

Refocus

Bible-based Thoughts on the Ministry of Christian Publishing

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Purpose

Publishing is hectic and pressure-filled. Most of us got into Christian publishing for noble reasons, but many days those reasons are hard to remember. The pressure is constant—pressure from customers, from writers, from bosses' expectations, from stacks of work screaming to get done, and that incessant pressure from the bottom line. By the time we finally get one success, we are already late for the next one.

Most of us entered Christian publishing out of a desire to feed hungry souls. But we end up scrambling to feed a hungry publishing program...or at least that's the way it feels. We want to do the right thing, but it's difficult to maintain direction. So many forces are pushing for slight course corrections. Those changes come one at a time and seem small and necessary. But before long, we've forgotten where we were going.

That's why I'm offering these reflections. It's a labor of love. Over my 34+ years in the business I've been both a publisher and a writer. I'm been with a large company and a tiny one. I've been an insider looking out and an outsider looking in. I've been through good times and tough times. I've been a success and a failure.

My desire is not to criticize you nor to take shots at you from some ivory tower. I'm just bringing you a few scripturally-based thoughts on the ministry of Christian publishing. My prayer—and my calling—is to remind you of truths that are absolutely vital—vital for you to accomplish the purposes God pressed on your heart back in the beginning. I hope these truths encourage you, challenge you, prod you, and refocus you. I want to help you “fix your eyes on Jesus” (Hebrews 12:2), for only His blessing will bring lasting fruit from our stumbling efforts.

Business vs. Ministry

Like each of you, I am engaged in the business of ministry. Thus in one ear I hear a business voice calling me to reasonable business practices. In the other I hear God's voice calling me to be His servant in this ministry.

In many ways the voices complement each other. Good ministry usually strengthens business. Good business usually strengthens ministry.

But sometimes the two voices seem to contradict each other, and honestly, I don't always know how to reconcile them. Here are a few examples.

Customer-driven

The business voice calls us to be customer-driven. Learn what customers want and give it to them.

But God calls us to be *His* servants, and He is most definitely *not* customer-driven, at least not in our sense of the term. Though His love focuses energetically on His children, He doesn't ask them what they want. He tells them what they need.

Furthermore, He demands that His servants follow *Him*, not the desires of those to whom they minister. He expects this of all His servants, whether they be individuals or corporations. Noah, Moses, the prophets, the Apostle Paul, Jesus—they weren't customer-driven. I'm sure they studied their "customers" for ways to communicate with them, but they ask them what needed to be done. They heard from God as to what the people needed, then they gave it to them. And He frequently demanded that they do what was unpopular. Following God often got them jailed, beaten, and killed. How's that for customer appeal?

But imagine how poverty-stricken the human race would be if the Bible had been developed by a customer-driven publisher!

Profit

The business voice demands that we show a profit. We must take care of ourselves to ensure our future. It's only good stewardship, right?

But God calls us to self-sacrifice, both as individuals and as ministry organizations. He demands that we be willing to lay down everything for a higher purpose. *“If you want to serve me, put aside all your own interests, lay down your life, and follow me”* (Matthew 16:24, paraphrase). He goes on to say, *“Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it”* (Matthew 16: 25, NIV). In other words, for Christians, focusing on our own survival is foolish and counterproductive. What does this say to Christian businesses who focus on their own survival?

Furthermore, God turns our idea of “profit” on its ear. Paul said that *“what I thought was so profitable I now write off as a worthless investment for the sake of Christ”* (Philippians 3:7, paraphrase). I wonder if we have any high-profit products that God would have us write off as bad ministry investments!

Quick and Secure

The business voice demands profits that are quick and secure. Prove that it will make money in twelve months or forget it. High profits, minimal risk. Firm assurances. Predictability. A sure thing.

But when God calls His servants to follow Him, He rarely gives such assurances. He takes the long view, and He demands that His servants do the same. He often calls us to make investments that will never pay off in our lifetime. Usually the only assurance we have is that God will accomplish His purpose in His time, and when He does, it will be perfect.

