

Innovation Theology: An Orientation

January, 2016

Current Context

Survey the volume of recent publications on entrepreneurship and innovation and you will find more than enough written on *how* organizations should innovate. Little, however, has been said about *where* innovations are needed and *why*.

As I write this, the economies of the U.S., Europe and Japan, along with many organizations and individuals within them, continue a seven-year drift in the doldrums.¹ Corporate sails droop, weighed down with unprecedented piles of cash, either un-invested or underinvested. Even the U.S. Defense Department—a traditional sponsor of many major innovations—is expressing worry that its defense contractors are not innovating like they used to.²

The doldrums have remained since the gale-force winds blew through in September, 2008. Some economists suggest we are in the quiet after another storm of "creative destruction."³ However, there remains much anxious money on the sidelines. What may be even more troubling than all the sidelined money is the absence of vision, hinting at the relevance of the biblical proverb "where there is no vision, the people perish."⁴

Before the events of 2008 the anxiety of society was building. The late Edwin Friedman spotted this anxiety among organizational leaders. According to Friedman, American civilization has reached a "threshold of anxiety such that reasonableness and honesty no longer defend against illusion." When this happens, "even the most learned ideas begin to function as superstitions."⁵ Superstitions have infected responses to change and innovating as well.

It may seem a bit strange to deploy theology to immunize leaders of innovation from these superstitions. Some might suggest that theology itself is but rationalization for superstitions. If you agree with this latter view, innovation theology is not for you. However, if you are interested in the twin questions of where innovations are need and

¹ Special Report: The World Economy. *The Economist* (October 4, 2014): "Since 2008 corporate investment in America, the euro zone and Japan has fallen short of cash flow...making firms net savers rather than borrowers. This reflects both subdued expectations about the near term sales and a more deep seated belief that, as populations age, markets will shrink and good opportunities for investment will become rare. Rising inequality may aggravate the process: the rich save more than the poor. Efforts by emerging markets to hold down their currencies and plough the resulting trade surpluses into rich-world bond markets do further harm."

² *The Wall Street Journal* (On-line); November 21, 2014 (<http://online.wsj.com/articles/pentagon-to-defense-contractors-innovate-1416527136>)

³ Also called "Schumpeter's Gale."

⁴ Proverbs 29.28. (KJV)

⁵ Friedman, Edwin H. *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*. (New York: Seabury Books, 1999, 2007), p 1.

why, personally or professionally, and you have a modicum of theological curiosity, then you may want to read further.

Rationale

Looking back on the past three decades of engaging in the innovating efforts of many organizations causes me to pause. Upon reflection it is clear to me that we need more compelling answers to the questions of where to innovate and why. We need answers that extend beyond the parochial interests of the innovating organization or individuals, and toward the kind of purposeful innovations that reside in the making of meaning more than money, the pursuit of substantive more than superficial value, the quest to contribute more than simply be different, the fostering of righteous more than merely efficient outcomes, the creation of just more than merely commercial success, the stewardship of common more than shareholder's interests, and the kind of growth that is faithful more than acquisitive.

Typically we define and confine innovation and entrepreneurship to commercial and economic endeavors. Recently, "social venturing" and "social investing" have extended innovation and entrepreneurship into non-commercial fields. Principles and experiences native to profit-making sectors are now being applied to opportunities for positive societal impact, not just financial gain. Many propose that one can do good while also doing well, challenging the notion that commercial success and societal contribution are separate and distinct.

Seldom, however, do we recognize that theology might have something to contribute to the principles and practice of innovation and entrepreneurship, whether defined traditionally, extended to social spheres, or both. But when we realize that the essence of innovation and entrepreneurship is *creating new value for others*, then it opens the prospect that this kind of activity may benefit from a theological perspective. In fact, creating new value for others may be essential to living a meaningful life—one that is not dependent upon getting so much as it is upon giving. Those of us who have tasted this experience know how gratifying, pure and purposeful such experiences are. Perhaps this is another way of describing the essence of what righteousness is—that state into which God persistently invites us in and through change.

