BOOK:

FAITH TRADITIONS AND SUSTAINABILITY: NEW VIEWS & PRACTICES FOR ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

CHAPTER:

Family firms: The impact of a Christian perspective on environmental protection and sustainability practices

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ABSTRACT

We focus on sustainability and a Christian perspective in family firms, the world's most common form of business. Based on a review of the literature, we argue that a Christian perspective is a key factor in our understanding of sustainability and business operations. We contend that sustainability in business is impacted by the personal values of family firm owners and their employees. Scholars have found evidence of the relevance of religious faith in decision-making processes of family firm owners. Thus, we explore and theorize how Christian principles influence the sustainability efforts of family firms. We offer a model that attends to our main theoretical question and interrogates how sustainability, influenced by a Christian perspective, is expressed in the context of family firms.

Keywords: sustainability; family business; family firm; Christian; stewardship

INTRODUCTION

While there is no single definition of sustainability, it broadly relates to "enduring into the long term future … [and] to systems and processes that are able to operate and persist on their own over long periods of time" (Robertson, 2017, p. 3). Management scholars agree that sustainability refers to how firms balance environmental integrity, social equity, and economic prosperity to secure intergenerational equity (Bansal & DesJardine, 2014). Compound macro- and micro-environmental fluctuations affecting firms have shaped accelerated economic, social, technological, and political changes. As a result, recent studies show that current socio-ecological and economic challenges are multifaceted and existential threats to society at large (Gunton et al., 2022).

Shifting environmental factors have garnered significant firm challenges that require firm management and adaptation to assure success. While the management literature has begun to investigate the nature of these challenges (Adger et al, 2005; Maniora, 2018), further research is needed to address how firms should respond to factors like environmental degradation and climate change and how shifts in organizational culture can be part of this process (Tyler et al., 2020). Scholars have also begun investigating the underlying mechanisms, including those that draw from a religious faith (Hoffman & Sandelands, 2005), which allow organizations to address environmental concerns under conditions of uncertainty (Muller et al., 2022).

An integral part of everyday operations is attending to trends in the external environment (Wilkinson et al., 2001). To broaden our knowledge of how these challenges are being addressed, recent studies have called for further exploration of family firms—the most common form of business in the world today that intertwines family and firm objectives over time (Howorth & Robinson, 2020). Family firms are ubiquitous and heterogeneous (Memili & Dibrell, 2019), existing and surviving in diverse contexts and guises. They are also the heartbeat of the global economy, ranging from small corner shops in local towns and cities to multinational business conglomerates and groups (Rautiainen et al., 2019).

Since family firms participate in all industry sectors (Baù et al., 2021; Sharma & Sharma, 2021), they have had—and continue to have—a key role in the diverse concerns of sustainability. Their embeddedness, strong visibility, and reputation are not only critical levers as they influence their local communities (Shainaz & Gomez-Mejia, 2021) but also key factors in our understanding of their complex relationship with the environment.

Family firms operate in multiple industries and provide a broad array of products. For example, Walmart offers products ranging from groceries to car maintenance and everyday fashion to technology. These products can create substantial amounts of pollution and industrial waste through manufacturing processes, transportation of raw goods, packaging materials, and distribution channels (Soppelsa et al., 2021). To enhance efficiency and productivity, some family firms might introduce harmful chemicals and processes to the environment (Cousins et al., 2019). For example, in the fashion industry, industrial waste can be toxic to the natural world, as well as human life, and production and associated supply chains account for 10% of the global carbon emissions (Brewer, 2019). An inevitable yet unfortunate corollary is that little is known about how family firms might successfully address these environmental concerns.

While diverse theoretical perspectives have been used to elucidate the emergence, development, and survival of family firms (Discua Cruz & Basco, 2018), it is only recently that studies have revealed how and why religious beliefs influence this form of business (Astrachan et al., 2020; Cater & Alderson, in press; Sorenson & Milbrandt, 2022). Whilst recent studies call for a better understanding of the underlying rationales motivating religious individuals to build their ventures (Litz, 2013; Barbera et al., 2020; Rietveld & Hoogendoorn, 2021) and ensure their survival over time (Burton et al., 2022), there is a paucity of research addressing how family firms—upholding a particular religious perspective—address sustainability. In this chapter, we contribute to our understanding of how Christian family firms approach sustainability.

We contend that, in the context of family firms grounded in a Christian perspective, sustainability may entail rethinking business operations (Ewest, 2018). These firms have endured in diverse societies and can be found in diverse industries, including food retailers and technical services (Carradus et al., 2020; Cater & Alderson, in press; Discua Cruz, 2013; Wong et al., 2018). Whilst people may be surprised to learn that some of the largest corporations are family-owned firms, such as IKEA, Walmart, and Samsung, other family firms may be well—or less well—known for their long-standing Christian principles and heritage (Cathy, 2007; Higginson & Robertshaw, 2017; Malloch, 2008; Redmer, 2008). Christian principles not only inform assumptions about how systems work (e.g., Chick-fil-a; see Robinson, 2019) but also affect the day-to-day decision-making processes of business leaders, such as how to manufacture and market healthy foods. The central premise of a Christian sustainability perspective is that leaders choose to serve God first and foremost. This perspective can shape distinctive approaches to sustainability (Cafferky, 2012; Wong et al., 2018) while permeating organizational culture with ethical, faith-based belief systems (Weber, 1905/1958, foreword by Tawney). For example, leaders of Christian family firms may support their communities (Hayes & Robinson, 2011) through charity, problem-solving interventions, and increased awareness of place (Seifert & Shaw, 2013).