C. S. Lewis wrote that security is one thing God will never give His children, apart from Himself. We want to accumulate enough to be comfortable and eliminate risks. He wants the opposite. He wants us to find our comfort and security in Him alone.

The Answers?

The contradictions go on. You could probably name others.

I don't have the time or wisdom to answer each of these problems. But I can tell you a few truths that have helped me navigate the road between business and ministry.

1. There is no substitute for God's personal leadership. Aside from Him, there is no flawless technique for making decisions. He must provide direction. And He will! James 1:5 makes this astounding promise: *“If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God,*

who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him” (James 1:5, NIV).

2. A meaningful, active devotional life will help you keep God’s perspective. Turn to Him frequently. Talk to Him. Read His Word. We all need that daily realignment with the God’s purposes. We need the mind of Christ every day.

3. Remember: the heart of God is *love*. The heart of living is *love*. Believe it or not, the golden rule applies to businesses! More later.

4. God calls us to trust and obey, even when it demands sacrifice. But remember this definition: sacrifice is turning loose of something good in order to grasp something greater. That is the sacrifice to which He calls us.

(REFOCUS, Ken Bible, p.6)

A Daily Realignment

A number of years ago the Lord challenged me to spend more time praying and to use the Lord's Prayer as the pattern for my prayer. I can't tell you how enriching this has been and continues to be. Praying this prayer from the heart with a sincere faith is a great way to realign ourselves with God every day.

*Our Father in heaven,
may Your name be glorified today,
not mine*.
May Your Kingdom come
not mine.
May Your will be,
not mine,
here on earth just as it is in heaven.*

*Father, give me today's provision for today's needs.
Forgive me when I do wrong
as I forgive those who wrong me.
Lead me away from temptation,
and deliver me from anything that would displease You.
For Yours is the Kingdom and the power and the glory forever.
Amen.*

(Matthew 6:9-13, paraphrase)

*The version above is written in first person singular (I, me, my, mine),
but pray it with others in first person plural (we, us, our, ours).

Money

The publishing ministry demands that we handle money on a daily basis, and handle it wisely. God expects good stewardship from us, both with our personal funds and with our business funds. Money is one of the resources lent by Him that He expects us to manage for His glory. God praised the diligence of the steward who took his responsibilities seriously and turned a good profit for his Lord (Matthew 25:14-30).

But in many business settings, money has gone from useful resource to ultimate, unquestioned good. Money is no longer a servant. It is Lord. Profit is king. The philosophy is that in business, only money deserves our passion and wholehearted commitment.

God declares that view shallow, short-sighted, and deceived. He calls it idolatry.

Stewardship

Financial profit is not the ultimate good of good stewardship. Remember what a steward was in New Testament times. With no quick communication and travel being slow and dangerous, many businesses had absentee owners. Daily operations were managed completely by stewards. The steward had the responsibility of making decisions on behalf of the owner. He was to best use the owner's resources for the owner's good.

Therefore as Christian stewards, it's vital that we understand what is important to our Owner and keep that uppermost in our minds. The longer I live, the more I realize that quantities and amounts mean little to Him. Remember that this Being created all the physical universe with a word, out of nothing. He simply expressed His will, and the universe appeared. In Psalm 50 He says:

*"I have no need of a bull from your stall
or of goats from your pens,
for every animal of the forest is mine,
and the cattle on a thousand hills.
I know every bird in the mountains,
and the creatures of the field are mine.
If I were hungry I would not tell you,
for the world is mine and all that is in it. (vv.9-12, NIV)*

Such a Being has no need for more money, more profits, or more copyrights. He can create such things with a word. If He needed them, He wouldn't need to tell us.

So what is important to this God? As His stewards, managing His resources for His benefit, we need to know.

God is love (1 John 4:8). *Love* is precious to Him. Our *trust* is precious to Him. *People* are precious to Him. Look at the way He spent His only Son.

