

Business People and the Local Church

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Many Christians who work in business feel very lonely in their jobs as Christians. That is a clear trend for which I could adduce much anecdotal evidence. This is despite the fact that the number of Christian organisations in the work-place seems, if anything, to be increasing. Many companies, especially the larger ones, have a Christian fellowship which runs lunch-time or evening meetings on a regular basis. In Britain, the ICF (formerly the Industrial Christian Fellowship, now the Industry Churches Forum) produces a stream of quarterly magazines and pamphlets; Christian Impact (in conjunction with the UCCF Business Studies Group) holds annual conferences for middle and senior managers; there are lunchtime services and talks at leading churches in the City; and 'prayer breakfasts' for businesspeople take place in many of the larger cities. Industrial chaplains continue to visit work-places up and down the country. This represents only a sample of a wide range of Christian organisations which are active in the business world. However, such activity is patchy, and not always well publicised. Many Christian businesspeople do not work near these centres of fellowship, and have not necessarily heard of them if they do. The sense of isolation and of feeling unsupported remains strong among large numbers of men and women.

It is also true that the fellowship to which the majority of Christians in business would probably look first and foremost for support is the local church which they attend Sunday by Sunday. But do they find support there? Here one has to acknowledge a highly paradoxical situation.

A paradox

I have recently read *The Irrelevant Church*, by Robin Gamble. He is the Anglican vicar of a working-class parish in Bradford, and from a working-class background himself. The question on the book's back cover sums up his theme: 'How can the church discard its middle-class, religious corsetry, and establish itself as a vital and relevant force in working-class communities?' Gamble passionately indicts the Church in England for conspiring in the creation of 'two nations'. He writes thus:

The one force or movement in society which is supposed to follow its Lord's commitment to the poor and needy, has in effect become a bourgeois institution. Jesus came and actually lived among the poor, but his twentieth-century followers prefer the semis of suburbia. Jesus was the God of the Incarnation, he actually became 'one of us', but today's Christians have opted for incarnation with a nicely trimmed

lawn back and front. The kingdom was heralded by the Good News being preached to the poor, but in our churches it is preached to the middle class.¹

Although I would quibble with aspects of his thesis, there is much painful truth in Gamble's analysis. His book is full of fresh ideas for making the Church less stuffy and more dynamic. He is also correct in characterising it as a predominantly middle-class institution.

People who work in management positions come, generally speaking, from the middle-classes. It might therefore be expected that a middle-class church would suit them down to the ground. Such a church would have their concerns, needs and interests very much at heart. It would pray for them regularly, provide preaching that was highly relevant to their line of work, and celebrate the task of wealth creation in which they are involved. But businesspeople testify with an almost unanimous voice that their weekly experience of church services is nothing like that. The world of business, commerce and industry goes largely ignored. Here lies the paradox which I referred to earlier.

The truth of the matter seems to be that although most churches *are* middle-class, they have an uneasy conscience about the matter. They have tried to take to heart the message of people like Bishop David Sheppard, with his 'Bias to the Poor', or liberation theology, with its 'power for the powerless'. Although they still make relatively little impact in working-class areas, the prayers, actions and financial resources of the Church are being focused increasingly on the more underprivileged sections of society. The Report *Faith in the City*, and the Church Urban Fund which it spawned, is a notable example of this.

Unfortunately, church leaders often operate according to some mistaken presuppositions in this area. They assume that concern for those who lack power and influence is compromised if one expresses sentiments which might be interpreted as support for those who wield power and influence. They imagine that managers and managed are likely to be at loggerheads, whereas the realities of a highly competitive world economy are that the two are often locked together in a struggle for survival. They look for wealth to be redistributed (rightly so), but do not pay sufficient attention to the fact that it has first to be created. Of course I am indulging in broad generalisations — to which there will be many exceptions — but it is attitudes like these which help to account for the fact that businesspeople's experience of their local church frequently leaves them feeling unsupported.

To support people but at the same time to challenge them is the dual task of the Church in every generation, for every class of people. It is not uncritical support which businesspeople either need or, generally speaking, want. The attitude which hurts them most is when the Church simply passes them by: when it makes no mention of or appears indifferent to their concerns. When preachers openly challenge specific trends in the business world there is at least a measure of engagement taking place. Members of the congregation who work in business can either heed or respond to such challenges.