We propose a model that addresses our main theoretical question: How is sustainability, influenced by a Christian perspective, expressed in the context of family firms? Our primary focus is thus an understanding of how underlying Christian principles inform family firms as they engage in sustainability efforts in rapidly changing environments.

CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND SUSTAINABILITY

Extant research has identified a relationship between Christianity and sustainability, suggesting that theoretical perspectives can be useful in revealing the impact of Christian perspectives (Boyd, 1999; Cafferky, 2015; Cundill, 2021; Spence & Brown, 2018). Focusing on Christianity as a relevant influence within sustainability efforts is essential in advancing our understanding of Christian principles and how they may be related to decision-making processes of the owner-managers of family firms (Ibrahim et al., 2008; Werner, 2008). For these leaders, a Christian perspective may lead them to choose sustainability practices that they know family firm members are willing to uphold over time (Muller et al., 2022).

However, a Christian perspective has also been criticized for being an ideology that ultimately leads to environmental degradation (Eckberg & Blocker, 1989; White, 1967). For example, the history of environmental exploitation in the West is linked with some Christian institutions. Such assumptions of the Christian faith, including a lack of interest in environmental concerns, emerged in the 1970s and 1980s (Hitzhusen, 2007). As a result, scholars have recently called for further research acknowledging and addressing one of the most significant challenges in the study of sustainability and family firms—the assumption that sustainability decisions by leaders of Christian family firms are nonetheless religion-neutral (Discua Cruz, 2018, 2020).

Christianity and Imago Dei

Christianity is considered one of the major world religions (Woodhead, 2004), broadly conceptualized as the good news concerning the historical figure of Jesus Christ of Nazareth (Gooding & Lennox, 2014). Jesus Christ is understood as engendering that good news: his life (i.e., what he did, taught, and claimed), his death (i.e., what it accomplished), and his resurrection (i.e. what it demonstrated – i.e., that his claims were true). At the heart of the Christian faith are two historical facts: as a human, Jesus Christ is understood as being born of the royal lineage of David, and, as the Son of God, he is known for his miracles, his crucifixion, and his ultimate resurrection from the dead (Rom 1:1-4; also see Gooding & Lennox, 2014, p. 2). According to Smart (1971), the focal point of Christianity is the resurrection, good news that justifies Jesus Christ's authority—during and after his ministry—and that releases a force within his followers to not only promulgate the Christian faith but also permeate all aspects of life. Thirty years following his crucifixion, the Gospels were written to highlight the teachings of Jesus Christ, thus establishing the roots of the Christian faith.

The basic Christian principle that directly relates to sustainability is the existence of God revealed by Scripture (Nash, 1992, p. 52). The ultimate Christian authority is thus the Bible, and any decision or action related to sustainability will be impacted by insights drawn from Scripture (Nash, 1992). While the Bible has much to impart concerning sustainability, it is often taken for granted or overlooked. One of the most notable features of the teachings of Jesus Christ is the parables, concrete illustrations of messages to his followers (i.e., concerning ethical, societal, and business matters), as well as the nature of the relationship between man and God, the relationship between man and other human beings, and the kingdom of God (Smart, 1971, p. 407).

In the centuries that followed, the Christian vernacular, values, and beliefs permeated the culture and the business activities in regions where it was disseminated (Woodhead, 2004). In the western world, the influence of Christianity in business is apparent since Christianity does not deny the importance of business nor shy away from enterprise (Rossouw, 1994). However, research investigating the influence of Christian principles and beliefs at the individual and firm-level of analysis has found mixed results: in some countries, its influence is part of the fabric of legal practices (i.e. US), while in others, including Northern Europe and Asia, influence is often underplayed or rejected (Jiang et al., 2015; Koiranen, 2002).

A Christian perspective of the environment and sustainability first appears in Genesis 1, where one of the most salient arguments can be found:

> So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (Gen 1:27-28)

This Christian perspective accounts for human dominion over God's creation; however, it also calls for human care for the environment (Cafferky, 2012). Scholars have contended that the words "subdue" and "dominion" do not grant permission to deplete any part of God's creation (Cafferky, 2012; Hitzhusen, 2007). Whilst subduing the earth involves harnessing the power of various resources on earth through advances in science and technology, dominion does not presume a right to abuse or misuse these resources (Hitzhusen, 2007; White, 1987). God's creation is meant for human use, and defacing, abusing, and destroying the environment is thus considered an act against God. Since air, water, land, plants, and animals are all God's creation and thus good (Gen 1:4-31), humans are called to sustain and preserve all—living in peace, working towards justice, and respecting the natural environment to ensure that it is renewed and sustained. Dominion is not interpreted as the authority to deplete God's creation but rather as the mandate to develop wisdom and the ability to care for it. In Scripture, various verses explicate the notion of dominion: Ps 24:1-2, Exod 19:5-6, Lev 25:23, Ps 50:9-12, Hag 2:8, Jas 3:7, and Deut 11:10-15. Thus, human decisions to destroy or provide care for all of God's creation, from ecosystems to the climate, are relevant and essential themes for scholarly debate.

