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The Role of Business in Making Poverty History: Liberation *versus* Transformation

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A large conglomeration of NGOs, campaign groups, trade unions, celebrities, churches and faith groups has been mobilized under the banner 'Make Poverty History'. While poverty has always been with us, this movement has helped to ensure that it has reached the top of the agenda of the world's richest countries. For all its strengths, however, the campaign underestimates the potential of business to help in the fight.

After fifty years and more than a trillion dollars spent on international development, one third of the world's population still lives on less than US\$2 per day. Yet a flourishing and responsible business sector can deliver the kind of economic growth that lifts people out of poverty.

Business alone is not enough, of course. The campaign rightly stresses the importance of well-targeted aid, debt cancellation and reform of global trading rules. The kind of social institutions that characterise free societies are also needed, such as property rights, democracy and the rule of law. These have strong biblical foundations, and provide the context in which business can flourish. Every country also needs the exercise of virtue beyond the requirements of the law. But these basic conditions aside, poverty will only be banished long-term through the vigorous growth of enterprise. This has been true for every rich country, and it's true for every poor one now.

Why then is this so often ignored or denied? One reason is the church's generally negative attitude towards business. This paper calls, therefore, for the development of a theology of business that is based on the paradigm of *transformation* rather than the one that has been used extensively ever since the advent of liberation theology in the 1960s - *liberation*.

1. Christian attitudes to business

To set this task in a theological framework I shall use Richard Niebuhr's characterization (or 'typology') of Christian perspectives on culture. Although it involves simplification, it remains a useful analytical tool. When applied to attitudes towards business, the following types emerge:

- I Christ against business
- II Christ subsumed by business
- III Christ subsumes business
- IV Christ and business in paradox
- V Christ transforming business

This paper allows space only for a discussion of the first and last of these.

i. Christ against business

With this type, the impact of the fall on business is stressed to such an extent that Christ is seen in opposition to business. The only option for a Christian is to dissociate as much as possible from the corrupting effects of the business world and to focus instead on the new order established by Christ. This attitude has a long history and it pervades contemporary theology, largely through the impact of liberation theology.

ii. Christ transforming business

With this final type, business is affirmed as an arena of Christ's transformative work. Because business is flawed (along with all other spheres of human society) it is vulnerable to error, perversion, and evil. But because it is under God's sovereign rule, human beings have both the capacity and the calling to embody Christian principles within their business activity. As corrupted good, rather than evil, business needs reform rather than replacement.

Because of the dominance of Type I in the church, which co-exists with a general antipathy towards business in contemporary culture, it is important that the weaknesses of this type are exposed. Two of these will be given attention before turning to two features that recommend Type V.

2. Why Type I won't do

i. Focus on distribution

In recent years most mainstream churches have produced statements on the economy. While these documents have many commendable features, they tend to assume that the processes of production are of little moral importance compared to the inequities of distribution.

The ethical demands of distribution cannot, however, be separated from the ethical demands of production, not least because distribution is dependent on production. Contemporary theologies and spiritualities that seek to identify with the poor and read the gospel through their eyes need to be careful, therefore, that they do not misunderstand the interests of those in poverty, which include benefiting from the wealth-creating processes of production and not just from more equitable distribution.

ii. Business theology stifled

Secondly, the mistrust that inevitably accompanies Type I serves to stifle a full-orbed theology of business. Such mistrust became a predominant feature of the higher social classes between the two world wars

of the twentieth century. This was reflected in the universities, which produced no more than a handful of business departments. Amongst those graduating from Cambridge in 1937-1938, fewer sons followed their fathers into business than into any other vocation. Business was left to recruit people who had failed to make it into university.

Few periods have witnessed as much opprobrium towards business, however, as the current one, largely directed at multinationals. National elites have seen these as threats to their rightful authority; conservative populists have condemned them as agents of cosmopolitanism; socialists and anti-globalisation protestors have anathematised them as 'the highest stage of capitalism', accusing them of the destruction of cultures and ecosystems; extremes on both left and right have blamed them for the loss of Western jobs.

While the church's mission should include helping the institutions of human life, including business, to find and fulfil their various callings and charisms, by colluding with this climate of mistrust the church will be unable to articulate what it expects of these institutions.

3. Why Type V will do

Whereas Type I won't do, Type V will do. The choice of words is deliberate. It's not that Type I has to be dismissed entirely. There will always be situations in business in which Christ's 'no!' to sin should be clearly heard. Likewise, 'transformation' is not such an all-encompassing paradigm that it is the only one needed to address business. It is, rather, a paradigm that is necessary if the church is to develop a theology of business that makes sense both to those in poverty and to those in business. There are two key reasons why this is so.

i. Takes account of the role of business

The Latin roots of the word 'company' lie in the two words *cum* and *panis*, which when put together mean 'breaking bread together'. The word 'corporation', moreover, comes from the Latin *corpus*, which means 'body'. These meanings are deeply suggestive of the way in which contemporary business can be a positive agent in society, helping to build credible, meaningful and inclusive patterns of community. They even suggest that in doing so they manifest a form of sacramentality. This certainly corresponds with the experience of Christian business people, who often find that their workplaces provide a relational context for ministry that is deeper and more inclusive than that provided by their local church.

