

The Success Syndrome

The Impact of Corporate America on the Church

“Wanted: Pastor- enthusiastic, entrepreneurial, cutting edge. To lead vibrant, missional, emerging church.”¹ The ad is real. The fact that you are offended is pleasant. That you are not surprised is indicative of the need to discuss the topic. Familiarity with such an abomination is the first step toward the loss of an adverse reaction. We could, conceivably, debate every single word in this ad, but for the purposes of today’s discussion I would like to focus your attention on the word, “entrepreneur.” It can be defined as: “A person who organizes and manages a business undertaking, assuming the risk for the sake of profit.”²

I do not need to inform you that this word is not found in the Holy Scriptures. The concept is foreign to the understanding of the Pastoral office, having not been referenced in any earlier age of the Church. How did we get to the point of speaking of the office of the public ministry in the language of corporate business? What are the impacts of imposing this kind of language on the Church? Let’s spend a few moments examining these questions as well as forming some sort of Scriptural response.

I. The entrepreneurial invasion.

The world has uncovered many inroads in its attempts to manipulate the Church, more than we have time to discuss. Perhaps the most dangerous are the so-called para-church organizations. They seem friendly. They purport to support the work of the Church. Yet, lacking any system of ecclesiastical supervision they are often at the whim of one or two charismatic leaders. As a result they are frequently the source of aberrant teachings.

However, let us first note the impact of the reign of capitalism. Certainly the high esteem in which corporate America was held in the post-war years set the stage for influence within the Church. America’s confidence in “progress” is balanced upon corporate America. Business is unrelenting in its pursuit of success, even when government falters, because its goal is profit. The halls of American heroes include many successful businessmen.³

It was only a matter of time before someone hit upon the idea of appropriating business principles for the mission of the Church. A strange twist on this concept was first proposed in 1925 in Bruce Barton’s The Man Nobody Knows. Barton claimed that Jesus was the greatest salesman ever and the founder of modern business principles. Barton felt the leadership style of Jesus could be used by corporate heads.

Ironically, the direction of the influence was reversed in a seminal work by a man known as the father of the Church Growth movement, Donald McGavran. In 1959 McGavran began to subject the “mission” of the Church to examination under the principles of corporate business. McGavran’s thesis was that the Church could increase

¹ I found the ad in an issue of “Your Church” magazine which is like a trade paper for churches. Unfortunately I forgot to document the source so you will have to trust me for its veracity. However, the existence of the magazine itself demonstrates the businesslike approach of para-church organizations.

² Your Dictionary.com

³ Who does not recognize names like: Andrew Carnegie, Henry Ford, Sam Walton, Bill Gates? The desire to adore men like this might be traced to the development of the Protestant work ethic.

its rate of numerical growth by studying the “methods” used by congregations that were already growing. He was confident that successful methods would be found.⁴ He further suggested that those methods should be constantly checked against the actual rate of growth. McGavran believes it is “natural” for the Church to adopt business methods.

In most forms of human endeavor progress is accelerated by constantly checking performance against defined goals...The business firm measures sales in various territories to discover markets, able men, and successful selling methods. It would seem natural for those carrying out the great Commission to check achievements in church-growth to find how well they are getting on with making disciples of all nations.⁵

A number of men followed in McGavran’s train, expanding and applying various principles, from the business world to the mission. Waldo Werning suggested that it was simply a matter of getting down to business. “It is assumed on the basis of scriptural truths that a Church can grow if it wants to grow, if it is willing to pay the price, if it uses church growth principles, and it does not have a terminal illness.”⁶ From a business perspective this may make sense, but it clearly discounts the role of the Holy Spirit in bringing people to faith.

Coming full circle back to Barton, C. Peter Wagner holds up Jesus as an example of success. Under the heading “Was Jesus ‘Success-Oriented?’” he writes:

Jesus began by winning 12 people to Himself. When He finished, the 12 had become a committed group in Jerusalem of no less than 120 disciples, but more probably upwards of 500- as hinted in I Corinthians 15:6. Growth from 12 to 120 in 3 years represents a decadal rate of 215,343% or an annual growth rate of 115%! This is astronomical enough without even figuring it on the basis of 500 instead of 120!⁷

If we didn’t laugh we would be compelled to cry at the arrogance of squeezing Jesus into the mail box marked “success.” This arrogance, however, is a benchmark of how accepting the Church had become in thinking of itself as a business.

