



THE CHURCH IS NOT A BUSINESS

Rusty Stark

Congregations of the Lord's church must conduct business. They have bills to pay and items to purchase. They have overhead and salaries and insurances to consider. Leaders often meet for "business" meetings. But the Lord's church is not primarily a business. If we forget this fact we are in danger of departure from the Lord's pattern.

DENOMINATIONAL DEPARTURES

Many in the denominational world have long since gone the way of professional business: As Adam McClane puts it:

- Churches hire HR professionals...
- Churches acquire other churches.
- Churches hire MBAs to be "Executive Pastors."
- Churches hire CPAs to run their finance departments.
- Churches hire advertising executives to run their marketing departments.
- Churches have departments!
- Churches have board rooms, safe rooms, and even war rooms.¹

There are many, even in the denominational world, who see the error of this:

- The Church has been using business models for a long time. It has been quite fashionable for church leaders to borrow jargon, organizational structures, mission and vision foci, and leadership styles from the business world in recent memory. In this paradigm, making disciples of Jesus Christ is equated with selling a product or service.²
- ...Maybe the problem was when we thought that it would be a good idea for the church to follow business models in the first place. Maybe what we should do is stop trying to be like the business world and start trying to be the church. Maybe God has a better model for the church than a market-driven consultation firm.³

- When our leaders think in business terms, we ought not be surprised when they act like corporate executives and our parishioners act like consumers. We are not peddlers for God. Neither are parishioners people who ought to be shopping for the next best experience.⁴

GOOD STEWARDSHIP

This article is not against wise stewardship. As individuals, we must be *good stewards of the manifold grace of God* (1 Peter 4:10). If we should be thus in our households, regarding our own private affairs, how much more important is it that we exercise stewardship over the Lord's money and business?

We must acknowledge at the outset that many principles from the business world come under the heading of good stewardship. Keeping overhead low, avoiding wasteful practices, making necessary purchases in a wise way — all of these are things we must be concerned about. In addition, many principles of salesmanship are also natural and scriptural elements in the spreading of the Gospel.

But still, we must insist that the Lord's church is not a business. 1) It is not to be 'MARKETED' as the business world markets itself. 2) It is not based on a BUSINESS MODEL. And 3) DECISIONS for the body must not be based primarily on business principles. These three points will provide us with an outline.

MARKETING

Marketing is not the same as selling or salesmanship. There are 4 Ps to marketing: Product, Place, Price, and Promotion. Marketing is the process of adjusting these 4 things to reach the greatest number of consumers.⁵ The trouble with bringing this over into the church is that we do not have God's authority to adjust these things.

1. With the goal of attracting people to the church, some have tried to make adjustments to the **Product**. This has resulted in efforts to make the Gospel less offensive and more appealing and to leave out hard doctrines regarding hell and sin and guilt. God's word has been forever settled in heaven (Psalm 119:89). We have no right to add to, take away from, or adjust it in any way. It is the word of God (2 Tim. 3:16-17).
2. Some have tried to adjust the **Place** to something more acceptable to the masses. People who don't like to "go to church" may accept house churches, cottage groups, gymnasium or theater-like atmospheres, so long as they don't feel like they are going to church. There is nothing wrong in meeting in any of these places. The church is not the building, it is the people of God (1 Peter 2:5). But if the church is not the building, why put so much emphasis on a different type of building to meet in? To meet in a gymnasium or a theater in an effort to substitute the solemn, holy atmosphere of worship with a casual, sensational, show-time, entertainment atmosphere is wrong.

3. Similarly, some try to modify the **Price**, i.e the demands the Gospel makes. The Gospel demands self-sacrifice (Luke 14:25-33). The Gospel demands that adulterous relationships, drunkenness, dancing, gambling and all other sins be left behind (Matt. 19:9; 1 Cor. 6:9-11). We can preach a Gospel that does not demand such a high price, but it is not the Gospel of Christ; and, it will not save men's souls (Rom. 1:16; Gal. 1:6-9).
4. There are also those who want to change biblical soul-winning to worldly, wild, all-out, no-holds-barred **Promotion**. The concept of worldly promotion has resulted in bribery to get visitors to attend, smoke machines and zoo animals in the worship, and a host of unscriptural 'ministries' that we can advertise to bring people in. In an effort to compete with worldly advertisers, church groups have chosen professional singers instead of congregational singing (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16) and professional entertainers instead of Gospel preachers (2 Tim. 4:2). God never authorized these approaches to 'market' the Gospel (Col. 3:17). The more we try to compete with the world, the more worldly we become. Do we really want a membership that comes because of the attended nursery, the free donuts, and the great jokes and stories the preacher tells?