In addition to human dominion over God's creation, another fundamental principle of a Christian perspective concerns God revealed in Creation. From the outset of the Scriptures, God is presented as the sovereign creator of all things, with Gen 1:26-27 stating that God created man in his own image (i.e., from the Latin term *imago Dei*). Grudem (1994) contended that *imago Dei* could be interpreted as similar yet not identical: “let us make man to be like us and to represent us” (p. 568). While designing his image-bearers, God also stipulated the responsibilities to fulfill the given charge to us as his image-bearers, the “actions that were morally good in the light of our telos (i.e., purpose) as creatures in Christ” (Lett, 2019). Since humanity represents God when working with and cultivating God’s creation for the benefit of the whole of creation, God’s purposeful plan also requires focused generosity (Liebengood, 2015), stewardship, and responsible use of resources and capabilities (Bradley, 2020).

The principle of responsibility and the precept of accountability are often used interchangeably. However, the Biblical practice of accountability offers an additional and valuable layer of meaning because it demonstrates that Christians must *give an account* of their decisions and actions (Gates & Steane, 2008), first to God and then to man. Responsibility and accountability thus underpin transparency, which is often associated with ethical practices.

Christianity and Sustainability

Early Christian literature highlighted that God created the world *ex nihilo* [from nothing], a critical metaphysical tenet of the Christian worldview: the world is not a purposeless machine but rather a God-ordained order (Nash, 1992). As a result, Christians have an inherent, natural relationship with the environment because God loves and sustains his creation, and Christians also understand creation as having inherent, divine value because it is God’s handiwork. Thus, the relationship that Christians have with God’s creation must also include actions of care to maintain its natural integrity. Cafferky (2012, p. 145) underscored that sin has not only distorted our relationship with each other but also with the natural environment, leading to ecological imbalances stemming from greed-fueled actions. Resources are thus consumed for economic gain, leaving the earth weakened and challenged as it seeks to heal itself. Following the biblical text of Rom 8:18-27, readers are informed about what has occurred to the environment and what ramifications this has for the future.

Hoffman and Sandelands (2005) also argued that, based on the parables of Jesus Christ (e.g., “Sermon on the Mount”; see Matt 6:26-6:30), aspects related to the environment could act as a model for how to live within God’s plan. Throughout the sermons and parables of Jesus Christ, metaphors and images of nature (e.g., birds, flowers, mustard seeds, sheep, shepherds, fish, fishermen, soil, planting, harvesting, grain, wheat, trees, and springs of water) convey moral teachings. Hoffman and Sandelands (2005) argued that this approach supports the Christian worldview whereby God “created man and nature on the same plan, each in relation to the other” (Hoffman & Sandelands, 2005, p. 152).

Scholars argue that Christianity’s emphasis on science and technology—a contributor to the current environmental crisis—and the Bible’s seeming justification not only remains misunderstood within the literature but also requires acknowledgment (Whitney, 2015). The Bible suggests that humans have the freedom to interact with the environment if this freedom is not used as a license to destroy (Cafferky, 2012). One example of how physical spaces can be sustained by diverse actors, including business, is chronicled in the book of Numbers (i.e., Num 35:2-5). Here, the amount of pasture a town should have to maintain its sustainability is described, showing how enterprises should supply products to a city to support and preserve both its economic well-being and ecological growth (Milgrom, 1982). The remains of such enterprises, found in recent excavations, suggest that family firms influence the sustainable development of community and place (Guijarro, 1997).

Along with exercising dominion over God’s creation comes the obligation of stewardship. While humans are challenged to act as trustees of God’s creation, using it for their benefit, there is also the expectation that humans are to act responsibly, with the knowledge that they are accountable to God (Wong & Rae, 2011). The obligation of stewardship should thus be also addressed when investigating the relationships between family firms, sustainability, and a Christian perspective.

FAMILY FIRMS AND SUSTAINABILITY

Family firms have not gone unnoticed when sustainability and environmental practices have been questioned (Muller et al., 2022). Since family firms of all sizes in various industries are increasingly judged on how they impact the environment, they are also increasingly motivated to implement sustainability practices, such as recycling materials and choosing sustainable suppliers.

Mitigating risk in the natural environment while creating social value over the short and long term (Borga et al., 2009; Slawinski & Bansal, 2015) can be aligned with financial performance goals. Motivations to mitigate such risks stem from both external pressures, such as climate change and industry groups and internal pressures, such as managerial values and increasing operational efficiencies (Cavalcanti Junqueira, 2021; Muller et al., 2022; Tyler et al., 2020). Family firms choosing to implement sustainable practices may gain competitive advantages by leveraging sustainability for cost advantages or to differentiate from larger competitors (Discua Cruz et al., 2020). For example, since consumers demand environmentally conscious brands now more than ever, the decision to create sustainable brands and products can lead to higher brand equity (Spielmann et al., 2021).