We can respond to change in many ways. Every responses can be classified and located on a continuum stretching between absorbing change on the one hand, and innovating on the other.

With *absorption* responses, individuals and organizations have sufficient resources, momentum or clout to cushion the change without adapting or adjusting to it, at least in the near term. Admittedly this is not much of a response. In fact it could appear as indifference.

Defensive responses show up in the middle of the continuum. Preservation of the *status quo* and conservation of resources characterize these types of responses.

At the other end of the continuum are *innovation* responses. These are conscious choices to respond to change in such ways as to create new value for others. In the case of a commercial enterprise, non-profit or social service agency, such a response could be to try something truly new—a product or service innovation. In the case of an individual, the new value created for another might involve the risk of doing something extra ordinary, both for the other and for the one taking the risk.

Of course *responding* to change is different than *reacting* to change. When we respond, we have a choice and make it. When we react, we also have a choice, but don't make it.⁶ Without a pause in between the stimulus of change and our response we simply react. Innovating starts with what we do in this pause.

Given the continuum, why innovate at all? Why would any one—organization or individual—take on the greater demands, uncertainties and risks that accompany innovating, particularly if there are other ways of responding in the "safer" middle, or even at the opposite end of the continuum? Why attempt to respond to change in such a way to create new value? Financial or cost/benefit calculations rarely add up to anything but clear warnings *against* innovating.

But numbers are only one of many considerations, including "the convictions of things unseen, the substance of things hoped for."⁷ Believing what is not seen except in the imaginations of ones who believe is an essential trait of entrepreneurs and innovators. That entrepreneurs and innovators use more of this capability is arguably what distinguishes them from the rest of us.⁸ But whether a defining characteristic or not, believing plays a central role in the experience of innovating. If theology⁹ is thoughtful reflection on believing experiences, particularly where God is believed to play a role, then innovating is well within what can and should interest theology.

Conversation needed

Clarifying the value and understanding the content of innovation theology requires conversation. Such conversations can be encouraging. Encouragement holds practical value whatever the context, proximity or urgency of change, partly because responding to change is so fraught with uncertainty and fear. Fear afflicts both the powerless and powerful, though in different ways. Neither is immune to the anxiety that comes with

⁶ Ackoff, Russell L. *Differences That Make A Difference* (Devon: Triarchy Press, 2010), p. 108.

⁷ Hebrews 11.1.

⁸ Vincent, Lanny. *Prisoners of Hope: How Engineers and Others Get Lifting for Innovating*. (Indianapolis: Westbow Press, 2011).

⁹ Unless otherwise stated, use of "theology" and its derivatives assumes biblical theology, of which more will be said in the essay "Innovating with company assets: Scripture and Spirit."

unsolicited change, especially when the response is aimed at creating new value. Such responses require courage. Theology boldly suggests that at the core of courage is love. "Perfect love drives out fear."¹⁰

From my own direct experiences—periods of success punctuated by dashed expectations and failed plans, personal and professional—I have learned what others have learned before me: there is no more reliable source of encouragement than the clarity of one person expressing the account of their hope to another. The Apostle Peter¹¹ urged us to always be ready to give such an account for the hope that is within us. The intent of these conversations is to catalyze and clarify this hope. From these conversations will grow, I believe, a conviction that unsought change is an envelope containing an invitation from a loving, caring God. In this envelope is not just any invitation. It is an invitation to create new value for others—in other words, to innovate in the Company of God.

Uncharted

These conversations might be something like a scouting expedition. Innovation theology is an uncharted territory at this time. As a scout for the expedition my qualifications arise from first hand experience with these two domains along with some published reflections to make some sense of it.¹² But the role and authority of a scout is limited. In this role I merely point to where the more prominent peaks and valleys are on the innovation theology landscape in the forthcoming collection of essays (described below). If you are looking for doctrinal precision or orthodox propositions you are not likely to find either in these conversations or in innovation theology.

