

The Ministry of Entrepreneurship

What should be the church's response to this issue of debt?

It was probably the most popular commencement speech delivered at any college graduation this year. To say it went viral would be an understatement. Billionaire Robert Smith in his address to the almost 400 graduates of Morehouse College pledged to pay off all their student loans. It was an estimated amount of \$10 million.^[1]

Many of you reading this probably wished you were in that graduating class (so do I). This act of kindness underscores a major fact in America today – to be young and college educated is to be in a lot of debt. The total national student loan debt is over \$1.5 trillion. Graduates of predominantly black colleges and universities carry 32% more debt than their counterparts at other institutions of higher education.^[2]

We are in a crisis that threatens the economic, emotional and social well-being of a generation. Political candidates are making big promises as to what they plan to do about this issue if they get elected. What should be the church's response to this issue of debt?

What does the prophet say?

In the Bible there is a story of a woman facing a similar debt crisis. It is affecting her peace of mind, her family, and threatening to jeopardize her future. In 2 Kings chapter 4 we find the story of a widow whose deceased husband was a church worker. Not only has she lost her life companion and the father of her two sons, but her only income source as well.

When we are introduced to her, she is in debt and the creditors are coming to take her boys and make them slaves. With nowhere to turn she seeks out Elisha the prophet, the mouth-piece of God in that day.

It may be expected that Elisha, as spiritually connected as he was and with all the miracles he had performed, would have prayed down resources out of heaven for her. But he does not do that. With a network of other believers it is also conceivable that he would have collected an offering from the body for her. But he doesn't do that either.

Instead Elisha helps her to develop a small business to relieve her debt situation, care for her sons present needs, and secure their future.

Could it be that this advice to this mother in debt is still relevant today for those under the weight of debt?

3 Steps to Start a Side Business

This story captures three principles that can help anyone to start a side business. It is estimated that 45% of Americans are earning extra income on top of their salary.^[3] Some of that is through freelance and contract work. Here are three steps for anyone looking to start a business.

STEP #1: Figure out what you have

The big question Elisha asks the woman is “What do you have in your house?” For someone who seemingly has nothing, that is a challenging question. It is difficult for each of us to stop and assess what skills, expertise and resources we have.

Just like the woman back then, it is easy to down play and overlook what we have. We tend to value what others do much more than our own abilities. But good stewardship of what God has given us requires that we stop and take inventory of what we have.

We can figure that out by looking at what we know a lot about, what we are highly skilled in doing, and evaluating the things people come to us for help with. Those three areas can give us a good picture of what we have that we can use for a business.

STEP #2: Connect with others

One of the brilliant lessons that Elisha shares with this widow is the need to connect with others. So he has her go borrow vessels from her neighbors. The fact of the matter is, in order for someone to lend items to you there has to be a level of trust. This widow had to tap into the trust she built up and possibly even develop new relationships of trust.

This is key for anyone seeking to build a business. You have to grow a know, like, and trust factor. People are looking to do business with others they feel confident in and believe in. And there are so many ways to build up trust in who you are and what you have to offer.

One big way to develop confidence in the eyes of potential customers is to show results. You demonstrate that what you have has helped others. More than anything people want to know that what you say you can do you are able to deliver.

STEP #3: Convert into sales

Elisha instructs this mother to go pour her oil into the jars she has borrowed. We cannot overlook the miracle that God works here. From a small amount of oil in her house, multiple vessels are filled. What an encouraging feeling to know that God blesses entrepreneurial efforts that we give to Him. After the vessels are filled, she has to go sell the oil to get the money to pay her debts. This shows us that what we have has to be packaged in a way that our customers can receive it. In our world today there are so many ways to package your knowledge and expertise. And people are willing to pay for it!

What's in your house?

Perhaps you opened this article by chance and initially were not interested in full time entrepreneurship. Truthfully, it is not for everyone. But what if God is nudging you to use what He's given you? What if He's challenging you to pour your oil into empty vessels? Once this woman filled those vessels I believe she went back to the same people she borrowed them from and offered the oil for sale. She took what they gave her and made it better.