1 Robin Gamble, *The Irrelevant Church*, Monarch, Eastbourne 1991, p 118.

I shall suggest three particular areas of the local church's life, prayer, preaching and celebration, where more connections could be made with people's working experience.

Intercession for business

In exploring the link between work and public worship, we have used the following exercise during the seminar weeks on business and management which we have run at Ridley Hall. We have asked participants the simple question: How often do you recall people in the following occupations being remembered in prayer in church services? The answers given are remarkably consistent. They are, on average, as follows:

Quite often: nurse, teacher, politician

Occasionally: ambulanceman, farmer, policeman, soldier, union leader

Never: bank manager, broadcaster, corporation chairman, design engineer, salesman, solicitor

A clear message comes through. The people whom the Church prays for most regularly in its public intercessions are those who work in the 'caring services' (e.g., doctors, nurses, social workers), in education, or in positions of political leadership. Every now and again it prays for those who are at the forefront of crisis situations (strikes, wars, droughts, etc.) or who have the task of maintaining law and order. It hardly prays at all for those involved in any type of commercial activity. Surprisingly enough, this remains true even when the country is caught in the throes of a severe recession, and when there are reports of companies having to close and more people being made redundant almost every day.

It would be unfair to say that the clergy alone are to blame for this. In many churches lay people are heavily involved in the leading of intercessions. As in many areas of life, a disturbing process of learned behaviour takes place, so that people unconsciously absorb messages from others about what is the acceptable way to pray. It is refreshing when someone defies the trend and breaks out of the conventional rut.

True, there may be a genuine uncertainty as to how we should pray when it comes to business. At one extreme, we are rightly wary about asking God to take sides in a takeover dispute or to give a boost to retailers' profits. At the other, 'God bless this' and 'God bless that' is open to the charge of being vague and bland. But this problem can soon be addressed with a little serious reflection. We can surely pray wholeheartedly for:

- The bringing of our economic system under the authority of Christ
- The creation of companies which are genuine caring communities
- A spirit of responsible stewardship in managing God's world, so that its resources are used fully without the causing of irreparable damage
- God's sustaining love for those who take costly self-sacrificial decisions in the work-place

Then there are blessings for which it is appropriate to thank God in a business context. In the West we often give thanks for the stability of our political system. Does it ever occur to us to express gratitude for the stability of our *banking* system? It should be possible to do this without provoking the

assumption that this implies unquestioning support for everything the banks get up to.

Another curious anomaly is this. As already noted, the world's prime ministers and presidents do feature regularly on the Church's intercessory agenda. Yet the chairmen of many large multinational companies preside over larger annual budgets than the gross national products of some small Third World countries. The men who run Exxon, Glaxo, IBM, ICI and General Motors have a formidable amount of power at their disposal. Is it not important to pray for them, that they influence the many countries in which they work for good, and not for evil? Another category of people who wield formidable influence are the money market dealers on the world's stock exchanges. On so-called Black Wednesday in October 1992, the Conservative Government proved completely powerless to shore up sterling in the face of the solid conviction held by the foreign exchange dealers that the pound was overvalued. The role which they play is a matter of public concern, and therefore proper material for corporate prayer.

Helping people to pray

There is a personal side to prayer as well as a public one. Businesspeople are not simply those who are prayed for (or, more frequently, not). They are also subjects of prayer, men and women who realise that setting aside time to be with God is vital for their own personal wellbeing. But here too there are problems which need to be addressed.

Along with many other people, businesspeople often find it difficult to maintain a disciplined prayer life. The pressures of their respective jobs, the length of hours which the job consumes, the demands made by family, church and other interests, all conspire to put the squeeze on a regular time of personal devotion. One idea that clergy might usefully pursue is a crash course on how to pray for busy people, probably within the programme of regular Sunday teaching. I am sure that there would be an appreciative response from members of the congregation in management positions.

