

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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SLEDGEHAMMERS, WEDGES, AND LOGS

by Gary North

One of the truly discouraging things for every businessman or minister to deal with is the slowness of all progress within his organization. A man who is pioneering a particular idea or technology believes that his product is so unique, so beneficial, and so marketable that buyers or contributors will line up to buy it. Design a better mousetrap, the saying goes, and people will beat a path to your door.

Baloney. The only person who will beat a path to your door is the man from OSHA. Or someone from the SPCA.

For example, consider the redesigned typewriter keyboard invented in 1932 by Dr. August Dvorak. Dvorak knew the story of the original typewriter, which had appeared on the market 60 years earlier. It had been mechanically inefficient. The keys kept jamming, even with "hunt and peck" typing. ("Touch" typing appeared only at the turn of the century.) So the designer redesigned the keyboard to slow down the typist. From this point of view, the "QWERTY" keyboard is a work of genius. It is very slow. Randomly allocated keys would be far more efficient.

Dvorak redesigned the keyboard to reduce by 95% the distance which the typist's fingers move. The professional typist's fingers cover an astounding 20 miles a day on "QWERTY." On a Dvorak, they move less than a mile. Fatigue is reduced; so are errors. Speeds of up to 200 words per minute are possible on an electronic word processor (e.g., world record holder Barbara Blackburn). On an electric typewriter, speeds of over 150 wpm have been achieved under test conditions. On a manual, speeds of up to 125 wpm have been sustained.

Yet hardly anyone has ever seen a Dvorak keyboard. The patent lapsed years ago, and still the public hasn't heard about it. Only with the advent of the computer have even a few people switched to the Dvorak Simplified Keyboard (DSK) or the variant called the American Simplified (ASK), even though it has been officially adopted by an international standards committee.

Why the failure? First, information costs. Who had any incentive to tell the story? Second, costs of relearning a new keyboard. People resist change. Third, doubt about the benefits of relearning. Would the investment of time pay off? Fourth, difficulties in reselling used typewriters with the strange keyboard with all the vowels under the left hand, home row. The DSK has been a cult item for half a century. But those who adopted it (such as my wife) doubled their speed.

Now the ASK system has become available for a number of computers. Several companies offer ASK keyboards as accessories (such as Keytronics Co. of Seattle), and other firms offer programs to restructure an existing keyboard electronically. For the latest information of what is available, contact Dvorak International Foundation, 11 Pearl St, Brandon, VT.

My point is this: Dvorak built a better mousetrap, by some fair margin. But are **you** going to spend a 20-cent stamp to find out about it, six decades after it was introduced, and five decades after every international typing speed record has been set on it (never once did a "QWERTY" user win)? Probably not. And even if you do, you are one of only a few thousand who ever have, except for championship typists.

You get my point. It takes more than the best product. It takes such things as timing, marketing skills, a marketing organization, production capital, and a host of other entrepreneurial skills. It also helps for people to recognize their need when they hear about it. Not many ever do. Therefore, not many multimillionaires or \$100 million T.V. ministries ever appear.

How Long Until the Pay-Off?

Dr. Dvorak died without seeing his invention succeed. I suspect I will die before I see it succeed, although I will do what I can to prove myself incorrect about this. The same is true of Frantz or Motor Guard toilet paper oil filters for cars. Use one, and you never have to change your car's motor oil again. (My 1972 Toyota has had three oil changes in the last 100,000 miles, and the last one was 50,000 miles ago.)

But no one can believe it, least of all automotive engineers who didn't happen to invent it. In fact, they are outraged when I write about it in *REMNANT REVIEW*. I always get nasty letters from engineers who have never seen one, tested one, or seen any impartial test results concerning one (the petroleum and auto engineering societies refuse to conduct such tests, since they know the results will be positive, and people will buy fewer cars and less oil). Don't confuse them with the facts; it **couldn't** be true.

Recognize the response? It is the same one we hear from the vast majority of people who hear the gospel. "This just couldn't be true! If it were, why wouldn't everyone believe it?" The answers are many, but the main one is **presuppositions**. Most people already have their minds made up.

Was Dvorak wrong in spending the time to invent his keyboard? Not from my wife's point of view. Not from the point of view of those who have adopted it. But from the point of view of market profits, it was a foolish waste of time. So are 99% of all inventions. Even of those that even reach the market, 90% or more fail to gain acceptance.

What about your calling, or your ministry, or your vision? Has the public refused to grasp its importance? Of course. Are you wasting your time? You probably won't know for sure until judgment day.

Guidelines

Then are there some kind of guidelines that will at least give you a hint? Yes, there are. They are not infallible, but they are helpful.

First, is anyone clearly being helped by your services now? Not everyone, of course, but **anyone**? If so, you are on the right track.

Second, is the person being helped ready to pay in full for services rendered? Now that he knows how beneficial your service or product is, will he reorder (assuming that you are trying to get repeat business)? If not, then you may not be helping him as much as the consumption of scarce economic resources used in producing it is hurting others.

Third, how long have you been trying to develop a market? A year? Five years? Twenty years? The longer you have been trying without success, the more likely it is that you are wasting your time—and the older you get, the less time you have to waste

Fourth, are you having a good time anyway?

