

Identifying the Marketplace

Jesus said, "Make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19).

"Marketplace ministry". Just another cliché? A new fad for a new century? Those of us who have been around for a while are accustomed to cyclical change in the workplace, accompanied by constant revision of business jargon and corporate priorities. Catch-phrases such as "downsizing", "rightsizing", "business process reengineering", "quality agenda" and "tipping points" come and go. Popular today, the stuff of MBA programs, adopted by the Western church (denominations are replete with jargon); effete and old-school tomorrow. So, what's new?

As older mainstream Christian name brands in the West acknowledge they are losing a generation and can barely reproduce themselves, sociologists warn that the world Christian movement needs to have the capacity to carry forward an engaged and vital form of faith. The heartland of the church needs to move from ecclesiastical shackles and corporate logic that defend traditionalism on sanctified ground for its own sake, and reach with vision into the global supermarket of choices with a fresh message that is transformational and relevant to "Everyman". The underlying message is the same, but the expression needs to be readily understandable in the markets of humanity. Our missiologies must incorporate both the green jungle and the concrete jungle, the village path and Wall Street, even though the methods will be vastly different.

We need a Biblical theology of "marketplace" and "ministry". Without clarifying terms and agreeing what we mean (let's begin by making sure we are all on the same page) we will dismiss it all as "too theoretical, or fail to grasp what Father God sees and wants to achieve through us.

What exactly is "the marketplace"?

In ancient Greece the market was usually called the "agora". The most famous agora was in the heart of Athens. It was the focus of political, commercial, administrative and social activity, the religious and cultural centre and the seat of justice. My wife and I have walked through what's left the Athenian Agora, trying to visualize what it must have been like when Greek culture and city states were considered the pinnacle of civilization.

The Agora was the place in the centre of town where people met, to buy and sell, talk, plot, gossip and hear the latest news and views about what was going on in the world. Traders coming from afar would set up their wares and coins and goods would be exchanged for food, clothing, slaves and other lines of merchandise. Luxury items would make their way into wealthier homes. Men of influence and women of sophistication would sample exotic cloths and food and purchase colourful ceramics from hitherto unheard-of tribes and nations. From time to time a politician or philosopher would wander by. A skilled debater would engage oratorical combatants in the square and crowds would gather around to hear him, more in the form of entertainment than serious intellectual enquiry.

Others would listen spellbound as story-tellers related colourful events from other times and remote places. The Agora was where human intercourse occurred, where different streams ideas and ethnic identities clashed or melted into one.

According to the United Nations, roughly half the world's population is now urbanized. Economists and political think-tanks speak of the "global village". Today's cities are agoras on historically massive scales. Villages have been replaced by unprecedented concentrations of population. The Industrial Revolution saw towns in Europe explode into metropolises. Since the end of the Second World War, the rest of the world has rushed to catch up; hundreds of millions of people have left rural areas around the world and flocked to burgeoning cities. We now talk about "megalopolises", agglomerations of people that run into tens of millions each, sprawling cities like Mexico City, Shanghai, Sao Paulo, Istanbul, Cairo and Tokyo, that are literally bursting at the seams.

Yet even in the largest urban centres the concept of "the market" continues to flourish. Family stores are replaced by Department stores and "hyperdomes" (why have five check-outs when you can have eighty?), one-stop shops, where traders can park their chariots and visit the village under the one roof. (No more getting wet.) Visit any coffee shop, arcade, grocery store aisle and you will still find people gathering in small groups to talk about what is going on, to share news and views and be entertained by the story-tellers (on LCD screens these days). Listen to the music. Check out the goods and people from countries around the new empires (now they are called retail "emporia"). Crowds of bright people with the right connections enter offices and factories, punch buttons on computers, make phone calls, exchange money or code for goods from the other side of the world (taking seconds, not months), write rules and talk to those in authority (corporate, of course; political power is a distant second).

