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MINISTERING TO THE AGORA INTO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Part I: A Biblical-Theological Rationale and Direction for Agora Missions

One need look no further than the apostle Paul's Second Missionary Journey, to find an example of Christian ministry directed at the world of commerce. In Acts 17:16-17 the Greek text notes that Paul reasoned daily with the Jews in the synagogue and in the agora (*ἀγορά*) or marketplace with all who met him. This ancient agora was the center of Athenian life and activity.¹ The great missionary apostle evidently knew the importance of addressing this vibrant, pulsing nerve center of economic, political, and intellectual life with the gospel of his Master. Whether Paul thought through a biblical-theological rationale for ministry to the business world I do not know, but such a rationale is not hard to construct from a biblical-theological perspective and I will attempt to do so in this first part of our two part paper, as well as point out some practical and cultural reasons for a corporate ministry in the course of my presentation. Second, I will note some faulty beliefs concerning the business world and how biblical data might be used to address them. In the second part of our paper, my colleague and friend, Dan Truitt, will attempt to

¹ F. F. Bruce, *Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n. d.), 349.

flesh out our rationale and direction for corporate missions by using the vehicle of a vocational corporate chaplaincy as one model for implementation.

Perhaps the primary driving theological reason for ministering to the marketplace is in order to fulfill Christ's missionary mandate. Summarized in the ending of Matthew's gospel (Mt. 28:19, 20), commonly known as the Great Commission, our Lord's missionary command to his followers is worldwide in scope and is all inclusive in nature. The charge of Jesus is to make disciples (mathēteusate) *μαθητεύσατε* an imperative in v. 19. Continuing with the Matthean passage, this making of disciples is a process which apparently includes conversion (represented by baptizing with the Trinitarian formula) and teaching obedience to Christ's commands (v. 20),² what evangelicals have historically called sanctification. Thus, the Commission entails an evangelism and post-evangelism component or task which must be addressed in any sphere of missionary endeavor including the marketplace.

The marketplace provides an enormously important point of contact for accomplishing the Great Commission because of its prior connection with the Creation mandate in Genesis 1 and 2. The world of commerce is an aspect of work, necessary to fulfill God's command to subdue the earth. According to the Genesis record, part of humankind's original reason for being was to "rule" or "have

² didáskontes autoús tēreîn pánta 'ósa èneteílámēn 'umín.

dominion" over the earth.³ It is evident that such dominion wasn't going to occur without effort, for God makes man's dominion contingent upon actively subduing the earth. In Gen. 1:28, the imperative verb form of $\psi'22$ 'to subdue' ($\uparrow 7 \psi'22$) denotes active work of some kind. This opinion is furthered by the purposive statement in Gen. 2:15 that man was placed in the Garden of Eden "to cultivate it" (NASB) ($\uparrow 7 \psi'22$) and "to keep it" (NASB) ($\uparrow 7 \psi'22$). The verb 'abad', of course, often means 'to serve' and 'shamar', 'to guard or watch over'. In addition, man 'worked' and carried out part of God's mandate for him, when he gave names to all the animals in Gen 2:20.

Surprisingly, to some, the Creation mandate affirms that work is to be a part of humanity's normal existence rather than an aberrant state. It is closely connected with the imago Dei in Gen. 1:26 and like marriage and family is one of the few things common to all created humanity. Further evidence that work is an aspect of the imago Dei is found in Gen. 2:2 where God is said to have completed "His work" ($\uparrow 7 \psi'22$). Also Ex. 20:9,10,11 connects Israel's cessation of work on the Sabbath with the Lord's cessation of activity on the seventh day of the Creation week. Once again work is closely connected with God's purposes and activity. The fact that some type of work permeates the lives of all created humanity on this planet regardless of culture, race, sex or religion is, perhaps, reason enough for developing business missions. For the missionary, it is a common contact point with

³Gen. 1:26 $\uparrow 7 \psi'22$; 1:28 $\uparrow 7 \psi'22$.

lost mankind which has its origin in the very heart and purpose of God. Even from a practical missions standpoint, work occupies 40 to 50 hours of a person's time in a given week and any failure to address that area would result in a significant loss of opportunity. Time at work approximates 1/3 to 1/2 of the awake hours in a person's life. In His written Word, it seems that God has given us an important area for the Church to address that we would be remiss to ignore.

