

# A Personal Adventure of Faith in Business

*Andy Sheppard traces the story of his business life, which started with a wish not to be in business at all, and shows how it has informed his spiritual development. He gives examples of answered prayer in business, and looks at some of the more challenging aspects of Christian life such as how to share our faith with colleagues. We see a strong affirmation of the presence of God in our businesses.*

## 1. God Cares About Business

*How are we bringing God's salt and light in our current roles?*

I actually didn't set out to work in business. After an encounter with God while I was studying engineering at Cambridge, I had resolved to apply my training to overseas development. Nevertheless, I found he was drawing me deeper into seemingly 'less noble' business situations. Initially I thought I was gaining vital experience for overseas development. I ended up discovering what I believe to be God's heart for business.

The benefits of business were never in doubt. A relative (who worked as a nurse) asked me at the time how I could reconcile entering the 'cut-throat corporate world' with my Christian faith. I replied (somewhat

defensively) by explaining the vital benefits of business, such as the creation of valuable products and services, the provision of employment and the generation of wealth. Over twenty years later these benefits resonate with me deeper still, but so does God's care for much more than outcomes.

My particular path took me through varied technical and corporate experience in Shell as a sponsored student, to managing projects as an engineer in Crown Cork, to serving primarily industrial clients as a management consultant for McKinsey & Company. During this journey it became clearer to me that God cares about business not just because of what it contributes, but also because of the *process* of doing business. God has made us in his image, and

through our work in business we can express much of his nature: designing, creating, tending, healing and innovating.

I also began to understand more of what it means to bring God's salt and light into our world. Just as salt brings out good flavour in food, God can extend the good approaches that our businesses need to thrive through *us*. I continue to specialise in leading industrial change, now as an author and independent advisor. Many leaders I work with recognise the need to change their organisation's culture, in order to achieve the potential they see in redesigning their operations for business advantage. As an example of the light that businesses need, I would describe the cornerstone for their desired culture as... love.

**Business's  
creation of  
valuable products**



(Although I do normally translate this as *respect for one another!*) To ensure that better, workable solutions can be sustained and further improved, employees must be involved in the process of change. But this is difficult if the current culture has been forged through managers forcing changes through the hierarchy: where employees may even have felt penalised for daring to raise concerns. The problem is that it is very difficult to change an organisation's culture at the outset of a change programme. John P. Kotter is a well-known expert in the field and a former professor at Harvard Business School. In his international best-seller, *Leading Change*, he reflects: "culture changes only after you have successfully altered people's actions, after the new behaviour produces some group benefit for a period of time"<sup>1</sup>. I have seen how effectively a healthy process of change can be used as a catalyst, to *precipitate* a powerful, respect-based cultural transformation. First, leaders must take the opportunity to model this 'respect for one another' in bringing

everyone together to *collectively* achieve substantial change that makes sense. Through this shared process and achievement a culture can be sown in which problems are no longer hidden and in which everyone can continue to contribute their potential. Personally, one of the most rewarding aspects of my work in leading change is when people at all levels begin to express new hope for the future of their organisation – not because of the results they have seen but because of the cultural transformation that they are also witnessing.

## 2. God Cares About Your Business

*What specific interventions can we ask God to provide this week?*

I will never forget the first time I saw God break through in a specific work situation. I cried out to him because my back was against a wall. I was responsible for introducing some new automation in the packing area of a large factory. It was Sunday: the installation had been going to plan and we were ready to connect to the bespoke computer system that

contained the live order information for the entire factory. I had been forced to rely on assurances from one of the few programmers that understood this system. He had insisted that his minor modifications would work, beyond the test environment. They didn't – and the programmer had disappeared. Even reverting to the old version would now involve risks for the production that was scheduled to begin again that night. I retreated to a deserted office in a corner of the factory and prayed. Within minutes a landline in a corner of that random office rang: these were the days before mobile phones. It was the programmer's conscientious colleague, who felt stirred to call from his home 'just to see how we were getting on'. Eventually he was able to upload further changes via a modem and by the time the night shift arrived the entire new system was working perfectly.

