

BUSINESS

So what is an article on business doing in a global dictionary of theology? What place does business have in the life and witness of the Body of Christ worldwide? Why should businesspeople take an interest in theology and its practical outworking as they ply their trade? These questions go to the heart of a persistent struggle waged by the church throughout history.

1. Business in a global context

Economic issues rank high on the agenda for much of the world. For good or ill, commercial priorities and the behavior of business leaders are shaping global events, in some notable cases, far beyond the capacity of traditional centers of influence, such as governments, to control or match. In many countries unemployment is rampant; even the solutions to other apparently unrelated issues, such as HIV/AIDS or traffic in human beings, involve a business oriented response. The church must choose between responses of ambivalence, antagonism, or positive engagement with business in its holistic understanding of the gospel.

2. Foundational theological concepts

Theological reflection on business is part of a larger set of issues including debate over distinctions between sacred and secular, the nature of work and ministry, and, in the missiological arena the nature and role of so-called “tentmaking”, of which business is generally taken to be a subset. An important overarching concept is the prophetic call to love justice, practice kindness, and walk humbly with God (Mic 6. 8). The vexing issue of profit is addressed

in scripture. Many of Jesus' own teachings use business examples, often favourably, to illustrate ultimate truth.

2.1 The Person of God

It might be said that God is the original entrepreneur. Beginning with an idea, and creating that which was good in all respects, God reveals His Person, and shows us an essential outlook on life (Gen. 1.1 – 2.3). Furthermore, the central business activity of providing meaningful and sustainable employment is a demonstration of justice and kindness, grounded in the character of God.

2.2 The Power of the Gospel

Alongside of proclamation is the need to demonstrate the transforming power of the gospel to a skeptical world. From the “thief who steals no more” (Eph. 4. 28) to the executive who “provides what is right and fair” (Col. 4.1) modeling successful business, based on God's truth and prayerfully led by the Spirit, is a tangible and irrefutable witness.

2.3 The Priesthood of all Believers

The “ecclesia”, the people of God, are found on the shop floor, in factories, and other work settings. Especially in countries where suspicion and hostility to the gospel is strong, the most natural and credible opportunities to evangelize and make disciples are often found among employees, suppliers and customers of businesses led by committed Christians.

2.4 The Practice of Stewardship

In contrast to conventional wisdom, the Christian affirms that business does not exist to maximize shareholder wealth, but by the permission of God and to be a channel of blessing to others. This leads to a number of considerations concerning the proper direction and use of all that God gives us, including the gifts of time and talent represented by employees, the earth's

resources, the very products and services produced, and the profit which accrues. These concerns are foremost in the thinking of the faithful steward.

3. Historical perspectives

Beginning with the story of Abraham, including the account of the worthy woman of Prov. 31, and culminating with the record of Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18), entrepreneurs hold an important place in the unfolding of God's purposes. In the Middle Ages, the Nestorians carried the gospel along the Silk Road as they conducted business on East-West trade routes. The influence of the Moravians and Basel entrepreneur missionaries of the 18th and 19th centuries was far-reaching. The Norwegian entrepreneur, Hans Nielsen Hague (1771 – 1824) represents a dramatic example of the power of business in the hands of a committed Christian to literally transform an entire society. Far from being on the fringes of God's global purposes, business has often played a central role. With this historical perspective in mind, the challenge of our day is in many respects to recover and implement afresh this exciting heritage.

4. Business as a multidisciplinary exercise

For the church worldwide to effectively embrace business as a vocation for its membership the collaboration of those with of a wide range of skills and spiritual gifts will be required. For example, because the practice of business takes place in a cultural context, anthropological perspectives are necessary. Similarly, the contribution of ethicists, economists, environmentalists, historians, journalists, lawyers, missiologists, sociologists, and others will add value to the more classic "business" competencies of finance, product development, marketing, and human resources. Chief among the spiritual gifts required will be courageous prophets, envisioned pastors, and authoritative

teachers, if those saints who are called to a ministry of business are to accomplish this with Christ-honouring accountability, affirmative equipping, and adequate resourcing for the task.

5. Current trends

There is a global movement of the Spirit in connection with business. Virtually every country in the world and every part of the Body of Christ is being touched. Perhaps most significantly, individual believers with business skills are being awakened to the potential involvement they can have in furthering the Kingdom of God in the business arena. In 2004, a gathering of over seventy representatives from every continent met in connection with the Lausanne Consultation in Thailand to focus on business as a missional activity for the church. Emerging across the world in at least a half dozen regions, many of which are economically poor and where the church is in a small minority, are consultations of entrepreneurs, business professionals and others engaged in the issues of business for the greater glory of God. Spanning the globe are Christian business ministries to executives and employees with a calling to the higher purposes of God. All this represents a genuine sign to the people of God, and to the world, of the Kingdom in our midst.

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