The cartography of *innovation theology*¹³ will require conversational efforts that traverse boundaries seldom crossed. Economists, serial inventors, theologians, biblical exegetes, lay leaders, entrepreneurs, intrapreneurs and those who study entrepreneurship and corporate venturing will need to talk with each other, and perhaps more importantly, *listen* to each other. Common charts will need to be forged that cross the boundaries of previously uncommon territories, mindsets, experiences and vocabularies. However, despite such a daunting conversational challenge, results should lead to more substantive results for innovators, greater willingness to see change as purposeful not merely inevitable, and less reluctance to embrace innovation as an option. It could also prove enlivening to theology as well.

Innovation is normally viewed as a secular and economic phenomenon, neither sacred nor spiritual. I am not sure why this is. The arc of the biblical saga moves from one divine intervention to another. It is filled with God intervening in the affairs of mankind to create

¹⁰ I John 4.18.

¹¹ I Peter 3.15.

¹² www.innovationsthatwork.com.

¹³ I could have called it a “theology of innovation” or even a “theology for innovation.” I chose “innovation theology” because it has fewer words and is probably more a theology than a theory of innovation. It should not be confused with innovations for or in theology as that is what Reformed theology is already about.

new and unexpected events—possibilities that were unimagined and unimaginable before they happened. The interventions are many and varied. Take for example,

- the birth of Isaac to a barren ninety-year old mother;
- a burning bush that is not consumed in the burning;
- the parting of the Red Sea;
- David's inspired improvisation with five smooth stones;
- the surprise calling of Israel to be a suffering servant to all other nations;
- an exile and a return from exile;
- a messiah whose messianic character was not what most thought it would be;
- resurrections; and
- a dramatic conversion of a chief persecutor, Paul.

These are but a few of the more prominent ones, certainly not all of them. Could these divine interventions be called divine innovations? Many of these interventions *seem* like innovations—new embodiments of value that were thought impossible at first. Like many innovations they were unexpected. Still, it feels awkward to call them innovations.

If we prefer to keep divine interventions separate from human innovations then reserving the later as off limits to any considerations other than secular and economic still leaves a theological problem. It limits the scope and movement of God's presence and purpose. Imposing such a limit is *theologically* difficult. It is contrary to one of the things typically included in the three-letter word "God:" a divine freedom to show up where ever and whenever God chooses. "God does whatever God pleases."¹⁴

Given the few occurrences of the word "new" in theology's primary source (Scripture) perhaps it is no surprise that innovation has been ignored by theology. However, if we pause and consider the entire sweep of the biblical narrative, the cannon is filled with accounts of God doing remarkably new, unexpected and "disruptive" things—many of which were thought impossible before they became not only probable but actual. Rarely, however, is innovating considered from a theological perspective. Why should it be? What difference might such a perspective make, especially now?

One is the legacy this generation is rapidly creating for the next. If God's interests have something to do with intrinsic values like loving kindness, doing justice and walking humbly with God¹⁵ then how are our innovations manifesting these intrinsic values, if at all? Are medical technology innovations—arguably embodiments of loving-kindness—constrained by the need for a profitable return? Is the requirement of a profitable return a form of *not* walking humbly? Are social media innovations enabling us to do justice by creating more and faster exposure of hidden injustices? Are these innovations at risk because they might not create enough profit even as advertizing platforms? Or are these platforms generating too much noise? Are we concerned that innovations producing

¹⁴ Psalm 115.3.

¹⁵ Micah 6.8.

economic growth—revenue, profits and jobs—also eroding the fabric of communities and relationships?¹⁶

Putting aside for the moment whether divine interventions are synonymous with divine innovations, all of the interventions in the biblical saga manifest the purpose and presence of God, regardless of how well or poorly we understand them. Many of them God accomplishes through people, sometimes as individuals and sometimes as leaders of tribes and nations.

