

The Road to Organisational Redemption

by *Chris Bemrose*



Unless organisations are redeemed from their mistakes and failures, they run the risk of progressive deterioration in performance, reputation and creativity. The way this is done involves: restoring relationships with customers and staff; passing power to those who have been wronged; rejecting greed and envy as motivators; exonerating scapegoats, while becoming scapegoats ourselves; accepting people without overlooking wrongdoing.

Seldom have organisations been in greater need of redemption. Financial organisations stand accused of greed, while the regulatory bodies responsible for policing them are held up for neglect. Many churches and care organisations are accused of abuse and seeking to cover it up. Parliament is accused of running a regime in which many MPs claimed dubious expenses. Then there are the cases of fraud and corruption (Enron, WorldCom, Madoff to name just a few) which can tarnish organisations as a whole.

While such cases hit the headlines, it is the day-to-day problems which often affect people more: the dodgy business practices which leave customers angry and dissatisfied; the unintentional mistakes and oversights, such as lost orders and faulty products, which damage organisational reputations; and the poor treatment of employees resulting in the 240,000 claims made at Employment Tribunals each year.

How can organisations be redeemed from such problems? Theologically, redemption is defined as deliverance from sin and its consequences by the atonement of Christ.¹ Just as slaves might be released into freedom

by payment of a ransom, the New Testament proclaims that Christians are freed through the atoning death of Christ.² This article suggests five propositions concerning how organisations may be redeemed from wrongdoing, based on biblical principles and drawing on my own experience of running a L'Arche Community³.

1. Organisational redemption is primarily concerned with restoring relationships

The organisational failures – or sins – given in the first paragraph are problems of damaged trust and relationships, not just abstract ethical issues of right and wrong. Banks have lost the confidence of investors, customers and each other. Churches have lost the trust of believers, and in all likelihood confirmed the prejudice of non-believers. Politicians have lost the trust of electors. Redemption involves restoring these relationships back to trust and confidence.

Redemption is important for two reasons. Redemption breaks the deterministic cycle



▶▶ of cause and effect by which organisations risk going progressively further off the mark. Without redemption, for example, the organisation which is poor at marketing fails to attract good marketing people and the downward spiral continues. Secondly, redemption enables an organisation to be at peace with itself, not in a complacent, self-satisfied way, but in a way that encourages openness and the search for truth. With knowledge of redemption, the positive taking of risks and initiatives is encouraged – including the potential to make mistakes.

As an organisation, the Christian Church is built on redemption. After Peter denies Jesus three times, Jesus not only forgives him but says that he will build his Church on him⁴. Paul, despite oppressing the early Christian Church, becomes its leading ambassador.

Without redemption, there is no scope to make mistakes and organisational growth and development becomes stilted. In L'Arche I remember when, due to a series of unintentional mistakes and misunderstandings, tension arose with the parents of one particular person with learning disabilities. For a time, we were almost obsessively concerned with how we managed the relationships with them. A mixture of anger, guilt, distrust and fear began to affect our relationships with parents as a whole. We became very self-conscious, no longer able to operate as smoothly or as freely as usual. It was only after some months, once the heat had gone out of the issue, that we sat down with the parents to explore what had been going on. Without that, I suspect that we would have continued to handle our relationships in a difficult and self-conscious way, finding it difficult to strike the right balance between keeping parents either too much at arms' length or involving them in every detail.

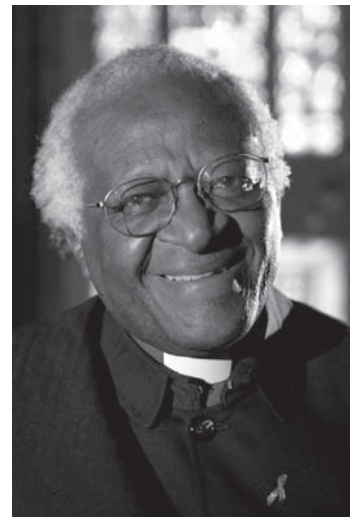
Ultimately, the most important relationship is that between individuals in an organisation and God. In L'Arche, I seek to maintain good relationships with the people I live and work with, as well as Social Services, funders and others. They invariably focus on sins of

commission: what the organisation has done poorly. However, it is only in the silent reflection of prayer, when my conscience meets with the spirit, that I begin to explore the deeper areas of peace and discordance. It is then that I focus more on the sins of omission: the opportunities and potential which we have failed to fulfil.

