

Overturning Tables: Freeing Missions From the Christian-Industrial Complex

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Critiquing our Capitalist Captivation

Pope Francis is not a fan of free market capitalism. Through his actions – shunning the Apostolic Palace in favor of more humble living conditions, washing the feet of those on the outskirts instead of only priests – the Pope has embodied the radical nature of the Christian faith. Pope Francis has also spoken out on behalf of those oppressed by “an economy of exclusion and inequality” in his 2013 exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel: Evangelii Gaudium*. In a section entitled “No to a financial system which rules rather than serves,” the Pope reminds us: “Money must serve, not rule!”

It is just such a conviction that animates Scott Bessenecker’s newest book, *Overturning Tables: Freeing Missions From the Christian-Industrial Complex*. With boldness and prophetic clarity, Bessenecker brings nearly thirty years of missions experience to bear on the complex relationship between missions and money. As the founder of Global Urban Trek – a summer immersion for students to sojourn with those living in slum communities of the developing world – and the associate director for missions for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Bessenecker has thought long and hard about the need for Jesus’ followers to address economic inequities as a foretaste of God’s kingdom. But what if some of those inequities are inherent in our current mission-minded organizations?

“After serving for more than twenty-five years in the Protestant mission industry I have grown frustrated at some of the barriers to accomplishing mission I have witnessed,” Bessenecker explains. “Protestant missions (and the larger nonprofit world) have become resource-driven, product-oriented, and metric-obsessed operations. We have turned ministries into businesses, the gospel into a product and people into consumers. It is a consequence of adopting a corporate container for our structures.”

To be clear, Bessenecker is not out to decry the effectiveness of capitalism. Rather his concern is the way that capitalist values have infiltrated Protestant Christians’ approach to missions and other faith-based ventures. In *Overturning Tables*, Bessenecker outlines a number of shifts that would lead away from capitalist assumptions and towards a truer embodiment of kingdom values in the practice of missions.

“As corporate-styled capitalism has grown in power and contributed to wealth disparity I have wondered about the appropriateness of this organizational vision for pursuing a peasant-born Savior who tells us the rich will have great difficulty entering the kingdom,” Bessenecker notes. “I hope to spark imaginations imprisoned by a corporate shape to large churches and ministries and free us to create more flexible, leaner models which more easily incorporate the wisdom and help of those from society’s margins.”

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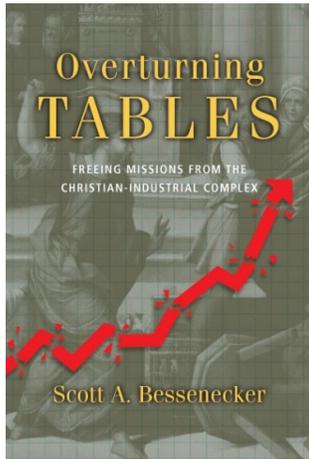
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From the Mainstream to the Margins

In following after the commercial business construct for mission, Protestants are oriented around a worldview that works best for society's elite and is practically unworkable for those eking out a living on the edges of empire. If we insist on constructing church and mission around mindsets and systems most accessible to the middle and upper classes, how do we hope to find Christ who was crucified between criminals and sojourners alongside the marginalized? If church and mission structures have not completely broken free of colonial mindsets, if they require large infusions of capital, if they are principally founded on the idea of gospel as product, and if they are built on a mainly European individualistic vision of the world, then how will the burgeoning, poor, outcast, majority of this world living in barrios, favelas and bustees see that the kingdom of God is good news to them?

Up until Acts 11 the gospel had moved forward only among Jews, despite Peter's powerful conversion experience in the home of a Gentile military man named Cornelius. But in chapter 11 we meet newly empowered marginalized Jews from Cyprus and Cyrene who have the gumption to envision dirty, pork-eating barbarians entering the church. . . . Cyprus and Cyrene had experienced violent ethnic tension between the Jews who were raised there and their Greek neighbors in the early decades of the first century. Believers from these parts would have known something of the challenge and exclusion of living a Jewish faith in a Gentile world. Such exclusion would have been experienced at the hands of their Hebrew-speaking brothers and sisters as well as their Gentile neighbors. Perhaps it is similar to those of minority heritage who feel "other" in a predominantly white culture and then go to their parents' or grandparents' homeland and feel "other" in that place as well because they are unfamiliar with the language and culture of their own heritage. But being a marginalized person gives one eyes to see possibilities no one else sees.

