

BUSINESS AS MISSION

Using business in your sending, welcoming or going ministry

While missiologists and business experts sometimes wrangle over precise definitions of “business as mission” (See sidebar.), business and mission have always coincided in the Kingdom of God. Remember the accounts of the 18th-century Moravians in our *Perspectives Reader* and sessions on the History of the World Christian Movement

Thousands of years ago, God told the alien Israelites, captive in Persia, to do business—and so get involved in local society and bring peace in His name:

Build homes, and plan to stay. Plant gardens, and eat the food they produce.... And work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare.”

—Jeremiah 29:4-7

Later Paul the Apostle explained the strategy of his tentmaking vocation in a church-planting setting (See Acts 18:1-4):

Don't we have the right to food and drink? ...Or is it only I and Barnabas who must work for a living? ...The Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel. But I have not used any of these rights.

—I Corinthians 9

• Is your role for now Sending?

Consider shaping your Marketplace Ministry business to contribute heavily to missions—providing free or discounted services to Kingdom workers, arranging logistics or communication packages for goers, etc.

• Are you a Welcomer?

Consider starting a business that provides some of your livelihood and allows you the natural connections of the marketplace with immigrants, refugees, foreign business travelers and tourists and—by hiring part-timers or interns—even international students.

• Are you Going as a missionary?

This is the core realm of the latest business as mission (BAM) movement. There is plenty of dialogue, orientation, short-term opportunities, articles, books, advice and implementation of this long-term strategy for blessing the nations. And, frankly, we at the Perspectives Study Program office aren't the experts! BAM seems simple, but is actually a highly complex topic since it involves all the disciplines of business, missiology and practical missions all in the context of the global market.

THE TERMS

• *Marketplace Ministry*

Influencing your own home culture with business practices built on Christian ethics and Kingdom business principles is the focus of hundreds of effective new organizations across North America.

• *Tentmaking*

The Apostle Paul often supported himself by his tentmaking business (Acts 18:1-4). Oddly enough, Westerners in the 1980s started using the term to describe believers who go to a foreign country and take a job in order to advance the Kingdom.

• *Business for Missions*

Okay, it's not really a term—more a concept as senders on the homefront push for profits in order to contribute funds for missions. One highly competitive industrial company in Memphis, Tennessee, for example, annually gives a million dollars to mission efforts.

• *Enterprise Development*

Neal Johnson and Steve Rundle in *Business As Mission* (See Resources.) describe this as helping “the world's poorest people bootstrap themselves out of poverty by helping them create a business.”

• *Business As Mission*

Johnson and Rundle define BAM as “the utilization of for-profit businesses as instruments for global mission.”

● The New Frontier of Business As Mission

But we know the experts—and so present this unit of *Post-Perspectives* as a signpost pointing toward the best resources. (*Quick start below.*)

One of our best resources, of course, is the founder of the US Center for World Mission and co-developer of the *Perspectives* course: Dr. Ralph Winter. In his blog at www.RalphDWinter.com, he spells out some BAM considerations in his excellent overview of “Twelve Frontiers in Context”:



NEW FRONTIER: “BUSINESS AS MISSION”

Let us now turn to what could be called a new frontier of thinking—the mere fact of the new swirl of books and conferences on “Business as Mission.” While the idea is not altogether new, the mounting discussion of it is, and thus at least in that sense can legitimately be called a “new” frontier in mission awareness and thinking.

I will begin with some of my own experiences in what might exemplify business activities. During grade school I delivered papers early in the morning. I worked one high school summer in a heating company spray painting on the night shift. Another summer I worked as a mechanical draftsman for the Square D Electric company, in a huge plant, later in its quality control department. After the war I was hired to do a topographical survey of the Westmont College campus. While in seminary I worked as a civil engineer for several engineering companies.

In Guatemala I initiated 17 small business endeavors allowing seminary students to earn their way in school and gain a portable trade after graduation (most pastors were tied down to the soil so all of these “businesses” were portable as with the Apostle Paul) the first ever in which Indians were the registered owners. Two other missionaries (from other missions) and I started the InterAmerican School which is thriving to this day. I helped very slightly in the founding of an Evangelical university which today has 30,000 students, and has provided all the judges in Guatemala.

At Fuller, while on the faculty, I was asked to set up a publishing activity which I called the William Carey Library. It has been operating for 35 years now and sells \$1 million worth of books a year and is now part of the US Center for World Mission. I also helped set up the self-supporting American Society of Missiology, not to speak of the U. S. Center for World Mission, and the William Carey International University, both of which have essentially business functions.