If we want to please our Owner, we must treat people well. That means everyone: customers, writers, vendors, employees, and even our competitors. God is love. If we love Him, we will love those He loves. They are all unspeakably dear to Him. He asks us to love them all as much as we love ourselves.

This "golden rule" isn't some secondary, optional commandment. It is the prime directive. There is no business exemption. He doesn't say, "Treat people the way you want to be treated, as long as it doesn't interfere with your bottom line." Jesus said that loving God and loving other people are the two greatest, most important commandments in all the world. Everything...everything...hangs on these two commands. (Read Matthew 22:34-40.)

Further, if we want to please our Owner, we must trust Him. Trust Him with every need and every concern, both in our personal lives and in our businesses. Words of trust aren't good enough. He wants us to prove our trust by the way we live. More on this below.

In summary, if we want to be good stewards and please the God who trusted us with His resources, we must use them to love people. We have to treat people right. And the way we live and do business should show God that we trust Him.

But the Bible gives us, His publishing stewards, yet more direction on handling money.

Two Masters

Jesus Christ had already spent an eternity with His Father before becoming a human being. Thus He is the only person who has seen and experienced all of life—this earthly life as well as eternal life in heaven. He alone has the whole picture. He has a complete perspective on what is important in life. When He talks, we should stop and listen. He said:

(REFOCUS, Ken Bible, p.9)

“No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.” (Matthew 6:24, NIV)

As Christian publishers, sometimes we think that as long as the general intent of our company is Christian, it's OK to let money guide our publishing decisions. In fact, it's only wise stewardship. We believe we can follow both God and money.

Jesus declares that wrong. He says it is impossible. We cannot be guided both by God and by money. There can be only one boss, not two. Inevitably we will please one and disappoint the other.

We have to ask ourselves: beyond our lofty missions statements, when we're really honest, what guides our daily decisions, God or money? Love or profit? What usually determines that final decision? It's a sensitive question.

A Necessity of Life

It's a sensitive question because in business, money is a necessity of life. It's like water and food. If we don't have it, we die. The business stops. The ministry stops. Everything stops. We're gone.

Hear what Jesus tells His followers about such necessities of life:

“Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink...your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things [that is, all the necessities of life] will be given to you as well.”
(Matthew 6:25, 32-33, NIV, bracketed portion added from context)

Jesus tells us that if we trust our loving heavenly Father, we don't need to be anxious about the necessities of life. Our Father has freed us from such anxieties so that we can focus on pleasing and serving Him. When we *seek first his kingdom and his righteousness*, all our needs will be supplied as well. This promise is for all God's servants, whether individuals or companies. If we keep first things first, everything else will fall in line.

When We Focus on Money

Let's look first at an individual. What happens when an individual focuses on money? Let's be honest--we've all been there. What happens? The process is gradual. We grow

anxious and self-centered. Joy and generosity go out the window. All our thoughts and energies are fixed on gaining more money. We are indifferent to the rest of the world. Only money makes sense to us. We become short-sighted, missing the bigger picture. We are blind to the deeper, richer possibilities of life. Money is the engine. The more we make, the more we want to make.

This same thing happens to companies and ministries that focus on money. We grow small-minded and self-centered. When all we see is our own profit, our vision is inevitably small. Our horizons are near and narrow. When we're focused on the bottom line, we're not focused on our task. We miss the ministry opportunities, and those ministry opportunities are our lifeblood.

That's why Jesus warns us about money. He says that even when the Word of God is alive and growing within us, *"the deceitfulness of wealth" can "choke it, making it unfruitful"* (Matthew 13:22, NIV).

The Apostle Paul tells his younger ministry associate, Timothy, that *"godliness with contentment is great gain."* He goes on to warn that *"People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil...Man of God, flee from all this"* (1 Timothy 6:6, 9-11, NIV).

Proverbs, which is full of practical wisdom for daily living, says: *"Do not wear yourself out to get rich...Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone, for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle"* (23:4-5, NIV). Psalm 62 adds, *"Though your riches increase, do not set your heart on them"* (v.10, NIV).