More recently, elements of the emergent church have put their stamp of approval on the use of a business plan to grow the Church. As might be expected the dot-com crowd has emphasized the use of technology and marketing. Technology has the potential to fundamentally change the way we think about a congregation. “For a growing number of churches, the primary teaching pastor is hundreds or thousands of miles away. This shift has big implications for the campus pastor and other local staff, in terms of the vision and local leadership roles.”⁸ Under this business model the “Pastor” never even meets his sheep.

Perhaps the dominant theme adopted by the Church under this influence is that of marketing techniques. Slick ads, provocative themes⁹, and targeted audiences threaten to replace simple proclamation of the Word. An emphasis on emotional response is essential. “Visit as many of the more than two million eBay sites as you want. You’ll

⁴ McGavran, Donald. How Churches Grow. Friendship Press, New York. 1966. p. 128.

⁵ Ibid. p. 144.

⁶ Werning, Waldo. Vision and Strategy for Church Growth. Baker Book House, Grand Rapids. 1977. p. 13.

⁷ Wagner, C. Peter. Your Church Can Grow. Regal Books. Ventura, California. 1976. p. 165.

⁸ Surratt, Geoff. A Multi-Site Church Road Trip. Zondervan. Grand Rapids. 2009. p. 148.

⁹ Some may recall the “Great Sex” ad campaign that at least one LCMS congregation used. It involved billboards with images of bare feet sticking out from under bed covers and equally explicit sermons.

find that almost every one has an image of what is for sale. Each image comes to life with story and sometimes music...The lesson for the church is simple: images generate emotions, and people will respond to their feelings.”¹⁰

It is clear that the language, structure, techniques and goals of corporate business have had their influence on the Church in grand as well as subtle contexts. The common thread that runs throughout Church Growth literature is the classification of congregations as either lively and growing or stagnant and dead. The criterion for making such judgments is success. The Church has been trained to think in terms of “successful” congregations and “successful” Pastors. If businesses can be successful then congregations should have the opportunity to be successful as well. The problem was finding a “matrix” to measure success.

II. A Quantifiable Factor of Success

Once the Church has fallen into the trap of thinking of itself as a corporation, and I believe that it has, (especially in the LCMS),¹¹ it must answer the question of the factor of success. It must find a way of evaluating its franchises, as McGavran says, of checking achievements in church growth. The problem with determining the volume of success in a congregation is that “sales” are challenging to quantify. Spiritual Growth is too personal. A defensive Pastor might suggest that although his congregation has not grown by numbers it has grown spiritually. That might assuage the Pastor’s confidence but the measurers do not find it satisfying. Putting spiritual maturity on a bar graph is a strenuous task.

Emotional highs are the mainstay of marketing techniques, but they will not do as criteria for success. They are too volatile. They are present one moment and absent the next. Quantifying the difference between a “staid, maintenance oriented, stagnant,” congregation and “vibrant, missional, lively,” one leaves the movement open to charges of bias. Such judgments are too subjective.

Numbers, on the other hand, are scientific. They represent cold, hard facts. One factor that the Church Growth movement avoided was that of dollars. Although the size, or better, the growth of the budget of a particular congregation might accurately reflect its success, the association with business was too strong, too cold. No, the movement settled on something more direct: people. People are easy to count. However, since membership rolls do not always reflect reality, and furthermore since some “members” are “stagnant,” and not “lively,” membership numbers could not be used. Instead the movement settled on the growth of average “worship” attendance as the sole criteria for determining the success of a local congregation.

Of course, the movement is able to defend its choice by pointing to any number of Scriptural texts that count people. In some of those cases it appears that it may have been the Holy Spirit who was counting because the numbers would have been hard to come by. What is generally not included in such assessments is the fact that the biblical

¹⁰ Sweet, Leonard. *Post-Modern Pilgrims*. Broadman and Holman Publishers. Nashville. 2000. p. 85.