With limited resources, family firms can struggle in the short term to manage costly operations, equipment, and personnel changes (Campopiano et al., 2020). Short-term costs can thus steer decision-making processes of the leaders of family firms in adverse directions. Changes required for sustainable operations may be viewed as unsound strategic choices because they may also negatively impact value creation over the long term (Williamson et al., 2006). However, rising environmental concerns have opened timely discussions and highlighted practical implications for members of family firms and the communities that they serve (Williams & Schaefer, 2013). As new insights into global challenges are uncovered, family firms closely connected to the natural environment, including those in agricultural (e.g., food production and wineries) and forestry industries (Alsos et al., 2011), are induced to take a closer look and to reflect upon their involvement and motivations to embrace environmental protection and sustainable solutions.

Recent findings suggest that family firms differ from other enterprises in terms of their underlying motivations, objectives, and orientations, which positions these businesses, and their commitment to sustainability, as relevant contexts for study (Westhead & Howorth, 2007). Family firm sustainability practices are often linked to efforts that assure family continuity by nurturing a healthy organization for future generations (Delmas & Gergaud, 2014). These practices may also include committing time and resources (i.e., financial and human) to nurture long-term relationships within the firm and with the broader community (Fitzgerald et al., 2010). Sustainability may thus be viewed as a collective undertaking, with family firms catering to not only the needs of the immediate family but also the concerns of a diverse set of actors and stakeholders (Olson et al., 2003). Early studies have revealed that many family firms rely on dialogue and articulation of their approaches in line with the natural features of their operating places (Roscoe et al., 2013).

Since many family firms are embedded in diverse places and are influenced by natural features, their actions can bring distinctiveness to their localities and surrounding environment (Baù et al., 2021). For example, rural areas, which tend to harbor family firms, have "location-specific advantages," including natural, social, cultural, and historical characteristics that have developed over time (Cortez Arias & Discua Cruz, 2018). Since these unique features are place-specific, and no place is made up of the same mix of resources, regional advantages can thus offer unique opportunities for family firms to create value and adopt sustainable practices

(Korsgaard et al., 2015). As a result, we cannot underestimate the power of family firms to act alongside others to contribute to community sustainability.

Several studies have identified that the long-term orientation of family firms leads to activities that create value not only for the family firms but also for the benefit of their communities, both economically and socially. Since family firms are thus frequently embedded in their communities, it is essential that research addresses the inherent sustainability concerns of the areas in which they operate (Lumpkin & Brigham, 2011; Woodfield et al., 2017). Studies suggest that family firm communities are firmly embedded in the local context, as evidenced by the strong relationships between family start-ups, community attitudes, and pre-existing small family firms (Bird & Wennberg, 2014). More recently, studies have also suggested that the sustainability practices of family firms may have a stronger relationship to religious beliefs than previously understood (Discua Cruz, 2020). Examples, such as the H-E-B Corporation (formerly the Howard E. Butt Grocery Company), merit further exploration. H-E-B is committed to sustainability, claiming responsibility "to take care of the communities where [they] live and work" (H-E-B, 2022). In part, this claim is supported by their continued commitment to providing environmental and conservation grants for multiple endeavors (H-E-B, 2022).

Family Firms, Sustainability, and Christianity

A fundamental challenge in investigating businesses associated with Christian principles is that there are no official databases of Christian firms (Ibrahim & Angelidis, 2005). However, there is evidence that some family firms do label themselves as "Christian" (Discua Cruz, 2013), although these family firms might demonstrate varying levels of commitment and integration with Christian principles (Discua Cruz, 2013). While this type of research is not straightforward, there is a gap in our understanding of how a Christian perspective can inform the sustainability practices of family firms.

Research has shown that a family firm's strongly upheld values and beliefs can influence sustainability practices (Discua Cruz, 2015, 2018). Such values, which may be closely associated with Christian principles, can influence which products, markets, and business opportunities are evaluated, deemed valuable, and eventually pursued by family firms (Discua Cruz, 2015). Thus, the presence or absence of religious beliefs can influence how family firms approach sustainability (Carradus et al., 2020; Discua Cruz, 2020). To date, the literature has offered some relevant theoretical insights on this topic, striking a balance between fundamental and novel concepts (Hamilton et al., 2017).

While Christian principles can influence firm approaches to sustainability and ethical decision-making, how Christian principles actually influence organizations is a complex process (Weaver & Agle, 2002). For example, tensions may surface when integrating a Christian perspective with sustainability approaches (Nash, 1994; Nash & McLennan, 2001). In a study of the practices and values of 85 evangelical Christian CEOs, Nash (1994) found several further tensions: “love of God vs. profit,” “family and work,” “charity and wealth,” and “humility and ego.” More recently, Nash and McLennan (2001) also revealed that communication voids and conflicts within business and religious communities accentuate these types of tensions, which are associated with different types of leaders and the varying degrees to which they incorporate Christian principles as they manage sustainability issues. While some family firm owners/managers may showcase their interpretation of the Christian faith in their approach to sustainability, others may act as clandestine agents. Further, some non-Christian family firms may also follow Christian principles in their sustainability approach.

Prior studies show that family firm heterogeneity is related to the values of founders or incumbents (Aronoff, 2004; Distelberg & Sorenson, 2009). The founder's values are often palpable and visible in newly created or acquired family firms. Since founders often stay in the family firm for a substantial part of their life, they have a greater chance of shaping and transmitting their values and beliefs to the firm (García-Álvarez & López-Sintas, 2001). Family or non-family successors leading the firm may choose to uphold, complement, or remove instilled Christian principles (Discua Cruz, 2015). There is thus excellent potential for conceptual and empirical studies to explore how Christian principles influence sustainability in family firms.