It is humbling to consider that our almighty, heavenly father cares about the specific business situations in which we find ourselves. As I went on



**God extends His power through us to light up our businesses**

to lead industrial transformations with McKinsey, I saw God break through by providing inspiration for technical solutions as well as through interactions with people. For example, when leading one transformation some important information came to light just before a high-profile client meeting. I quickly wrote a seemingly impossible list of seven clients with whom I needed to hold individual conversations in the twenty minutes before the meeting. After praying I walked down one corridor and will never forget how all seven people were either in their offices or peeling out of other people's offices just at the right time, as if everything had been perfectly choreographed. Timely answers to prayers like these are incredibly encouraging, but they should not detract from God's ongoing influence, as he continues to develop our skills and wisdom for how we should go about our work.

### 3. God Cares About Integrating Your Faith and Work

*In what way might God want us to make a specific stand for our faith at work?*

I imagine that as Christians in business, most of us share the question of how we can or should seek to integrate our faith with our working life. Professional etiquette tends to suggest that faith in God should be a private, personal matter. Yet in practice many challenges have to be navigated. One such challenge arose as soon as I started applying for jobs as a graduate engineer. The application form for a major global corporation dedicated a blank double-spread for answering "What is the most important thing in your life? Explain what attracts you to it and what you gain from it". I asked God what option to take: should I answer truthfully, or in this instance should I play the game and write about a genuine but secondary interest such as climbing mountains? I sensed that I should be completely honest, so I did my best to express in

my own words why my faith in Jesus meant so much to me. The firm's head of recruitment responded with even more prejudice than I had anticipated. She showed little interest in how I could contribute to the business. Instead she spent the majority of our interview trying to persuade me that I would be better off becoming a vicar. I was not invited back for a second interview, but I have never regretted making a stand in taking what I sensed was the right decision.

Many years later I cannot offer any easy answers for prescribing how to integrate our faith and work. For example, I don't think there are any patterns to govern when we should speak up like Paul before Agrippa (Acts 26) - or when honouring God should take more of a private nature like Daniel (at least initially, in Daniel 6:10). However, one thing I sense is that discerning what God wants us to do in specific situations *is* the principal part of our adventure of faith in business. This is something for us to work out in communion with our gracious heavenly father.

Another significant opportunity to make a stand came soon after I started to train other McKinsey consultants to lead industrial change. The lifeblood of leading change is about bringing complex personalities together in a 'noisy' environment: one which is typically full of competing perspectives and unique circumstances. Within the confines of a conference room I had to break down the art of change-leadership into its constituent parts. I could introduce exercises and partial simulations to engage people but I felt that the lifeblood of leading change had drained out as soon as the content was dissected. The

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consultants seemed to agree with most of the content but I did not feel I had equipped them to reintegrate the various components and to bring everything back to life in a new situation. I therefore longed to immerse future students of change in an integrated, realistic environment - and a lifelike change-leadership novel seemed a promising route. It would offer common reference points to facilitate debate and group learning for how to deal with typical scenarios. I then began to see further

possibilities to develop the storyline as an allegory for the life of Jesus: like *The Chronicles of Narnia* for business readers. This spiritual content eventually felt too important to leave out, which meant that I would no longer be able to develop it as a McKinsey text. I therefore ended up

leaving McKinsey to develop the novel independently.