I encourage you to use what God has given you to enrich the lives of others through your small business. Remember, Billionaire Robert Smith, through the

success of his entrepreneurship, was able to take care of the debt of the 2019 graduating class of Morehouse College. How can the success of your small business help your community or church? Maybe God is waiting to bless you so that He can use you to bless others. What if God is seeking for a generation of believers, a generation of churches, that are willing to do ministry through entrepreneurship? What's in your house?

[1]

<https://www.thegazette.com/subject/news/education/billionaire-robert-smith-says-hell-pay-off-morehouse-college-class-of-2019s-student-loans-20190519>

[2]

<https://www.businessinsider.com/student-loan-debt-crisis-college-cost-mind-blowing-facts-2019-7>

[3]

<https://www.fool.com/retirement/2019/06/07/45-of-us-workers-have-a-side-hustle-data-shows.aspx>

Tax Benefits of Charitable Contributions

The Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 increased your standard deduction, which lowered your incentive to itemize deductions, including for charitable donations. This causes many to ask if there are any tax benefits left in making charitable contributions? Well, it depends! Here are three tax benefits to consider.

1. **Limitations Suspended:** The new tax law suspended the limitations on itemized deductions. *Translation* – You are no longer limited by the amount of your charitable contribution for which you will receive credit. Prior to the change in the law you would only receive credit for some of your charitable contribution and not the entire amount. With the change in the law it is possible now to receive full credit for your contribution.
2. **Increased Deduction Amount:** Under the old tax law you were only allowed to deduct charitable contributions up to fifty percent (50%) of your base or adjusted gross income. Under the new tax law you are able to deduct up to sixty percent (60%) if you're making cash contributions to a public charity.
3. **Donor Advised Funds:** A Donor Advised Fund (DAF) is a giving vehicle established at a public charity. It allows the donor to receive an immediate tax deduction and then recommends the grant from the funds at a later date over time. One tax benefit is that you can designate the recipient of your funds later and NOT at the time of your contribution.

Be Smart About How You Give

It's the most wonderful time of the year! That's the line from a popular song played during this holiday season. This is the season in which most tax

exempt or non-profit organizations receive more than fifty percent (50%) of their charitable contributions. But with all these individuals, friends, family and organizations soliciting your donations, how do you know who to trust or how to allocate your resources? Here are smart steps to consider before you donate.

1. **Accountability:** It would be wise to investigate whether can you hold the organization accountable to execute the responsibilities associated with your donation. To assist you in making a wise decision you should look up the organization at www.charity.org and www.give.org.
2. **Avoid Donating Over the Phone:** During this season, you may get bombarded with calls from several individuals who claim that they represent an organization. What they are not telling you is that they are employed on behalf of a for-profit organization, soliciting funds on behalf of the non-profit organization. In other words, their company will receive a percentage of your donation as compensation for fund raising services. So, do you want one hundred percent of your contributions to benefit the organization or do you want some to go towards fund raising expenses?
3. **Tax Exempt:** This is a simple question which has significant meaning. You just don't want to know if the organization to which you are donating, is a non-profit. The real question you need to know is whether the organization is currently tax exempted under the Internal Revenue Service Code and has section 501(c)(3) status. Some organizations were once tax exempted, but may have lost their tax exempt status. To help you figure this out check on the organization at www.irs.gov and click on charities to find out if the organization to which you are about to donate is still legitimate.

Jesus and Politics: Religion With Responsibility

One thing I love about the book of Revelation is its focus on the imminent return of Jesus Christ. It speaks of how He will defeat the kingdoms of this world, and usher in a new kingdom governed by love, justice, equality and truth.

When Heaven Becomes an Excuse

This hope in the soon coming of Jesus is essential to the faith-walk of a believer. However, as a young, black Christian man, the songs that speak of heaven are drowned out by the cries of those living in an earthly hell. Have we become so focused on glory that we have created a culture where hope in eternity is a sort of eschatological escapism?

