Introduction

In a country where the pay gap is widening to Victorian levels, where estimated corporate tax avoidance stands at £35 billion, where executive pay rise is 49% and child poverty levels are considerable, it seems clear that some live in the best of times while others live in the worst of times. Beyond our nation’s boundaries, the desperate plight of the world’s poorest calls for fundamental change.

In the midst of this “tale of two cities”, a dialogue is awakening as to how we can live more justly. The existential questions vocalised by the Occupy crowd resonate with many worldwide and reflect the search for a more economically-just and loving way of life. Though vulnerable in our time of economic-shaking, these transformational moments have the potential to lead to radical, biblical propositions.

The Judeo-Christian concept of shalom, well-being that is communal and personal, must be rediscovered in the public debate to develop a commitment to political, economic and cultural transformation which benefits poor communities as well as redeeming the rich from their relational and inner poverty. Part of the answer to the question of how we create a more economically-just society lies in enterprise, for business has the potential to bring social reform, model justice and equality, and reduce poverty.

Both the historical and contemporary Christian community is full of inspiring and faithful expressions of entrepreneurship for the common good. In the midst of the dominance of the City and in a culture of captured imaginations, Christians are involved in imaginative work. We need such Christian imagination in all spheres of life, business included, that will energise the alternative economics of God’s kingdom.

A historical glance – ‘Chocolate lessons’ from the Quakers

When we consider a more just economic paradigm, we do well to look at some historical examples. In the 18th Century the Quaker community made up only 0.2% of the population, yet their contribution to the transformation of Britain is substantial. The Society of Friends was the first Christian group which denounced slavery and did not permit any of its members to own slaves. Besides modeling such faithfulness in their own household, they also pursued a political line of engagement when in 1783 they presented the first substantial anti-slavery petition to Parliament.

In addition to their involvement in the Anti-Slavery Society, the Quakers were active in the Peace Society that campaigned for an end to war and in famine relief organisations. Quaker business ventures such as chocolate companies (Cadbury, Fry, Rowntree and Terry), the steel industry (railways), and engineering, significantly merged virtue with entrepreneurship. [1] These businesses were supported by Quaker banks (Lloyds, Barclays) and by the 1700s,
the modern banking system was beginning to emerge. Quakers had a reputation for honesty and fairness.

Cadbury

Let's zoom in on some entrepreneurial dynasties. Sir Adrian Cadbury considers that the Quaker business ethic and innovative character was derived from their Christian faith. [2] God inspired them to imagine the world anew rather than accept the status quo as they followed “the Divine Light within themselves”. John Cadbury's (1801-1889) involvement with the Temperance Society influenced the direction of his business enterprise, providing tea, coffee, and chocolate as an alternative to alcohol in an era of significant alcohol-related causes of poverty and deprivation amongst working people.

George Cadbury (1839-1922) was committed to helping the less privileged, "we can do nothing of any value to God, except in acts of genuine helpfulness done to our fellow men". Such commitment to the less privileged shaped the working conditions in the Cadbury factories, as well as housing, pension, medical and dental care for their staff. Every summer, Cadbury provided food and entertainment for 25,000 children from the deprived areas of Birmingham. “I have for many years given practically the whole of my income for charitable purposes, except what is spent upon my family.” However, ‘charitable purposes’ is too narrow a description; ‘reform’ would be more apt. Successive generations of Cadburys were catalysts in wide-ranging social reform. Their Christian faith motivated their involvement in campaigns aimed at ending poverty and deprivation in Victorian Britain.

Rowntree

Joseph Rowntree (1836 –1925) was a Quaker philanthropist and businessman, perhaps best known for being a champion of social reform and the chocolate business. He was deeply interested in improving the quality of life of his employees, providing them with a library, free education, a social welfare officer, a doctor, a dentist and a pension fund. In 1904, he gave half of his money to the Rowntree trusts dedicated to social reform, which continue his philanthropic work today. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation still funds research that seeks to understand the causes of social problems (poverty, poor housing, and other forms of social exclusion). Its Housing Trust manages affordable housing and care homes for the elderly and disabled and its Charitable Trust works for Quaker ideals including international peace and justice.

Others followed a similar path. Jesse Boot's concern for the poor extended to selling "honest medicines" at cut prices that could be afforded by those who needed them; a concept he called "philanthropic retailing". These English Protestant entrepreneurs lived modest lives, spearheaded trustworthy businesses and practiced philanthropy. Historically, they understood the whole of life as a vocation; a sacred space of worship through deeds of love, righteous service and commerce. Peter Heslam writes, in Transforming Capitalism: Entrepreneurship and the Renewal of Thrift [3], that “what mattered was not worldly riches but a richness towards God expressed in gratitude, generosity and a life of virtue.” For these,
and many other Christian entrepreneurs, it was natural that business would have a transformational effect.