2. Redemption ultimately rests with those who are wronged

If redemption is primarily about restoring relationships, it follows that an organisation cannot redeem itself solely by its own efforts. Just as bonds are redeemed when they are repurchased by the original issuer, organisations are redeemed when they are reunited with those around them. Redemption requires that the organisation both seeks forgiveness and that it is granted forgiveness by those whose trust it has damaged or betrayed. As such, redemption – the giving and receiving of forgiveness – cannot be imposed. In seeking redemption, power is passed to those who have been wronged. Apologies and even offers of compensation can be rebuffed. No organisation can force those who have been wronged to forgive it. The organisation can ultimately only be ready to receive forgiveness from others.

Redemption requires care on the part of those who feel offended. As Desmond Tutu has said, ▶▶



Desmond Tutu

▶▶ writing in relation to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, ‘we should be generous in our judgements of others, for we can never really know all there is to know about one another’.⁵ People – even bankers and politicians – seldom deliberately do wrong. Experience suggests that issues are seldom as black and white as they may initially be presented. In nearly all complaints and conflicts, misunderstandings and confusions between organisational and personal priorities invariably have a large part to play.

We can seek to follow the model of Jesus, not seeking to judge people (or organisations) but to save them (John 3:17). This means trying to refrain from condemning the guilty and seeking to understand through dialogue. Tutu suggests we avoid the ‘victor’s justice’ as seen at the post-war Nuremberg trials just as much as well as the ‘amnesia’ in which everything is swept under the carpet and ignored. It is only through dialogue that people can share what they have suffered and the mistakes they have made, learn from them and seek reconciliation from anyone they have hurt, however unintentionally.



Tintoretto: “Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery” (1550)
at Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Antica, Rome

Before we condemn the politician, the banker or the chief executive of the organisation caught in fraud or other wrongdoing, we might reflect on the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11). Jesus charged the woman to learn from the experience, and not to sin again – just as we might imagine him charging the bankers to learn from their mistakes and change their behaviour. More striking is his

injunction to those who accused her of wrongdoing to recognise their own shortcomings. It is so easy to focus on the failings of others that we forget our own failings. Before condemning bankers for greed, for example, perhaps we should look at our own share in encouraging building societies to de-mutualise in the hope of a quick capital return or using comparison websites to switch accounts at the merest hint of a better deal.

3. Organisations invariably need to be redeemed of greed and envy

If sin is a preoccupation with ourselves rather than others, then the sinful organisation is one that is so self-centred that it ignores its wider purpose in society. More generally, sin can be seen as ‘missing the mark’⁶ In practice, however, for organisations, perhaps the greatest temptation derives from greed and envy.

René Girard, the French philosopher of social science, argues that people are mimetic⁷: they copy one another not just in terms of language, gestures and external attributes, but in terms of what they desire. Where people desire the same object – as with children arguing over toys – it invariably results in rivalry and possible conflict. This can apply even more to organisations. If organisations aspire to being at the top of their particular league table – or even just in the first quartile – many are going to be disappointed. The mimetic organisation, seeking to outpace its peers, climbs onto a moving conveyor belt in which the further it goes, the faster it travels. The organisation, instead of developing organically in response to its own gifts and the needs of customers around it, becomes driven by a need to outperform its peers. It risks becoming so self-centred that it loses its own sense of identity and ignores its wider purpose in society.

An example of this was given in the recent financial crisis. One banker, asked why his bank was investing in a business which had been identified as a long-term risk, responded: ‘Because it offers short-term returns and the



▶▶ market is pushing for higher returns next quarter.⁷⁸ Market pressures make it difficult for organisations to step out of line with the practices of other organisations, even though they know it may be wrong or have dangerous consequences long term. In a similar way, I often find myself tempted to think and talk of the Community I run in terms of its size, as though that it is an indication of how good it is, when what really counts is the quality of the life we offer. These are ways in which organisations can move from being a ‘slave of righteousness’, having a sense of God’s spirit working through them, to becoming a ‘slave of sin’, preoccupied with self-interest and outward appearances (Rom 6:17-19).