The biblical data in Genesis also address another more somber reality that greatly affected the Creation mandate and through it the marketplace or work environment. It is clear that work is no longer always exhilarating and fulfilling. There is a dark side to the world of commerce. A frustrating toilsomeness and weariness is the experience of all who labor. The job and the people who perform it are infected by something. Moral evil permeates the marketplace. Indeed the Bible speaks of a Fall into sin that has corrupted and degraded both the task and the doer of it.

It is intriguing to notice that God cursed man precisely in the ability to carry out the Creation Mandate. Adam was placed in the Garden of Eden "to cultivate it" but after his rebellion his task is impeded by God's ^{אָרָב} curse on the ground (Gen. 3:17) to the point that it will be in "toil" (^{עָמַל}) or "sorrow" that his task will be accomplished. The same word "sorrow" is used to express the woman's pain in childbirth in the preceding verse. The curse at least means that the basic necessities of life will be obtained by the sweat of man's brow (Gen. 3:19) until he dies and

returns to the dust of the earth. Singer Dolly Parton stated its effects well for moderns when she sang the words, "Working 9 to 5 what a way to make a living," (no doubt without reflecting on Genesis 3). The universal toilsome nature and weariness of work is the experience of all and provides another entry point for missions.

The Fall had effects beyond physical decay leading to death. The very heart (*24*) or mind of man was darkened and infected by sin. Mankind is spiritually dead, a moral rebel "under God's wrath," "in need of redemption." Romans 1:18-32, provides the apostle Paul's graphic description of the results of the Fall mentioning everything from futile speculation to lust and murder. Today, a quick look at the financial magazines assures us that such moral evils are prevalent in the world of commerce. Moreover, one has only to remember the thundering pronouncements of the Old Testament prophets and the sages in the OT wisdom literature, directed toward the world of commerce, to accept the idea that God was and is concerned about moral evil in the marketplace where humanity attempts to carry out God's mandate to subdue the earth. God's desire is to redeem the marketplace by penetrating it with the life-changing power of Christ and changing its faulty operating principles.

Biblical theological data abound to construct a far-reaching Christian business ethic. However, I shall confine myself to listing a smattering of biblical evidence from a redemptive standpoint that addresses some principle misconceptions of the

business world. All these texts directly affect areas of moral concern in the work place and recognize the importance of the divine Creation mandate and the effects of the Fall.

As a touchstone for evangelism, the Creation mandate provides a superior explanation of the nature of work and its origin. It has dignity before God and is worthwhile in itself. Even before the Fall, there is a transcendent rationale for work which gives it worth. It is (*ḡ*), "good". Likewise, the worker or employee, the doer of the task, is valued as well in the Creation mandate. His or her value is absolute and transcends subjective business personnel valuations such as productivity or position in a company. Thus, the divine Creation mandate grounds the worth and dignity of every worker and the task he or she performs in the transcendent purposes of the Personal Infinite Creator God revealed in the Bible. Surely, the biblical understanding of the value of work and the worker is good news and has redemptive implications for labor-management disputes, shoddy workmanship, and a T.G.I.F. work philosophy by employees. Affirming the absolute value of work and the worker can then become a bridge to the gospel about the One who graciously provides such value.

Likewise, the biblical explanation of the weariness of work grounded in the Fall and God's curse provides a solid hopeful alternative to the rival evolutionary view of work under the terms of the 'struggle for existence' or 'survival of the fittest.' In the evolutionary view the struggle is the normal state of affairs, but a 'curse' has a chance of being removed. One might be redeemed

from a curse, but not from a 'biological law.' Again, redemption from the curse opens up the door for the redeeming message of Jesus Christ's love and deliverance from the curse for those who turn to Him in faith.

