

# The Business of Religion

*By Ebony Whitson*

Jesus gave a command to spread the gospel to all nations. With the help of modern technology, the church has been able to do as it was commanded. Ministry has grown from small congregations to mega churches and large platforms such as television, online services, and media distribution. Churches now include various outreach ministries and offer extended services. There are now ATM machines in vestibules, bookstores in sanctuaries, and holy items for sale for personal use such as blessed oil and water. This expansion of the church has come with a costly price. With growth, the church has adapted to the world.

According to a 2016 article, Sherwood revealed that religion has grown significantly. Religion has a net worth of 1.2 trillion dollars, which is more than Apple and Google combined (Sherwood, 2016). With the integration of corporate business models, the church has become more of a thriving industry rather than a functional ministry. Some churches have become legal entities with models created for profit. The goal of the church is no longer focused on saving souls, but on whose ministry can outgrow the other. Mega Pastors and Bishops thrive off of a generous salary, while positions within the church are sought after for fame and power.

Tithing is the first and original form of income for the church. It is the beginning of the formation of business in the church. Tithes are the earliest recorded transaction of supporting the church (Genesis 14:20). Tithes are different from the sacrificial offering. In a sacrificial offering one can give above tithing, but general tithes focus on what the Bible states as a “tenth of one’s earnings.” In the Old Testament, tithing would consist mostly of produce and cattle (Leviticus 27:32). Most of the people in the Bible and early church were farmers. Their harvest was their income.

Our tithes and offering play a big part in the infrastructure of the church. Initially, the sacrificial offering of paying tithes was to help sustain the church and support outreach opportunities. Tithes and offerings are the first initial stream of income for the church. They are one of the very sources of misappropriated funding within. As churches grew, they sought out partnerships with local businesses to help support the church beyond the giving of the congregation. They began to form many divisions of ministry, services, and entities. Today one can find many collaborations within the church that appear to help the ministry provide more for its community and congregation. Examples include donation of school supplies, and funds for funeral expenses or medical assistance. There are also organizations like the Hunger Task Force, that help to support many of the local food pantries within the ministries. The external partnerships may help increase the reach of the church, but they also benefit them financially. In a past article presented on Christianity Today, Ted Olsen wrote about the formation of a new partnership between the Revelation Corporation of America and African American congregations in Tennessee (Olsen, 1997). This partnership is a perfect example of merging business and ministry.

The two entities Olsen referred to, created a program that was intended to be a bridge between the church and a local corporation, which would help to create more homeowners within the congregations (Olsen, 1997). Through this deal both entities stood to profit as more members took part. In another article by Shelly Branch, which was reported on CNN Money, the specifics of the deal were evaluated. Thirty percent of the profit went to the individual church or congregation, and seventy percent went to the Revelation fund for the housing program (Branch, 1996). At face value this appears to be a good deal for everyone, but not all congregations were a part of this partnership.

An article by Candace followed the Revelation Corporation when it was first introduced to all the preachers of Memphis, TN. It was during a Congress of National Black Churches, a pitch from Jon B. Lowry was introduced to the attendees as a way to “have silver, gold, and Jesus.” With so much economic influence and yet so little knowledge on how to use it, the black church community was the perfect opportunity for investors. On average the black churches raise an estimated \$11.5 billion annually which is collected from the community (Candace, 2017).

The church is seen as the positive central hub in the black community. It was the pivotal center for many social and political movements in the community. The church has a reputation for being a positive center of the neighborhood.

The black congregation has yet to be successful in business ventures for their congregations. They have untapped power to transform their neighborhoods and surrounding areas.

Candace wrote:

Black churches have the ability to transform poor black communities by simply creating jobs. With all the abandoned businesses and homes, seen when driving through these communities, they could profoundly change lives. They could transform the community block by block rehabbing homes. They could open markets providing fresh fruits and vegetables to the community. They could create better schools, schools in which the curriculum is fun and challenging (Candace, 2017).

In addition to the infrastructure of the church becoming corrupt, the members of the church are targeted through giving to further its agenda for growth. In an article by John Blake of CNN on the “Sunday Morning Stick-up,” the name of God is being used in the church not to collect tithes, but everything one has to offer in hope of blessings. What he wrote was the experience of Mr. David Lee, who attended a Sunday morning church service and witnessed people not only giving money, but also their possessions to the altar (Blake, 2015). The scriptures do speak of giving to one another, but not in this way.

In Acts 2:45 after the Pentecost experience, Jesus’ followers gathered all they owned. They sold it to help those around them who were in need. This move was made by the Holy Spirit which signified selflessness, charity, and love. It was the beginning of the church that God called us to be. Today the sale of our possessions goes to the pastor’s new plane. Collections are put towards an investment of the new east wing expansion for the new “technology ministry.” In addition to the excessive offerings, churches are known for expansive giving campaigns that can generate thousands of tax-free dollars. Churches also have the option of satellite locations, whether online or in other cities to expand their reach and revenue.

Towards the end of His earthy ministry, Jesus came to the temples to find the selling of doves, cattle, and sheep for those who did not have a sacrificial offering (John 2:15). His response to these actions taking place in the temple courts was constructing a whip made from cords, driving the people out of the temple, and overthrowing their tables (Matthew 21:12). Jesus was furious with the actions of the men and scolded them for turning the House of God into a marketplace (John 2:16).

Jesus gave warning to those who had their focus on worldly gain during religious activities. Greed is a sinful and selfish monster that takes away from the church’s work of loving and supporting one another. The greed of the church is greater today than a common marketplace of animals. By selling the free gospel at a price no one can afford, those who do this stand to suffer a more severe punishment from God.

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