Acts 11:26 tells us that in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians. I would suggest that before Antioch, Christians were called "Jews." In Antioch, Christianity sheds its Jewish wineskin and becomes something unrecognizable as Judaism. Here the church defies the normal trajectory of every faith rooted in one nationality or ethnicity. Egyptians had their pantheon, Greeks and Romans had their gods and goddesses, Persia and China and African tribes all had their own national deities. I am unaware of any faith before this time that was not thoroughly entrenched in an ethnic group. But when these boundary-crossing minority Jews from Cyprus and Cyrene started baptizing men and women from non-Jewish ethnicities into the faith, the followers of Messiah could no longer be called Jews—or a sect of Judaism. Only then could an identity be disentangled from the Semitic ethnicity. The ethnically Hebraic wall to the Christian faith had been breached. Christianity has remained the most nationally, ethnically and linguistically diverse faith in the world. And it started in

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BOOK EXCERPT

“Jerusalem was not the birthplace of Christianity. Antioch was.”

Antioch. Jerusalem was not the birthplace of Christianity. Antioch was. Giving power to the margins and then experiencing revival at the margins brings tension. Both the Roman Empire and the Jewish religious empire opposed the emergence of a Gentile church. It was the exclusivity of Christ over state that offended the Roman Empire, and the inclusivity of Christ to save any prostitute, tax collector or criminal that offended the Jewish empire. The calcified structures of human empire cry out in pain as they are resisted by the pressures from the excluded. To experience real breakthrough in our churches and missions we need to allow those at the edges to help us deconstruct the industrial complex.

Let us rethink our orientation to the cultural, political and social centers we have constructed for the faith, and draw into mission those who are on the margins. Otherwise we will naturally build insular systems that work well for those at the center but will exclude those on the margins: outliers who could, together with those in the mainstream, break new ground and witness fresh advance. Who are the outliers in our churches and organizations, the men and women who do not fit the dominant cultural model? The believers from Cyprus and Cyrene who are willing to do things others have not dared to do because they may offend majority culture sensibilities? Their position outside the dominant culture uniquely qualifies them to see things others don't see and reach into places that feel profane to us. They will create wineskins that confound or upset the current structures, but that can release the gospel of the kingdom like nothing else.

— Adapted from chapter six, “From Mainstream to Margin”



Scott Bessenecker is associate director for missions for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and author of several books, including *The New Friars: The Emerging Movement Serving the World's Poor*. He sends more than two thousand students each year on short-term mission experiences in a number of urban poor locations around the world.

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All about the Benjamins Building God's Kingdom

Why should theologians be allowed to address economic issues?

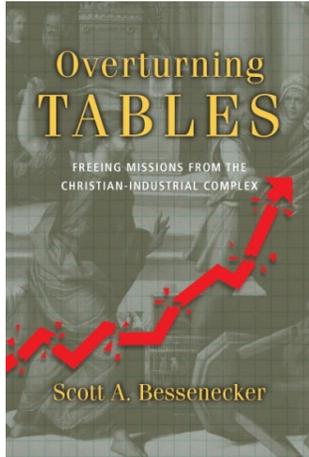
Scott Bessenecker: Our relationship with money and possessions is profoundly spiritual. Jesus warns his disciples about the dangers of pursuing wealth and possessions five times more than he warns them about pursuing sex outside of marriage. I like to say Jesus is more concerned about the misuse of our coins than our misuse of our loins. The Hebrew Scriptures as well as the New Testament and the writings of early church leaders addressed economic concerns frequently. Wealth is a form of power that holds serious material and spiritual consequences. Until the last few centuries the field of economics was located within the broader fields of theology or philosophy. Today it has become disconnected from the humanities and therefore, less humane. Economics has become a pure and simple mathematical science, set adrift from any anchoring in morality. How we create and use wealth, how wealth is distributed, who controls it and how it is accessed – these questions are not primarily formulaic but belong to ethicists and theologians. The first economist was God who has always been incredibly concerned about how wealth is created, distributed and managed.

What was the point of Jesus clearing the temple?

Bessenecker: There is usually a religious thread in Jesus' interactions with the powers, but to suggest that Jesus was simply angry at the way in which the marketplace in the outer courts of the temple had displaced religious worship would be an oversimplification. Jesus was confronting a first century Palestinian version of Wall Street when he overturned the tables of the money changers. The prototypes of what we now call banks were located in temples throughout the Roman Empire, so Jesus overturned the tables of what amounted to the largest "bank" in first century Palestine. The poor were being gouged and the powerful high priestly families were making a killing. Jesus' act of clearing the temple courts had political, economic and religious overtones. Jesus was addressing systemic injustices in all three of these spheres and provoking the first century imagination, such that when the early church formed, their instinct was to pool financial resources for the collective good. The result was that, in contrast to the profound inequities of the temple banking system, "there were no needy among them" (Acts 4:34).