All these serious warnings are just as important for Christian companies as for individuals. However we started, whatever our proud heritage, when our daily lives no longer pulsate with *"Father, may Your name be glorified, may Your Kingdom come and Your will be done,"* when our heart is no longer Christ's loving heart, then we have set a new course, and it is not toward God. Separation from Him has begun, and death has set in, no matter how healthy we seem. Greed eventually strangles all that it holds.

Christian individuals and Christian companies all have an instinct for survival. We all want to go on living. But our loving heavenly Father tells us that self-centeredness and anxiety are counterproductive. Love Him, trust Him, and live for His purposes. Focus on Him, not ourselves. Leave our lives in His hands, and He will provide for our needs. More than that, He will make our lives full and meaningful beyond our imagination.

(REFOCUS, Ken Bible, p.11)

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No matter how far you have gone on the wrong road,
turn back.

Turkish proverb

The Essence of Life

By current U.S. standards, my financial means are modest. I'm comfortable, but my lifestyle isn't lavish. I'm a typical middle-class American.

Yet compared to other times and places, I am pampered beyond measure. My luxuries far outstrip what the world's wealthiest could imagine just a few years ago.

I live in a comfortable, climate-controlled environment.

I enjoy virtually instant communication with almost anyone, anytime, anywhere.

With careful planning, I can travel nearly anywhere in the world. And compared to earlier years, travel today is quick, comfortable, and reliable.

I live in relative safety—the best civilization can provide. I live in a strong, stable country where the government works to protect its citizens from a wide variety of dangers.

I have ready access to virtually any educational information I desire.

I have a comfortable home, meaningful work, a wonderful wife, and three healthy, intelligent children.

I am in good health and have affordable access to excellent health care.

A wide variety of nourishing foods is always at my fingertips.

Freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom to go where I want, leisure time, a whole range of entertainments, a strong, active church—all these luxuries and more surround me every day. I have virtually every good thing the human imagination can conceive.

Yet with all this, my happiness is determined not by what I have, but by what I give. It is measured not by what I possess, but by the love I give out and live out day by day.

Look at your own life. Look honestly at your daily happiness, and you'll see that it is so.

(REFOCUS, Ken Bible, p.13)

Specifically, our happiness is determined by our response to what Jesus called life's two greatest commandments:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.

"Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30, 31, NIV).

Love shapes our happiness. Not material goods. Not comfort. Not the finest luxuries. Love. It is true for us. It is true for every person around us.

We are told to pursue love—love for God and love for others—as the very essence of life (1 Corinthians 14:1). What if our businesses took this seriously? What if love drove our business, not profit? How would this change our decision-making? Our products? Our customer relations? Our treatment of employees? The way we work with vendors? Our attitudes toward our "competition"? How would it change our company values and personality, from top to bottom?

Motives Matter

*If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love,
I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.
(1 Corinthians 13:1, NIV)*

When we get focused on our bottom line, genuinely loving our customers and acting for their good easily turns to simply appealing to them for our own profit. Serving them turns to exploiting them. We become like the shepherds that God condemned, shepherds that fed *on* the flock rather than feeding the flock (read Ezekiel 34:1-12).

God calls us to love our customers, not their money.

Drug dealers sell people a temporary “fix” without any lasting nourishment, simply because the demand seems higher and the rewards greater. Let’s make sure we’re always serving our customers nourishing meals, not a temporary “fix”.

Motives matter, and the pull toward selfishness is insidious and constant. *Pursue love* (1 Corinthians 14:1, NRSV, NASB).

During my student days in college, a professor in a music composition class asked us why we write. Hardly a single cogent reason was expressed.

Now years later, I know why I write and publish. Jesus Christ can bring a fully satisfying life to every human being. Education doesn’t matter. Financial status doesn’t matter. Culture, age, personality, none of them matter. Jesus Christ can bring a fruitful, satisfying life to every individual. But they need to know. Someone needs to tell them.