*The Incredible Transformation of Gregory Todd*<sup>2</sup> was published several years later. Set in a sofa factory, it tells the story of a typical change programme which veers towards many common pitfalls before it succeeds. It resonates with people who have either driven organisational change or been on the receiving end of it. A special case-study version has been published for practitioners of change who would like to gain from the novel as a resource. This contains questions for individuals and teams to draw out learning in the fields of leadership, leading change and/or managing operations. The Christian allegory is woven throughout the story, at a potentially invisible level. Gregory represents humankind, and how he chooses to run his business represents how we might choose to run our lives. In the beginning, the sofa business is established by a benevolent entrepreneur, who



**God helps us to discern what it looks like for our faith and business perspectives to become one**

represents God. His original plan was to recruit and develop Gregory so that he could run his business as his managing director. Gregory enjoys doing this for a while, but then starts to entertain lies about how much better off he would be if he was in full control. He succeeds in wresting this control through a management buy-out, and sets out to capture some of the low-hanging fruit. But this is not enough for Gregory's new chairman who becomes impossible to please. Without giving too much of the storyline away, Gregory's journey of change becomes characterised by his dealings with another character, who represents Jesus. Just as Gregory is exhorting everyone to get behind his new improvement plan, this self-assured Jesus-like character appears to be stirring up further trouble on the shop floor... The novel served as an important milestone in my own journey of integrating faith and business credibly. I pray that it might play a similar role for other

Christians who work in business, precipitating some meaningful conversations between colleagues. My further prayer is that God would use the book to bring more salt and light into diverse organisations, through all it serves as a change-leadership resource.

**4. God Cares About Your Co-workers**

*How can we seek to express his hope to our colleagues?*

One particular part of integrating our faith in business is discerning how or when to share our faith with colleagues. My own track record in talking about Jesus is probably a little unusual – in that I was looking for opportunities to talk about Jesus before I had properly encountered him. I grew up with a sincere Christian faith and I wanted to influence others because of the implications of my beliefs. Yet it was while trying to do so at university that an intelligent friend challenged

me. This made me realise that some of the beliefs which I had once accepted no longer resonated with me. I set out on a private quest to discover whether there was more to Christianity than I had already discovered. I was hoping for some kind of peace or assurance, but I ended up with an encounter of supernatural love which changed my life.

After this encounter my motivation shifted from wanting others to know 'the truth' to wanting others to benefit from something as real as I had encountered. One Bible verse which has heavily influenced me in navigating the challenges of when to speak up is 1 Peter 3.15<sup>3</sup>: *But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.* Early in my career it seemed that I had more frequent opportunities to speak about my faith. My belief in Jesus then became

a source of ridicule for some, but generally it became part of good-natured workplace banter. For example, in one factory I received the nickname “Angel” from my fellow process managers with more gratitude than they appeared to have anticipated!

In later years when my faith arises in conversation I have noticed that colleagues appear more eager to move the subject on, often making an unprompted declaration like ‘Oh, I’m not religious’. I wonder if this reflects a more general trend, or maybe it is associated with the increased seniority in role of those with whom I am spending more time. Interestingly, though, when some trusted colleagues have confided to me specific personal needs, they have welcomed prayer – and some have testified to the difference this has made.

It still concerns me how many people in business appear to have rejected Jesus because of the religious subcultures and paraphernalia they associate with him, for which they discern no attraction or need. What if we could find more credible ways to present Jesus in the ‘language’ of our own business subcultures? This was the question that first set me on a journey of lateral thinking between business life and spiritual life. Although my initial focus was to relate my faith to the world in which I was immersed, I began to find that the lateral thinking was also helping me the other way round: offering me deeper understanding of the gospel through my experiences at work. Perhaps I should not have been surprised, given how frequently Jesus used metaphors from everyday life in his own times (e.g. light, salt, shepherd). For example, in my

current role I help workforces to redesign their business operations to reduce ‘waste’. This waste can be thought of as anything a business does which does not add value, in the eyes of its customers. Some readers may know that decades ago Toyota defined a list of seven types of waste. The idea was to help people in its operations to identify the waste and root it out, to achieve more of their collective potential. Now, by seeing sins as akin to wastes, I find a deeper understanding of God’s goodness. As a teenager I began to associate biblical lists of commandments with a disciplinarian characteristic of God. Now the analogy helps me to see that he is invested in helping us to avoid (and root out) sin, not to *restrict* our lives, but to set us free to enjoy more of our potential and his goodness in life. Jesus said “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10.10). I can now see how partnering with God’s spirit to root out the ‘wastes’ of sin contributes

towards this fullness of life for us to enjoy, in the here and now.