BUSINESS MODEL

Actually, there are various business models, but there is only one pattern for the Lord's church. The Hebrew writer makes this point with extreme clarity and a very pointed warning. First, he points to the admonition from the physical mountain (Mt. Sinai) that Moses was to see that the tabernacle was made after a certain pattern (Heb. 8:5). Then he contrasts that physical mountain and that physical tabernacle with a spiritual mountain and the spiritual kingdom, the church. His warning? If they had to be careful to follow the pattern given them from Mt. Sinai, how much more careful should we be to "*see that ye refuse not him that speaketh...from heaven*" (Heb. 12:25).

There are those who try to make fun of the pattern concept, but those who do so will not escape punishment. This is the precise point the writer of Hebrews is making — follow the pattern, or else.

We are on this earth to *serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear* (Heb. 12:28). The church is a theocracy:

- It is not run by a board.
- It does not answer to its shareholders.
- Its mission statement is not self-defined; it is defined by God.
- Its vision must be the vision of God, grasped by faith.
- Its articles of incorporation are not subject to debate.

We cannot accept any changes to the structure of the church as laid down in the New Testament.

- Each congregation is autonomous. Our only head is Christ (Eph. 5:23).
- Our only headquarters is in heaven where our head is (Col. 3:1).
- All Authority in the church is vested in Christ (Matt. 28:18), and is exercised only through the Scriptures or through the scriptural delegation of authority to elders (Heb. 13:7,17; Acts 20:28; et al).
- Elders are authorized to oversee only the flock which is among them (of which they are members) (1 Peter 5:2).
- Qualified deacons are appointed as special servants for special jobs (1 Tim. 3:8-13).
- The concept of pillar churches or one congregation meeting in two or more locations is contrary to the Bible pattern.

DECISION MAKING

Sometimes members think their contribution entitles them to decision making authority. In the Lord's church, such authority rests with those men who have been scripturally qualified and appointed as elders (1 Peter 5:2; Heb. 13:17). Control of the church cannot be bought by large contributions or sold to the highest donors.

Since the Lord's church is a theocracy, decisions must be made according to God's will. Many times this will be in harmony with good business sense. However, there are times when doing the right thing, i.e. following God's will, will run counter to and even fly in the face of 'good business' practices.

1. Decisions about discipline — Church discipline is not an optional matter. The commands of God are plain. We are to withdraw ourselves from every brother or sister who refuses to live according to New Testament teaching and those who teach false doctrine (Matt. 18:15-17; 1 Cor. 5 ¶ esp. verse 11; 2 Thess. 3:6,14-15; Rom. 16:17-18; Titus 3:10; 2 John 9-11).

Too often elders think they have the right to decide whether or not to practice these commands. They do not have this authority.

Too often elders make such decisions on the basis of what they think is good for business. They don't want to cause strife, they might lose too many members, outsiders might react negatively, the contribution might go down, etc. One elder told me, *"If we practice church discipline, we'll be the laughingstock of this whole area."*

It might be good business to be concerned about such things, but the church is not a business. Shepherds must be more concerned about souls for whom they must give account (Heb. 13:17) and the answer they must give to the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:1-4), than they are about what others may think.

2. Decisions about Doctrine — Doctrine has been determined by God. There are no decisions to be made in this area. In watching over the flock, elders are to feed the flock and to protect it from false teachers (Acts 20:28-31). They do not have the right to accept false doctrine from their pulpits or to endorse and support false teachers with their money or with a platform on which to teach (2 John 9-11).

It may seem like good business to leave out part of the Gospel, but to do so leaves us guilty of the blood of those who are lost by our actions. Paul was only free from the blood of all men because he had declared all the counsel of God (Acts 20:25-27).

Elders do not have the right to choose a smooth-talking false teacher because he pleases the members over a stuttering, coarse, unpolished but faithful Gospel preacher. Remember, false teachers use good words and fair speeches to deceive the hearts of the simple (Rom. 16:17-18).

