

By Cal Bailey

Introduction

In the early church, as in much of Africa today, priests were also farmers or worked a trade. They received gifts from their congregations, but – like St Paul – were largely self-supporting. In most of the West today, priests have become more single-minded, focussed mainly on church leadership, often enabled by centralised funding and an enlightenment culture which supported this division of labour. Many priests today inevitably have little experience of the secular work their congregations do to “earn a living”. The effect is that Monday to Saturday activities aren’t seen as serving the Kingdom of God – unless they involve church meetings or outreach – and so Christian workers in the business world have widely ceased to see their work as service.

This divide between the work of priests and their congregations is one example of the sacred-secular divide, which so profoundly challenges the relevance of the church today, because Monday has so little connection to Sunday. However, the renewal of business purpose – increasingly widespread – alongside an understanding of God’s Kingdom as extending beyond a perfected church, creates the opportunity to re-unite the missional purposes of both congregation with priest and business with church – to their immense benefit.

A brief history of business purpose

The word ‘business’ has a much briefer history than company or family – yet all had to find the wherewithal for life: food, shelter, clothing. Initially this was done at a family level; later – around the Middle Ages in Britain – companies were formed which specialised in a trade: making shoes, smelting metals, baking bread. Their purpose was to sustain the families and crafts of those who shared the endeavours – including earning money, training apprentices and defining standards; and the Guilds were established to assess both youngsters’ skills and product quality.

Since then we have taken multiple steps to focus business purpose, of which 3 are demonstrative. Firstly, in a series of Companies Acts, we have defined the accountability of directors as being primarily to their shareholders. (Technically the 2012 Act enshrined a broader conception of ‘stakeholders’, but it is very limited).

Secondly, the world of business accountability – held by the Guilds with their strong church connections – has been largely ceded to the accountancy institutions which have specified, ever more carefully, the definition of profit. Thus, the annual results of a business – comprising thousands of people and hundreds of products – are frequently reduced to a single sentence about the profit earned. What about its myriad impacts on customers’ health, or the jobs of staff, or justice in suppliers’ businesses, or the shared environment? What about relationships and

reputations? No, only the impact on shareholders really counts.

This, thirdly, has a major impact on the managers and directors of a business. When a business is considering its strategy – and this applies to almost any decision – you can be certain that a decisive aspect is the financial consequences. This has become so accepted as to be uncontroversial. The law now reverses this trend: it is within living memory that employee safety has become a requirement of every business: The Health & Safety at Work Act became law as recently as 1974.

The collective consequence of these steps is that businesses today – whatever other goals are paraded before us – are run with a single primary objective: profit. This is a very reductionist understanding of business purpose compared to our forebears; and it leaves many in the workplace today feeling over-focussed and under-excited about their work. No wonder Friday night is a time to party for so many! And no wonder the church isn't relevant for many – how will going improve my month-end performance?

What does renewal in business look like?

Renewal begins by re-visiting purpose. Business is about using the wonderful resources of God's world and the skills of its people to provide a product or service people need and will willingly pay for. It's about serving people – and that's Christ-like.

So, at its best, business isn't primarily about profit, but service. It's not about my benefit but the common good. We need to renew and re-equip the language of accountability, and challenge the goals of businesses and their people: what, for example, comprises real wealth and true happiness, and how are you helping to provide it? We need to investigate the impacts of our production and consumption in a non-defensive, open manner, which enables truth to emerge and people to be encouraged to use their skills to create, innovate and serve, enabling better outcomes for everyone – including the business itself.

This frees people to identify the most important goals, not just the most profitable goals; it encourages engagement in the broader outcomes, not just the money; and so it creates a more sustainable, fun and satisfying workplace, which is more diverse and altogether richer even if accountants find it harder to measure.

This is being practised by many businesses, often the newer ones with younger people. Think of Patagonia, or Ben & Jerry's, or Innocent Drinks. I spoke with a Research Director at Unilever who talked about the renewed enjoyment of work for his whole team when the goals were broadened from being solely profit-oriented – product cost reduction and market share increase – to life-oriented: developing recyclable packaging, treatable waste water and improved customer health. As a result, he had delayed his retirement and recovered a love for his job.

The simple truth of business is this: it is the only sustainable way of helping people out of poverty and serving most of their basic needs; yet it is the unsustainable, inhuman and greedy face of business which deters people from pursuing careers there and leaves many in the church believing it can't be part of God's purposes in the world.

How can churches support their businessfolk?

Churches which value business people demonstrate their understanding that God's Kingdom is broader than the church, their recognition of the skills of businessfolk, and their challenge to use those skills to serve others as well as themselves. This sets God's people free. An easy way to enable this is to interview people about their work, asking – as the difficult final question – ‘How does your work serve God's Kingdom?’ This reveals all manner of responses which become coffee-time conversations. In our church they have caused people to leave lousy employers, to seek more purposeful jobs, to challenge hierarchies, to help youngsters into careers. . . even to become ordained.

Another way to engage is to network! Connect up with others in your church or area who are ‘Christians in business’. This might be to pray, to discuss decision making, or to reflect on how your business might itself have a role to play in the coming of the Kingdom. . .

Cal Bailey is a writer on, and champion for, sustainable business, based in Leeds. He is a former executive in the construction group NG Bailey

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