

Design Thinking: The Missing Link from Theology to Business Practice?

by Michael Hodson



At a recent meeting of Christian business people the speaker took pains to deny there was anything distinctive that the Christian faith could contribute to the redesign of the financial system. This lack of faith in the power of the Christian faith is widespread and due in part I believe to the difficulty of linking theology to business practice.

The hermeneutical route

There are a number of well-known hermeneutical problems in applying biblical texts to the present day. On the one hand Scripture must not be reduced to a set of principles that are so general that they are capable of almost any application. On the other, the narrative must not be applied in such a particular way that it is applicable only to one situation. There are well-trying and tested hermeneutical solutions such as the use of paradigms. However a further problem for the business strategist or product designer is that they face so many possibilities in their task that they defy individual ethical evaluation. The problems are not well defined. The dynamics of solving the problem are uncertain and can change as the result of introducing the new strategies or designs.

The Virtue route

N.T. Wright in his recent book *After You Believe*¹, advocates developing virtue as the way forward so that we make the right decisions by 'second nature' (a theme among others taken up by Clive Wright in *The*

*Business of Virtue*²). This requires identifying the goals, the virtues required to achieve the goal and 'the process of moral training' to achieve virtue³. Training is required; but what sort? Might it be the case that we are not trained in the right type of thinking or practice to make the transition from theology to business practice? If we are to adapt a type of Aristotelian ethical approach towards the Scriptures, should we not adopt a largely forgotten type of thinking which some think was first identified by Aristotle? Could we not learn from those trained in 'design thinking'?

The arrival of design thinking

Ironically, it was just at the time when engineering departments were turning away from their links with design toward pure science and mathematics⁴, that academic awareness of design thinking grew. Initiated by design research during World War Two⁵, and goaded by the question, 'Can a computer design?' academics became aware of design thinking as a distinct process.

Unlike analytical thinking, in physics or exegesis for example, design thinking is not directed toward analysing what already exists, though it does make use of analysis. Unlike qualitative assessment, for example in literary criticism, it is not concerned with evaluating what has been created before, though it makes repeated use of evaluation. Rather, design thinking is directed toward devising what doesn't already exist, designing something new. This means that design thinking isn't just ►►

- ▶▶ something done by product, graphic and interior “designers”. It could be done by applied theologians; that is, us.

Design thinking fits with the change in our theological perspective advocated by N.T. Wright, which many Christian business people already appreciate. If life is not just about ‘getting through’⁶ but helping creation to flourish and building towards God’s



*‘Getting through’ or helping creation to flourish?
Delegates at the Bonn Climate talks in June 2010*

Heavenly City, then design thinking is pivotal. A more creative and unpredictable process implies thinking designed for that purpose. Design thinking is well suited to ‘prototyping’ in the in-between times in which we live, when the ‘age to come’ has arrived but not totally eclipsed this ‘present age’. Design thinking is more open than analytical thinking. It typically deals with situations where we don’t know how everything “works”. It often concerns problems where the goals, never mind the ‘drivers’, are not well defined and the inter-relations are many and possibly not straightforward. The design paradigm is more open-ended. Design thinking requires judgement and wisdom, attributes which the biblical writers would encourage. Some might say that design thinking therefore leaves more explicit room for God and us to work together.

A major reason why design thinking is so open-ended is because it’s based on achieving a purpose, a vision, a *telos*. So there can be as many “answers” as there are visions of what

the designer wishes to achieve. The designer therefore has to choose his or her vision. The connection with theology is apparent. Our theology helps set the purpose of the design. The designer works in a way that is analogous of the way God works - with purpose. We draw inspiration from the biblical accounts of God’s purpose throughout the governing paradigm, from Creation to the Heavenly City. Our purpose need not be described or pictured in precise detail, just as the *Eschaton* is not described in detail. Moreover as Christopher Alexander wrote in one of the earliest modern dissertations on design theory, it’s often easier to identify what we don’t want our ‘requirements’ to look like⁷. Certainly our biblical theology presents us with many examples to avoid, if we can but make the right translation into our own time. How many products today are designed, for example, to give us modern-day idols, except we term them as ‘icons’ or ‘status symbols.’ Defining what the result doesn’t look like nevertheless leaves much scope for designing many forms of ‘solution’ to the design problem.