A few years ago, I heard a retired seminary professor, Dr. Paul Bassett, make this statement, and it stuck with me: God is always, everywhere, calling everyone to Himself.

God asks us to participate in that call. What a privilege it is! As we lift up Jesus Christ, He calls people to Himself. As publishers, this is the key to our fruitfulness and success: lifting up Christ.

(REFOCUS, Ken Bible, p.15)

Give Them Jesus

We wrestle with sales, technologies, merchandising plans, and more. But let's face it: what the world needs is not another writer, another artist, another book, or another recording. Its problems are far too deep and too serious.

The world needs Jesus. When you publish, give them Jesus. When you record, give them Jesus. When you serve your customers or deal with vendors or work with your writers and employees, give them Jesus. Every day and in every personal encounter, give them Jesus.

A Broader Vision

*All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing,
just as it has been doing among you.*
(Colossians 1:6, NIV)

Christians had gathered from all over the world to spend a week worshiping, talking, and learning together. I had spent the entire week there in a publisher's booth selling one particular product: our new hymnal. Every little feature of that product, every detail of the booth, was my life for those days.

Then on the last day, with lighter crowds, I wandered around a bit and saw some of the other exhibits. Right there across the aisle from me was the world missions area. Walking through, I got a glimpse of the desperate needs in so many world areas. I saw display after display of the world's great cities, and I thought of all the needy millions crammed into each of them.

It's so easy to get wrapped up in the details and mechanics of our own little area of ministry. And let's be honest: at times our concerns revolve too much around how that ministry impacts our own interests. We forget the needs of people, which is the real reason the ministry exists.

With all that in mind and feeling small, I was approached by a former missionary who was hosting the display. Seeing my name, he commented on a publication I had helped produce years before. He relayed how useful it had been in his work on the mission field.

As he spoke, I thought immediately of new projects I was working on. I realized that God would be able to use them to touch the lives of others, if I stayed focused on Him and on the needs of His people.

I came away with a desire to do a better job right where I am. I don't need a broader field of service. I need a broader vision of His work here where He has placed me.

Our ministries are only a tiny part of the overall picture, but they matter. We need to stay faithful to Him and focused on Him with each task He places before us. Somewhere that task will make a difference in the lives of people. Somewhere are needs He intends to meet through us today.

Think as a Member of the Body

In my years in publishing, here are a few thoughts that have come to mind more than once:

- “If I didn’t have to work with these people, I could get this job done right!”
- “This job is impossible. I simply don’t have all the abilities it takes! I just cannot do it!”

A few familiar passages of scripture offer great advice for these attitudes. First, from Ephesians 4:

To each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it...It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. (vv. 7, 11-13, NIV)

Here’s a related passage from Romans 12:

Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts according to the grace give us. (vv. 4-6, NIV)

These passages are loaded with practical and important ideas, but let me highlight just two.

Built-in Limitations

Each of us has built-in limitations. These are not flaws. They are opportunities. They are part of God’s perfect design. God intentionally distributed His gifts to various ones of us in order to make us dependent, not just on Him, but on each other.

That’s important, positive, and healthy because together, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. God has driven us together so that we might discover the miracles of interaction.

(*REFOCUS, Ken Bible, p.18*)

The human body is a great example. Our bodies are made entirely of common elements from this earth, not mysterious ingredients from another planet or from heaven. All the miracles of life happen, not because of the raw materials, but because of the way they interact. When they come together as the Creator intended, the whole is far greater than the sum of the parts. I've read that a simple process like blood clotting is actually a succession of 31 different chemical reactions.

In your job, in my job, among our co-workers, there are miracles of interaction that we've not yet discovered. In his book, *The 8th Habit*, Stephen Covey says that in the fully-functioning team, the weaknesses of each member are made irrelevant by the strengths of the others. That's an ideal worth striving for.

Bean Counters vs. Dreamers

Let's take an example from the publishing world:

It seems to me that there are two very different types of people involved in managing publishing companies. One is the bean counters. These are the analytical people, the accountants, the business people. They believe publishing can be done with logic, order, and discipline. Just run the data, systematically follow it, and you'll get the optimum result.

