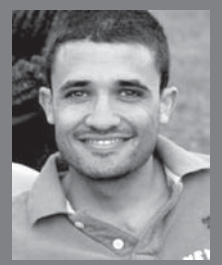


Shared-Bread Companies

Reclaiming community and creativity as the backbones of business life

by Eduardo Sasso



Starting with his own personal experience of being a privileged manager meeting low-paid workers on the factory every day, Eduardo takes us on a journey of reflection and practice. He begins by suggesting a gospel-based resistance to hierarchy, and goes on to consider the community and equality of the Trinity as a model for a company, finishing with practical suggestions to encourage participation and creativity.

'Bread for myself is a material question. Bread for my neighbor is a spiritual one.'

Nikolai Berdyaev,
Russian political philosopher

A friend recently noted to me that the word 'company' comes from the Latin *cum panis*: 'shared bread'; or, 'breaking bread together'. This suggests that the notion of a company carries an implicit interrelatedness; a closeness and togetherness between its members, similar to the one experienced in the intimacy that comes with sharing a meal.

This forgotten meaning points to some dimensions that tend to be compromised in today's hyper-mobile workplace where labour is fluid, increasingly technique-oriented, and often treated as a disposable commodity. And further, as is the case of publicly listed companies, the notion of 'sharing' has been narrowed down to a particular group of people: *shareholders* - absentee landowners whose pressing financial expectations frequently reduce an organization's activity into simple monetary results. Sadly, such expectations result in a gross abstraction in which people are, ultimately speaking, treated as mere economic agents.

Feeding off the 'shared bread' metaphor, this article aims to reclaim the view of companies as centres where people can enhance and

develop their capacity to imagine and to create, and where the opportunity for community can flourish. The first section describes my own personal experience in a business context; whilst the last two offer a constructive theological critique of such experience by means of suggesting alternative business practices and assumptions.

I. A Brief Glance into a Pyramid of Sacrifice

Five years ago I was the commercial manager of a family owned and operated company in San José, Costa Rica's capital city. It took me twenty minutes to get to work in my brand new VW Polo, while all the seamstresses - ten of them - woke up at 5.00am to take the 6.00 bus across the city in order to make it to work by 8.00. My work was dynamic and challenging; theirs was somewhat dull and repetitive. In contrast with mine, theirs was also undemanding in terms of brain use, and with little space for creativity. And while I was pretty free as to how I used my time, they had fixed schedules and hourly pay. My comfort got me a good salary and yearly dividends; their comfort barely got them the pennies they needed for their daily bread. My job got me travelling, expenses all covered; theirs hardly got them anywhere beyond their last daily bus stop.





Seamstress, Costa Rica

▶▶ Was I lucky? And was my luck the mirror-image of an inevitable curse upon others? And, in any case, how did I get to the point where these ladies smiled at me when I walked by the production facilities? One is minded to presume that they must have been either ignorant of a better reality; or hypocritical. I'm tempted to think it was the former, particularly as I remember one of them saying with gratitude: "This company is my life." One could tell. Their hard work and commitment testified to that. (Of course it did, for how else would they be able to feed their children?) Being the 'unqualified' workers that they were (and still are, and will most likely continue to be) they didn't have much beyond their experience and technique; their only asset was their labour. And cheap labour it was too: grossly underpaid if contrasted to those of us who were blessed to be 'up the ladder'.

This situation, of course, is not new, but has been the staple diet of human history. For instance, in ancient Egypt kings were buried in monumental stone tombs under the conviction that they were to live forever. Yet kings did not build their graves: hordes of slaves did. (And how wouldn't they, when kings thought of themselves as good as gods, and thus deserving of undivided loyalty?) Ancient royal worship at its best: only kings were seen as the bearers of divinity.

Not much has changed today. Although Western societies have done away with belief in gods and the afterlife, I sense many of us are still caught up in the Organisational-Shrine myth. Like these seamstresses, today people still lay their lives down for the building of business structures where the helpless many are forfeited in favour of the affluent few: true pyramids of sacrifice, to borrow a phrase, for which the many die, and let live.

Reflecting on this experience, I realise that it was a flawed pyramidal worldview which drove everyone (employer, managers, and employees) to embrace such beliefs and behaviours. And even though organisational charts tend to be flat and more organic nowadays, unspoken pyramidal configurations still undercut much of what passes for democratic structures of decision-making.