What do you mean by "the Christian-industrial complex"?

Bessenecker: Dwight Eisenhower coined the term "military industrial complex" to describe the merger of business and militarism. The financial profitability of war had become a dangerous development. A symbiotic relationship had emerged between the architects of business and the architects of war, in effect incentivizing the marketing of fear and hatred in



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order to grow business. I use the term “Christian-industrial complex,” somewhat loosely, to describe the relationship between corporate-styled capitalism and the Protestant church and her mission. Many churches and ministries have become corporate behemoths patterned after for-profit corporations. In fact the nonprofit world has almost universally adopted the corporate paradigm as their primary operating value. We have essentially become corporations and turned the gospel into a product and people into consumers of religious goods. I believe the corporate-capitalist worldview has outlived its useful purpose as an operating system and obscured our mission.

How has the way we do Protestant missions been informed by corporate values?

Bessenecker: Some of the earliest limited liability corporations were the British and Dutch East Indies companies. They were birthed in the earliest Protestant nations, funded by Protestant investors and captained by Protestant sea farers. The inspiration for the corporation appears to have been mainly a Protestant notion. As a result, the hierarchical corporate vision of investors, board members, executives, employees and customers is embedded deep into the DNA of Protestant mission. The earliest financiers of Protestant ministries in America were people like Andrew Carnegie, the Rockefellers and the Morgans, people very invested in the corporate paradigm. To this day many Protestant ministries and large churches invite successful business persons onto their boards. The engineers of the corporation have by and large engineered Protestant ministry and the Protestant megachurch.

If the capitalist mindset has helped create productive and profitable corporations, what is the harm in allowing those ideas to shape our church and mission practices?

Bessenecker: There are gifts that the for-profit world has to offer the church and her mission. Good management, careful evaluation and division of labor have their place in informing Protestant ministries. But I believe there are a number of liabilities when our churches and ministries conform to the structure, mindset and values of the for-profit corporation. Very often large donors (the nonprofit version of investors) become our board members who then choose our executives who in turn choose the employees which then work with primary constituents. The separation between those who possess significant organizational control and those working on the ground is too large for such highly interpersonal, whole-life, relationships. Also, very often the value of ministers and ministries lying fallow, or celebrating the value of the “grain of wheat which falls to the ground and dies” or the difficult-to-measure increase in love, peace, patience or kindness gets sacrificed on the short-term altar of external growth. In addition, the “entrance fee” to becoming a full-time minister is so often tied to the ability to raise financial support. When that is true we build an organization of exclusion that rejects competent ministers who do not have access to the money required to fund their salaries or run organizations. Finally, I simply think our imaginations have been handicapped by the corporate container into which we have placed our churches and ministries.

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How do free market values compare to kingdom values?

Bessenecker: The free market places a premium on the unrestrained increase of profit. Jesus said “what does it profit a person to gain the world but forfeit their soul?” One cannot serve both God and money. They are powers which demand absolute fidelity and will not tolerate a second lover. Without regulation, capital is leveraged to increase capital, therefore there is a tendency for wealth to concentrate. Money is a magnet. In the free market world it attracts money from other places, but in the kingdom of God that magnet has reversed polarities, sending wealth out to the edges. God cast his lot with the marginalized when he chose his birthplace and birth family. This should signal to us the centrality of the worlds excluded in God’s kingdom. Most of the power centers in our churches and ministries are occupied not by the poor, the excluded, the sex workers, the children, the uneducated, the “sinners.” These people were at the center of Christ’s universe.

What are some organizations or groups who are modeling a different way doing mission?

Bessenecker: There are a number of organizations, my own included, who are taking daring steps to wiggle out from under the Christian-industrial complex. Unfortunately, we are all still deeply mired in the corporate paradigm. However, some new models are emerging. Many developing world ministries simply cannot afford to run the corporate structures embraced by Western ministries. For them, leaner and more flexible structures are used. Ministers are much poorer and often bivocational, living with friends or family and working jobs within the communities in which they minister. There are also a handful of Western-based organizations attempting to live outside of the industrial complex. I write about some of these organizations in my book, *The New Friars*: organizations like Servants, Word Made Flesh, Servant Partners, Urban Neighbours of Hope and InnerCHANGE. In addition, micro-church movements like the Tampa Underground and missionary organizations like Frontiers that equip churches to mobilize and send groups of congregants to live and work together overseas are attempting to envision other sorts of structures. In *Overturing Tables*, I attempt to tell the stories of American slaves of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, new friars and developing world leaders who offer a different vision for church and mission structures.