

Richard Higginson

# FAITH, HOPE & THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

A power for good



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Does faith have any hope to offer a global economy beset by debt and crisis?

Richard Higginson argues that, rightly understood and applied, faith can be an enormous power for good – stimulating enterprise, reducing poverty, promoting integrity, ensuring sustainability and making disciples.

This ground-breaking book will help business men and women to think deeply about what they do and why they do it. It shows how every episode in the biblical story of salvation has something important, challenging and hopeful to say about business practice. It explores alternative business models that provide signs of hope, and also offers insight and encouragement to those working for mainstream companies.

Full of examples from business seen and researched by Richard on his travels, this book will inspire you to see the relevance of your faith to your work – and yourself as God's agent in transforming the world for the better.

*'Refreshing and challenging biblical reflections.'*

Ram Gidoomal

*'Richard's perspective makes him uniquely qualified to convey how the Christian faith can be a power for good in the global economy.'* Richard J. Goossen

Richard Higginson is an international speaker on business ethics and the theology of work. He lectures at Ridley Hall, Cambridge, is founder-editor of the quarterly journal Faith in Business, and has written a number of books. He is married to Felicity and has five grown-up children.



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**FAITH**  
at WORK

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of entrepreneurs as innovators: they devised new products and methods of production, often using new technology; they created new forms of organization and even conjured up new markets.

God, as portrayed in Genesis 1–2, exemplifies much of what Say and Schumpeter celebrate. This God creates something radically new: he is a true innovator. He exercises his wisdom in making a wonderful world with rich potential. He is blessed with superabundant knowledge and sees into the future. But he knows that he is taking a huge risk: a risk largely associated with the human beings to whom he entrusts responsibility for the earth's welfare. God will certainly need the qualities of judgment and perseverance to keep the enterprise on track.<sup>9</sup>

Obviously, every analogy has its limitations. That of entrepreneur tells us only so much about God. We need overtly biblical images to fill out our understanding. God's foreknowledge vastly exceeds that of even the most prescient human entrepreneur. But many of the characteristics fit. In an age when entrepreneurs have a more important role than ever, it could be a very timely image of God for Christians to use in their witness.

### The fall and rise of entrepreneurs

Interestingly, Schumpeter believed that the success of capitalism would lead to a form of corporatism and a fostering of values hostile to capitalism, especially among intellectuals. A social climate would develop that discouraged rather than encouraged entrepreneurs. This happened in the UK during the period 1950–80. Entrepreneurs had a bad reputation. They were dangerous visionaries with egotistical drives, impatient to acquire wealth, ready to take moral short cuts: they were ruthlessly out to eliminate the competition. In his autobiography, Richard Branson tells how:

[i]n the 1970s, when we set up Virgin Records, no one in the UK used the word 'entrepreneur' any more. Or if they did, they considered it something unsavoury. A business man running a number of firms was seen as a 'chancer' – the television comic stereotype was Del Boy, the wheeler-dealer on the outside of the law, in *Only Fools and Horses*. In the early days, I was regularly dismissed as a 'Del Boy' myself ...<sup>10</sup>

Attitudes have changed. Branson himself, with his informal, unconventional image but clear commitment to giving the customer value for money, whether selling records, air flights or train rides, played a significant part in improving entrepreneurs' reputation. So did Anita Roddick, founder of Body Shop International, which produces natural-ingredient cosmetics that avoid testing on animals, and developed the idea of corporate social responsibility long before it became commonplace.

The image of entrepreneurs has improved; many are known for their indefatigability, integrity and ability to inspire other people. They are no longer treated with disdain by academics. After 1970 a revolution of attitudes took place at Cambridge University, as many innovative ideas with commercial application developed from university departments' research laboratories and the two richest colleges, Trinity and St John's, used land owned on the edge of the city to provide a home for fledgling information technology, biotechnology and pharmaceutical companies – at the Cambridge Science Park and St John's Innovation Centre.<sup>11</sup>

Vancouver, Canada, another beehive of entrepreneurial activity, is home to the **Entrepreneurial Leaders Organization (ELO)**, founded by businessman and academic **Rick Goossen**, whose vision is to equip, connect and inspire Christian entrepreneurial leaders. The ELO carries out an ongoing

research process interviewing Christian entrepreneurs, the outcome of which is an annual publication entitled *Entrepreneurial Leaders: Reflections on Faith and Work*.<sup>12</sup> These books document interviews with entrepreneurs from Canada, the USA and the UK, and are intended as an instruction for aspiring Christian entrepreneurs. Goossen aims to provide a platform for experienced practitioners to inspire a younger generation.