Yet Christian theology presses one to think otherwise: both in terms of the role of profit-making as well as the configuration of governance structures. If the backbone of any business seeks to reflect Judeo-Christian values, it should give primordial attention not to profit generation *per se*, but to holistic transformation where the life of the triune God is brought to bear upon the material, ecological, social, and spiritual dimensions of all of life. This requires a shift from 'how can a company satisfy our shareholders by making the most money?' to 'how can the company make the best of money and resources to positively impact all its internal and external stakeholders (whether intended or collateral)



▶▶ to the glory of God?’ This clearly implies that profit should not be the ultimate ‘end’ of a business; nor the chief reason why businesses exist. The generation of profit needs to be sustained and *coordinated* alongside other higher, holistic, and more humane, purposes. Or, put differently, profit should never be the ‘god’, the ‘alpha and omega’, of an organisation. And it cannot be obtained at the detriment of third parties. Otherwise, we’ll be led to the situation in which many are caught up in today, where the marketplace is the one place where the ‘invisible hand’ reigns supreme — the arena where Christians, after revering Yahweh on Sundays, very quickly, and with little conscious reservation, bow to Mammon on Mondays, and the days following. A result of this, very tellingly, is that humans have become human ‘resources’ - personal beings who serve impersonal ends. Money - a good, God-given instrument - often seems to have the last word.

But as a friend repeatedly reminds me, ‘we need blood to live, we don’t live for our blood.’ Like oil in an engine, or like water in a plant, profit is essential in that it allows organisations to operate, grow, and flourish. How is a Christian expected to respond? What unique values, then, should a kingdom-like business embrace with the aim of healing and transforming the marketplace by means of redefining the bottom line?

II. A Key Theological Underpinning: Relationality and Total Communion

Fortunately, there is a growing awareness that companies need to rethink the values and assumptions upon which they operate, for they cannot continue to do it at the expense of the human, the social, and the natural order. Even so, a read through recent journals on business ethics reveals a common inclination toward incorporating spirituality into business life.¹ There is certainly openness for social responsibility and for corporate good will; a love for beauty; room for interconnectedness with one’s self and with the universe; a reaction against efficiency and productivity

for their own sakes, and against corporate greed as the bottom line; awareness of the here and now; increasing attention to treating people holistically, without demanding that they leave part of their humanity (including their religion) outside a company’s door; a thirst for authentically embodied community in the midst of the ‘barrier culture’ of cyberspace. The list goes on. According to an analyst, the shift is away ‘from who owns the company to what does the company own?’² There is a growing focus on moving beyond



*Corporate Social Responsibility logo in use by many companies
This one is from Ukraine*

social responsibility as a marketing façade or as a merely philanthropic initiative, to turning responsibility into an all-embracing umbrella over every aspect of business strategy and operations which adds value for the firm as well as to all its stakeholders. Increasingly (although not always) a company’s added value goes beyond those ‘inside,’ and stretches outwards.

At the same time, even though corporate social responsibility efforts are a significant step forward, it still remains the case that the prevailing logic of the marketplace remains largely untouched: attempts to exercise a wider responsibility are still subordinated to the generation of some type of *result*- typically, of course, monetary revenue.³ Of course, not ▶▶

▶▶ all of this is misleading - for results matter, after all - but it runs the risk of subordinating relationality to pragmatism. The Christian worldview reverses that order.

‘That they all may be one,’ said Jesus, ‘as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that you have sent me’ (Jn. 17:21). Relationality is the very essence of God himself. As German theologian Jürgen Moltmann has said, we ought to move beyond the slogan ‘three Persons - one God’, towards a social understanding of the trinity which speaks of ‘three Persons - one Family’.⁴ The Greek theologians in the sixth century referred to such tri-unity as *perichoresis*: the divine interpenetration. In terms of our opening metaphor, the Trinity is like a meal where all the bread is fully-shared, and all of it is simultaneously fully-consumed by each divine person.



Perichoresis

Andrei Rublev, *Icon of the Trinity*, c. 1410
Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

Invited by Christ to participate in the unity and life of the divine family, such perichoretic union invites us to re-imagine the praxis and purposes of a company. Because the church

is called to join God in his ongoing mission to the world, such undertaking ought to reflect the essence of the three divine Persons as being present with one another, for one another, and in one another. Thus a non-negotiable hallmark of a company that seeks to shed God’s light into the world is embodying the truth that God’s kingdom is, above all, a kingdom of relationships - of relationships with all peoples from all cultural and socioeconomic strata: men and women, old and young, privileged and unprivileged; and especially relationships of solidarity with those who grieve. The hope and the yearning of those often excluded from participation in society are thereby brought to life. Further, in contrast with much of present day reality in which a company’s freedom is maximised by means of disposable labour and mobile capital, the divine family invites us to reconsider today’s notion of freedom. In the journey of ‘conversion to the neighbour’, as Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez once put it, one is not free *from* the other, but free *for* the other. The ultimate goal is total-communion with God, with ourselves, with one another, and with creation: to be connected by mutual bonds of self-giving and solidarity, and - above all - by friendship.