The contemporary market is still the "place" (perhaps virtual) where goods and services are bought and sold (or swapped); where deals are done and where those who "have" advertise the fact and supply those who "need". Markets have their own vocabularies, styles, priorities, cultures and pressures.

The modern "agora" is more sophisticated than the ancient Greek model, but its underlying purpose is similar. On-line sites are called "AgoraCart", "Agora Gallery", "Agora software" and "Agora Finances". Everyone understands the concepts of market: "market shares and securities". "The market moved upwards today", "market forces", the "job market"; the "market meltdown". We speak of the metals market, or the knowledge market. People are transferable commodities. Almost everything (physical or virtual) can be traded. The rapid growth of the on-line trash and treasure site, e.Bay, the world's largest market, shows that there are buyers and sellers for just about anything on the planet.

The Bible and the marketplace

Don't let the speed and dimension of change fool you. Whether swapping olives for cloth in Ancient Greece or shares for cash on Wall Street, the marketplace has always been the place to be. If we are to touch our generation for Christ we need to understand our playing field.

Most of the influential men and women in the Bible were marketplace operators. Among them were graziers, administrators, soldiers, magistrates, fruit growers, musicians, teachers, waiters, slaves and politicians. They were “in touch” with what was going on and were able to influence their times.

Very few were trained prophets, priests or theological masters, what we would today call “professional” ministers. The notion of a secular-social divide was implicit in ancient Israel, but the most effective people were located in “the world” (that is, outside the clergy); they had connections and credibility and were available to serve God at the same time, driven by His sense of Divine purpose.

Jesus Christ understood the concept of market implicitly. He spent very little time behind synagogue or temple walls. That was for the Pharisees, Sadducees, and other religious professionals. Not that their role wasn’t important. It was, for they were the keepers of society’s rites and religious values. The problem was that they went beyond their authority. People today who dismiss those in full-time ministry fail to realize the key place such professions have in explaining the religious functions that are part of every society and breaking down and declaring complex theological truth.

Most of Jesus’ time was spent in the marketplace. Think about it. Where did He undertake most of his teaching and ministry? On street corners, in shopping centres, in open fields. Where did he heal? In private homes and along public roads. Where did he meet those who became his band of disciples? Beside a lake, in a public service outlet, in a dusty hamlet.

Did you know, for example, that 122 of Jesus 132 public appearances were in workplace settings and that 45 of his parables were about work environments? Jesus used parables to make people think. He talked about a farmer sowing seed, different types of soil, weather forecasting, a farmer’s boy who left home looking for a better life, investing with bankers, employing workers, making bread, producing wine, wheat and weeds, helping victims of violence, weddings, building on good and bad foundations, valuing pearls, using the best wineskins, deploying armies at war, dealing with debt, using fishing nets, constructing towers, dispensing public justice, giving to the poor and managing employees. All very practical. And yet, today, his lessons are often restricted to church life situations and spiritualized out of their original meaning for religious, cultural, ethnic, and social reasons

Ordinary people recognized superficially what Jesus was talking about, and they loved it. He spoke their language. They did not necessary grasp the deeper meaning; that came on another level. Jesus often sat in the market and watched camels, goats, donkeys, slaves, soldiers and thieves passing by. He listened to the cacophony of animals, hawkers, wedding parties and musicians. He went to parties and sat in the smoke of cooking fires, eating bread, cheese and olives, while talking about the latest events over a mug of wine. He wasn’t artificially different from the religious leaders. He just wasn’t one of them. He was closer to the man and woman in the street than the rulers who talked about God but interposed themselves and their rules between Him and them.

Moving through the New Testament, did you also know that nearly all of the supernatural encounters recorded in the Book of Acts took place in the marketplace, in homes, prisons, ships and in the street?

Christians and contemporary markets

What is your marketplace? It is where you are. Think outside the box. In fact, let's forget thinking about boxes? There are no boxes.

Christians need to understand the "marketplace" because this is where the vast majority of people get together. If we are to reach our world, we need to take a peak outside the doors of the church, past the shadow of the steeple, to where men and women are born, live, breathe, learn, work, love and die, many of them without once gracing the sanctuary.

