

Why the Church is Not a Business?

While the Church shares certain characteristics with secular businesses such as the ownership of property and the employment of staff, she is fundamentally and essentially a different kind of entity. Indeed the Church is *sui generis*, a society made up of human beings, but uniquely founded, inspired and sustained by God. The Church might well learn useful lessons from business about the management of people, money and property, and about accountability, but, in essence the Church is different from business, and it is even more important that business learns the lessons God has entrusted the Church with teaching about the proper valuing of people, money and property and about human responsibility to God, to other people and to the whole created order. Biblical models such as Bride and Body of Christ, vine, flock and Temple of the Holy Spirit are much more useful to the Church than business models and far less potentially misleading.

Before entering the thicket of theory three simple questions illustrate the difficulty of regarding the Church in business terms. Are the laity the customers of the clergy, or are clergy and laity co-workers, or are the laity the employers of the clergy? All those questions could be answered in the affirmative – which is not the case in any business!

A business is owned by human beings (shareholders, workers' cooperative, family, an individual, national or local government). A business supplies its customers with goods or services and hopes to make a profit (almost always a monetary profit, except perhaps in barter economies). (Trying to run the NHS and other public services on a business basis founders on the fact that there is no profit in the classical sense in public service. Hence absurdities such as the internal market.) Apart from one man businesses, a business employs staff directly or indirectly. A business requires raw materials and/or goods and services usually supplied by (purchased from) others in order to produce its own product or services. A business has to identify its actual and potential customers – people who need, want or who can be persuaded (by advertising) to want the goods and services the business has for sale. A business may change its products in the event of insufficient demand or a lack of the resources needed to produce them.

It is sometimes said that profit is the only motive for conducting a business, but this is an oversimplification. People may go into a particular line of business because of the personal satisfaction they derive from the work or because they see that what the business produces is of benefit to society. For these reasons most businesses do not ruthlessly pursue monetary gain irrespective of the human values which matter to the owners, the managers, the staff, the customers or to society at large. However, in the last analysis, a business' income must exceed its outgoings – even if part or all of its income is a subsidy from the taxpayer (such as the railways).

In all the essentials, I would contend that the Church differs from a business in every important respect in the foregoing two paragraphs.

Who owns the Church? In order to answer that question, one would have to ask what the Church is. Of course the Church is the people. The Church is the people of God. The Church can have only one owner, God Himself. For people to own people would be slavery! However, if God is the owner, can it make any sense to talk about the profit motive? God does not need anything. He does not want anything and if He did He could create it Himself *ex nihilo*. (Psalm 50). Businesses are accountable to shareholders, the workers, the customers, society at large, any other stakeholders. The Church is accountable to God.

[Of course, businesses also ought to regard themselves as accountable to God and the Church offers herself as a model of accountability to Him. The Church is accountable to other people and other groups of people under God, but only to people under God. She has to resist, for example, the state if the state tries to inhibit public worship. She has to resist her own members if they expect the Church to put their own interests before the needs of the world.]

Of course the people of God as a corporation own buildings and money (the word being derived from the Latin *corpus*, body, and the Church being *Corpus Christi*, the Body of Christ). We Christians might learn from business how to be good stewards of this property, but it is not ultimately ours. The money, buildings, etc., are held in trust by us for God and we hold them in order to do God's Work, not to make profits for ourselves or for Him.

Who are the Church's customers? Even those who think of the Church in business terms have trouble with this question. Are the customers the people in the pews Sunday by Sunday? Sometimes they are so identified, but equally the people in the pews are identified as the work force – lay ministry, every member ministry. Are the customers the people presently outside the worshipping community who want the Church's services for christenings, weddings and funerals or for the Church's benign influence on the political process, her charitable activities and her traditional or radical {depending on circumstances} place within the life of the nation? Are our customers those who might be persuaded to join the worshipping community if we modified our "product" or improved our advertising? Or are the Church's customers all the people of the world (and perhaps the non-human creation as well)?

A business serves customers for the good both of the business and of the customers. Generally speaking, the customers recognise their need or desire for what the business offers and profit is what the business gains from meeting that need or desire. With the Church, things are entirely different. We believe that the whole world needs what we have to offer – eternal life in Jesus Christ. We do not expect any reward for offering the world eternal life. In fact we are constrained to proclaim this Good News because we ourselves have already received it (II Corinthians 5¹⁴⁻²¹). We cannot but share the faith if we have truly apprehended it ourselves. We have eternal life as the gift of God and we would be very wrong to expect any additional reward for doing our duty as God's people. To ask people to pay for God's grace is the very serious sin of simony.

The whole world needs what God has commissioned the Church to offer. *Just as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you.* (John 20²¹). Paradoxically, however, the Bible leads us to believe that most people are so far ignorant of their need for God that they will turn deaf ears to the message and very often persecute God's messengers.

There is the further implication in a great deal of the Bible that it is quite easy to gain a hearing and to fill temples and churches by telling people what they want to hear – tell them that God promises them peace and prosperity and play down the ethical and moral requirements of true religion.