The false evolutionary explanation of work raises another powerful reason for evangelizing and discipling in the marketplace. It has become a place teeming with rival metaphysical systems of thought, evolution being just one. Pagan metaphysics are quickly being spread in the marketplace. My friend and associate, Dan Truitt, knows a salesman whose company has a Shaman employed as a staff consultant to make sure the spirits are working on the company's behalf. New age ideas are being used to improve everything from employee relationships to productivity. These rival metaphysical claims, often antagonistic to Christianity, reiterate that the Fall has had major negative effects on the business community. Such claims vie for control of the marketplace. When a salesman is told that he can virtually create his own reality and become successful, it behooves the Church to provide point by point biblical answers based on the true nature of man, God, and His universe.

There are numerous inadequate reasons for working. One widespread ultimate rationale for working is to obtain wealth. Many in the marketplace look to wealth to provide ultimate security and happiness. But the biblical sage responds by pointing out the futility of such a belief. "A rich man's wealth is his strong city, and like a high wall in his own imagination" (Prov. 18:11,

NASB). Such security is obtained by keeping all the rewards of one's labor for oneself, a position soundly rebuked by Christ in the parable of the "Rich Fool" who kept hoarding to the loss of his soul (Luke 12:16-21).

When gaining wealth becomes the absolute reason for working in the marketplace, the results are often tragic. Consider Amos's thundering pronouncement against the corrupt businessmen of Israel for selling the righteous for money and the needy for a pair of sandals (Amos 1:6), apparently by making the bushel smaller and the shekel bigger, and by using dishonest scales (Amos 8:5). From these passages in Amos, it is clear that God's interest in the marketplace extends even to the point of judgement on the nation whose commercial world runs amuck doing evil. Pragmatically speaking, there are enough modern examples of the folly of pursuing wealth unjustly in the marketplace. It is incumbent on the Church to speak prophetically to the business world to assist in its very survival, for unless its people and principles are redeemed, it is doomed to judgement. It is not insignificant that God's judgement on cryptic Babylon in Revelation chapter 18 refers to the merchants of the earth "who have become rich by the wealth of her sensuality." Much of the entire chapter refers to the destruction of godless commercial interests in league with the cryptic city for the attainment of wealth. The possibility of judgement can spur on the Church in evangelizing the marketplace.

There are many other areas and problems in the businessworld that can be addressed from a biblical standpoint that deal with

everything from relationships to method, but not in the scope of this short paper. However, in our judgement, the biblical foundation for marketplace missions is in the Great Commission. It is also in the Creation mandate where we are given some directional hints for ministry. How business missions can be pursued is another question. One method of doing so will be the subject of the second part of this paper.

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Part II: The Vocational Corporate Chaplaincy As One Methodology for Agora Missions

The church's ministry in the workplace occurs whenever a believer, in his occupation, lives in obedience to the Lordship of Christ. At his job, the faithful disciple becomes the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt. 5:13-16). He is the banker who deals compassionately with the widow whose note is past due (James 1:27). She's the secretary who chooses not to enter the group's cutting gossip about the co-worker whose 15 year-old daughter is pregnant. He's the construction laborer who "works as unto the Lord" (Col. 3:22-24) in an environment of mediocrity. He's the business traveler who refuses to overstate his expense account even when "everyone does it." And she's the supervisor who shows compassion and patience for the clerk who made too many errors today because the clerk is preoccupied with her tragic divorce. So in a significant way, the body of Christ has been involved in industrial missions as long as and wherever committed believers have gone to work.

The History of the Corporate Chaplaincy

Another expression of the church's outreach to the business world has been through her clergy in the form of the corporate chaplaincy. The earliest reference to an industrial chaplaincy in the U.S. goes back to the Saugus Iron Works in Massachusetts in 1644. In 1931 R. G. LeTourneau provided chaplains for crews

building roads to the Hoover Dam, and in 1941 he provided the first full-time chaplain in his Peoria, Illinois plant.

Overseas, the Roman Catholic Church in France after World War II instituted a form of corporate chaplaincy referred to as the worker-priest movement. There, experienced parish priests entered the workforce as workers, often in the lowest grades. They took this assignment as a life-long vocation to identify with the working-class culture. They did not reveal their clergy status unless asked. Their ministry was apparently one of quiet influence and assistance.

