

Bootstrapping. Have you heard of that? It's pretty interesting—bootstrapping is one thing that many entrepreneurs have done very well without ever having heard the term before. But when we sort through the whole idea in the next few minutes—with a few twists, of course—well, we'll see that all of us as Christians are privileged to be doing some fruitful bootstrapping. And, hey, some people who don't even consider themselves even close to this idea are actually bootstrapping. Let's start with a definition and then build some key observations that each of us can find very useful, sooner or later.

Nowadays the term bootstrapping is used in some technical areas, like in statistics, law, and bond yield curves. But what we're talking about is good, old-fashioned small business—starting a company! After all, that idea is what most people focus on when they hear the word *bootstrapping*. Along those lines, the Investopedia website is often helpful, and it has a definition of bootstrapping that's worth starting with. Here it is: "Bootstrapping describes a situation in which an entrepreneur starts a company with little capital, relying on money other than outside investments. An individual is said to be bootstrapping when they attempt to found and build a company from personal finances or the operating revenues of the new company." Now, here's more of a street-level take on bootstrapping: an organization is started totally and operates for a significant time using just the owners' resources plus new revenues. No angel investors, no venture capital, no one putting money in...not even a rich uncle, at least at the start!

Now, we all are pretty aware that the vast majority of businesses in America—*numerically speaking*—are small businesses...they're relatively small operations, like a local store, right? While the corporations like Apple and Google and Toyota dominate with company sales levels and profits, there are fresh, new, vibrant businesses that start every day. Like a young go-getter just getting started by mowing lawns or babysitting. Like an artist selling works at a local antique mall. Like a food-cart operator selling hot dogs on a downtown corner. Like a bit of consulting going on in the home office of a business professional.

Hey, America is historically a country chock full of entrepreneurs. Still, the current reality is that many countries with very high entrepreneurship rates are poverty-stricken! That's because people in these countries struggle to simply survive, so they start businesses, and, by the way, many of them are women full of drive and gumption! But many European countries in recent decades are of the opposite profile—they have low rates of entrepreneurship for a whole host of social, cultural, and governmental reasons.

But a significant segment of the population in the U.S. has continued to stick to a very persistent ideal of entrepreneurial activity. Yeah, many Americans are very independent—they want to start a business, to be their own boss, to have more control over the fruits of their efforts at work! It's simply in their DNA!

In fact, for decades, the wealthiest people in the U.S. typically have *not* inherited their wealth—they've built their wealth from the ground up. Take the top ten wealthiest people in the U.S.—the record has been that these people started their business and lived to see their hard work put them the top of the wealth heap. You know names, like Gates, Bezos, and Zuckerberg—innovators who have truly bettered the lives of millions. Remember, wealth in a free market is really just the key real-world indicator of successful stewardship on behalf of customers, employees, and investors! And recent history reveals that even the very few folks on the "wealthiest" list for America who *didn't* start a business are only one generation removed—they are the sons and daughters of Sam Walton, the famous founder of Walmart!

The response to that list by many Americans? Well, they don't sit back and envy these people or criticize them for being great stewards of their companies—no, instead, they start their *own* enterprises! It's part of what many perceive to be vital to the American dream: the freedom to start an enterprise and to steward that organization to greatness—yes, paying workers...pleasing customers...rewarding investors!

Now let's get to the peculiarities of bootstrapping, the start of virtually every business. The story is that the term came of pulling on cowboy boots by those straps that are tightly sewn into the top of the boot. The person who wears the boots takes the effort to position the boots at their feet and get those boots

on by pulling vigorously on the two straps on the either side of the boot. Then they're literally off and running—because they pulled their boots on by the bootstraps, by their own efforts and resources!

So, let's talk about the pure money dimension of bootstrapping. That's when the founders use only *personal resources* to make the business start. No other investors. No bank loans to the business. Wait, you say, what about using personal credit cards? Well, that's a bit of a gray area, for sure, but many would say that's still bootstrapping when using *personal* credit cards, not using *company* borrowing.