A single example from the past is sufficient to highlight the transformative potential of an inclusive approach to business. Liberation theology assumes that social revolution is the preserve of the economically excluded. And yet the early history of Marks & Spencer suggests that business can be a vehicle of such revolution by way of its inclusiveness. By the mid-1920s, the four brothers-in-law who ran the company had turned it into a major chain of variety stores. At this point they could have retired to a life of leisure. Instead, after visits made by Simon Marks to US retailers in 1924, they decided to re-think the purpose of their business. Its mission, they decided, was 'social revolution'. It would seek subvert the class structure of Victorian England by making goods of upper-class quality available to the working and lower middle classes, at prices they could easily afford. The focus would be on clothing, as this was the most visible of class distinctions.

Instead, therefore, of seeing business as the power from which we must be liberated we could come to hold it in a similar regard to the way we hold our churches, neighbourhoods, voluntary organizations, schools and hospitals. If we were to do so we would still find plenty wrong with business. But the attitude of trust that would spring from such regard would mean that any judgements and moral demands we were to make would be more likely to be heeded. Otherwise, as Ronald Cole-Turner writes: 'It is altogether too likely that the church will marginalize itself in the role of chaplain, picking up the pieces, caring for the bruised, mopping up the damage, but never engaging the engines of transformation themselves, steering, persuading and transforming the transformers'.

Without developing a theology of business, it is doubtful whether the church will be able to construct a viable vision for society, as business has become the chief agent of social transformation. It is the social form distinctive of an increasing amount of co-operative activity outside the family, government and personal friendships. While nation-states have been on the defensive and churches and trade unions have been in decline, business has been gaining strength. Areas of social life that were once assumed to be 'public' are increasingly regarded as the preserve of business. Given such seismic change, it could be argued that anyone intent on maximizing their social impact would be better pursuing a career in business than running for political office, joining the armed forces or becoming a church leader!

Business is a social institution to which the world is becoming increasingly committed. The biblical message needs, therefore, to be dynamically reconceived

in a socio-economic context far removed from those of biblical times. This task is at least as important to the future of humanity as today's theologies of sexuality and biomedical ethics.

ii. Takes account of the biblical story

A second key advantage of the transformative paradigm is that it takes account of the biblical story of creation, fall, redemption and consummation. It is thereby able to avoid extreme positions that either denounce business as irretrievably corrupt or embrace it as synonymous with God's kingdom. Unlike a liberational perspective, it encourages Christians to participate in business to mitigate the effects of the fall, further the effects of redemption and anticipate the coming new order.

It therefore allows business to be seen as one of the foundational spheres of human life that provide the moral framework for human flourishing. This sphere is constituted and shaped, at least in the current era, by market-orientated institutions and practices – in a similar way that the political sphere, at least in high-income countries, is dominated by democratically-oriented institutions and practices – and should therefore be accorded ethical significance and affirmation.

This is particularly important because of the potential of business to extend the kingdom of God, which is breaking into the created and fallen world through the redeeming work of Christ. Christian mission and development agencies are slowly waking up to this potential, and some are beginning to encourage business professionals to use their commercial skills to bring both spiritual and material uplift to needy countries. This new model of mission reflects the fact that, under the impact of globalisation, there has never been a time when so many people in the world have belonged to the same community of work. Business is thereby becoming a transcendent global culture. Through their involvement in it, business missionaries, or 'kingdom professionals' as they are sometimes called, are finding that otherwise impenetrable societies are opening up to the gospel *and* experiencing increasing prosperity.

Whereas this global business culture can be used to dominate, exploit and demean, many are finding that it can be a vehicle of social justice, dignity and freedom from oppression. The critical question before us is not, therefore, 'globalisation – good or bad?' but 'what *kind* of globalisation is good?' Whether it turns out in practice to be largely good or largely bad partly depends on how radically and creatively business people follow Christ into the global marketplace, seeking to pervade their business activities with his truth, liberty and justice.

For the call to seek first the kingdom of God (Mt 6.33) is not just for ‘professional missionaries’, leaving business people to support them financially. Rather, in the 21st century, business holds a vital key to unlock nations for the Kingdom of God. Countries that have closed the door to traditional missionaries are competing with each other to attract professional entrepreneurs who can help grow their economies. Building opportunities for mission through business is a vital and strategic means of co-operating with God in his mission to the world.

This mission involves bringing salvation, healing and *shalom* to every sphere of society. The impact of the fall is waiting to be undone. Because of the cross and resurrection, evil can be overturned and the scourge of poverty can be addressed. History is replete with examples of how Christians have picked up this challenge – through the political framework of the Roman Empire, through the invention of the printing press, through even the colonial apparatus, and, most recently, through global business enterprise.

Christian business people working in the global economy are uniquely placed to help transform the circumstances of the world’s poor. As they do so, they are ensuring that globalisation works as a blessing, rather than as a curse. They are helping to realize business’ potential to bring social uplift, serve the common good, and even help protect the environment. The perspectives derived from liberation theology have to set aside for the sake of a rigorous, biblically based, non-ideological engagement with the transformative role of business in today’s world. Without this, it is not obvious that the church will have a sufficiently compelling vision to allow it to ‘make a difference’ in contemporary culture. For a reconstruction of its theology will require a major shift in orientation and tone. But such a reconstruction is an important first step in making poverty history.

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