In 1970, the Church of England authorized a non-stipendiary corporate ministry. Individuals in secular jobs were selected and trained while they continued in their occupations. After their training and ordination were complete, they continued in their present secular work. Because of their official church authorization, they were consulted by their co-workers concerning personal matters and by management for assistance with ethical issues.

Returning to the United States, a model for industrial pastoral counseling services was initiated when R. J. Reynolds Industries hired its first full-time pastoral counselor in 1949. During the construction of the Alaska pipeline from 1974 to 1977, a chaplaincy staff of eighteen men and two women provided pastoral support to the pipeline workers. This ministry was a unified effort of thirteen different faith groups.

Chaplains are now found in a wide variety of work settings,

including airports, race tracks, truck stops, and in a growing number of businesses and industries. A corporate chaplaincy provision is becoming increasingly common in employee assistance programs.⁴

Traditionally, an individual corporate chaplain was employed full-time by one company and served only that company. Obviously, under this arrangement only larger companies could afford this type of employee benefit. An example of another approach was begun in 1983 with the founding of Marketplace Ministries, Inc., by Gil Stricklin. Stricklin was a former staff member of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and a evangelism department executive of his denomination. He was motivated by his previous experience as a chaplain in the military. In that setting he noticed the effective ministry chaplains had with men and women who were separated from the assistance of their immediate families and their community or faith support groups. He observed that the business world of America was much the same: most people do not live near their immediate families and most are not significantly involved in any religious group which could provide support during times of a personal or family crisis. The awareness of these needs coupled with Stricklin's vision for a vehicle to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to meet those needs led to his founding of Marketplace Ministries, Inc. The organization currently serves over 80

⁴Rodney J. Hunter, gen. ed., Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), s.v. "Industrial and Business Chaplaincies." and Alastair V. Campbell, ed., A Dictionary of Pastoral Care, (London: SPCK, 1987), s.v. "Work-Related Ministries."

corporations having employees numbering from 10 to 8,000. Companies of any size can contract with Marketplace Ministries on an as-needed hourly basis to provide the chaplain program benefit as part of their employee assistance program.

The balance of this portion of the paper discusses the outworking of the ministry of the corporate chaplaincy. This discussion does not specifically describe the work of Marketplace Ministries, but it does derive from my personal experience as a chaplain through this organization. The theological perspective is within the conservative evangelical tradition.

The Philosophy of the Corporate Chaplaincy

The assumption and testimony of the church has always been that every need can be addressed and met through a relationship with Jesus Christ. The church's commission is that of her Lord: "to preach the gospel to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, and to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18). The hungers of life can be satisfied by the Bread of Life. The Great Physician can and will bring healing to the afflicted. The challenge of the church has always been to find effective means of bringing her message of salvation to people in a way that the message is received.

The corporate chaplain ministry can be an effective vehicle of the Gospel of Christ to people where they work because:

1. The corporate chaplain **goes** to the workplace to offer his assistance.

2. People at work have personal needs, and many people are receptive to the chaplain's help because they perceive that his help is available.

3. The corporate chaplain, motivated by a love for Christ and people, endeavors to meet the needs of individuals through the compassionate application of biblical principles.

4. The corporate chaplain can develop a close relationship with executives and other corporate policy-makers, and thereby have an opportunity to bring a biblical ethic to the company.

First, the chaplain goes to the workplace. By his going, the corporate chaplain embodies the example and commission of his Lord. From the point of His incarnation Jesus' custom was to go where people were. Often this meant that He approached people in their places of work, whether at the sea side or in a tax booth. And as David Pettus noted earlier in Part I, a ministry in the marketplace is a superb opportunity to fulfill the Great Commission. Indeed, as my colleague observed, because of the amount of time spent at work, it is an opportunity that must not be overlooked. One study concludes that in some areas of the country over 80 percent of the population are unsaved.⁵ Obviously, most of these unbelievers will hear the Gospel message only if someone brings it to them. By going to the business or industrial location, the chaplain provides a way for unbelievers to hear the Gospel by a means already acceptable to them--their employee benefit program. They are

⁵Survey conducted by the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, cited by "Break Point with Charles Colson," (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, March 1991) Vol. 1, No. 1 .

accustomed to receiving help through this provision as employees and are therefore open to the assistance offered by their company chaplain.