The history of missions is full of other examples. The Moravians went out to establish new villages with all of the necessary functions. They planted what is today the largest retail company (sort of a Sears Roebuck) in Surinam. Swiss missionaries planted a chain of hardware stores in Nigeria, which not only fulfilled a much-needed function but displayed an attitude toward customers that was a marvelous Christian testimony. And, of course, every church or school that is planted on the mission field and is self-supporting, is like a business that renders a service and earns what it needs to function. If you added up all of such “small businesses” on the mission field (churches and schools) it would run into millions.

However, let us ask the question:

What is business?

Basically it is the activity of providing goods and services to others on the condition of repayment to cover the cost of those goods and services. This is not to say that businesses never do anything that does not at least indirectly assist their efforts in image building, public relations or something of that kind, but using profits in ways that add nothing to the business would seem to be very rare.

Businesses, in fact, would run into conflict with customer's interests, employees' interests, owner's interests or stockholder's interests if any considerable proportion of their gross income were diverted to private interests of no concern to customers, employees, owners or stockholders.

Note that a business involves a concrete understanding between two parties, the customer and the company, and comprises what is essentially a two-way street: the company gives the customer something and the customer gives back something previously agreed-upon.

Missionaries, by contrast, serve people from whom they do not expect to receive anything previously agreed upon.

However, even mission work is in one sense a business. Donors, in this instance, are the customers paying for a service to be rendered. The missionaries are providing the services for which the donors are hiring them. An additional feature is that the ultimate beneficiaries of the missionaries' labors, and of the donors' payments, are needy people in foreign lands who receive aid of some sort without paying for it. For those final recipients to get something for nothing is hard for the recipients to believe-as with those healed by Jesus, who apparently did not charge for His healing services.

Sooner or later it may dawn on the ultimate recipients that someone wants to help them without asking a price. How better can God's love be communicated?

Of course it is equally true that a hardworking businessman may be providing a very beneficial service out of genuine love, not just as a means to earn a living. That is equally true but not equally obvious.

What Types of Businesses?

You can well imagine that some business missionaries will go overseas and start a business that will be owned and operated by citizens of that country. Others will plant a business or a branch of an international business, owned by the business-missionary, that truly serves the people and is itself a type of ministry.

Still others will not only plant a business but will expect to support other work from the profits.

Others may not have the capital necessary or the required expertise to set up a business but will take a job in the foreign land. Not everyone can buy 20 tons of castor oil at a time as described in an excellent book I will mention below.

Just getting a job in a foreign land is what is more often thought of when the phrase *tent-maker* is used.

*“Others may not
have the capital....
Not everyone can buy
20 tons of castor oil
at a time!”*

Several experts wisely question businesses run by missionaries as a “front” or disguise for mission work. And they should.

Ironically, Paul the Apostle was not that kind of tent-maker. He essentially owned his own business. He likely supported both himself and others with him, although they, too, may have helped him in his leatherworking tasks. He also accepted gifts from churches so as to cut down on leatherworking. Thus, he fits all of these patterns except the one we most often associate with tentmaking, namely becoming an employee in a foreign country.

How is the Business Viewed by the Customer?

I firmly believe there is ample room for businesses owned by believers who work with Christian principles. Those principles may not always be clear. The hardware chain I mentioned that was founded by Swiss missionaries astonished people by the fact that if someone bought something that had the wrong specifications or that did not work they would exchange it or get their money back. Thus a business to be effective mission needs to be conceived of by onlookers as a service, not just a way of making money, although most assumptions will tend to be the contrary.

Here in America all businesses loudly proclaim their desire to serve the customer. We get used to that. We don't really believe it. In many overseas situations businesses don't even claim to be working for the customer. Neither the customer nor the business owner views the money being received as simply enabling the continuation of the service rendered but as a contest to see who gets the most.

It is also true that no matter how altruistic an owner is, what pulls down many a business or ministry is the quality of the employees. The owner may have high purposes. The employees may not.

Incidentally, if any business starts siphoning off “profits” overly to increase the owner's wealth or even as gifts to Christian work, the business may, to that extent, be unable to withstand competitors who plow all profits back into the service to refine it or to lower their prices below what the Christian-owned business (with its extra drain on profits) can afford to offer.

An excellent book, edited by one of our board members, Ted Yamamori, is entitled, *On Kingdom Business, Transforming Missions through Entrepreneurial Strategies* (Crossway Publishing). Several authors of chapters wisely question businesses run by missionaries as a “front” or disguise for mission work. And they should. To “see through” such disguises is not at all difficult for governments or private citizens. We also read that “micro-enterprises” have their problems. If one woman in a village gets a loan enabling her to employ a sewing machine she may produce more for less and be better off, but at the same time she may simply put a number of other women out of work in that same village, which is not a desirable witness.

More “New Frontiers” discussion at www.RalphDWinter.com ■

For resources for Business as Mission, visit the Next Steps Section of the Perspectives website. www.perspectives.org