

“Mission and Business: Partners in the Kingdom”  
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In a recent presentation entitled “The End of Mission as Business”, Scott Bessenecker argued that mission has been consistently distorted and co-opted by business and corporate models of thinking and practice. He raises some very important concerns about how we conceptualize and engage in the mission of God – how we understand that God is present and active in our world and how we assess (to use typical academic language) our participation in that mission. He asks two questions: What is the mission of God and how is God at work in our world? And, second, how are we *participants* in that mission and how is that participation assessed? Or, put differently, how is this participation deemed legitimate?

And his particular concern is that the sensibilities of the corporate world of business have consistently been used to assess Christian mission and that mission has thereby lost its integrity and thus its legitimacy. And so he pleads that we find other approaches to mission that are more congruent with the way that God is at work in our world. And he urges that we keep the two apart – business on one side and mission on the other.

In one sense, Bessenecker has a legitimate concern. We often feel in both the world of education as well as Christian mission – the ministry of word and deed – that business sensibilities are being used to judge the effectiveness of either education or mission and that in the process good education and a biblical understanding of the nature of mission is either marginalized or completely lost. It is always a concern to me when business people ask an academic administrator: how much profit is this particular course raising? And if there are only 12 students in the class, then we cancel it and only offer cost money-making courses. Or, where there is pressure in mission for an immediate return on a financial commitment, in terms of measurable results: if we invest these funds in this ministry, we would hope to see this result by such and such a time – typically rather soon. And ministries are praised and able to raise more money if they are able to deliver short term tangible results. It is these very concerns that lead Mr. Bessenecker to dismiss business and business people whom he claims have co-opted truly biblical models of mission and ministry.

And yet, I wonder: is business the real enemy? Business itself is surely not evil or bad; when we head to the grocery store, we are looking for a well-run business, where the produce is fresh and local, and where there is attention to fair-trade practices. We want good business when we take an air flight, with concern for safety and precise measurements and attention to schedules. And if business in itself is not bad or evil, but rather a vital means by which God is using people to witness to the reign of Christ, could it be that those of us in mission and ministry have something to learn from those called into business?

And so in response, I want to propose an alternative: not the end of “mission as business” but rather that we find a way for those in business and those in mission to learn from one another, partner together and actually be accountable to one another for our work and for the ways in which we are witnesses to the kingdom of God.

The real enemy of mission and ministry is not business, but *pragmatism*. From this perspective, both those in business and those in mission need to resist the same demon – pragmatism – the judging of something or someone in terms of immediate, utilitarian criteria – a short term vision in terms of numbers or, in finance, in terms of quick economic gains without reference to principle. If this is the actual enemy, then it opens up the possibility that we could view business and mission as partners in the kingdom work of God, witnessing together in word and deed to the in-breaking of the reign of Christ?

Business and mission or ministry are different; they reflect different sensibilities, different ways of witnessing to the kingdom of God, different forms of engagement in the world. We need to keep them distinct and recognize the integrity of each. But then also we need to demonstrate that they are not only distinct and complementary but also that they each *need* the other. They are mutually dependent partners

in the kingdom work of God.

First, they are distinct. Something is lost, profoundly so, when either is co-opted by the other. Bessenecker is right when he insists that business should not co-opt mission; mission should not be reduced to business or demarcated by the same contours or criteria as business. When mission is business, mission is compromised.

But the reverse is also true: when business becomes mission it loses its true metier such that business has no inherent value or worth in itself. Surely we need to recover a sense of business as, in itself, a noble and good way by which an individual and a corporation can witness to Christ, not legitimized by virtue of “mission” but merely as “good business.” Business is good work – or, better, business has the potential to be good work. Business – the production of goods and services – is good work, part of the fabric of God’s creation and a vital and legitimate way by which people are called into service for Christ as participants in the kingdom. The book of Proverbs in Chapter 31 is doxological in its celebration of a business woman who buys and sells fields and fabric and who attends to the economic well-being of home and community.

Through business a person can participate in the redemptive purposes of God and bring glory to God not because they are a platform for mission – though they might have this attendant contribution – but in its own right, business has the potential to bring glory to God through the production of a good or a service, through the establishing of a just and equitable economic foundation for communities. I would go so far as to say that we will not see the answer to our prayer ‘thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven’ until there is economic justice and the only capacity we have for economic justice is through the leverage made possible through the world of business.

But for this to happen, those in business need those of us called into mission. Those of us “in mission” or ministry are those who will provide the theological vision and underpinnings for their work, and through the ministry of the Word, we will foster faith, hope and love while calling for vocational effectiveness and a commitment to economic justice in every dimension of life and work, but in this case, particularly in the world of business. And they need our prayers, for their work is crucial to the kingdom purposes of God in the world.

Thus I contend: business is good work and it is so when it is informed by the missional work of the church to empower and equip those called into business to do precisely that, good business: locating business in the kingdom purposes of God for God’s world.