The collection of analogies between faith and business was finally published last year as *Reflections from the Incredible Transformation*<sup>4</sup>. It is designed to serve either as a stand-alone book, or as a

follow-up to *The Incredible Transformation of Gregory Todd*. Each left-hand page starts with a brief quote from the management novel, which illustrates a concise business lesson that is developed underneath. Each right-hand page then *reflects* the essence of this left-hand insight, but applied to a holistic search for meaning from life. Most of the right-hand insights are developed from a saying of Jesus. The strength of this format is that it presents the full gospel through a series of business ideas which may

already resonate with people through their experiences at work, and provide a gentler challenge than they experience when provoked to debate. My prayer is that through this book, God will bless many with spiritual insight and the benefits that are available through faith in Jesus. But I also pray that the insights and analogies will enrich the business and spiritual lives of *all* readers, just as I continue to feel their benefit in my own.

## 5. God Cares About You

***In what way might we be holding on to our own idea of what a good position or career looks like, rather than yielding to God’s best for us?***

I mentioned at the start of this article that after the encounter with God I did not set out to work in business. It is probably significant that *before* this encounter I *was* heading into business. In working for Shell before and during university I was enjoying gaining a breadth of experience across the business. I was also ambitious and eager to *do as well for myself* as possible. With hindsight, a potential problem was that I had not begun to consider how I was going to achieve everything, remain happy and yet keep my life in balance. My first significant encounter with God then changed me and I was strongly influenced through verses such as Luke 9v23-25: *if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me*. My transformation was perhaps most fully seen in that I no longer wanted to make career decisions by myself. My ambition had been rechannelled into wanting to serve God and to make a difference – wherever He would lead me. Yet after committing each decision in prayer it became more difficult to trust God, as it became less clear what he was doing or where he was taking me.

With hindsight I began to see that God had been leading me through

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**On God's good, winding course we might not always be able to see where He is leading us**

business situations which I might never have chosen for myself. Through these, he was teaching me new skills and developing my character – including dealing with the spiritual pride associated with my ambition and sacrifice. He was also preparing me and leading me into a specialism which I love. I still feel privileged that I am able to continue to learn about leading change, and to help others to realise much greater potential within their organisations. Furthermore, I know that through his winding course he has continuously changed me so that I can value and appreciate good things that constitute a fuller, balanced life. If I had pursued my own narrower understanding of a

successful, fulfilled life, I might well have plotted a course that headed straight out to sea. This has developed in me a deeper appreciation of how much God can be trusted with all our decisions, and fresh insight as to how much he does indeed care practically for each one of us. His love for us is much greater than our limited idea of what might be good for us.

Of course, hindsight is a wonderful thing. Trusting God with our CVs and our lives can still prove challenging when we face an uncertain future. My last twelve years as an independent specialist have brought a new set of challenges and a new understanding of what it means to live by faith in

business. Yet God has given me the strength to reserve space to write and I have seen God's provision through ideal work at the right times. I have a few dreams for the foreseeable future, but I don't know exactly how to proceed with which one or what success will look like. What I do know is that discerning how to proceed is related to God's invitation for us to abide in him. As each of us figures out what this looks like, I sense that God is developing us as his partners in business. This seems to be what Jesus described and modelled to us when he said *the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees the Father doing* (John 5v19). My own adventure continues. 

- 1 John P. Kotter, *Leading Change*, Harvard Business School Press, 1996, p156
- 2 A J Sheppard, *The Incredible Transformation of Gregory Todd: A Novel about Leadership and Managing Change*, A J Sheppard Books, 2015
- 3 All Scripture quotations in this article are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com. The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™
- 4 A J Sheppard, *Reflections from the Incredible Transformation: An Exploration in Lateral Thinking between Business Life and Spiritual Life*, A J Sheppard Books, 2016



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