



Being Human

2009, though now passed will likely be long associated with two key issues. One is the unfolding impact of the financial crisis or “credit-crunch” as it has come to be known and the other is the furore that developed around the issue of MP’s expenses. Although both are rooted in events much earlier, this was the year in which their impact began to really be felt. Repercussions have been many and varied - not least the fact that many attribute the election of the first ever MEP’s from the British National Party as a reaction against the more established parties’ handling of their own and the nation’s finances.

What seems to have particularly riled the British public is the apparent lack of repentance on the part of all those involved - MP’s have continually argued that claims for duck ponds and moat cleaning, while an obvious unnecessary extravagance were nonetheless “within the rules”. Meanwhile, having driven their institutions to the brink of disaster, left our endowments and savings to fall far short of target growth, needing a bail-out by the taxpayer and failing to pass on the benefits of reduced interest rates to the business sector, bankers still consider themselves to be worthy of bonuses that represent what most of us would struggle to earn in a decade!

This is of course a somewhat populist account, but the widespread response has been to call for greater and more robust regulation to prevent such things happening again. Politicians have been quick to oblige, already launching more stringent rules to control their expenses and promising to contain salaries and bonuses in the financial sector. This well intentioned response may well satisfy the demands of the masses, yet we might also ask whether it will ultimately exacerbate the very behaviour it is intended to curtail.

This may seem like a rather bizarre claim, but reflect again on the most common defence used by those who have been found wanting through these recent crises. The argument from many quarters has been that “*we did not break the rules*”. They are by no means alone in this appeal. The same well may be said by the footballer who falls to the ground after a reasonable but clumsy challenge, grabbing the chance of a penalty when they could easily have recovered their balance and allowed the game to continue; it is the argument used by the business owner who shifts assets into the name of a family member before declaring themselves bankrupt and avoiding their financial obligations to others. This is the line taken by the supplier who provides goods and services to the naïve and vulnerable at hugely inflated prices or the writer of the ambiguous small-print that locks people into seriously disadvantageous contracts and agreements. Our moral judgement it seems is increasingly determined not by a human instinct that something is right or wrong, or by reflecting on the benefit or harm of our actions to others but simply on whether or not they fall within a prescribed set of regulations.

When things go wrong we inevitably appeal to the rule-makers to devise a suitable raft of policies to prevent such things from ever happening again. But rule-makers have their limits - for one thing their impact and scope can often be limited through the codes and statutes by which they themselves are controlled; and they inevitably fail to see a potential loophole or anticipate a context in which their legislation may be applied to achieve the very opposite of what was originally intended. It is not long before another raft of tabloid headlines herald the spectacular failure of a regulatory system which seems to prescribe or permit a pattern of behaviour that defies all human reason and common sense.

In the final analysis, rules and regulations can only ever be an imperfect attempt to practically define and apply a deeper spirit and purpose to a particular context or operation. This is a fact which Christians themselves can often lose sight of - we frequently speak of the Ten Commandments as though they are some all-encompassing moral code for society, when in reality they are simply a contextual application of a far deeper invocation to "love the Lord your God with all your heart ... and your neighbour as yourself". These "commands" were never intended to be grudgingly adhered to as the basic means of community cohesion, or be continually scrutinised to find ways of getting around them - they defined the instinctive behaviour of a community deeply committed in relationship with a loving and gracious God.

These "deeper principles" are part and parcel of what it means to be human. We cannot create love, by prescribing a set of regulations or following a series of instructions; any attempt to produce a definitive code can only ever describe certain patterns of behaviour which would cause us to conclude that an individual is or is not displaying this emotion. Regulations therefore can only ever be completely effective if those who are subject to them are at the same time seeking to act and behave within that same spirit which the rules are seeking to define. And it is the role of human spirit that I would suggest is being increasingly regulated out of today's workplace. As decision making is more and more being controlled by the application of set criteria or by following a pre-determined matrix of clinical choices, so the capacity to apply human instinct and intuition diminishes. This in turn means that our collective endeavours rather than developing and honing those virtues, risk diminishing and undermining them.

It has to be recognised that adopting a more regulated approach has brought great advantages. Take the area of recruitment; as the speaker at our recent ICF Annual lecture reminded us, the introduction of the principle of equal opportunity was both welcome and long overdue in many employment sectors. And we would have to admit that without sufficiently robust legislation, and the means of demonstrating that its principles have been applied, it is likely that it would have failed to impact those areas where it was needed most. In such an environment it is pretty much unthinkable that the member of an appointment panel could argue "I just don't think this person would fit in here" or "There's something about this candidate that I really like". At one level this may have achieved greater fairness, but has it also in many contexts reduced the role of a recruitment panel to one that resembles the judges at a dance contest. A process of careful deliberation and reflection has largely evolved into aggregating their individual scores for technical merit, artistic impression etc. and awarding the post to the winner.

Society increasingly expects the right to hold the decisions of those in positions of responsibility up to scrutiny, and in such a context the application of a pre-defined decision process rather than human judgement becomes highly attractive for all parties. Responses like "I did what I thought best" or "I followed my instincts" tend to be considered highly suspect. Yet the corollary is that when the regulations fail to outlaw a particular action, it is deemed to be acceptable even when it flies in the face of our basic instincts of right and wrong, or the principles of straightforward common sense.

Of course we need regulation, but if we are truly to realise our potential as managers, producers, service-providers or whatever else our work might require, surely we also need the freedom to act as human beings. In fact there are times when the system needs us to do so. There is a growing realisation that when our financial systems ground to a halt towards the end of 2008, it was not the systems, structures or procedures that broke down, but that basic human attribute of trust on which they all depended.

We can justifiably argue that such things are as much a consequence of de-regulation as they are of over-regulation, and as Christians we might cite that basic doctrine human fallenness as lying at the heart of all of this. Yet it does seem we need to re-discover the workplace as a context where human responsibility is nurtured and valued alongside corporate policy; where our obligations to one another can be morally and not just contractually defined.