¹¹ As a District President I have been the victim of the onslaught of business propaganda. The books we have been encouraged to read as members of the COP are a compendium of business best sellers, e.g. *Good to Great* and *Deep Change* etc. In my estimation TCN is the major proponent of the business model in the LCMS. Its book list for Pastoral learning groups is exclusively business oriented.

accounts are not using the numbers as a factor of success. Instead, the numbers are used to point to the activity of the Holy Spirit.

Once this final piece of the business model was set in place everything changed. The focus, the goal, the mission for the local congregation became getting people into the building on Sunday. That, after all, was how you could be judged to be a success. It would not take the enterprising Pastor long to figure out that there are many ways to get people into the building on Sunday. The congregation is not far behind. What Pastor has not been subject to the lament: “We’re not growing”?

III. The Devastating Consequences of the Pursuit of Success

This paper should not be understood as a diatribe against growth. The Scripture clearly presents God’s desire for all nations to hear the Gospel, and for all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. I am writing against an incorrect understanding, or image of the Church that I believe is detrimental to this desire. Let me illustrate with five consequences of the pursuit of success.

The Gospel becomes a product to be marketed. Under the business model the Church has a product to sell. It is a good product. It has a huge target. Everyone needs it. But it is not always easy to sell. Thus, the Church Growth movement emphasizes methodology. Much research is invested in determining which methods of selling the Gospel are working at the present time. Successful congregations are held up as models for all others to follow.

This emphasis on methodology is detrimental to the work of the Gospel. It discounts the power of God’s Word. The Church is a mouth. It proclaims the powerful Word of God. The Word, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, is the means that God uses to grow the Church. The Church proclaims. God gives growth. The emphasis on methodology leads the Church away from this true confession and from the only means of true growth.

The second danger of marketing is its effect on the Gospel itself. Ad campaigns have a way of sniffing out weaknesses in the product. “This is not what the people want. They want...” As a result of advertising research the product is changed, to make it more marketable.

This is certainly a reality in the Church. How many congregations refuse to speak against abortion, homosexuality, or greed because such a message would not receive a favorable audience. It is not only the law that suffers abuse. In many confessions today Jesus is presented as a great leader to be followed. While this particular approach has been in vogue for ages, today it is followed with fervor because “leader” is much easier to market than “savior.” Marketing the Gospel is destructive of its message because it makes the message subject to the whims of its hearers.

Pastors become CEOs or leaders. If the Church thinks of itself as a business then its Pastors must surely be Chief Executive Officers. No other nomenclature would make the analogy complete. However, the buzzword at the moment in business, and subsequently in the Christian publishing industry, and therefore in the LCMS, is “leadership.” Pastors are to be evaluated on the basis of their particular set of leadership skills. Policy based governance, currently deemed to be the rescuer of the Church from intractable conflict, comes to the Church straight from the Wall Street guide to success.

No self-respecting CEO would rule without it. Thus, structural change follows that of nomenclature.

This is not a subtle change. The picture that God gives of those who proclaim the truth to His people is tied to the words: Pastor, Elder, Bishop, Prophet. Respectively those words reflect the functions, (among others), of care, wisdom, oversight and proclamation. Turning the Pastor into a CEO or even a leader does away with these essential functions. It also immediately establishes a structure for the local congregation. Policy based governance is insisted upon by those leading the Church toward “growth” because it gives the Pastor more power to “cast the vision” for the congregation.

This change is devastating to the proclamation of the Gospel on a number of counts. First, the loss of the shepherd-sheep relationship in a congregation is not insignificant. Shepherds are in a unique position to apply the rod of the law and the healing salve of the Gospel in a way that leaders are not. The evidence of this influence in the LCMS is the recent convention decision to delete all references to Pastors in the Constitution and Bylaws of the Synod. They are to be replaced with the sterile, IRS imposed language of “ministers of religion-ordained.” Second, when the issue becomes who has the power, the Gospel will lose. It is a message that must be proclaimed from a position of service. Third, under this model it is strangely seductive to cite Constitution and Bylaws instead of Scripture.