The chaplain personally visits the worksite, often on a regular, weekly basis. Through his presence in the company and his growing friendship with the employees, the chaplain soon becomes a source of assistance accessible to the workers. Although many employees will not seek his help immediately, when a crisis comes to them or to their families, they call the chaplain because he is someone they know and have come to trust. This opportunity for ministry occurs not because a person went to church, but because the church came to the person through the chaplain at work.

Second, the corporate chaplain ministry can bring the gospel of Christ to people where they work because the employees perceive that his help is available to them. The primary reason why people do not receive help with their personal problems is because from their perspective help is not available. They may be surrounded by many resources of assistance and multiple offers to help, but for one or more reasons, the help does not reach the need.

A major obstacle to receiving help in the minds of many people is the fear of others knowing that they have a personal or family problem. The social stigma of emotional or relational problems can be a barrier to receiving help in many circumstances, but the need for confidentiality in the workplace is especially crucial to an employee. When an employee believes that knowledge of his problem

by others will affect his status at work, he will rarely take the risk of exposing his need. For example, the employee may feel that if co-workers knew of thier questionable relationship with another employee, they would use this knowledge against him or her when competing for the next promotion, or to avoid the next layoff. Also, because most employees perceive that their supervisors are always in a evaluative position, the troubled worker would rarely seek help from those above him or her on the administrative ladder. The supervisor may even be a compassionate Christian, but the fear of repercussions in the mind the employee keeps him from receiving help from this source.

More and more employers are providing a psychiatric provision in their employee benefits programs. Nevertheless, even this professional help, however effective it may be, is not considered available by many hurting employees. The stigma of needing help from a psychiatrist is still unacceptable to many people, and therefore they will not risk using this assistance. The chaplain can be a bridge for employees who need psychiatric help but are still wary of it. Also, even though the insurance plan may pay a portion of the professional fee, many employees find the remaining cost to be out of their reach financially. After insurance pays, the employee's expense may still be \$25 to \$75 for a weekly visit. This help is not an option to a worker who lives from paycheck to paycheck.

Because of the chaplain's relationship with the company, he can be a source of help that is considered available by many

employees. Although the chaplain is a member of the management team, he is not an employee of the company. Therefore, he is neither an evaluator nor a competitor to the workers in the company. He is neither supervisor nor co-worker. And because of his ministerial ethic, he is committed to confidentiality. His agreement with the company ensures that he is not obligated to report confidential issues to the management. Through building relationships with employees he can earn their trust in his ability and in his commitment to keep their personal issues confidential. Also, because his fee is paid by the employer as a personnel benefit, the barrier of cost to the employee is removed.

A third reason why the corporate chaplain can have an effective ministry in the workplace is because he has the opportunity to offer biblical solutions to people's problems. Many people do not recognize the spiritual component or cause to their problem. If they did, they likely would have sought help from a religious source before. Nevertheless, if the employee feels that the chaplain's help is available, he or she will go to him hoping to gain relief. The problem presented by the hurting employee is possibly a symptom of a much deeper spiritual issue, and the employee may at first resist a religious or spiritual solution. However, a compassionate and patient chaplain can gain the privilege of offering a biblical solution when he addresses the pain as the employee feels and presents it to the chaplain.

An example of this recurring process is the story of a middle aged lady who came to a colleague. The issue she presented as her

problem was an uncontrollable child. As she discussed this problem a related concern was her inability to adequately parent her son. Over the weeks, as the chaplain patiently listened to her story and offered support and guidance, a much deeper issue came to the surface. As a child, the lady had been molested by several significant men in her life. The chaplain continued to compassionately help her deal with her pain and anger from the past. After several months of counseling, he was able to lead her to a loving heavenly Father through salvation in Jesus Christ.