Innovation affects each of us, whether we realize it or not. Some of us are innovation *victims*: workers displaced by "advances" in information technology, small business owners put out of business by big box retailers or Amazon.com, or consumers "forced" to upgrade our two-year old smart phone made obsolete by the latest operating system update. Some of these victimizations are "first world" to be sure. Other dislocations and disruptions may be more than merely inconvenient.

Others of us are innovation *beneficiaries*: the curious with instant virtual libraries on our own desks; communicators with fast, cheap, easy and reliable ways to send messages to others elsewhere; city-dwellers reliant upon fuel-efficient distribution methods to bring us food from distant agricultural regions.

Still others of us, especially knowledge workers, are innovation *contributors*, directly or indirectly engaged in developing the next new thing, whether laboring in a commercial R&D lab, testing a hypothesis or prototype in the field, or solving problems and creating solutions.

Whether we realize it or not, theology effects us as well. By "theology" in general¹⁷ I simply mean thinking about reality that considers the presence and activity of God. Much of this thinking is implicit, even sub-conscious. To be sure, there are many who regard themselves as atheists—those who think about reality deliberately excluding the presence or activity of God. There are agnostics also—those who are not sure. But there are many who include God in their thinking about reality.

This is not to say that those who include God in their thinking do so in a way that satisfies them or others. There is likely a great deal of ill-conceived theology. Nor is it to say that these "believers" always adequately consider the Divine purpose as often as they should. I simply mean to imply that theology—thinking about reality that includes God—is more widely practiced than we might otherwise acknowledge.

If there is even a smidgen of truth in the preceding paragraph, then it is a bit surprising that so little attention has been given to innovation theology. Theology, particularly biblical

¹⁶ Marglin, Stephen A. *The Dismal Science: How Thinking Like an Economist Undermines Community*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2010). See also, Turkle, Sherry. *Reclaiming Conversations: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*. New York: Penguin Press, 2015.

¹⁷ "Theology" in this instance does not necessarily imply biblical theology.

theology, has had much to say about transformation, liberation, reconciliation, redemption, and restoration for individuals especially. However, it has had little to say about innovation. This is not because it has little to say or contribute. Rather, more likely because it has not yet found ways to say it. Currently innovation is something confined to the next new thing, something that has to do with entrepreneurial activity or that which comes out of places like the Silicon Valley—something subject to economic, technological and business perspectives, not theological ones. I hope these conversations prove to be at least a start in helping biblical theology find a credible voice in matters related to innovation.

I fully realize that some may think I have gone off the deep end in proposing something called innovation theology. However, the simple combination of these two words point to essential yet unexplored realities. God is not only present and at work in changes occurring around us (not just within us). God is at work in our responses to change as well, including those responses that aim to create new value for others.

Certainly not all change expresses the purposes of God. Some changes may express the opposite. Likewise, not all responses to change are aligned with the purposes of God. Some are the opposite. And indeed, not all responses to change are aimed at creating new value. However, those so aimed and succeeding carry disproportionate influence on our lives and culture, for good or for ill. When they are not successful they waste an inordinate amount of energy, time and resources. As such, innovating is particularly worthy of theological consideration given the potential for contribution or waste.

Despite all the recent talk about entrepreneurship and innovation, substantive innovating has been declining for years.¹⁸ Reasons for this are many, varied, speculative and worrisome. Might theology—that which helps us more articulately account for the hope that is within us—have an encouraging contribution to make, especially now? Continuing to look to economics—nicknamed by many the "dismal science"—may not be the best choice as a source of encouragement. Responses that broaden the field of view and invest in what's valuable to others might be better. This is what innovation theology intends to do, or should.