But then, second, I come to my main point: that the reverse is also true. Those of us called into mission are called to do good work: to minister in word and deed, through preaching and teaching and works of mercy and thereby witness to the reign of Christ, whether through evangelism, pastoral ministry and preaching, or through theological education and intellectual leadership or through the essential work of caring for the poor the sick and the disenfranchised. This is good work. And it should not be reduced to or co-opted by business sensibilities; it is good in its own right. From the vantage point of this work in word and deed, teaching and deeds of mercy, we provide theological and pastoral formation for those called into business.

And yet, do we not also need to affirm that our work in mission requires the counterpoint involvement that I have suggested those in mission need to offer those who are called into business. Yes, those in business need the “word” of those called into mission. But those of us called into mission – as I have defined it here – also need the encouragement and support of those called into business. And perhaps we can even speak of a mutual accountability: they are accountable to those called into mission but in like manner, as one called into mission, could it not also be appropriate to suggest that I am called to be accountable to those called into business?

For example. I serve, in mission, as the executive director of an agency that fosters excellence in

theological education in the global south. The board of directors to whom I report – a board of eleven – is made up, primarily, of those called into the world of corporate business. With a couple of exceptions, they are business people. They oversee this ministry; I am directly accountable to them.

They are not asking me to direct this organization as I might a for-profit business; they are keenly aware that the sensibilities that shape this organization's work and ministry is not that of business. And yet, their contribution is much more than merely their financial support, though this is no small factor in our capacity to do what we are called to do. Their financial support is part of a whole: their encouragement, their gentle oversight and affirmation of the strategic importance of what we do, and my intentional accountability to them – i.e. to women and men called into business. And what I would contend is that with a group like this that appreciates the character of this ministry, we are organizationally the better for their presence. They work with me to think critically and creatively about our shared vision for the organizational life and mission that they oversee and I direct. And, personally, my work is deeply enriched and strengthened by their presence at the table. I could not conceive of doing my work without their partnership in the kingdom.

What specifically do they offer – apart from their direct financial support which is possible precisely because they are in business and are good at the work they do in business, so that they have discretionary funds to invest in mission. Beyond this, they offer three things that are invaluable to those of us called into mission.

First, those in business tend to think clearly about organizational mission and purpose – fostering clarity as well as courage about what it is that we are called to be and do. Their work in business requires this: what business are you in, they are inclined to ask? And by this they are not asking those in mission to become a business; rather, that is their way of pressing the point: so what, precisely, it is the mission organization or ministry is called to? If we are not called to do everything, what is the one thing that we must do? What is the essence of the work that God has called us to? Those of us in mission often find it difficult to say “no”, to be precise and clear about what we are called to do and what we might be freed by God to set to one side so that we can focus and attend to the core of our calling and thus our ministry. Those in business think this way and foster this in the non-profits with which they partner.

Second, they understand that there is always an economic component to ministry; they know that many mission agencies and ministries do not reach their potential or actually die because there was insufficient attention to financial equilibrium. In my experience they easily adapt to the realities of a non-profit; they know that academic institutions, mission agencies and art galleries are not established to create wealth. They know that another agenda lies at the heart of non-profit agency. And yet, there is an electric bill. And it has to be paid. And those from the world of business are an invaluable aid to the leaders of mission agencies precisely because they know how to think about the economics of ministry. It will be your business people who will likely be the first to tell you when your financial plan is not viable and that good ministry inevitably includes attention to fiscal health.

And third, those from the world of business provide an essential eye and ear from the outside – the potential for an objective assessment and accountability. Those of us in mission can so easily get caught up internally in talking to each other and reinforcing each others' perspectives. While we do need the sharpening that comes through these conversations with colleagues in our specific ministry – I am in conversation with fellow academic administrators, for example – we also need real accountability to those who do not speak the same “language”, pressing us to explain what we are doing, why it matters and why our approach to ministry has merit.

Business people may well get exasperated trying to explain their work to us; and we may at times think that these sincere folks in business do not ultimately get the heart of our work. We do live in different worlds. And yet, it is generally the case that if we cannot explain our work and our ministry and our approach to this ministry in a way that makes sense to those in business then, perhaps, it *doesn't* make sense. It is sheer hubris or presumption to assume that only those of us in ministry can make sense of

our own work and that therefore we do not need structures of accountability, least of all to those in business.

So again, my thesis: business and mission are different. And mission at its best is mission that is not coopted by or reduced to business. And business at its best is good business and is not reduce to or co-opted by mission. But this leads not to two solitudes but to a basis for genuine partnership in the kingdom of God. Those in mission serve those in business by providing a theological vision for their work and by equipping them through word and deed to do good business. And those in business are equally essential to those in mission: providing them with a attentiveness to some key and essential dimensions of good ministry.