The fact is that in the area of personal prayer, people often have unhelpful burdens of guilt and unrealistic expectations. Because they feel that they ought to be spending half or three quarters of an hour every day alone with God, and they never manage to achieve this for all sorts of reasons, it is easy to feel a failure and give up altogether. For some it will be far better to set much more modest targets during the week (perhaps making use of slack moments during the day, such as time spent on travel), and to carve out a more extended period in prayer at the week-end. I have made a few practical suggestions in this area in my booklet *Living with Affluence*.²

A wise pastor recognises that in prayer, as in other areas, different individuals operate according to different rhythms. The same pattern will not be appropriate for everyone. It is also crucial to help people to see prayer first and foremost in terms of *relationship*: cultivating a healthy relationship with God, keeping it fresh and vibrant. Prayer in its essence is not a task to

2 Richard Higginson, *Living with Affluence: Prayer, Prosperity and the Christian Business Person*, Grove Books, Nottingham 1992.

be performed, but the condition of consciously being with God. Intercession, similarly, is being with God with people on your heart. If we care about the people whom we rub shoulders with day by day, it is only natural that we should want to bring colleagues, customers and even competitors before God in prayer. One of the skills a good prayer counsellor can teach is how to impose order and instil imagination in doing this while avoiding the condition in which intercession becomes a chore.

Preaching which bites

Wherever one goes in the Church today, a common refrain is heard: that outstanding preachers are very thin on the ground. This seems to be the case even in the evangelical wing of the Church, where the emphasis put on the preaching of the word has always been strong. Why is it that people so often leave church feeling un nourished?

I suggest that sermons often disappoint on one of two grounds. In many churches the best attended time of worship is a family service where the fare is deliberately light and the message easily accessible to everyone. In the hands of a gifted communicator who has a flair for the unexpected and some good visual aids up his or her sleeve, the result is sometimes memorable. Too often, however, the talk says nothing which makes one think, and fails to expand even the horizons of the children: it is a pedestrian retracing of familiar ground. If this becomes the congregation's regular diet, there is a danger that its members will never 'leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity' (Heb.6:1).

A second peril is the preacher who is the very opposite of light. On the contrary, he speaks solidly for 25 or 30 minutes and gives systematic, thorough expositions of the biblical text. He expounds the word very conscientiously. The question here is whether he (less likely she) engages effectively with the modern world. Certainly, attempts at application may be made, but these are usually in a highly generalised form. References to 'church', 'work' and 'home' never become more specific. The consequence is that the sermon lacks bite.

I believe that it is possible to steer a middle ground between these two approaches. It is possible, within a time-limit of, say, 20 minutes, to say something which engages honestly with the biblical text and makes imaginative connections with life today. It is possible to give a message which is succinct and memorable. It is possible to *move* people: in particular to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable, as someone once described the role of the preacher.

The use of illustrations which are specific but, at the same time, representative, is a vital aspect of such preaching. There is a telling example of this in one of the pastoral epistles, where Paul is exhorting his young colleague Timothy: 'You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier on service gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to satisfy the one who enlisted him. An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. It is the hard-working farmer who

ought to have the first share of the crops. Think over what I say, for the Lord will grant you understanding in everything' (2 Tim. 2:1-7).

Here Paul draws lessons from three different spheres of life, military, sporting and agricultural. Each makes a slightly different point. The example of the soldier teaches endurance and concentrated service, the athlete teaches discipline, and the farmer teaches perseverance. Taken together, they illustrate vividly what it means for Timothy to be *strong* in the grace that is in Christ Jesus (v 1).

Suppose that Timothy then made use of these illustrations in his preaching to the congregation over which he had charge at Ephesus. After all, the apostle encourages him to pass on what he, Paul, has taught him. The congregation would probably include a sprinkling of farmers, soldiers and athletes. If not, they would be figures with whom the church members were familiar and could easily identify. The result: a general moral point which could go down like a lead balloon is brought to life by the use of specific illustrations.

More teaching of this type is needed in our churches today. Risky though it is, the preacher should venture to suggest what a particular point of application might mean in a variety of occupational situations. Men and women who work in business should be able to recognise themselves in the people described along with other church members. One day, the preacher might make his or her point with reference to the building society manager, the housewife, and the probation officer; another day, it could be the engineer, the check-out girl at the supermarket, and the child in the school playground. It is all part of a process of helping people see work as a place where faith can be put into action.

Some parts of the Bible lend themselves to this process of horizon-bridging particularly well. Imagine a congregation which includes an unusually high number of individuals in senior business, political, and civil service positions. A sermon series on the Old Testament figures of Joseph, Daniel or Esther would present a fascinating challenge. They were all God-fearing people in high places, wrestling with questions of conscience in a distinctly pagan environment. To identify their crucial qualities of character, and to see (reading between as well as along the lines) what were the issues on which they were and were not prepared to compromise, could prove enormously enlightening for such a congregation.

For sermon read seminar?