Family firm founders and incumbents that interweave their Christian faith into their approach to sustainability may engage in diverse forms of integration (Discua Cruz, 2013). Drawing from the conceptual framework of Niebuhr (1951), Discua Cruz (2013) identified five different ways in how Christians family firms balance Christian and cultural values: (1) Christ against family businesses (i.e., Christ is viewed as a challenge, an either-or decision for those involved in family businesses); (2) Christ of family businesses (i.e., Christian principles and values are fundamentally aligned with family business practices); (3) Christ above family business (i.e., Christ is the Christ of family businesses, but He is also above family businesses because His values are above the values of the world); (4) Christ and family businesses in paradox (i.e., Christians leading family businesses are citizens of two worlds that are at odds with each other, which demands that they separate the things of God from the things of the world); and (5) Christ the transformer of the family businesses (i.e., Christians are most concerned with the renewal of family businesses through a process that brings them into alignment with Christian principles). The classifications of Discua Cruz (2013) suggest that leaders of family firms, who profess the Christian faith, may gradually guide their firms to any point along this continuum, which can then influence how they develop the relationship between their family firms and sustainability.

As governance is closely related to sustainability, Solomon (2004) analyzed six family firms from a corporate governance perspective to understand how Christianity influenced legal and environmental compliance, products/services, employee satisfaction, and charitable giving. Solomon (2004) found that the executives leading these firms either followed: (1) a low-key approach, in which Christian life and business spheres were separated; (2) a preacher-style approach, in which Christian values were woven into business, with the aim of having non-Christian stakeholders embrace Christianity; or (3) a servant-stewardship approach, in which executives placed stakeholders first in their approach to business. These three approaches incorporate a sense of accountability for others, allowing Christian family firm leaders to rethink the waste their businesses produce. The findings of Solomon (2004) also showed that faith integration could positively influence organizations and be sustained over time.

Non-family Christian leaders may also influence sustainability decisions in non-Christian family firms (Discua Cruz, 2015). Non-Christian family firms that incorporate biblical insights in business activities through managers and/or influential stakeholders may also experience a transformation in the values that guide the organization (Discua Cruz, 2015). Christian principles and values may be unconsciously woven into non-Christian firms through new leaders who are believers in Christ (e.g., Christian successors or appointed leaders). These individuals may then impact how Christian principles are integrated within business activities and which approach to sustainability is taken. Conversely, some family firms founded on Christian principles may eventually be transformed into secular organizations by those who lead or manage the firms and take diverse approaches to sustainability practices. Overall, studies that have addressed sustainability within family firms show that leaders can influence environmental decision-making and practices (Sharma, 2012).

A Christian perspective of sustainability in family firms can prompt long-term approaches and multifaceted relationships (Cafferky, 2012, 2015). These distinctions are better understood when we explore contexts where a Christian approach influences sustainability. These contexts are characterized by the wise use of natural resources and the care and preservation of the planet. Christian values can encourage leaders of family firms to both act as stewards of God's creation and demonstrate environmental responsibility.

Recent examples of family firms that have integrated a Christian perspective in their sustainability efforts can be found in several countries worldwide. Zigarelli (2019) found that some family firms, such as Tom's of Maine, Cardone Industries, and Herman Miller, not only link a Christian perspective with sustainability but also frame this relationship within their products—ones that create a better world, protect the planet, and value the care of God's creation. Overall, these family firms not only respect God's creation but also allow profit gains so that they can remain viable over the long term (Ruddell, 2014). These firms use natural resources as efficiently as possible and typically have net-zero goals.

A STEWARDSHIP PERSPECTIVE

While several theoretical lenses can help frame the integration of religious beliefs in business organizations (Miller & Ewest, 2015), recent studies have highlighted the relevance of mainstream perspectives in family firms—particularly a stewardship perspective (Le Breton-Miller & Miller, 2018)—when elucidating the influence of Christian principles (Wong et al., 2018; Discua Cruz, 2018). Some theoretical perspectives of family firms focus on the misalignment of objectives between owners and employees (Chua et al., 2003), while others highlight the relevance of stewards and stewardship.

In the field of management, stewardship is broadly defined as "the attitudes and behaviors that place the long-term best interests of a group ahead of personal goals that serve an individual's self-interest" (Hernandez, 2008, p. 122). Stewardship theory thus focuses on the actions of individuals who take on a stewardship role in family firms and on the behaviors of owners and employees when objectives and goals are aligned (Davis et al., 2010). Hernandez (2008) contended that stewardship is created through social exchanges between family business owners and employees and often across generations.

Stewardship theory is relevant to sustainability and Christianity since it also has a biblical foundation (Discua Cruz, 2015). Amidst contemporary ecological crises, family firms that hold Christian traditions and practices can be appropriately rooted in a historical past and the Scriptures (Discua Cruz 2015, 2018). For example, the Bible calls for stewardship of the land and the search for *shalom*, the Hebrew word meaning "peace." According to Wolterstorff and Joldersma (2004), *shalom* also means assembling, aligning, and cultivating an appropriate relationship with God, other humans, nature, and oneself (i.e., in that order). There is also a partaking element in *shalom*: man is an actor and contributor in bringing about *shalom* (Sider, 2020). Beyond the precepts of peace and justice interwoven into the meaning of *shalom*, this word also relates to the practice of responsibility and accountability for the community and the environment. Christians are therefore encouraged to pursue sustainable practices due to the value placed on caring for and preserving God's creation: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to *work* it and *take care of* it [emphasis added]" (Gen 2:15).