The other type is the dreamers. These are the creative people...product developers, for example. They chafe under the restrictive formulas of the bean counters and believe that there are better products out there if we just give our creativity the freedom to make them happen.

It seems that publishing companies go through cycles. For awhile, the dreamers are given control, and they can be successful, for a time. But eventually free spending sets in, a healthy discipline declines, and the company suffers.

The pendulum swings, and the bean counters are given control. By restoring order and discipline, they too can be successful, for a time. But eventually "formula" publishing squeezes the life out of the product line, and the company slowly withers.

Usually the pendulum then swings again, and the cycle starts all over.

The obvious truth is that dreamers and bean counters desperately need each other. Publishing is both a creative effort and a business. It is objective and subjective. It is both analytical and beautifully unpredictable. Sales figures only track what we've done

in the past, not the unimagined that we could do in the future. Creative types and business people need each other. They need to find a way to work together, or there can be no balance. They need to respect one another and to realize that each depends on the expertise and viewpoint of the other.

Part of the Bigger Picture

Here's the second major truth I want to highlight from the Ephesians 4 and Romans 12 passages above: we are part of a Body with many members. We aren't an isolated entity, pursuing our own ends. We must think and operate only as part of the whole. That's true of us individually, but it's also true of our companies. We need to think of our companies as members of the Body of Christ.

Isolated, what our companies do is insignificant. It is paper and ink and megabytes. It is yet more information in a world drowning in information. It is just more books when we're swimming in books.

Our significance, our possibilities are as members of the Body of Christ. We are an integral part of the wonderful things God is doing in our world. We get wrapped up in ourselves and in our products, thinking as if everything starts and stops with us. But we are only significant as part of the whole.

I suggest you do three things:

1. Step back and see the whole picture. Remind yourself of what God is doing through the Church.
2. Place yourself and your company as part of that picture.
3. Think and plan ways to connect with the other links in the chain. How can you work more effectively with the other members of the Body that connect with you? Look at the process before it gets to you and after it leaves you. See the task as it comes to you, and watch your work through to the next step. *Plan* through to that next step. Work intentionally to improve your interactions with other members of the Body on whom you are dependent. This may mean partnering with people and ministries that you've never considered working with. But your productivity depends on strong, effective connections with other members of the Body.

(REFOCUS, Ken Bible, p.20)

Remember, our limitations are opportunities. All the miracles of life happen through interaction. Possibilities are waiting for us that we've not yet experienced.

Words That Never Pass Away

*“Heaven and earth will pass away,
but my words will never pass away.”*
(Matthew 24:35, NIV)

As a publisher, have you ever thought about these words of Christ? How incredibly, unbelievably bold a claim!

Look at your own brief history in publishing. How many publications have already come and gone? Visit any used book store, and you'll get a tangible, sobering view of the fate of most published words. Walk past the dusty shelves and see where your efforts will soon end up. With lots of focus, hard work, and “luck”, we publishers occasionally get a book that survives in print for a few decades. Rarely does anything last beyond that.

Here is a Jewish peasant in a tiny corner of the world, never published, never holding any position of influence in society, many centuries before the printing press, simply speaking words out into the air. Only a handful of His closest friends were within ear shot, and they were as unlettered and uninfluential as He. Yet He claimed that His words would never pass away, even when heaven and earth were long gone. Not even the greatest human classics would pretend to such a status.

How could He say that?

“These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me.”
(John 14:24, NIV)

Jesus' confident boldness was not based on Himself or any of His abilities. He was confident in His Father. He knew that the word of the sovereign Lord of all reality would never pass away. He speaks, and it is so. No force can oppose Him. No change touches Him. As long as Jesus spoke the Father's word, His words would never pass away.

This is our confidence as well. To the extent that our words are His word, they will never pass away. Our purpose will succeed as it is His purpose.

Let's keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. As we get a vision of Him and His work, we will get a vision for our work and what it can be.

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