Not surprisingly, 100 individuals spread through five books of interviews exhibit a fair degree of variety. Yet there are clear common threads. In his introduction to volume 4, Gordon Smith comments how these are people of hope rather than cynicism. They are 'entrepreneurs who through their creativity, innovation, and persistence, model what it means to live with hope'.<sup>13</sup> He continues:

An entrepreneur is one who sees reality clearly – has a good read on the circumstances; but the entrepreneur is also one who can see possibilities, connections, and the ways in which innovation and creativity can alter that reality. People of hope are not naïve; it is merely that they do not acquiesce in the status quo.<sup>14</sup>

This enables them to thrive in times of chaos or recession. If one market closes down, the entrepreneur thinks about what new markets might emerge; if a product becomes outdated, the entrepreneur considers the next product that might replace it. Schumpeter called this capacity not only to embrace change positively but to provoke it by challenging the status quo 'creative destruction'.<sup>15</sup>

In the third volume, for which I wrote an introduction, I was struck by the *passion* energizing many of the interviewees. Here are two examples.

- Paul Verhoeff, President of ISO, a flooring installation company: 'You need to lead with passion. If the leader of a company is not passionate about what the business can do, the kind of service it can provide, and how it can grow, then there is no way the rest of the staff will catch the passion. Passion starts at the top and runs downhill.'<sup>16</sup>
- Reg Petersen, Chairman of Versa-Care, a retirement home business: 'Entrepreneurship is my passion, and God created that passion in me for a purpose. I am called to fulfil that purpose . . . We looked for people who had a passion for the well-being of others – that was the key issue. Each needed to have a caring heart and a passion for service.'<sup>17</sup>

Another businessman featured in the book is Terry Smith, President of Smith Gardens, a wholesale flower distributor based in Bellingham, Washington State. Terry's enthusiasm was as evident when I met him in person as it is on paper: 'I know God wired me as an entrepreneur in my mother's womb. It's back to DNA: He hard-wired me to be passionate, creative, adventuresome, committed and encouraging.'<sup>18</sup>

A Ridley Hall conference on entrepreneurship in March 2009 certainly revealed plenty of entrepreneurially minded Christians who were in good heart. Although the event happened in the wake of the global financial crisis, they were undeterred. Banks may have been lending less, but entrepreneurs have ways of finding the investment finance they need, and for small-scale ventures, family and friends often provide the initial outlay. Entrepreneurship is an ongoing social necessity, even – indeed especially – during an economic downturn. The conference provided the opportunity both to gain mutual encouragement from kindred spirits

and to draw inspiration from the God who gave them their creative juices.

### **Subduing the earth**

Embedded in the first creation story are two phrases that have proved extremely controversial. We have already noted one in passing: human beings are allowed to ‘have dominion’ over other living creatures (Genesis 1:26, 28). They are also given permission to ‘[b]e fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it’. These notions of dominion and subjugation have come under strong critical scrutiny in the light of the environmental crisis that has emerged over recent decades.

In 1967, American historian Lynn White wrote an influential essay entitled ‘The Historic Roots of our Ecologic Crisis’. He claimed that because of its role in the rise of modern science and technology, ‘Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt’ for the present situation. Christianity established a dualism of man and nature, and insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his own ends.<sup>19</sup>

Scottish ecologist Ian McHarg was even more outspoken when he wrote that the Genesis story, by its insistence on dominion and subjugation of nature, encourages the most exploitative and destructive instincts in humanity. ‘Indeed, if one seeks licence for those who would increase radioactivity, create canals and harbours with atomic bombs, employ poisons without constraint, or give consent to the bulldozer mentality, there could be no better injunction than this text’ (Genesis 1:26, 28).<sup>20</sup>

Christians need to be careful how they respond to such accusations. Some seek to dismiss White’s charge by pointing out that ecological problems also exist in parts of the world where the Judeo-Christian tradition has had negligible influence, or that Genesis 1 should not be read in isolation