The Hebrew words for "work" and "take care of" may also be translated as "serve" and "preserve" (Akram & Rashid, 2020; Bradley, 2020; Geneva College, n.d.), thus emphasizing that the word *shalom*, is a classification of priorities leveraging potential benefits for communities in which family firms operate (Wolterstorff & Joldersma, 2004). Seeking *shalom*, therefore, implies that family firms strengthen positive relationships with diverse stakeholders while guarding the well-being of the places where they dwell and thrive (Cafferky, 2012).

From a Christian perspective, stewardship goes beyond guardianship, as it should encourage applying helpful business tools, acumen, skills, and expertise. Following a stewardship perspective, Christian principles charge owners of family firms to be diligent and wise investors with what has been entrusted to them, both for their welfare and for those who work with them (Discua Cruz, 2018). The goal is to safeguard existing skills and resources and put them to good use in the organization for the benefit of all. Liang (2011) argues that employees, acting as stewards in family firms, should: (1) serve the best interests of owners over the long term; (2) maximize the actual worth of entrusted resources; (3) save strategically for a better, albeit uncertain, future; and (4) invest in relationships and build equity as shrewd counsels and trusted executors of the strategic decisions of the owners. Discua Cruz (2015) highlights that leaders of Christian family firms sometimes support rationales for stewardship by relying on biblical narratives, such as the parable of the talents (Matt 25:14-30) and the portrayal of ideal characters (Genesis 39; 41; 47).

The influence of Christian principles on sustainability within family firms may impact how leaders approach sustainability practices, that is, through the eyes of faith. For example, when scanning the external environment for opportunities to address environmental concerns, Christian leaders may evaluate opportunities, for both business and family objectives, according to the Christian faith. Christian leaders may also evaluate opportunities beyond straightforward economic perspectives and instead incorporate evaluations of how likely an opportunity will make it more or less difficult to remain faithful to one’s beliefs and care for God’s creation (Cafferky, 2012).

Family objectives and rationales shaped by a Christian perspective can influence risk-taking behavior and innovation (Discua Cruz, 2015). Risks may increase when economic analyses of market and industry structures do not include value constraints as the basis for developing strategic decisions. As a result, leaders of Christian family firms engaging in certain environmental practices might be perceived as dishonest. Hence, these individuals might try to identify, evaluate, and pursue (or reject) opportunities based on their adherence to Christian principles (Discua Cruz, 2018).

Some leaders of Christian family firms may reject the introduction of products whose production processes or related marketing approaches may work against Christian principles related to sustainability (Paterson et al., 2013). When family members evaluate a new international market, similar rejections may result when practices in the new market are unethical or against founding Christian principles (Wong et al., 2018). Thus, the sustainability of family firms may also be impacted by Christian principles that shape how practices are identified, evaluated, pursued, and introduced.

For some leaders of family firms, Christian principles can constrain available alternatives, making some decisions off-limits when change is needed in areas related to the environment (Cafferky, 2012). Decisions to pursue or not pursue short-term gains can be impacted by long-term obligations to stakeholders, such as employees, customers, suppliers, and society, and how certain decisions could affect the environment. For example, long-term thinking may include an unwillingness to invest capital in specific industries that are perceived as producing “bad products.” A commitment to maintaining moral relationships over the long term (Fitzgerald et al., 2010) can also limit the vision of what companies can become in the future. Against this backdrop, leaders of Christian family firms may evaluate the success of their organizations and the achievement of their strategic goals in terms of their organizational missions. If given the opportunity, leaders may also subordinate organizational goals while amplifying Christian principles that underpin the formation and success of family firms (Cafferky, 2012). Achieving above-average economic returns can be a goal for Christian leaders that can be supported in times of crisis without compromising Christian principles related to the environment (Cathy, 2007; Zigarelli, 2019).

From an economic standpoint, stewardship focuses on “financial assets, physical facilities, products and services, systems, and processes” to benefit several generations (McCuddy & Pirie, 2007, p. 962). Thus, a Christian stewardship perspective calls for those working in family firms to go beyond guarding assets for firm sustainability in times of crisis and extend this view to the immediate environment and related stakeholders. In adverse times, stewardship involves a “balancing of interests,” involving a responsibility to God and one’s fellow man (Rossouw, 1994). Leaders of Christian family firms might look at these demands from a Christian perspective (Discua Cruz, 2018). A Christian perspective in times of crisis follows the principle of accountability, which is reflected in the level of integration of Christian principles in business (Cafferky, 2012). According to Discua Cruz (2015), biblical teachings underscore the communal and relational nature of accountability, upon which owners and employees of family firms may often rely when addressing sustainability concerns (Deut 20:19; 1 Chr 29:1; Ps 24:1-2; Ps 95:3-5; Exod 23:10-11).