The mission becomes a means of unifying the Church. How do you bring unity to a business? The unity of a business entity is not found in being, but in doing. Stasis is less than nothing. It is the road to bankruptcy. The mission is everything. In the late 1970s creating mission statements for businesses was all the rage. The purpose of mission statements was to unite disparate elements of a company behind one cause. For the sake of the company everyone was encouraged to pull together as a team to get the job done.

The practice made its way into the Church. Today the Church is in the midst of a “missional” revolution. The mission is everything. There appears to be a concerted effort to use it as a means of unification. We are encouraged not to focus so much on doctrine but on mission. The concept seems to be that if we all pull together to get the job done we will be able to overlook our differences.

I do not seek to disparage the mission of the Church. I only argue against its association with corporate business and its use as a means of unifying the Church. Business is mission statement, action plan, contingency plan and mission accomplished. The Church is Word. It is mouth. It is speaking, proclaiming, and confessing. Strictly speaking the Church acts only as a tool. “...it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”¹²

The Church does not find its unity in its action but in its confession. Being sinners, members of congregations will never act in complete unity. But since the confession of the true faith is a gift from God, the Church bases its unity in that confession. That is why many in the LCMS prefer to think of the Synod as a confessional movement, not a denomination. When the mission becomes the “main

¹² *The Holy Bible : English Standard Version.* Wheaton : Standard Bible Society, 2001, S. Php 2:13

thing” in place of the confession, the Gospel will suffer because our action, even if it is within God’s mission, will be tainted by sin.

Pastors and congregations compete for people. The most subtle, yet the most pervasive effect of the business model on the Church is what it does to Pastors and congregations. When success, measured by number, becomes the shiny star of accomplishment Pastors and their congregations find themselves competing with other Pastors and congregations for sales. No matter how big the community, the market is limited.

Pastors are peppered with comments like, “Why aren’t we growing like St. John’s by the freeway? Why can’t we do what they are doing?” The unspoken implication is, then we will grow too. If the Pastor weren’t a sinner before such comments he certainly will be afterwards. The bitter root of jealousy has been planted.

This is not hypothetical. I will get myself into trouble but I will press on. You have all felt this jealous, competitive urge. Worse, you have acted on it. Your brothers in the holy ministry have become your competitors, your enemies. You have compared yourself to them and coveted what they have. You have slandered their reputation and refused to put the best construction on their actions. You have seen the pictures of the “golden boy” Pastors in the glossy publications and have immediately deduced that they are not faithful. After all, if someone as faithful as you cannot grow a congregation then no one can. Conversely, you have wondered when your 15 minutes of fame would arrive. I know these things. I have not imagined these thoughts and actions. I have lived them. Large congregations ignore small congregations. Small congregations alternately hate and then seek to imitate large congregations. Competition in the pursuit of success is deadly. It kills Pastors. It kills congregations. Worst of all it kills the proclamation of the Gospel.

I speak as if I am angry, and I am. I am angry that we have all been seduced into adopting the business mode of competition. I am angry that no one wants to name it for what it is, sin. I am angry that I have competed with my brother for the souls of men and the Gospel has suffered for it.

Worship is perverted. Finally, all this weight upon average worship attendance as the means of quantifying success has done immense harm to our understanding of worship. The evidence for this statement is the common habit of referring to average Sunday attendance as worship. I frequently hear faithful Pastors (present company excepted) utter such nonsense as “We worship about 300.” I know they don’t mean what they say, that the 300 have become the object of their worship. But it does point out a rarely recognized consequence of the pursuit of success. If numbers in weekly worship attendance becomes the goal, then worship becomes a means to an end. As a result we really don’t know what we mean by worship. Since, according to the Confessions, the highest expression of worship is faith, once again we observe the devastating effects of the business model on the proclamation of the Gospel.

IV. The Body of Christ builds itself up in love (A Scriptural response)

The teamwork metaphor of the business world is the wrong metaphor. Teams are related by a specific action. The Church is related ontologically. In fact, the Scriptures don’t present it as a metaphor at all. The Church is not a corporation. It is a body. The

Church is not an organization. It is an organism. It is not an association. It is a people belonging to God.