This kind of genius that combined nobility and entrepreneurship is rooted in an understanding of faithful citizenship that measured success in terms of communal well-being rather than personal enrichment - the alternative economics of the Kingdom.

**An alternative Oikonomia**

At the start of the recent banking crisis, Katherine Bucknell, partner of a City banker reflected in her account of ‘a desperate City wife’, “how did we become so undisciplined? What allowed us to say to ourselves ‘you deserve it’ when we knew full well that people elsewhere were ill or starving or working in sweatshops?...perhaps we will all discover some of the kind of wealth that cannot be measured in monetary terms”. [4] The current crisis poignantly asks questions about management of our personal and communal household.

The Biblical character, Job, monitored the humility of his character and the righteousness of his behaviour. Justice for his labourers, exercise of (judicial) power, compassionate care for the poor, honouring the image-bearing identity of each individual and correct stewardship of his property and God’s creation, were important aspects of his life’s account (Job 31:13-23). His account gives us a great overview of Israelite ethics. As frequently occurs in the Scripture, Job placed *tzadeqah* (“righteousness” - a life of right relationships) and *mishpat* (justice) alongside one another (Job 29:12-17).

The *Mishpat*, or justice, of society concerns how we treat the vulnerable. History testifies to a rich Judeo-Christian heritage of advocacy. The prophets were the social commentators of their time, advocating legislation that would shield the poor. In the Third Century, the African author Lactantius describes the perfect justice that sustains the human society in which wealth is used “not for present profit but for justice, which alone endures forever” (*The Divine Institutes*, 6.12). The Church Fathers developed their thinking concerning social consciousness and justice in the light of the Scriptures and applied it to the circumstances of their times, affecting not only individuals but also socio-economic structures, and political dimensions. Advocacy and policy went hand in hand. [5]

Besides our individual lifestyle and character, the corporate expression and character of society demands our attention. As Ron Sider comments, “evil is far more complex than the wrong choices of individuals. It also lies outside us in oppressive social systems and in demonic powers that delight in defying God by corrupting the social systems that his human image-bearers need”. [6] Sinful humans build imperfect and sinful social structures. In the Western world today, Christians are part of a catalogue of unjust structures that contribute to poverty through market economies, international trade, natural resource and environmental depletion, and food imports from poor nations.

In Ancient Greek, *oikos* referred to the house and everything included, such as extended family, slaves, farmland, etc. *Nomos* means act, law, or principle. Our word ‘economy’ was born from these two roots forming the word *oikonomia*, so the word literally means “the principles to maintain our house”. Whether that ‘house’ is governmental or familial, the values that underlie and the principles with which we structure our ‘house’ are crucial. Economics –
oikonomia – concerns the responsible way we administer the household for the common good. In The Mission of God, Chris Wright states that the Old Testament combination of “righteousness/justice” is at the heart of ethical teaching and suggests the nearest English expression would be “social justice”, with the warning that this cannot be seen as a static phrase, since the Hebrew twin theme is dynamic, i.e. things you do. [7]

Counter-cultural business

Each culture tells and lives out a narrative that is to some degree incompatible with the gospel. In The Globalization of Pentecostalism Harvey Gallagher Cox writes, “Christian theology, if it is truly biblical theology, must always be prophetic. It must constantly expose those points at which any culture engenders false values which are destructive to God’s will for the human community.” [8]

However, while Christians must develop a critical theology of the culture, as James Davison Hunter observes, the Christian community has uncritically assimilated itself to the dominant culture and its way of life, and has failed to give a rigorous critique and offer an alternative. In his book, To Change the World, he calls for a faithful presence in which Christians enact God’s shalom in the circumstances in which He has placed us, and actively seek it on behalf of others. [9] So we need to develop a critical theology of oikonomia and subvert the dominant narrative of global capitalism by offering an alternative; a pursuit of business that has its home in faith and virtue and is concerned with the well-being God intended for the wider community and for His wider creation.

“Good business will not answer the world’s problems, but we will struggle to solve the problems of the world without it,” writes banker James Featherby in The White Swan Formula: Rebuilding business and finance for the common good. [10] The entrepreneurial gift can be employed to create opportunities for jobs and prosperity; not a prosperity that is narrowly defined but one that more faithfully pursues the well-being God intended…and there are numerous creative contemporary examples to celebrate.