When entrepreneurial leaders integrate Christian principles in their decision-making processes during times of crisis, related traditional yet successful cultural patterns may help family firms overcome diverse challenges, including environmental ones. For example, H-E-B provides training to its workforce to address the annual season of severe weather in Texas and follows sustainable practices that support the environment and the communities they serve. Since H-E-B's desire to serve is grounded in Christian traditions and the desire for excellence, Christian principles *in business* become a meaningful guide *for business* (Discua Cruz, 2018). Rather than exiting a problematic industry as an easy way out, leaders of Christian family firms may choose to improve the practices of their industry in support of the environment. As stewards, they may procure the best ecological solutions for the environment in which they operate while exercising careful responsibility for God's creation (Parish, 2022).

A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE OF SUSTAINABILITY IN FAMILY FIRMS

Based on the works of Discua Cruz (2013, 2015, 2018), Cafferky (2012), and Wong and Rae (2011), Figure 1 presents our model of a Christian perspective of stewardship-based environmental protection and sustainability practices in family firms. First, the activities of Christian family firms are supported by natural resources from God's creation. While the Scriptures encourage the responsible use of resources to support the production of services and products for the betterment of humanity, Christian family firms must balance responsible use with environmental care. Second, environmental care should include a broader, transformative mission whereby existing products and processes are made less harmful. For example, some Christian family firms, such as Parts Life, Inc., already develop eco-effective products that create new materials and processes. The skills and knowledge of leaders and employees are put to work for the benefit of the company and the environment, engaging a cyclical approach as much as possible. Waste is a cost; however, repurposed or eliminated waste can be transformed into a financial return. In this context, leaders in Christian family firms must find solutions to environmental problems, which demands stronger links between practitioners, policymakers, and researchers.

For instance, Herman Miller (2003) has revised their manufacturing processes through a "design for environment," implementing environmentally responsible concepts in the manufacturing cycle, acquiring better materials, and optimizing supply chains. As a result, Herman Miller not only produces products from natural resources that can serve their business but also supports a reclamation process that brings discarded materials back into the product lifecycle with minimal waste and ecological impact. Some byproducts previously discarded or sent to landfills are now repurposed or form the inspiration for new ideas and products, generating new lines of business with an environmental view.

The transformation of existing natural resources must develop alongside an approach for restoration. Consistent with broader biblical themes of the relationship between humans and the environment (e.g., Gen 2:15), our model reveals that the relationship between Christian family firms and the environment is reciprocal. Based on Cafferky (2012, p.145) and Hoffman and Sandelands (2005), our model also reveals that a Christian-centered view of the environment results in six interrelated dimensions related to the sustainability of Christian family firms: Humility, Respect, Selflessness, Moderation, Mindfulness, and Responsibility.

Table 1, illustrates our six dimensions of a Christian-centered view of the environment with implications for Christian family firms.

Table 1. Dimensions of a Christian-centered view of the environment: Implications for Christian family firms

Dimensions	Description	Implications for Christian family firms
Humility	Humility is a central tenet of a Christian perspective. There is an omnipotent and inscrutable God before man and before nature, which highlights significant limitations to man's knowledge and actions. Man's power to harness the environment is, thus, also limited.	The multifaceted issues in the natural environment are poorly understood, such as the capacity to provide the resources people need while addressing the pollution humans create. Leaders of Christian family firms should thus take steps to avoid the temptation to discredit the needs of diverse stakeholders who are concerned about the environment or who need help dealing with environmental issues. Lacking knowledge of the impact of human actions compels the practice of precautionary principles and prudence. For example, Thistly & Twig, a florist shop in Morganton, North Carolina (USA), shows significant consideration for the local rural economy and community. They enjoy working exclusively with local farmers to source seasonal blooms. https://www.thistleandtwigflowers.com/
Respect	Respect is required if we show humility towards each other and the earth, following the expectations of God. The environment has divine value for everyone.	Leaders of Christian family firms should produce products and services that remind people that the earth was not created for humans alone but rather for humans and nature to live in a respectful balance. Resources should regard our respect for the environment in the light of how it can be managed as stewards. Products that promote the depletion of resources solely for personal pleasure rather than reflect a stewardship role should be avoided (e.g., forest management). For example, Sidetracked Brewery, based in Morganton, North Carolina (USA), aims to better serve its small-town community by providing sustainably-sourced, world-class craft beer in a community gathering place. https://www.sidetrackedbrew.com/community

Dimensions	Description	Implications for Christian family firms
Selflessness	Christians should limit desires and make sacrifices if they respect the earth and the God who created it—especially in cases when the actions of individuals can negatively impact the environment.	Leaders of Christian family firms should reduce the impact they have on earth. Every new product or service should be checked for potential threats against nature and/or man, which would constitute a form of disrespect for what God has made. This perspective can be observed in CSR practices, initiatives that encourage care for others, and steward rather than agent organizational behavior (e.g., Cardone Industries; see Redmer, 2008). For example, Interstate Batteries, based in Dallas, Texas (USA), serves their communities by honoring a general concern for the environment. They have specific policies on battery safety and responsible recycling practices. They have developed a green standard recycling program that reaches out to organizations and individuals. https://www.interstatebatteries.com/recycling
Moderation	Christians should guide others to use only what is needed from the environment. A fundamental teaching of Christianity emphasizes limiting the earth's resources, tempering tendencies for materialism and consumption, and providing checks to economic growth that threatens the environment (Wong & Rae, 2011, p. 233).	By challenging the use of the earth's resources, such as calling for fewer virgin materials and less waste disposal, leaders of Christian family firms should stand in stark contrast to today's society's unrestrained materialism and consumerism. The business philosophies of Christian family firms should reduce the selfish tendency for satisfaction *from nature* and relatively immediate satisfaction *in nature*. This notion would also apply to industries, such as lumber and associated businesses that endeavor to adopt moderation and restoration in their resource approach (e.g., Herman Miller, 2023). For example, Parts Life, Inc. extends the life of mission-critical assets through reverse engineering, life cycle sustainment, acquisition logistics, and obsolescence management. https://www.partslifeinc.com/about