This fact makes it very hard to evaluate what the Church does in any way that would make sense to a business. Large congregations may be an indication of effective evangelism or of accommodating the worldliness of a basically faithless people. A Church may be materially rich because she has inspired her members to give generously to the glory of God and the needs of others (the same thing surely) or because the Church herself has become greedy and selfish, preying on people's fears or promising them blessings in return for cash. A Church may exercise great influence in society because she has earned respect by her humble service or because the high and mighty are grateful to a compromised Church which lends their wrong-doing a cloak of religious respectability. In the end, only God know what is in the hearts of people and it is in the heart that the Church is effective or not.

Given that what the Church offers, we offer without charge (Isaiah 55^{1&2}), does it make sense to refer to people as customers at all? British Rail still suffers derision for calling its passengers customers. It makes much less sense to call Christians, potential Christians or the world in general the Church's customers.

Marks and Spencer's can ditch the St Michael's range of Y fronts if more customers prefer boxers, but St Michael's Church can only offer the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 3) whether our "customers" want it or not (Ezekiel 2⁵). We can change the packaging and possibly learn how to do it from the secular advertising industry, but we cannot change the message. Our concern is the welfare of those to whom we preach the Word, not any profit we might make. We ought therefore to be immune from the insincerity which underpins (and ultimately undermines) the advertising industry.

Shareholders and employees expect a return, a reward for their contribution – dividends, wages, salaries. Christians, the people who constitute the Church, do not do God's work for any reward they expect. We do not seek to earn God's favour or to earn anything else from Him. Eternal life is the gift of God (Romans 6²³). The Church (Christian people) do God's work for love. We are amateurs (whether paid by the Church or not) in the true sense. It is because God loves us that He redeems us and because God sets us free we are free to love Him with all our hearts and if we love God with all our hearts we inevitably love our neighbours as ourselves and it is because we love that we serve God and neighbour.

Any other reward is irrelevant – dividend, salary or wage. Indeed just before St Paul says that eternal life is the gift of God, he says that death is the wages of sin – a significant contrast, I think.

The Church as a corporation does of course employ people to do all sorts of jobs from leading worship to running charities and to unblocking drains or digging graves and the Church might learn how to do this efficiently by studying best employment practice in secular businesses, but the Church will be wary of adopting the ethos of organisations which regard people as human resources rather than as brothers and sisters made in God's image for whom Christ died on the Cross. Indeed the Church ought to be reminding business to treat people as people rather than as human resources.

When considering recruitment, deployment and training, again the Church might (warily) examine secular business practice for possible models, but she emphatically must not lose sight of the counterintuitive lesson from the Bible. God's choice for some of the most significant positions in Salvation History has very often been the man or (occasionally woman) who appears to be inadequate, unwilling and totally unprepared – Moses, Jeremiah, Amos, Paul, etc., etc.. Paul was not only first called to be an apostle on his way to imprison the Christians in Damascus, but he explicitly did not go to the existing apostles for training. (Galatians ^{116&17}). The reward for some of the most effective and faithful of God's workers has often been to be despised and persecuted, to live a life of poverty and to suffer a martyr's death – quite the opposite of the rewards and incentives business offers to potential recruits. *My grace is sufficient for you.* (II Corinthians 12⁹), rather than a good salary, a guaranteed annual bonus and a pension scheme.

And finally, the resources and raw materials with which we work. We do not deal in commodities which fluctuate in price and availability on the world market. Neither do we rely on services provided by fallible human beings. *Our sufficiency is of God.* (II Corinthians 3⁵). What we have to offer is both limitless and without price. We have no need to make a return on our investment in order to remain in business!

Let me dare to suggest that if a given Church appears to have run out of resources for its mission it is either because the resources which God has supplied are not being utilised (because people are giving less than they could and should of the time, talents and money God has given them) or because the Church's resources are being wasted (on buildings, meetings and administration, say) rather than being spent on mission. [Of course time, money and talents wisely spent on buildings, meetings and administration can facilitate mission, but too often the tail wags the dog!]

The Church belongs to God. All Christian people have received freely from Him everything which we require to fulfil ourselves as human beings, the children of God, created in the image of Him Who is love. Our mission is to the whole world. God supplies everything we need in order to conduct that mission. So in all the important points, we are utterly different from any secular corporation. It is true that we might learn from them some of the second order techniques of management. Much more importantly we ought to be teaching secular corporations the first order principles of unselfish motivation and ethical principles in dealing with customers, staff, shareholders and the world at large (including animals, plants and the inanimate creation).

It is tempting to model the Church on business because business commands so much more prestige than does the Church in modern society, but it was probably ever thus. Nebuchadnezzar, Augustus Caesar and Josef Stalin probably in their own day appeared far more impressive than the people of God and no doubt many people were dazzled or bullied into accepting their hegemony. But the Church is still here and they are not! And I am confident that we shall still be around long after the City of London, the "modern" state and the multinational corporation. What matters is not how we appear in the eyes of the world (packed churches, large bank accounts, being generally expected, although all those things might be nice). What matters is that *a man be found faithful.* (I Corinthians 4²).