The sermon in its traditional format still has great potential, but it also has its limitations. It is difficult for a preacher to engage in serious depth with complex social and ethical issues without leaving most of the congregation feeling rather frustrated. There will be points which need qualification, questions which are begged, bold moral judgements to which some will want to respond. Most sermons are a case of the preacher standing six foot above contradiction. Certainly, individuals can take points up with him or her afterwards, but the wider body misses out on whatever constructive interchange may ensue.

Preaching which is a conscious grappling with substantive topical issues

(as opposed to sermons where reference to those issues is more incidental) needs to incorporate elements of dialogue. Here one would like to see more churches being prepared to experiment; some are doing so. One possibility is for people to be invited to stay behind after a service to ask questions of the preacher and engage in discussion. Another is to try what has sometimes been called All-Age Learning or, in the United States, Adult Sunday School. Here the sermon is replaced by something more akin to a seminar or, very likely, a series of seminars. People choose one from a number of different areas of interest to attend. A seminar leader provides a certain amount of input which serves to stimulate group discussion. The seminar might take 45 minutes (longer than the average sermon), with the rest of the service probably being condensed to allow room for it.

The church which I attend in Cambridge has run programmes of this type for limited periods of time, notably Advent and Lent. Seminars of particular interest to businesspeople, such as 'Using the Bible in Ethics', or 'Prayer and Work', have featured among the options offered. The response has been very positive. A greater sense of participation and depth of engagement are achieved than is possible within the normal run of Sunday services. A church can only sustain such a programme all the year round, however, if it has a large group of unusually talented and energetic seminar leaders at its disposal. A continual diet of this sort would probably not be desirable in any case. There is still a place for the more proclamatory style of speaking associated with the sermon.

A festival of work

A third area of church worship in which the theme of work might be further developed is that of celebration. There is already one well-established example of this, in the form of Harvest Festivals. The origins of this go right back to Deuteronomy: 'When you come into the land which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance, and have taken possession of it, and live in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God gives you, and you shall put it in a basket, and you shall go to the place which the Lord your God will choose ...' (Deut. 26:1-2).

Here there is an invigorating sense that work is God-given, and the product of work part of God's blessing upon his people. The Church today still seems to find that easier to accept in relation to agriculture than to industry. There is an Industry Sunday celebrated in some churches, but it has never caught on widely in the way that fruit, vegetables and loaves continue to adorn church buildings every Harvest Sunday. But in societies where only a tiny fraction of the population is involved in agriculture, this state of affairs is becoming increasingly anachronistic.

I suggest there is scope in every church's life (urban and rural) for an occasional Festival of Work. This might well include both an all-together time of worship and a breaking up into smaller groups, along the lines of service experimentation suggested above. The aim would be one of celebrating and exploring the work — paid and unpaid — performed by the whole congregation. It could include such activities as:

- The bringing of an object associated with each person's work
- Sharing a testimony about how the person sees it as God's work
- Offering the object and ourselves to God in his service
- Giving thanks to God for everyone's contribution
- Sharing and praying about problem-areas at work
- Collecting for a cause associated with a selected area of work
- Praying more widely for the work situation in the country (to which one could add continent or world)

The focus in doing this would not be particularly on business. But it is likely that an effect would be to highlight the positive contribution that commerce and industry make to the community.

Bread and wine, product of human hands

One act of celebration which already takes place on a regular basis is the service of Holy Communion. Here elements which human beings have played a part in creating (the bread has to be baked, and the wine fermented) are transformed into tokens of eternal significance. It will be appropriate on occasion to draw attention to this dimension of human labour, though the effect should not be to detract from the centrality of God's grace in the saving death of Christ. I once asked an ordinand to consider how the Communion might be handled in a service intended to highlight the theme of work. Using as her basis Rite A in the ASB, and building upon published material from a variety of sources, the imaginative alternatives she came up with included the following:

Proper Preface:

And now we give you thanks that through your Son we have an example to follow for the whole of our lives, at home and at work. In sharing our earthly life, he shared also our experiences of toil and labour, and entered fully into our human condition.

Breaking of Bread:

Though our lives may be different, and our occupations varied, we are one in our Lord Jesus Christ. We come together, to share the one bread, product also of human hands, and so we share in the body of Christ.