Contemporary vignettes

The ‘Base of the Pyramid enterprise’ is based on an understanding of enterprise that serves, as its name obviously indicates, the ‘base of the pyramid’. It aims to work with the very poorest of people, understanding their needs and aspirations in order to provide good quality, socially-valuable products or services that are affordable to them. A true social enterprise will also develop products that have a social and environmental benefit and ideally create new enterprise in the developing world.

An example of a ‘base of the pyramid’ enterprise in the UK is Toughstuff. [11] The company develops affordable and lightweight pocket-sized solar panels for the developing world, enabling kids’ education during power cuts and darkness, and, thereby, providing a good, cheap and safe alternative to kerosene lighting. The connecting cables enable the vital improvements in information, communications and secure banking that radios and mobile phones provide and the enterprise stimulates local entrepreneurship.
The ‘Transformational Business Network’ is a network of business and professional people that brings community transformation through sustainable business solutions to poverty. The Network support projects in developing countries that create jobs empower the poor and transform communities. It has created, and is sustaining, over 20,000 jobs in 62 projects in 22 countries, with a total direct or indirect investment of £55 million. Examples range from the design and production of a safe cooking stove (preventing many accidents that occur when cooking on unstable stoves placed in crowded, confined spaces) to the creation of jobs. [12]

Microcredit banking is changing the world, as modeled by Muhammad Yunus, founder of Grameen Bank, pioneer of microcredit and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize for 2006. In the UK, Five Talents supports micro-finance initiatives in developing countries. Through training and small loans, Five Talents helps to establish and nurture small businesses. Training in business skills combined with loans for stock, equipment, raw materials, land, premises etc. are provided to help establish grocers, hairdressers, bakers, brick-makers and shoe-repairers. Each business builds economic independence for the individual entrepreneur, their families and the families of those they employ. Employment and independence bring dignity and the constructive relations furthermore open communities up to Christian witness.

“Those who engage with the business of economic transformation, which is the opening of the world to justice and the freeing of the world to a future of hope, are in my view doing work that is not just good but sacred,” according to Bishop Selby. [13]

Conclusion

Jeremiah instructs the people of God to seek the welfare of the society in which they live whilst in exile; to seek its well-being, peace and prosperity, and to pray to the Lord on its behalf (Jer. 29:7). His letter to the exiles gives the Israelites a theological and historical framework for their experience in which he advises them to settle, for the long term, maintaining their distinctiveness and serving the common good, for the welfare of their conquerors was linked with their own. In sketching this alternative reality and inspiring a new imagination, Jeremiah uses the word shalom - the idea implies restored human relationships as well as reconciliation between God and people. Its concept is well-being in its entirety; social, spiritual, emotional, physical, cognitive and material. So, the concept has a communal focus.

We are not called to adjust to the dominant script of the world, but to live faithfully reflecting the alternative script given by God. While business has the capacity to serve the common good, it equally holds the capacity to oppress, increase injustice, and harm people and the environment. Whilst we may function in a culture that prefers profit over welfare, greed over generosity and success at the cost of integrity, we need to think through a constructive subversion of the frameworks of social life in every sphere of life. Such subversion is creative and constructive.

Heslam advocates for the integration of Christian worldview, belief and virtues in entrepreneurship (including the mindset and habits it requires), in education and in both domestic and international economic development policy. He writes that “the Holy Spirit can work in and through the spirit of enterprise, helping businesses to contribute to human and environmental well-being.” Commenting on the Parable of the Talents, concerning
stewardship that serves God's purposes, he notes that “the fearless words and actions of the first two servants, who 'put the money to work', reflect a God who inspires the kind of imagination, productivity and responsible risk-taking that characterises the thrift needed to convert the bareness of money into the fruitfulness of capital. Having made this conversion, which underlies all investment and entrepreneurial activity, these two servants are welcomed into God's *shalom* economy: 'I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness.” [14]

Once the focus is on well-being, the evaluative questions concerning 'success' focus upon the creation of opportunities for the hopeless, the increase of well-being to the lowly, the valuing of each individual in the creative process, etc. The discernment of God's good, pleasing and perfect will for His world (Romans 12:1) requires a whole-life stewardship. Our corporate and individual 'spiritual act of worship' takes place in the everyday-ness of business life; in the sanctuary that is this world. The life of Christ awakens consciousness, disrupts routine and deepens insight. It inspires a commitment to live justly and gives hope for the renewal of all things.

May we all live richly towards God.

**Notes**


[4] “After Lehman Brothers: desperate City wives” *The Times*, 17 Sept. 08. [http://women.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/women/the_way_we_live/article4769062.ece](http://women.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/women/the_way_we_live/article4769062.ece)


[11] [www.toughstuffonline.com](http://www.toughstuffonline.com)

[12] [www.tbnetwork.org](http://www.tbnetwork.org)

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