed from oppressive organizational practices. In all these processes, the Holy Spirit plays a key role in facilitating the development of this radical *oikos*. Finally,

there is a four-phase process model for changing from conventional management practices to the radical and countercultural ones proposed by Luke.

I will now propose a few points for discussion that I will outline briefly and leave for the reader to contemplate. For example, and without wishing to be too exhaustive, the following ten questions could be proposed as *caveat* for a creative and critical reading of the text: (1) Is the scheme -the *lens*, according to Dyck- on which the whole analytical approach to Luke's reading is based, well built, justified and appropriately founded? (2) Are not certain interpretations unfounded, excessively risky and somewhat contrived in order to make them fit one's interpretation? (3) Does the construction of the *lens* that supposedly allows us to see the literality of the Lucan text with first-century eyes and from which we are to extrapolate teachings for 21<sup>st</sup>-century managers, conflate different perspectives -Greek, Aristotelian on one hand; Jewish on the other? (4) Is not the exegesis of certain passages and *pericopes* of the Gospel sometimes prone to anachronisms? (5) Does this interpretation of Luke not overshadow *the historical Jesus*, as well as *the Christ of the faith*? (6) Are there certain implicit, quasi-axiomatic assumptions in the method of analysis? (7) Is it possible to respond to the *research question* raised at the beginning of the book? (8) Does Dyck fulfil his stated intention, that of covering the *gap* pointed out by Weber at the end of *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*? (9) Is the choice of St. Luke a good methodological criterion with regard to the *quantitative analysis of the terms* of economic nuance that appear in his Gospel? (10) Is the study of one of the *synoptic Gospels*, rather than the other books of the *New Testament* a suitable means for interpretation?

The *Christian New Testament*, which gives an account of the life, teaching, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, does indeed consist of four Gospels. Three of them are *synoptic* - those attributed to St. Matthew, St. Mark and St. Luke; that is to say, they narrate, with different nuances and undertones, Jesus' life, doctrine, miracles, passion, death, resurrection and ascension to heaven. They all follow a similar scheme: could they be printed in three simultaneous columns on the same page, given that the narrative structure is quite similar. The Gospel of St. John however, possesses a different tone, style and approach. According to biblical-exegetical studies, all the Gospels, especially the Synoptic ones, have a common antecedent, a source -*Quelle*, in German; and hence *Source Q*- that Mark would have used when he penned the first Gospel. Other writings and books make up the neo-testamentary canonical ensemble: The *Acts of the Apostles*, also attributed to Luke, where he gives an account of the first steps of the nascent Church and where we find *how the Jesus of history, a Jew of the time of Herod and Pilate, became the Messiah, the Christ of the faith, a true God to his believers*. We must also mention the letters of St. Paul that, by all indications, must be considered the first writings of the New Testament. The letters attributed to St. John, James, St. Peter, and the *Apocalypse* - that is deemed traditionally to have been written by St. John the Evangelist - complete the canon of the New Testament.

In short, Dyck's book has a tone that could be characterized as *quasi-axiomatic*, according to the *implicit* assumptions that it makes, the viewpoints that it assumes are good and valid, and the background of its study, in our opinion, *without sufficient justification*. This is undoubtedly, a crucial aspect of the hermeneutics of the book *Management and the Gospel. Luke's radical message for the First and Twenty-First Century*.

Luke's message is radical, not only for its first century context -e.g., role of women, adult children, slaves, acquisitive economics, patron-client relations- but because it is also applicable to the twenty-first century -e.g., role of women, widening gap between the rich and the poor, acquisitive economics, competitive advantage. "In short, Luke describes an alternative moral point of view to the materialistic-individualistic hallmarks that characterize the present status quo" (p. 194).

Does Dyck receive an answer to the enigmatic Weberian question that serves as the spark for his research? He appears to think so, and says: “Weber may well have welcomed how Luke’s radical message reintegrates the spiritual and the material” (p. 196) . . . *to escape the iron cage*.

Let the readers draw their own conclusions, but not before I reiterate the need for a calm and critical reading of such a stimulating book. To conclude, it is worth stressing that it is what it is, a book. It is a study that can – and must – adopt a literary genre different from that demanded in scientific papers for high-impact journals. It is precisely from books and monographs that one would expect new intuitions, new ideas and heterodox perspectives that are capable of challenging the *communis opinio* and mainstream theories of company and organizational administration, and the art of management.

José-Luis Fernández-Fernández  
*Iberdrola Chair for Economics and Business Ethics, Universidad Pontificia Comillas-  
ICADE, Madrid, Spain*

 [jlfernandez@icade.comillas.edu](mailto:jlfernandez@icade.comillas.edu)  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2344-7169>

© 2019 José-Luis Fernández-Fernández  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14766086.2019.1627732>