A practical consequence of this call to perichoretic relationality is that a business will resist Mammon’s two great commandments (i.e. ‘love financial statements above all things, and numbers as yourself’) and will instead go aboard the journey towards ‘Relationism’⁵ by embracing paradigms that give profit its rightful place but never at the cost of downplaying prayer, contemplation, rest, intellectual reflection, care of the environment, worship, family life, leisure, and development of human capacities and intellectual skills. But perhaps the most crucial significance of embracing such total relationality as the core of business is that neither God, nor people, will be turned into a ‘resource’ to achieve a goal. Relationality *is* the ongoing goal towards the ultimate eschatological goal: towards the consummation to be brought about by the One who is the beginning, and the end. ▶▶

▶▶ III. A Concrete Outworking: Governance and Creativity

Recalling the opening metaphor of companies as places of 'bread-breaking' and 'bread-sharing', companies could recover the vocation of becoming authentic relational hubs for human exchange, communion, and creativity out of which the superabundant life of God spills into the marketplace. In the light of that, I would like to highlight at least two implications of the Trinitarian framework outlined above.

a. Reclaiming workers' stewardship, participation, and ownership.

Granting the Trinitarian family pride of place as the foremost model for social relationships, one realizes that any notion of hierarchical domination is radically called into question. As Moltmann urges us to acknowledge, the very communal nature of God challenges



Jürgen Moltmann

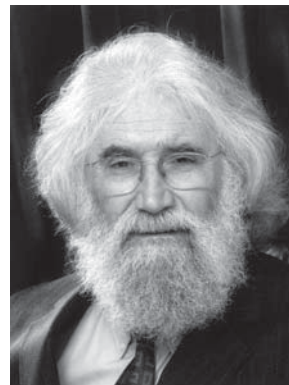
any notion of monarchism, for monarchism breeds into religious, moral, and patriarchal domination and thus legitimates dependency, helplessness and servitude. In contrast, God's 'reign' within the mystery of his Trinitarian being takes place not by means of subjugation, but by a (tri)mutual and voluntary submission.⁶ The Trinity is the perfect example of freedom where power is replaced 'by the principle of concord. Authority and obedience are replaced by dialogue, consensus, and harmony.'⁷ And because God is not an absolute monarch who requires abject servitude, but a Family of three Persons which 'does not merely speak and decree, but also hears and receives,'⁸ therefore we ought to resist any hierarchical structures within society.

Quite naturally, this calls into question the validity of business pyramidal structures

which, in their tendency to embrace unidirectional authority relationships, often impede community and affront full human dignity. In contrast, as Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff points out, the harmonious trinity of God calls forth a posture of openness and surrender, not only to God, but to all our fellow human beings and to the social-ecosystem at large; as well as an egalitarian posture of co-existence, communion, and reciprocity towards one another.⁹ Further, as two Japanese experts recognise in the light of a meaning-depleted business world which sets companies and society at odds, the call is for a 'new communitarian approach to capitalism' which recognises that everyone is, first and foremost, a member of society before being a member of the company.¹⁰

How might this play out in relationship to ownership and control? In a day of global financial fluidity and deregulation, it is too common a

practice for companies to be either owned by unknown, absentee shareholders pursuing short-term financial success; or by a few individuals 'up the ladder' - at the top of the pyramid of sacrifice referred



Leonardo Boff

to above. This causes a major problem. Theoretically, Western society tells us that we are all free persons with equal universal and inalienable rights (whatever that means!). Yet in practical terms, employees are often reduced to being the operational muscle without which business gets stuck and oxidised like a potent engine without oil. In comparison to shareholders, the physical effort (or, in some cases, the pain, or time investment) involved in blue-collar or middle-management work counts as very little. In merely transactional economic terms (which are the dominant terms on which society currently operates) employees are reduced to



▶▶ discardable labour-producing units: their voice is often translated into a financial equation as a mere monthly salary, or hourly wage. Real people are converted into a monetary abstraction — and often left with little voice to effect any change. This, of course, is a bitter pill to swallow, for it makes one realise that it is not primarily the capital of the ‘haves’, but the operational, emotional, and intellectual muscle of the ‘have-nots’, which keeps the profit-making apparatus rolling. Being essential to the continual operation of most businesses, such employees are, however, neither financially rewarded nor publicly recognised as such: in purely transactional terms they are not essential — they are trivial. The economic logic is built in such a way that the ‘have-nots’ (the labour-producing units) obtain the fewest rewards (monetary, and otherwise).