In short, an underlying premise of the conversations is this: that God is engaged in change and that how we respond to change reflects our resistance to or alignment with God. Discernment is required, to be sure, to assess whether our responses are more opposed or aligned with God's purpose and presence in change.¹⁹

Rarely will our responses to change directly line up with God's will, precisely. To assume so lacks requisite humility at the very least. Neither does resistance to change itself necessarily represent a resistance to God's will. It could be the opposite. Change and God's intentions are not synonymous. However, if we reframe change as an invitation from God,

¹⁸ Wladawsky-Berger, Irving. "Some Advice on How to Jump Start Entrepreneurship and Job Creation." *CIO Journal/The Wall Street Journal*. November 7, 2014.

¹⁹ Such discernment is best done in an explicit process with others in the context of a faith community.

then to respond with love and faithfulness may represent the first steps in creating new value for others—i.e., innovating. Innovation theology should help us recognize what those first, and next steps, are.

Initial Content

Under the working title *Innovating in the Company of God*²⁰ I have written twelve essays, each of which offers subject matter for these conversations. The set of essays briefly described below are presented in four sections, but each essay was written as a stand-alone thought piece. However, the set intends to investigate and enter the territory of innovation theology from different points of view.

Under the first section—*Change, Innovation and Theology*—the first two essays have to do with where theology connects with innovation and why such connections matter in the grand scheme of things. The first proposes a bare minimum of theological givens and makes the case for the practical importance of bringing theology into the field of innovation ("*Theological assumptions and practical purpose*"). The second essay intends to invite innovators into the conversation ("*Innovating needs theology*"). It makes the case that innovating needs theology to help answer where innovations are needed and why. This is a question that generally receives too little attention from innovating organizations. However, theology may also itself benefit from attending to innovation, helping theology stay current with the presence and activity of the company of God, here and now.

The next three essays have to do with *accepting* change—how we think about change, how we feel about it, and what God might be up to in what is changing. The first essay in this section takes up the seductions of planning as it relates to change and innovating ("*How do you make God laugh*"). The second speaks to the loss-filled challenges change presents and the implications of loss on our imaginations ("*Change wounds; grieving heals*"). The third essay in this group proposes that change may be an envelope through which God invites us to respond ("*Change as invitation*").

The next section—*Making Sense of Change*—is comprised of four essays, all of which recognize how both theology and innovation are inextricably engaged in sense-making. The first of these proposes that making sense makes more sense with God's help and God's lead ("*Making Sense in the Company of God*"). This is followed by an essay that proposes just what its title implies ("*Make meaning before money*"), whereas the third one in this group speaks to the "elusive" character of God who invites our participation in making sense more than spoon feeding us with the sense God has already made ("*Coincidences: God's way of staying anonymous*"). The fourth examines the quiet and often-ignored role humility plays in sense-making ("*Humility: a practical necessity that takes practice*").

²⁰ The full working title is currently: *Innovating in the Company of God: For a Biblical Theology of Innovation and Entrepreneurship*.

The final three essays have to do with the practical challenges of *Innovating in the Company of God*. These practical challenges start with understanding what the company of God is and how it is different from other companies (*The Company of God has no exit strategy*). The next essay examines the potential role and contribution of the church in contexts of change and innovation (*Church: servant subsidiary of the Company of God*). The last essay examines how Scripture and the Holy Spirit combine to contribute to our ability to innovate and how our attitudes about these two assets either help or get in the way (*Innovating with company assets: Scripture and Spirit*).

While at least one additional essay is under development, a glance at the current set of essays is as follows:

Change, Innovation and Theology

1. Theological assumptions and practical purpose
2. Innovating needs theology

Accepting Change

3. How do you make God laugh?
4. Change wounds; grieving heals
5. Change as invitation

Making Sense of Change

6. Making sense in the Company of God
7. Make meaning *before* money
8. Coincidence: God's way of staying anonymous
9. Humility: a practical necessity that takes practice

The Company of God

10. This company has no exit strategy
11. Church as servant subsidiary
12. Innovating with company assets: Scripture and Spirit