Since the number of possible solutions is large, design thinkers often start with one possible form of a solution, work out the consequences from there, and then modify and reiterate the process. There are tools provided by theology which can be used in conjunction with the tools designers use to ‘ideate’ solution concepts, most typically from first principles, by analogy, combination and mutation⁸. The product, service, business process strategy designer can use systematic theology and critical correlation to design from first principles. The business designer can use narrative to suggest analogies or combine biblical paradigms and imagine adaptations of them.

So for example the organisational structure of an enterprise may be designed in such a way that it allows people to reflect how they are made in the image of God. This was one of the sources of Christian Schumacher’s consulting career⁹. Or in the design of a business incubator the designer might use the example of Jesus’ way with his disciples as ▶▶

►► an inspiration for how they might equip entrepreneurs to launch new enterprises.

The designing process is often emergent. It's only as the designer frames the problem and tries out for example various pricing strategies, perhaps conducting market trials, that he or she discovers how the design will realise the theological as well as the commercial and social vision of the enterprise. Design thinking is thus a natural part of practical theology, perhaps revealing to us more about how people behave and our



Emergent design process

Ikea and Enertrag conducting market trials for Opel on a fourth generation hydrogen fuel cell vehicle in May 2010

capacity to err as a result of the Fall. We may also learn much about God's grace in the process.

There are no best solutions in design thinking. Each stage in the design process requires many choices; and there are many stages in the process. The number of choices is so great that we can't number the possible combinations. Moreover the order in which designers try out various designs is significant. The order will determine what

the designer learns, and therefore what modifications are made at each stage in the design cycle. Designing is path dependent. This is another reason why there are in theory many possible design solutions.

As a result evaluation is so important. The designer needs repeatedly to evaluate what his or her design looks and feels like and to make design 'moves'. The large number of possible designs necessitates that the designer is, as Herbert Simon, an economist, father of artificial intelligence and one of the early developers of design thinking put it, a 'satisficer' rather than an optimiser¹⁰. It's at this stage that design thinking most resembles ethical thinking. The business designer needs to compare what's in the storyboard, customer journey map, spreadsheet or prototype, with what is virtuous and consistent with the biblical paradigm. Does the business design satisfy these requirements?

At the evaluation, and then selection and implementation stages, there is also a link with spiritual theology. God can 'speak' into the design process through the tools of spiritual discernment such as the Ignatian 'examen' for example. Some business people find this the most exciting part of combining theology with design thinking.

Business men and women of faith should therefore take heart. Biblical, systematic, practical and spiritual theology all have much that is distinctive to contribute throughout the process of designing a business. Design thinking may be the way to discover it. ■

Michael Hodson has worked in business, consultancy and government and now leads the Social Enterprise Incubator Project at the Marketplace Institute of Regent College, Vancouver, and lectures there part time on social and business enterprise. He is the organiser and one of the presenters at the forthcoming Christ-centred Enterprise course to be held at Regent during 6-11 February, 2011. See marketplace.regent-college.edu



1 NT Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters*, HarperCollins, 2010.
 2 Clive Wright, *The Business of Virtue*, SPCK, 2004, pp.107-9.
 3 *After You Believe*, p. 33.
 4 See Herbert Simon *The Sciences of the Artificial*, MIT Press, 1996, 3rd ed., p.111.
 5 See Hazel Clark and David Brody (eds.), *Design Studies: A Reader*, Berg, 2009, p.104.

6 *Op.cit.*, p. 48.
 7 Christopher Alexander, *Notes on the Synthesis of Form*, Harvard University Press, 1964, pp.22-23.
 8 Nigel Cross, *Designerly Ways of Knowing*, Springer-Verlag, 2006, pp.73-76.
 9 Christian Schumacher, *God in Work*, Lion, 1998, pp.145-151.
 10 *The Sciences of the Artificial*, pp. 28-9.