Following a major crisis, redemption invariably requires that organisations go through a period of vulnerability. In theological terms, this can be seen as God’s grace making power perfect in weakness (2 Cor 12:9). In some cases – suspected abuse or financial fraud, for example – internal or external investigations are set up to investigate allegations. An organisation can feel vulnerable as power is given up to allow others to investigate particular issues, and fears may be raised about washing dirty linen in public. There is also the need for organisational penitence, recognising that particular thoughts and actions, often undertaken with good intentions, were in fact wrong. This requires humility and openness to change on the part of those who have offended. In all events, it comes as an antidote to the excessive pride, greed and envy that often provoke the wrongdoing in the first place.

4. Redemption requires that we exonerate scapegoats, while becoming scapegoats ourselves

Organisations often respond to organisational wrongdoing by pleading ignorance or scapegoating. ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ is the classic plea of ignorance, given by Cain following his murder of his brother Abel (Gen 4:9). Organisational pleas of ignorance include: ‘We didn’t know it was going on; it wasn’t against the rules; it’s not our job’.



Size doesn't matter

The scapegoating response was used by Adam when he was accused by God of eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Adam blamed Eve who in turn blamed the serpent (Gen 3:8-13). Scapegoating is seen to be an important theme by René Girard, who argues that it plays a major role in establishing and maintaining social order. When there is a crisis, social processes invariably result in people focusing their aggression on a scapegoat, who is seen as the alleged cause of the trouble. In this way the group maintains its own unity and harmony, while the scapegoat is seen as both the instigator and, by virtue of their departure, the resolver of the crisis. Girard shows that in the Bible, God is on the side of the innocent scapegoat, most dramatically and clearly in the person of Jesus on the cross.

The implications of this are twofold. First, we need to be acutely conscious of potential scapegoating in our own organisations. It is all too easy for a group of people to search for simplistic solutions (e.g. ‘to get rid of x’) to a problem that is in fact far more complex and deep-rooted, and where the scapegoat, even if not entirely innocent, can nonetheless cast a very different light on reality. We also need to recognise that organisational sin is seldom focused on just a small number of people – even though the banking crisis was often presented in such terms.

The second – and harder – implication is that, as leaders, we may at times need to become ▶▶

▶▶ scapegoats ourselves. This is following Jesus: denying ourselves, taking up his cross and following him (Matt 16:24).

I see this when people complain to me about various aspects of the L'Arche Community which I lead, or criticise decisions I have made. It is often easy to give a quick response, deny the problem or pass the buck and blame others. But that way the blame and negativity spreads through the organisation like ink on a blotter.

Experience suggests that often it is better to listen to the comments as quietly as possible, allowing feelings of anger to be expressed and not seeking to justify myself. This allows genuine grievances to be aired and helps me to take the other person's concerns seriously. It enables me to offload my own anxieties and concerns in a different way – in prayer or with my own supervisor. In this way, I become the blotter, soaking up the trouble and metaphorically letting God transform it. It also helps me to see things not just from my own perspective, but to understand the position of others. This process gives time for the wrongs to be seen in perspective, and avoids 'quick fix' solutions which often focus more on the symptoms of a problem than the underlying cause.

5. Redemption starts with acceptance

When Jesus told Zacchaeus to come down from the tree (Luke 19:8), he didn't start by condemning him, even though Jesus must have known the sort of person he was. Instead, Jesus invited himself to stay with him. Zacchaeus' change of heart – giving half his possessions to the poor and repaying people four times the amount he defrauded them – can be seen as a response to Jesus' love and acceptance, which helped Zacchaeus to see himself as the corrupt person that he was. It is similar to the story that in Africa, before the Europeans came, a criminal had to stay under a mango tree to be punished. The villagers would gather round and everyone would say something positive about him until he would start to feel guilty and repent⁹.