As one Christian writer expressed it:

"Some people live within the sound
Of Church and Chapel bell
I'd rather build a rescue shop
Within a yard of Hell."

Identifying your special marketplace

So, let's ask the question again: what is your marketplace, as a Christian? Is it your Sunday School Class or Bible Study group, where you spend one or two hours a week? Hardly. The best hours of your life are spent where you live and work (whether or not you are paid to do so). Outside of the home, the majority of our relationships are with people in the workplace.

There is a cultural shift away from the more traditional methods of worship and mission by people who, through it all, remain deeply spiritually hungry and want a sense of meaning in their lives. The fact that they don't venture into churches to satisfy their needs does not de-legitimize their search.

Your market can be an office, a laboratory, hotel, class room, surgery, stage, PC screen, factory, social group, club or living room, wherever you interact with people, literally or virtually. Your marketplace can be in education, commerce, industry, music, media, literature, communications, visual arts, public administration, medicine, mental health, high finance, defence, hospitality or international relations. If you are a parent or carer, and you are looking after children at home, that is a marketplace. The people in your market have distinctive vocabularies, styles, priorities, cultures and pressures.

Because you understand your marketplace (you are an integral part of it, after all) it is arguable that you are the best person to live out the meaning and message of the Gospel for those who inhabit that space. You are uniquely positioned to impact their lives, as no one else can do.

How we live, as employees, contractors, bosses, customers, traders, work associates, club members, brokers or next-door neighbours reflects the values we believe to be truly important. The testing ground is not the pew on Sunday, but the workplace, the childcare centre or the home front, where the unalloyed “us” is visible to all, friends and detractors alike.

I often feel that my performance is way less than perfect, but life isn’t a performance, a show for the sake of others. Jesus said that our lives demonstrate irrefutably what is lurking on the inside. The real challenge is to test the fruit and see where we need to change, to grow. Colleagues in our particular marketplace often see into our souls more effectively than fellow-Christians at church or our Bible study group. It is hard to maintain a Sunday morning façade during the week. That’s scary. It brings us back to earth on Monday mornings.

The moment we identify our particular marketplaces we begin to realize why the random (scattergun) approach to reaching people with the Gospel that is often pursued by evangelical Christians (we all do it) yields unsatisfying results.

In highly individualistic societies, people who do not know us are invariably less than open to what we have to say to them about the state of their relationship with God. They can be downright hostile and tell us to mind our own business. Or they can put up walls and politely shut us out. We make a serious mistake when we ignore closed doors and keep bashing against them, trying to convince those locked inside that God loves them. We need to re-think our approaches.

People are not “targets”

Friends once related to me how they shared the Gospel with Kikuyu tribes-people in Kenya. “Witnessing to Kenyans is easy. We put rubber bands around supplies of Gospel tracts; we call these ‘Bible bombs’. We drive along the road and, when we see a group of people sitting in a circle, talking, we bomb ‘em”.

Are our marketplace colleagues just targets, waiting like bulls’ eyes for the arrow to strike, or like sitting ducks to be “bombed” by our words or religious merchandise? Is being Christ’s witnesses a matter of scorching the earth and moving on, looking for new targets to lock onto, like a US “top gun” fighter pilot attacking a Soviet MIG? The Great Commission is about “discipling”, not just counting scalps.

The choices we need to make, as Christians in predominantly non-Christian marketplaces, have a lot to do with understanding our marketplaces in the first place, and our roles in them; how we will interface with people; how who we are will (or will not) gain credence for the Gospel we believe; how we apply our theology of “work” and how we deal with the dualism that artificially distinguishes between vocation and calling. These choices will also reflect the constraining contextual issues, such as dominant cultural values, the kind of society in which we operate (say, Muslim or working class), how people network and how we understand the practical pursuit of the Great Commission. These are all issues that need to be unpacked and addressed, if we are to make a difference. Let’s determine to do so.