Words of Invitation:

Come, draw near with faith. Receive the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, who shared our human life, its joys and its sorrows. Come, find rest for your souls, and refreshment for your lives in one who knew the toils and struggles of human life. Eat, drink, remember he died for you, and lives for you, and feed on him in your heart by faith with thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving:

Father of all, we thank you and praise you for the gift of your Son to humanity: for his sharing of our earthly life; for his work as a carpenter; for

his understanding of those whose jobs made them outcasts, but also of those who held positions of honour; for his own ministry, and that of his disciples. And now, above all, we thank you for feeding us with his body and blood. Send us back into the world, refreshed by this heavenly food, to work as he did, and, by the power of your Spirit, to live our lives as witnesses to his life, death and resurrection. Amen.

Blessing:

Christ whose family were carpenters, and whose company was tax collectors, uphold you in your work, give you a sense of value in what you do, and guide you in your decision-making; and the blessing of God...

There is some imbalance in the direction of a rather negative view of work in these selections (much about work as toilsome, little about its creative aspects), and liturgists could doubtless do some useful polishing up. But the material has the virtues of relevance and freshness. When eucharistic liturgy comprises the same familiar phrases week by week, it is all too easy for the congregation's concentration to wander. To emphasise a particular dimension from time to time serves as a valuable stimulus to thought about what it is that the gathered community is celebrating.

Every member ministry

My plea in the article thus far has been that people in the local church in general, and businesspeople in particular, be more satisfactorily nourished. This is not to belittle much excellent work which goes on in lots of churches, including the sterling efforts made by some clergy to keep in touch with what the members of their congregations do during the week. Overall, however, too many Christians are leaving Sunday and entering Monday feeling poorly fed. The body of Christ is supposed to be 'nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments', growing 'with a growth that is from God' (Col.2:19).

Paul's teaching on the nature of the Church, however, emphasises that relationships within it are mutual. Lay people should not be thinking just about what they can get from the Church; they also have much to give. There is a wide variety of ministries in which they can play their part, and the development of this aspect of the Church's life is a welcome feature of the last twenty-five years.

There are particular gifts which businesspeople may have to offer the Church. They are accustomed to drawing up specific objectives, devising clear lines of accountability, and analysing the effectiveness of new initiatives. Churches are often surprisingly muddled in the way they go about their business; many lack even an adequate understanding of their own mission. While there are important differences between companies and churches as organisations (such as the fact that only a few individuals are employed by a church), many general management skills and techniques are relevant in both spheres of operation. Church leaders are wise to draw on the fund of experience in running complex corporate entities which are often available in their congregation.

There are also specific tasks in the church's life which may seem precisely matched to a particular businessperson's skills or gifts. Perhaps the church membership includes an advertising executive who makes a superb editor of the church magazine, and an imaginative architect who is marvellous at running the youth group. The message of the New Testament seems clear: 'As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace' (1 Pet. 4:10). Nevertheless, two common dangers are to be avoided.

One is to assume that individuals who practise a particular profession day by day necessarily want to perform its church equivalent outside their working hours. It may be important that an accountant does *not* look after the church's finances, and a hard-pressed teacher does *not* teach in the Sunday School, in order that they keep themselves fresh for their weekday ministry. It would actually be better if someone else has a go at being treasurer or teaching the children, and that the accountant and teacher use or develop another gift in the context of their involvement in the church.

The other danger is to ignore the considerable pressures experienced by most people in management positions in the present era. Often their work (travel time included) consumes twelve or more hours of the day; they come home with their heads buzzing and feeling thoroughly drained. But work is only part of life, though for some it threatens to consume the whole. The home to which a businessman returns towards the close of a day may serve as a haven and a solace, or it could be a further source of pressure. The man's wife may resent the long hours worked by her husband. She herself may reach the evening hours exhausted by the demands of young children. She is keen to talk, having been deprived of intellectual stimulus for most of the day, and wants to know what has happened to her husband at work. The last thing that couple probably need is the demand of having to lead a house group the moment he walks in. But it is all too easy for church activities to add to the stress felt by Christian people in demanding positions. Church leaders need to be sensitive to the existence of such pressures, and to know when — gifted as a particular individual or couple may be — asking them to perform a task might drain their energies or strain their relationship to near breaking point.

One of Paul's aims was to present everyone mature in Christ (Col.1:29). What this means for different social groups within the Church needs teasing out carefully. Businesspeople are only one among several. But how to minister effectively to and with businesspeople is a subject worthy of more thought and attention than it customarily receives. I shall be very pleased to hear from anyone who would like to discuss ideas contained within this article with me.

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