I know that we are waiting on the return of Jesus, but I believe that the people of God should be working while we are waiting. Let's be honest, the world needs us, right now. If we are going to take on the name of Jesus, we must also take on the agenda of Jesus.

The Politics of Jesus

In Luke, Jesus said the Spirit anointed Him to proclaim good news to the poor, set captives free, and bring liberty to the oppressed. In spite of these verses, many have been taught not to engage in “social movements” or “politics.” I would like to suggest that if we believe that Christ cares for the whole being, we should definitely use every resource possible to bring liberty to the oppressed among us, even if that means becoming engaged in the political process.

When there are policies that disproportionately impact the health of women of color, we must fight to change those policies.

When certain neighborhoods of predominantly black and brown people don't have adequate healthy food options, and the life expectancy rate of that neighborhood is lower than that of a majority white neighborhood in the next town over, we must get involved.

When the median wealth in white America is 10 times the median wealth in black America, we must do something.

Christians Engaged in Politics

It is possible to become politically and socially engaged without becoming corrupt. We shouldn't fight for power or prestige. We shouldn't engage with the hopes of lording over people. We don't even have to align with one particular political party. But when we see issues that are aiding in the oppression of people who cannot speak up for themselves, as believers, we have a responsibility to be their advocates. Here are three reasons why as followers of Christ we have the responsibility to be advocates and activists.

Reason #1: Jesus Advocated for the Oppressed

The Bible is a book of hope to people who are either going into oppression, experiencing oppression, or coming out of oppression. The overwhelming narrative of scripture is that God always sides with the marginalized people of society. You cannot read scripture and come to the conclusion that God is the defender of the empire.

He is the God of the Hebrew slave.

He is the God of the young woman in Babylonian captivity.

He is the God of the forgotten leper relegated to the outside of the city.

He is the God of the teenage refugee protecting her newborn from a murderous king.

He is the God of the religious minority risking life and liberty in the shadows of the Roman empire.

In light of Scripture, our political activity should be for the purpose of advocating for the people God has called us to defend. We should support candidates whose agendas set out to present policies that make life better for the marginalized among us.

Reason #2: Our Communities Need More Than Charity

I remember being a child in church and discovering our congregation's food pantry. I remember my parents explaining to me that our church gave food away to people who were poor and didn't have the money to buy groceries. This was surely a noble deed. As I got older, I began to question why so many people who looked like me, and lived in certain neighborhoods needed food from church pantries?

Many of our congregations are known for doing charitable work in our communities. Let me be clear, charity is good, and necessary. Jesus said "I was hungry and you fed me, naked and you clothed me." Righteousness is demonstrated by meeting the present needs of people. However, at some point, we have to ask ourselves why certain people in certain demographics continue to need food, or help with rent, or services provided by free health clinics. Charity responds to the symptoms of a much deeper sickness. Certain communities remain in need because of systemic evil. Yes, we need to clothe the naked, but we also have to ask ourselves why our children can't afford clothing and new school uniforms? Why aren't wages keeping up with the rising cost of living? Yes, we should feed the hungry, but we must also deal with the joblessness and income inequality that keeps certain people groups food insecure. We should house the marginalized immigrant, but we must also fight against the policies that force them into hiding in the first place. As we aim to tear down certain oppressive strongholds and systems, we must recognize that something as simple as voting, can make a big difference in the shaping of public policy.

Reason #3: Social and Political Engagement Helps Our Witness

Finally, we as a church should engage socially and civically because it helps our witness. My pastor used to always say, people don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care. When the church fights for people's right to vote, marches in protest of a criminal justice system void of justice, and publicly supports policies that protect the economically vulnerable, people will be more willing to hear about our Jesus. It is possible that an introduction to Jesus the social advocate, can lead to a relationship with Jesus the savior.

So yes, let's look forward to the return of Jesus. He is our hope. But as we wait on Jesus, remember there's a world waiting on us.