Then there's the founder's *contributing the free use of resources* already being paid for, like home-office space and desks and laptops and other types of work areas. Yes, that's like the giant Hewlett-Packard—you know, H-P laptops—yes, famous for starting in co-founder David Packard's garage!

How about keeping *operating costs* really low? "Pinching pennies." Doing without. Scraping by. Putting off unnecessary purchases. That's typical for bootstrapping! Same with *astutely managing inventory*, if the company sells physical products, but it's harder to do when the company needs depth and selection in its product line. That can require some significant resources. But even so, Michael Dell propelled his company ahead with a classic move: thirty years ago, customers used Dell's innovative internet interface to pre-order and prepay for their self-customized computers! Hey, with savvy entrepreneurs, informed creativity makes ways to keep early control of their efforts away from meddling bankers and investors.

So, let's summarize...what's bootstrapping all about? Well, several key things. Yes, keeping vital control early while crafting product-market fit. While honing marketing and improving operations. While getting ready to much more efficiently raise money through loans or investors. Yes, perhaps even *never* having to use other people's money—OPM—because personal resources and then revenue made it all work such that the bootstrapper started a business that *never* ended up needing outsiders' money!

Now, hold on, let's back up to what's probably the most important factor. Yes, here's the somewhat hidden yet very often the most valuable contribution to a bootstrapping effort—what's called *sweat equity*. That's the founder's background, the experience, the innovation, the thinking, the motivation, the drive, the wisdom, the discernment, the late nights, the perseverance. That all can combine together to create an utterly unique effort that's often the crucial difference between failure and huge success!

Here's the truth: sweat equity is not about being created equal, it's about what's done afterward! In fact, truly successful founders have often paid special attention to building the skills, the knowledge, the wisdom to succeed at bootstrapping. Of course, not everybody is a Gates or a Bezos. But wait a minute! The Christian standard is not a "Gates standard" or a "Bezos standard." Our standard is the "partnering with God standard." And this is true for *all* our spheres of life. It's not limited to just church work or even bootstrapping a business—it starts with God giving each of us our peculiar giftings, including "the measure of faith God has assigned!" (Romans 12:3) Then we take it from there—indeed, doing all the very things that bootstrappers do. We do our part building on the foundation of Christ...we gather meaningful experience...we work to gain understanding...yes, we put in sweat equity. That positions us to bootstrap into witness to others in our spheres of influence. We each run our own undertakings that do business for God's Kingdom. But we do this in concert with the Holy Spirit's direction!

Hey, we should be *expectant* that God has specific plans for us. Just like a business startup, we're to be aware that our sweat equity in our vocations, careers, and families is poised for *bootstrapping for God's Kingdom* at little to no additional cost or effort—we're poised and ready with a witness or a word of encouragement. The question is: are we expectantly building towards our God-orchestrated moments, ready to bootstrap for eternal results? In the Christian life, God is our partner, and no effort, event, or experience is wasted. But our willingness and readiness to bootstrap is crucial to the equation. Are you constantly looking to bootstrap your faith, your background, your experience into the extraordinary purposes of God, purposes that emerge out of the seeming ordinariness of life? Now, that's crazy good!

## *A&A: Application & Action*

1. Bootstrapping takes the courage to step out and take the risks of losing hard-earned savings or of the possible ridicule of failure. But there's a fine line between true fact-based courage and foolhardy confidence. Think of successful bootstrappers, from a Bill Gates to someone you personally know. Describe the five characteristics you believe are most key to successful bootstrapping.
2. Think about the enterprise or project that God has currently aligned you with, entrusted to you, or given you passion for. Your role at work, your small business, your role at church...whatever it is! Are you perhaps complacent in certain areas of that, instead of pouring sweat equity? In what new ways can you sacrifice to bootstrap something fresh into existence?
3. Are you thoughtfully, constantly ready to bootstrap for eternal purposes in the midst of seemingly ordinary circumstances? Are you personally expectant for the extraordinary purposes of God and His Kingdom, ready with every one of your sweat-equity resources? Be specific.

