

Personal Ministry in Book Selling **by Jim Wilson**

There is an excitement in selling books. It is not a recent phenomenon. When Mr. Brownlow asked Oliver Twist whether he would rather write books or read books, Oliver replied that he would rather be a bookseller.

I have been reading books for fifty years and selling them for over thirty years, as well as having written two books. And believe me, the excitement is in selling them. I agree with Oliver.

Over the years I have had people tell me how they would love to be in the bookstore business. Their reasons sound like this. "I love to read books and I love bookkeeping." If one is going to be a bookseller, it is important that one read books, and it is important that one do bookkeeping. But that is not what makes a bookseller. A bookseller must be a lover of people more than a lover of books. A lover of books becomes a book collector. A lover of people becomes a book distributor.

When we narrow book selling down to Christian book selling, the love for people is even more important. Putting the right book in the right person's hand, so that the person will become a little more like the Lord Jesus, is a cause for great excitement.

Most of us, when we first thought of going into the Christian book business, had all kinds of idealistic-ministry-excitement. We had ideas of long conversations with customers about the Lord. We had ideas of being able to spend hours reading Christian books. There were ideas of coffee corners with chairs and a table around which people could feel comfortable and ask questions about the Savior. Other ideas included having the store combined with a craft shop, or dress shop, or coffeehouse, or restaurant, and on and on. The ideas were wonderful because they were dreamt with ministry in mind--personal ministry. These additions to the store were to increase the contact with non-Christians. Then we also had the idea of discounts. We remembered that we had never been able to afford all of the Christian books we wanted to read. Books were too high, so we would discount as a service to the Lord's people. We would do the Christian thing. We would even give away and loan books!

There is someone reading this who is already a Christian bookseller and he can remember when the hard facts of staying in business began to erode, or cause to collapse, the wonderful ideas he had of reading, and talking, and coffee, etc. At first it was disillusioning, but then he found a new kind of excitement. It was the excitement of business, of turnover, of 2% 10 days e.o.m., of profit margins, and of gross sales. Now it is not the excitement of Christian book selling, it is the excitement of business, and it happens to be Christian books. This excitement keeps him going. He begins to think in terms of the dollar amount that came in that day, not the people who came in. In fact, he finds himself less interested in what the people are buying, but only that they are buying.

Occasionally his conscience hits him, reminding him that his values have changed since he got into the business. Then he tells his conscience that he was naive and did not know what he was doing when he started the store. But the conscience still talks back, so he reminds it of how many Christian books are in the community that would not be there now if he had not minded the business. Since the conscience still makes noise, he promises it that he will do some of these idealistic ministry things as soon as the store can afford it, which he thinks might be when it grosses \$100,000. But when he does get to that figure, he finds out again that he was naive, so he makes another promise to proceed in the direction of personal ministry when the store grosses \$200,000, then \$300,000. By that time, if not long before, he has neither the energy nor the desire to do some of those wonderful things for which he went into the ministry. A love of money may even have crept in where once the love of people and the love of books were. Some of us have accepted the business facts, but are frustrated and unhappy. There is still a strong desire for more personal ministry.

Here are a few recommendations on how it is possible to follow good business principles and still have a major personal ministry. They are not opposed to each other. They are different and therefore should be complementary, not mutually exclusive. In order for them to be complementary, the sense of ministry has to be primary. If the ministry is primary, then the business becomes a very good servant of the ministry to people. But the opposite is not true. If the business becomes primary, the ministry then becomes a servant to the business. It is then not long, before the ministry is not a ministry. They become exclusive to each other. This may not seem to be so to you. Good business gives itself to people and good ministry gives itself to people. Are they then not parallel? No, because the "giving" is for two different reasons. Good business "gives" because it pays off -- it gets in return. Good ministry "gives" with no thought of return; and believe me, the people know the difference.

First, in our hearts and minds, we make a decision that we are here to give ourselves to the needs of the people, for their good only. Sure enough, as soon as we do, all kinds of people will take advantage of us. That's true, but that is just one of the hazards of being a Christian. It is not a reason to revert. Second, we educate our staff to think in the same way, to give themselves to people for the people's good.

If there was someone who lived a hundred miles away, who called you and said he was in great trouble, and he knew he needed God, and then asked you if you would drive over and talk with him about God, what would you do? With very few exceptions, of those of you reading this, you would go. Not only would you go, but you would pray about which books you should take to give to him or loan to him. It might be one or it might be several. The result would be that it would cost you time and money, and since time is money, it would cost you fifty to one hundred dollars. But you would say, "So what? Money is not important when it comes to the value of a human soul, and neither is time." Well, we have people like this coming into our stores every day, but they will not tell us their needs if they only sense our politeness and our cordial business practices. We have learned responses that keep people from wasting our time. They also keep people from opening up to us and asking for real help.

The real ministry is not the coffee corner or reading room. It is our outgoing love for people. We could probably make a few changes in the decor of the store to make it warmer and less business-like. That would cause people to feel more free about talking. But it is our love for people that will really build the bridge. This love is not automatic. It is a choice that has to be made, a choice over other choices.

I have been associated with several stores. I have seen stores lose the "personal" and become "impersonal," and I have seen a store go the other direction from impersonal to very personal. The results are very different in the community. The personal store will change the character of the community much faster than an impersonal store with greater gross sales. The character of the store is determined by the character and policies of the people who run and work in the store.