In addition to pastoral counseling, company chaplains also have opportunities for significant ministry through performing weddings, funerals, and by providing support for employees and families during times of serious illness or other crises. During times of tragedy or change, many people are open to spiritual issues. An employee will often turn to their trusted and respected company chaplain for guidance and help when their lives are in upheaval.

Finally, the corporate chaplain ministry can be an effective agent of biblical change in the marketplace because of the unique relationship the chaplain can have with the executive management of a company. The saying "It's lonely at the top" is an accurate description of the isolation many chief executives feel. One reason for this isolation may be the intimidation people below him on the corporate ladder feel toward their boss because of his power and authority. Therefore, employees avoid building a relationship with him. A second reason could rest with the executive himself.

If he fears that people seek his wealth or position, the executive may build protective barriers between himself and others.

Since the the company chaplain a minister and not an employee, he is in a unique position to build a trusted relationship with executive managers. The chaplain need not be intimidated by the executive's power, nor does he covet his wealth or position. With these obstacles aside, the chaplain has an opportunity to have a fruitful ministry in the life of the corporate leader.

Three possible areas of ministry in the life of an executive include his own personal issues, his relationship with the employees of the company, and the ethics of the corporation. Many executives feel the need to maintain an untarnished public image in their role as the corporate leader. Indeed, he may be a committed Christian and an active church leader, but to retain his image he does not even want his pastor to know about his problem. The company chaplain does not desire to take the place of the pastor, but he can be a welcome source of professional and compassionate assistance to the chief executive in his personal life.

The chaplain can also minister to the executive by helping him in his relationships with the workforce of the company. First, the chaplain is an example of ministry to the employees. This ministry and assistance is often performed in the name of the chief executive as an extension of his concern for his people. In this way, the executive recognizes that as a Christian he has the opportunity and obligation to act responsibly towards the people

who work for him. In one case, the president of a company received insight and encouragement from his chaplain in the actions he, the president, had to take in laying off several workers. In another company, the president invited the chaplain to address the executive management team to provide insight into ways to fairly meet the needs of the employees and to raise the morale of the workforce. The president made changes in the corporate personnel policy because of the chaplain's suggestions.

Finally, through his ministry with the company leadership, the chaplain can influence the ethics of the corporation. Executives who are growing in their faith are eager to fulfill their role of stewardship with the company they manage. Under the Lordship of Christ they begin to see their work and their company as more than a means of amassing wealth. Many of these men and women are surprised and relieved to discover that the Bible provides clear principles for leading a company to become a force for good in the community as well as a testimony to the ways of God. In this way, the chaplain ministry can play a redemptive role by influencing corporate leadership to acquire a biblical view of their work and the work of their company. In January 1991, one company owner called his employees together to publicly dedicate his companies to God through the Lord Jesus Christ. This owner acknowledged that he gained significant insight and encouragement to make this decision while attending an executive discussion series led by his company chaplains. This series involved a group of company executives who gathered weekly to study biblical principles of

corporate management and ownership.

Thus, the position of the corporate chaplain within the company provides for him a favorable opportunity to bring the gospel of Christ and the truths of the Scriptures to those who work in that business. The chaplain is both an outsider and an insider. In a sense, he is an outsider because he is not a part of the company in a way that would motivate him to climb the corporate ladder and therefore compete with the workforce. And he is evaluating neither the rank and file workers nor the executive leadership. But because he has been invited into the company, he can build relationships that can lead to an effective, biblical ministry.

Conclusion

Through the Scriptures and the power of the Spirit, the church has always had relevant answers for society's dilemmas available to her. The continual challenge of the church is to bring her message to hurting people in a way that will be received. On the eve of the twenty-first century the arena of the agora, or marketplace, is a locale of ministry which the church must not overlook.

The church is well within its scope in ministering in the marketplace because of the major role of work in the imago dei. The concept of work must continually be uplifted and redefined for the culture by the church. Also, Jesus and other ministers of the gospel customarily met people at their place of work, and brought to them the truth and a compassionate ministry.

The corporate chaplaincy involves the church joining efforts with Christian business leaders to bring the love and truth of Christ to employees and their families. In problems and crises, the corporate chaplain can compassionately show the relevance of the gospel to people as he relates to them at their job.