Dimensions	Description	Implications for Christian family firms
Mindfulness	A Christian perspective calls for thoughtful choices and mindfulness by considering the impact of every action on local communities and society at large.	When the environmental impact of actions is known, and when alternative actions are available, leaders of Christian family firms should opt for the latter. A Christian perspective would prompt firms to revisit business policies concerning product packaging and disposable products. For example, Hobby Lobby, a US-based arts and craft retailer, shrinks its environmental footprint by reducing waste, recycling cardboard, and incorporating reusable boxes and bins. Each year, Hobby Lobby keeps more than 16 thousand tons of cardboard out of landfills. https://newsroom.hobbylobby.com/articles/hobby-lobby-recycling-initiative/
Responsibility/Accountability	A Christian perspective encourages a mandate of God found in the book of Genesis: the restoration of nature is the moral challenge to correct inadvertent damages to the environment. Christians are responsible and accountable for using all available means to recover the balance of nature created by God and reverse any disruptions.	Leaders of Christian family firms should voice concerns and offer solutions in industries that harm the environment. Initiatives should prompt engagement in CSR that creates a shared sense of responsibility towards others and the earth (Discua Cruz, 2020). For example, the Howard E. Butt Grocery Company (H-E-B) is the 15th largest grocery chain in the US and one of the leading chains in Texas. This family firm thrived under Howard E. Butt, a committed Christian and preacher who pioneered mental health support through the H-E-B foundation and Laity Lodge, a spiritual retreat and nature center in the Frio River Canyon (Texas Hill Country River Region). Committed to sustainability, H-E-B vows “to take care of the communities where we live and work … [and to] embrace sustainable practices across our business” (H-E-B, 2022). H-E-B also provides several environmental and conservation grants to various endeavors. https://www.heb.com/static-page/environment

Note: adapted from Cafferky (2012, p. 145) and Hoffman and Sandelands (2005).

Our model reveals that leaders of Christian family firms exercise principles such as moderation and mindfulness when approaching environmental protection and sustainability practices. We define mindfulness in the Christian context as initiating a reflective personal judgment (Vu & Burton, 2020) coupled with community feedback and involvement that can unfurl thoughtful choices by considering the impact of every action on local communities and society at large. We contend that moderation and mindfulness may direct leaders of Christian family firms to approach critical sustainability decisions and actions based on shared knowledge, values, and beliefs of the Christian communities where they cultivate relationships (Dana, 2010; Davidson & Honig, 2003). In this context, gathered knowledge can be used in group actions to serve faith communities and society at large. Future studies are needed to understand this process better.

If leaders of Christian family firms recognize the current environmental crisis as a moral, ethical, and faith-based issue, one response may be to engage in specific businesses in some sectors while avoiding others. Another response may be a gradual change in business approaches and processes, targeting wasteful production practices while adhering to and improving respectful and responsible business practices. Since this type of approach does not dismiss secular, widespread movements, such as corporate social responsibility (Matten & Moon, 2008), it is an underlying mechanism that can allow initiatives like CSR to be adopted by Christian family firms. Recent studies have demonstrated that when family firms adopt a stewardship approach to business and are guided by Christian principles, they may develop a unique approach to CSR, which appeals to diverse organizational members aiming to become less self-centered and to care more for others (Discua Cruz, 2020).

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we contend that family firms play a vital role in furthering our understanding of how Christian principles can influence sustainability approaches. Current research often overlooks family firms where the religious beliefs of family members can operate in tandem with business goals. By addressing how and why Christian principles influence sustainability in Christian family firms, we contend that future research will attain a better understanding of sustainability since Christian perspectives and principles can guide decision-making processes and shape sustainable business cultures.

We hope that new theoretical and empirical advances will be inspired by our contributions in this chapter. While some concepts and perspectives we have presented are not new, we believe that future research should continue to investigate the impact of Christian principles as fundamental and foundational aspects that can drive sustainability processes and decision-making. For example, future investigations should investigate international comparisons in how the Christian faith is expressed in varying contexts around the world. Legal frameworks used in different contexts should be investigated regarding their impact on current assumptions of how Christian principles impact the practices, responsibilities and accountability of family firms (Gupta & Levenburg, 2010). We also hope our chapter encourages future research that will continue to capture family firms' inherent richness and complexity. Both researchers and practitioners can benefit from expanding their views of family firms to include Christian principles that inform sustainability approaches.

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Figure 1. Model of a Christian perspective of stewardship-based environmental protection and sustainability practices in Christian family firms