The scriptural image of the Church as the body of Christ is the antidote to the business model. Paul consistently notes that growth comes from God.

*Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.*¹³

Please note the emphasis on the spoken Word, “speaking the truth in love.” The body speaks the language of its head. The growth of the body is directed by the head. The body cannot be separated from the head or their will be no growth, only death. Each part of the body is directed, by the head, to work properly for the growth of the body.

This is the life of the Church. Jesus is the head. He is not a disembodied CEO sequestered in the conference room of heaven. He is here now. He is here now and imparts life to His Church, not through various human methodologies but through His Word and Sacraments. He uses His Church as a steward of these mysteries, to speak them to the world. There is no thought of success. There is only life, or death in the case of severance from the head.

Pastors and the congregations to which they have been called are not created equally. Under the business model this stark reality can lead to jealousy and covetousness. It is not designed for this purpose. Rather God creates unique individuals and congregations for the unique purposes.

*For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.*¹⁴

Please note under this text that the body has many members. These members are all different. They all have specific functions within the body. None of the parts do everything. None of the parts do nothing. They do not compete with each other for glory. They work together for the good of the body. Most importantly God has arranged the members of the body as He chose.

This arrangement disregards the pursuit of success. Bodily growth is a matter of God’s arrangement. The body simply lives in confidence in its head. Each part recognizes its own function within the body. Each part also recognizes the function of the other parts. Each part is cognizant of the entire body.

This amazing miracle is true of congregations as well as of individual members. Congregations are not voluntary associations of like-minded people. They are the people

¹³ *The Holy Bible : English Standard Version.* Wheaton : Standard Bible Society, 2001, S. Eph 4:15-16

¹⁴ *The Holy Bible : English Standard Version.* Wheaton : Standard Bible Society, 2001, S. 1 Co 12:14-20

of God. He calls congregations together for the same reason that he calls individual members into the body: that is, to live the life of faith, testifying to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

This arrangement of callings abhors competition. Each Pastor is called to his congregation for a specific purpose. God called him there. Even if the Pastor is unable to identify that unique purpose he believes he is there because God wanted him to be there. Likewise each congregation is in a unique setting with a unique set of members for a specific purpose that fits the context of that community. Congregations in different contexts sometimes pursue the proclamation of the Gospel in different manners. This has precedent. Jesus said to those who rejected His purpose for them:

To what then shall I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not weep." For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, "He has a demon." The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, "Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" Yet wisdom is justified by all her children.¹⁵

Jesus and John the Baptist had clearly identifiable approaches characterized as teetotaler and drunkard. Yet Jesus concludes that wisdom is justified by all her children. This text does not justify all approaches because it clearly says that "wisdom", the Word of God, is the mother of acceptable approaches.

Congregations and Pastors can be confident, not competitive in the purpose of God within the arrangement of His calling. Neither has to pursue success because they function within their calling. They cannot succeed by some criteria other than speaking the truth in love within their calling. Paul instructed the congregation in Corinth in this way. *"Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches."*¹⁶ Pastors do their part to reach the people God has gifted them to reach and to equip the saints. Congregations do their part to reach the people God has gifted them to reach.

Conclusion

The pursuit of success, the idolatry of profit, the entrepreneurial spirit is foreign to the body of Christ. We can gain the whole world and yet lose what we most desperately need. Jesus calls us to the cross not to success:

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?¹⁷

¹⁵ *The Holy Bible : English Standard Version.* Wheaton : Standard Bible Society, 2001, S. Lk 7:31-35

¹⁶ *The Holy Bible : English Standard Version.* Wheaton : Standard Bible Society, 2001, S. 1 Co 7:17

¹⁷ *The Holy Bible : English Standard Version.* Wheaton : Standard Bible Society, 2001, S. Lk 9:23-25

In the cross of Christ, dear brothers, you find the only answer to the problem of this dangerous seduction. He has given Himself for you. In Him you are forgiven, and free from the pursuit of success.

SDG

Terry Forke

Montana District Pastor's Conference

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Great Falls, MT