I try to remember this in supervision meetings with those I manage. If I start with a list of criticisms all I will do is provoke denial and defensiveness. It is only if people feel secure that they will be open to risk change¹⁰. I find that in focusing on the positive aspects of what they are doing (how did you manage to do such a good job last week? what do you think was your greatest achievement last month?) this not only boosts their self-esteem, but makes them ready to raise difficulties and failures much more openly than if I had raised the same issues myself.

This does not mean that we should overlook wrongdoing. When I became leader of a L'Arche Community, I was given several objects to symbolise the needs of the role. These included a large pair of ears (for listening), a map (for guiding), a balloon (to keep my eyes on the horizon) and a stone (to



A torch to look into the dark corners of the organisation

keep me down to earth). However, the object that struck me the most was a torch to help me look into the dark corners of the organisation: uncovering issues which were messy and difficult. I am struck how often, at one level, I do not really want to shine the light and know about these things. Fear of what we might discover means we do not want to know the truth. Like Jonah, not wanting to confront the people of Nineveh, we want to run away from challenging people and calling them to account. It seems easier – at least in the short term – to ignore or deny problems. ▶▶



Pollution on an epic scale

The Union Carbide pesticide factory in Bhopal India where a gas leak in 1984 led to the death of over 5,000 people. The protests continue. Part of the problem is the refusal by Dow Chemical (UC's new owners) formally to accept responsibility for what Union Carbide allowed to happen

▶▶ This often leads to allegations of cover-ups as issues fester and grow, and makes us feel progressively less free. Challenging the person who needs to be challenged becomes harder, not easier, with time.

Conclusion

Sin and redemption have been compared with ink on a blotter. In many cases, however, a closer analogy might be with a deep wound to the flesh. It is only gradually, with the onset of time, and the absence of infection, that the cut begins to heal, even though it may remain visible for the rest of our earthly lives. In much the same way, organisations have wounded relationships with God and others through involvement

in activities such as the slave trade, the holocaust or pollution on an epic scale. Such activities cannot be forgotten, but can gradually be healed, even though full redemption may only be completed in another world.

No organisation is ever perfect. In that sense, all organisations need redemption. But we may be consoled that God told Abraham that he would save the city of Sodom if there were just ten righteous people in it (Gen. 18:23-32). Trust in a forgiving God also helps us to know that whatever mistakes we may make, we start each new day with a clean slate and a new opportunity for God to operate through us.¹¹ If the true measure of a genuine apology is the preparedness that an organisation has for real change and transformation¹² then we need to learn from past mistakes and do what we can to put them right, but also recognise that we should not dwell unduly on past mistakes, as they do not define who we are. This in turn can give rise to hope as we face the future.

We live in an uncertain world, where once great organisations are suddenly plunged low. Paradoxically, in an increasingly secular world, spiritual concepts such as trust, redemption and liberation are gaining new currency. If organisations are to be free they need to be redeemed from sin and the shame and guilt that go with it. This is a constant process which is never complete. Nonetheless, the process – a sort of organisational confession – can be strangely liberating. ■

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1 *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford, Third Edition, 1968
 2 Rom 3:24f ; 1 Cor 6:19f and 7:22f; Eph 1:7; Heb 9:15;
 3 L'Arche is a federation of faith communities based around the needs and gifts of people with learning disabilities. See www.larche.org for further details.
 4 Mt16:18
 5 Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, Ebury Press, London, 1999, p.131.
 6 Mark Biddle, *Missing the Mark: Sin and its Consequences in Biblical Theology*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2005, p.viii.

7 See e.g. Michael Kirwan, *Discovering Girard*, DLT, London, 2004.
 8 Keith Leslie, 'What really caused the crash of 2008', *The Tablet*, 4 Oct 2008.
 9 Jan de Cock, 'I've slept in 70 prisons', *FT Weekend* 20-21 June 2009, p.7.
 10 Rick James, *Creating Space for grace: God's power in organisational Change*, Swedish Mission Council, 2294, p.50.
 11 2 Cor 5:18-21
 12 Giles Fraser, 'Sorry? They haven't a clue', *The Tablet*, 31 January 2009.