

Notes on Managerial Missiology ... and on Envyng Corporate CEOs

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As I was reading *Good to Great* by Jim Collins (New York: HarperBusiness, 2001, 300 pages), I found myself thinking about the critique of “managerial missiology”. What is “managerial missiology”? Following are some quotes from *Global Missiology for the 21st Century* edited by William D. Taylor (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2000, 564 pages):

from Samuel Escobar:

[In managerial missiology] missionary action is reduced to a linear task that is translated into logical steps to be followed in a process of management by objectives, in the same way in which the evangelistic task is reduced to a process that can be carried on following marketing principles. Movements that express this approach proliferated as we were approaching the end of the century (page 109).

... this missiology has been subject to severe criticism, because it has yielded to the spirit of the age (page 110).

There are some aspects of missionary work that cannot be reduced to statistics. Managerial missiology has diminished those aspects of missionary work which cannot be measured or reduced to figures. In the same way, it has given predominance to that which can be reduced to a statistical chart (page 110).

An enterprise that presupposes that the theoretical questions are not important will be by force anti-theological. It is the kind of process that demands a closed view of the world, in which the tough questions are not asked because they cannot be reduced to a linear management-by-objectives process. This system cannot live with paradox or mystery. It has no theological or pastoral resources to cope with the suffering and persecution involved many times in mission, because it is geared to provide methodologies for a guaranteed success (page 110).

However, only categories like paradox, mystery, suffering, and failure can help us grasp something of the depth of the spiritual battle involved in mission (page 110).

If the missionary effort is reduced to numerical growth, anything that would hinder it has to be eliminated. If the struggle for obedience to God in holistic mission involves costly participation in the processes of social transformation, it is simply eliminated. The slow process of development of a contextual theology for a young church tends to be considered inefficient and costly (page 111).

from Valdir R. Steuernagel:

Let me, once more, share a mere outline of concerns about the direction I see the church heading into. ...

1. The church is being viewed through the lenses of progress and success. Within this view, the church must always grow and be bigger tomorrow than it is today.
2. The church is understood according to the criteria of numbers and a political as well as marketing perception of “space to be occupied”.
3. The church tends to be managed from a business and bureaucratic approach. The church is being run as a corporation - small or large (page 128; note that there were 5 more points in this list).

I won't take the time now to comment on these ideas. These people are saying important things, though there are many points where I disagree, or at least carry a different perspective.

I believe, for example, that God is pleased when large numbers of people come to believe in Christ and join his church. I believe God is pleased when his missionaries and other servants seek to make that happen, by the leading and power of the Holy Spirit. I believe God is pleased when we are alert to the various distinctive peoples he has created, and we work in a deliberate and organized way to bring the gospel to each, by the leading and power of the Holy Spirit. I believe that the Word of God, the leading of the Holy Spirit, Christian theology, and the instruction of the Body of Christ are the first voices we should listen to as we develop mission strategy. But I also believe that we can, secondarily, glean helpful knowledge and ideas from the fields of sociology, anthropology, organizational theory, management science, and others, and thus serve God better.

A later thought.

It may be that mission CEOs sometimes envy corporate CEOs. Corporate CEOs dress better, have a higher standing in society, seem smarter, seem to accomplish more, and certainly have more money. It can appear that corporate CEOs' lives are more with-it, more cool, more rewarding, more elegant, more classy, and more stress-free. It can seem that their corporations are better run, better funded, smarter, have better policies, and have better people, than mission organizations. It can even seem that they are happier.

In fund-raising, and in other contexts, mission CEOs meet corporate CEOs. Maybe they have fellow church members who are corporate CEOs. Maybe they have old school buddies that are corporate CEOs. Maybe they can see that had they chosen to go the corporate route with their lives instead of the mission route, life would be much different. Maybe the corporate CEOs even give direct comments to the mission CEOs, noting their intelligence, drive, dedication, and ability, telling them how successful they would have been in the corporate world.

To start with, envy is a sin.

For another thing, “What good will it be for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul?” (Matthew 16:26). If God calls someone to leadership in the cause of world missions, it’s a terrible sin to envy another vocation. “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62).

I think of a time when a pastor in Singapore, a friend of mine, told me about an old school pal of his who was then a wealthy, high-living accountant. He said to me, “Do you ever think about what might have been, about how other people live, about where you might be in life had you chosen a different course than ministry?”

I answered, “Yes, there are times when the devil tempts me.” He laughed out loud at this reply, sheepishly admitting his temporary loss of eternal perspective.

A mission CEO, under such temptation, might leave the service of God and jump to the “greener pastures” of the corporate world. But actually, I don’t think that happens very often. I think the greater danger from this corporate-CEO-envy can be this: for a mission CEO to try and act, in at least some ways, like a corporate CEO, while remaining a mission CEO.

On one level, a mission CEO, out of envy, can take on aspects of a corporate CEO’s wealth, lifestyle, or perks, and enjoy them. A mission CEO can get caught in the devil’s trap of love of money, or love of comfort, or love of the things of this world. It’s easy to do. It’s also deadly. Love of money, or of the things money can buy, can stunt, halt, or hinder spiritual health. “No one can be a loyal servant to two masters. . . . You cannot faithfully serve both God and Money” (Matthew 6:24). All effective mission comes from one place: from the work of God, from the power of the Holy Spirit working through the servants of God. If spiritual power is lost, all is lost.

On a different level, a mission CEO, out of envy, can lead their organization to take on aspects of a secular corporation. This can be a matter of outward appearance, of use of terminology, of adoption of working styles and strategies, or of mindset.

Mission organizations are not secular, commercial corporations. Sure there are some similarities, but these are only on the surface, and are deceptive. Corporations are devoted to maximizing profit. Missions are devoted to the glory of God. Corporations use people to achieve goals. Missions love people, in the way of Christ. Corporations are all about money, and the things of this life, and the things of this world. Missions are all about God, and heaven, and the things of the next life, and the ways of Jesus Christ. The corporate world is a dog-eat-dog world. The mission world is a humble-servants-feeding-the-poor world.

Now, there can be Christian corporate CEOs who lead their corporations with Christian integrity and who seek to set Jesus at the center of their vocation. A corporation led by a Christian should look quite different than a corporation led by an atheist. But even a corporation led by a Christian is a very different animal than a mission organization, devoted to the service of God.

Envy is a sin, and sin leads to death. When sin is permitted or entertained in our hearts even a little, the devil can get a foothold and a wide circle of dark things can grow and grow. I think we all would do well to examine our hearts on this.

So ... I'm thinking that reading secular business management books may be helpful for those leading Christian organizations, but dangerous. We can be easily tempted to think in the world's ways, without even realizing our errors. We can read such books, and learn from them, but we should read much more in books that teach us how to walk with God, how to pray, how to receive power from the Holy Spirit, and how the Kingdom of God can move the kingdoms of this world.