3. Benevolence — Benevolence is a part of the mission of the Lord's church (James 1:27); and, we have a special obligation to those "of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10). Sometimes the demands of benevolence will seem like dangerous business practices.

We have a great illustration of this in the church in Jerusalem. Thousands of people became Christians on Pentecost and shortly thereafter (Acts 2:41,47; 5:14; 6:1,7). Because of the great number of converts, many of whom did not actually live in Jerusalem, the early church had many needs. They responded to those needs in a very unbusinesslike way. Acts 2:44-45, "*And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need.*" Acts 4:34-37, "*Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, And laid them down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need. And Joses, who by the apostles was surnamed Barnabas, (which is, being interpreted, The son of consolation,) a Levite, and of the country of Cyprus, Having land, sold it, and brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.*"

I'm afraid to think what many modern elders would have said regarding the benevolent needs of the Jerusalem church: "We can't help all the widows, what kind of precedent would that set?" "We can't have all our members selling their homes and property to feed all these people this week. What will we do next week?"

It is true, the needs of the Jerusalem church were unsustainable at first. Selling their personal property to sustain an unexpected population of Christians in Jerusalem was not good business practice for the individual Christians involved or for the church. But God knew what was coming. His plan included allowing Satan to scatter the church through persecution (Acts 8:1). If those people had not sold their property, they would have had to simply leave it all behind.

This was an unusual circumstance, but it is probably not the only time that benevolence needs don't seem like good business practices. If we tell a mother with small children to leave her adulterous marriage relationship, are we willing to support her and her children until she can get back on her feet? When members suffer great tragedy and financial loss from fires or other disasters, do we have enough faith to deplete our church 'savings' in order to extend the help that is needed?

We must not let our idea of business stand in the way of the love we should show to each other.

4. Expectations — Christianity is a matter of hard work. There is labor to be done. Tragically, getting Christians busy in the work is one of the hardest tasks we face.

Just as tragic is the tendency among some congregational leaders to lower the expectations for fear of expecting too much. Elders often decide against certain programs because they are too labor-intensive. They don't want to expect too much of the members' time. It's hard enough to get members to attend services, much less getting them to show up for extra works.

In many places, the days are gone when members would spend hours a day for weeks at a time working on VBS material. The generation has passed that would show up for a building project evening after evening, after laboring on their own jobs, to advance the cause of Christ. Too many Christians are simply too busy with their own lives to seek the kingdom first.

If the church is a business, then the members are the customers and they reign supreme. If the church is a business, then we must not expect them to alter their overcrowded schedules or sacrifice their precious time. The business-oriented leaders think, "If we expect too much, our 'customers' can 'shop' elsewhere; we don't want to lose them." On the other hand, if the church is a family, a cause to be advanced even at great personal cost, a monarchy ruled over by the God of heaven, then should we not expect and insist on sacrifice by each member? What have we lost if we lose members who will not be active for the cause? We have lost nothing but their souls, and their souls are already lost while sitting in the pews.

5. Numbers — There are elders who hire and fire preachers based on the 'bottom line' of attendance and contribution. As long as attendance and contribution are good, it does not much matter what the preacher says. This may be a good bottom line for business, but not for the church. The church is not a business. David got himself and all of Israel into a lot of trouble when he started focusing on numbers instead of on God (2 Sam. 24).

CONCLUSION

If we approach things from a business model, things of the church may seem quite inefficient — inefficient at bringing in crowds, at keeping those we have, at getting the Gospel to the lost. There may indeed be things in the business world that would be more efficient. But the Bible is right, and God knows best. As one man said, "Let's embrace some holy inefficiency and grow the Kingdom!"

Here is the true bottom line for God's people: Isaiah 8:20, "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them."

ENDNOTES

¹ Adam McLane, *Business Models in the Church*, adammclane.com/2010/10/28.

² Andy Bryan, *Church Business*, www.entertherainbow.blogspot.com/2009/06/church-business.html

³ Ibid

⁴ Steven D Bruns, *The Business of Church*, www.stevedbruns.wordpress.com/2011/02/10/the-business-of-church

⁵ This material on marketing is adapted from ideas from Rodney Zwonitzer, *Is the Church a Business*, www.mtio.com/articles

1495 E Empire Ave.

Benton Harbor, MI 49022