

We Are Not a Company

By Rev Dr Chiang Ming Shun

When I was serving as a pastor in a church, I was very much struck by the pastor and author John Piper's 2002 book, *Brothers,*

We Are Not Professionals. John Piper dramatically argues that pastors "are being killed by the professionalizing of the pastoral ministry". He rails against "cultural expectations of professionalism", "the pride of station" and "the borrowing of paradigms from the professional world". He longs instead "for radically Bible-saturated, God-centered, Christ-exalting, self-sacrificing, mission-mobilizing, soul-saving, culture-confronting pastors". Piper quotes Methodist pastor Edward McKendree Bounds, "The preacher...is not a professional man; his ministry is not a profession; it is a divine institution, a divine devotion".

While I largely agree with the general thrust of Piper's argument, I think the problem these days is not so much the professionalisation of ministry but the corporatisation of the Church.

By this I do not mean that good management and governance are unimportant or unnecessary. John Wimberly has shown clearly in *The Business of the Church: The Uncomfortable Truth that Faithful Ministry requires Effective Management* that... well, the title says it all. Modern churches and congregations are complex and require good

management and leadership. In Singapore, the requirement for effective management is enshrined in a Code of Governance for Charities and Institutions of a Public Character which churches have to adhere to. Churches are required by the Code to submit a Governance Evaluation Checklist that the public can view. Transparent, effective management is a good thing.

I also do not mean that businesses should be neglected. I heartily affirm that we should be good stewards in business and that the Kingdom of God must be proclaimed in the marketplace. "Business" is not a dirty word. Gea Gort and Mats Tunehag have written about the Business as Mission (BAM) global movement to integrate business with mission. They give inspiring stories about how Christians from all over the

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world have been able to use their businesses to share the gospel not just in innovative ways but in challenging situations. They show how businesses can be shaped for God and for the common good. Our God is the God of business and the marketplace.

By corporatisation I mean the adoption of a business mindset that makes only financially-based decisions in the church and not faith-based ones. What I object to is the unthinking, wholesale adoption of secular business practices in churches without considering whether these are appropriate or even Christian in nature and effect. So the human resource board of a church offered staff salaries below the market rate not because that church could not afford them but because the board wanted to see if desperate applicants would be willing to take less. This may be what companies do but is it what a church should do? How is this being generous, gracious and Christ-like?

In 2017 Edwin Alston submitted to Liberty University's School of Divinity his doctoral project entitled *"Corporatization of the Church Compromises Christian's Priorities, Purpose, and Practices"*. Writing about churches in America and drawing on the work of a wide range of researchers, Alston argues that a corporate mindset focuses on the church and not on Christ. So the church is built up as a corporation or a business-making enterprise at the expense of ministry. Policy, structure, finances, branding, according to secular models, these become key, and the building up of God's Kingdom using God's methods is sidelined. As Alston put it, "Many corporate-minded individuals in churches believe they can run God's house better with practices learned from business principles instead of the Word of God and the Holy Spirit".

We do need inspiring, sacrificing and competent church workers, missionaries and pastors. We need lay people embedded in the marketplace who are able to draw out the best from secular models and practices. We need them to be skilled not just in handling the Word, in motivating and shepherding people, but also in managing churches, missions and programmes. All I am saying is that we have to be careful in using the methods of the world uncritically. The world has much to teach the Church, but the

churches should adapt business practices and not just adopt them. Can churches make these practices better for use? What should best practices in the church look like? We have to find our own Christian way.

Yes, in Luke 16:8 we are told, "The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness" and we should be shrewd. But remember what Isa 55:8-9 says:

8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord.

9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Let's think about what God's



ways are. God's ways can include some modern management and business practices. But we have to keep asking ourselves, "How can we be counter-cultural when we uncritically accept prevailing business culture in churches? How can we hope to change the world if we blindly follow it?" Because we are a Church and a family, not a company. ❖



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