Fifth, if this service, product, or idea is valuable, but people just refuse to see it today, is there a possibility that they will recognize its importance years in the future? And are you the key person—perhaps the only person—who is likely to be able to keep the vision alive between now and then? If so, it may be worth your effort, not as a source of income, but as a kind of “Johnny Appleseed” project.

Certain occupations lend themselves to **illusions** concerning the long-term pay-off. Missionaries suffer from this affliction. “Just one more year, Lord, and I know we’ll see fruit!” So do writers, especially writers of non-fiction, and above all, ideological or religious writers. A novel that dies is unlikely ever to be resurrected, as novel writers know. But a man like Karl Marx can always hope (though not pray) that his efforts will eventually pay off. In Marx’s case, they did, although it is unlikely that he would have admitted that what Lenin, Stalin, and Mao built is based on Marxism. But that means little; he refused to admit that anything anyone except Engels wrote was “true” Marxism. Marx was an ego-maniac—a common affliction of ideologues.

The fact of the matter is this: **very few books survive the first printing**. Very few of these survivors then survive a decade, especially scientific books. They get obsolete too fast. Almost no book survives a century’s change. These few become “the classics,” which a handful of formally educated people talk about but virtually never actually read.

Do people really read Augustine’s *City of God*, cover to cover, despite its being the most important book (other than the Bible) in the development of Western Civilization? (A few people may read his *Confessions*, since this work is highly personal, and autobiographies are popular.) Who reads Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica*? How many Calvinists have actually read Calvin’s *Institutes*, cover to cover? I never have. He wrote for a different century using different types of argumentation. (Ministers or historians may read his commentaries sporadically to find out his views on this or that verse.)

How many Marxists have ever read *Das Kapital*? Maybe a few anticommunist critics do. I read three volumes (though I never did get around to the fourth). And how many Darwinists have ever read *Origin of Species*?

What is my solution to the writer’s dilemma? I write Bible commentaries for the long run, since there will always be some preacher who is stuck on some verse and needs an answer. I also write present-bound investment books to put bread on my table. I wrote *Unconditional Surrender* to be a handbook serviceable a century from now, with only three references to twentieth-century books. I have learned to **target my audience**, and then produce for that audience. If you try to target several audiences, then produce different things for them.

Actually, though few novels survive, people in our day really only read century-old books if they are novels. Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, Melville (because he is assigned in college classes), Dostoevsky, and Tolstoi (maybe). We read good novels for enjoyment, or because they are still assigned in literature classes.

So the writer writes, hoping for a kind of immortality. It rarely comes. But when a few writers do write true classics, whole civilizations change. The pay-off is huge; those who achieve it, few.

Maturity and Patience

One sign of maturity is a person’s ability to understand that in God’s world, there can be (and usually is) a **long interval between spiritual cause and visible effect**. In contrast, it is of the very essence of magic and witchcraft that the practitioner expects an immediate effect on his environment from his manipulation or ritualistic practice. If he doesn’t get it, he may switch rituals.

Patience must be grounded in faith—a faith strengthened by knowledge. To be zealous when your expectations are really preposterous is to be bull-headed and wasteful. I know a respected Christian scholar who spent his productive years dreaming of creating a university, or at least a college. This was ridiculous; colleges are institutions more appropriate in a civilization’s mature phase, yet he expected a millennial or near-millennial transformation of the present humanist order. What is crucial to this transformation is a new Christian worldview, which his own writings have helped to provide, but he spent his career hypnotized by visions of bricks and mortar. **He wanted a pyramid, a monument, with his name on it.** He never really understood his true importance. He was a man whose career goals were as present-oriented and therefore futile as his theology is future-oriented. His **bricks and mortar fetish** cost him his ministry, most of his serious followers, and certainly his peace of mind. He grew deeply envious and bitter concerning light-weight rivals who had gained large ministries. God eventually put him on the shelf. Or rather, God left him on the shelf where he had fled in order to sulk.

Wedges Are Narrow

It discourages us to see how long it takes for significant effects to follow from our life’s efforts. But we must take seriously the parable of the woman who relentlessly badgered the unjust judge until he rendered judgment (Luke 18:1ff.). We must keep banging at the door. If we see ourselves as pioneers, then we must not expect the wilderness to flower immediately in order to comfort us, or to give us immediate, visible confirmation in the value of our efforts. You don’t split a log with a sledgehammer. You split it with a sledgehammer and a wedge. A mass-audience ministry is a sledgehammer. Ideological ministries are wedges.

God appears to be breaking this civilization, not by smashing it into oblivion, but by slicing it open. Wedges are narrow, but they are excellent tools for specialized purposes. Leaders who lust after mass audiences had better not try to get into the cultural log-splitting business, which takes a sharp message acceptable only to a narrow remnant. Luther was an exception to this rule. Are you as sharp, and as much of a sledgehammer, as Luther was? If not, be content with a presently limited calling, if you are a wedge. Mass-audience ministries are soon forgotten. They do not survive the death of their founders—not in the form, or with the goals, of their founders. Those with sledgehammer ministries eventually use wedges. Patience!

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