Without straying into some of the utopian dead-ends of socialism, a relational journey marked by co-existence and communion calls for a different model in which control is replaced by faithful stewardship; and where the decision-making process is transferred from absentee shareholders to the workers themselves, seeking to be fair, democratic, and empathetically inclusive of all the interests

companies to be owned by workers, but he advocates for workers’ active involvement and control on the basis of their human dignity and their need for community - both of which tend to be compromised in capital managed firms.¹¹ This, in turn, also evokes the insights of so-called ‘participatory economics’.¹² In contrast to hierarchical authority in leadership, for example, participatory economics acknowledges that people are able to conduct their own analysis of their own reality. This invites leaders to take the role, not of masters, but of facilitators who catalyse critical awareness, ownership of ideas, and responsibility in others. Supporters of this approach propose decision-making bodies comprised of workers of all stripes within the organization by means of, say, a janitor and a manager intersecting at a boardroom table to hear each other’s perceptions on an issue that will impact either the company itself or the people it is seeking to serve. Such an approach will promote an environment where people are not just remunerated for their output but takes into consideration factors such as effort.¹³

This is in harmony with what Michael Schluter and David Lee call ‘relational proximity’ — an encounter between workers and managers that transcends the immediacy of the workplace and embraces, instead, the building up of a many-layered relational ‘multiplexity’. To achieve this, they suggest building a storyline by means of getting to know others in different situations and non-working contexts; practising total engagement during personal encounters; aiming for parity and respect between management levels; and having mutually-owned and mutually-beneficial goals.¹⁴ Others also suggest creation of and participation in open contexts where ideas and frustrations can be shared.¹⁵ The natural result of this will be a heightened sense of community within the workplace. In short, the aim is an inclusive



Worker Participation

James Berk, Worker-Owner of Mandela Foods Cooperative in Oakland, California, giving a presentation

involved. Thus Gregory Dow, for example, does not embrace the inalienable need for

participation which opens opportunities for all workers to ‘share bread’ in a company. ▶▶

▶▶ (A side-note requiring further attention beyond the scope of this article is that a business which seeks to reflect the values of God's kingdom is also driven to re-empower the employee, not only as an active decision-making agent, but as a (potential) owner of the means of production - the co-operative, of course, being the archetypical model. Private property ought not to be abolished, as in communism, but *distributed* by means of fair structures of common-asset-ownership, open-book management, and democratic participation.¹⁶ And note well that this will not necessarily imply that there will not be external shareholders who are not workers. If that is to be the case, then at least there ought to be, as Peter Heslam notes, 'a willingness to experiment with ways in which the gap between ownership and responsibility in the shareholder model of capital can be narrowed.'¹⁷)

b. Structures that foster risk-taking, rotation, and human creativity.

Partly because of the influence of scientific management theory which has tended to see people as atomised and unimaginative individuals, it is no coincidence that work has increasingly become technical and specialised. Often departmentalised companies do not foster authentic creativity, but are built upon structures which encourage efficiency at the expense of the rationalised alienation of the employee from peers and from the outcome and ultimate purpose of the company — particularly in operational and middle-management positions, which compromise the bulk of the workforce. This thirst for efficiency, in turn, leads to narrower opportunities for workers to exercise their creative human potential; and often results, instead, in work that is drained of meaning by being too focused on a particular set of tasks or activities. The employee sees bread dough up close, but loses sight of the wonder of the bakery.

In contrast, the insights of the Judaeo-Christian tradition invite us to reinvigorate and develop individual and group potential,

as well as to free people to be genuinely creative and to make decisions which entail a proper amount of risk. Surely, this is often impaired by the nature of a job. Considering again the insights of participatory economics, job-rotation might be considered as a way of resisting the dehumanisation of labourers by allowing them to gain a fuller understanding of what the entire company is committed to delivering. Thus the window-cleaner, for instance, is permitted to talk to the IT director, to see what an engineer does, to sit with the accountants, and even to interact



Staff Rotation Programme at a Container Shipping Company in Zuhai, near Hong Kong, China

with some customers. Advocates of participatory rotation note that by having every person within an institution participate in the tasks of several different workers in the life of their career, the values of respect, empathy and appreciation for the greater good are fostered. Although each person carries a specific responsibility, individuals are allowed to experience the overarching vision that each worker is striving towards. It allows every worker to work up close with bread dough, but also to experience what others do in the bakery.

Furthermore, in order to safeguard freedom and stimulate creativity, money and technology become servants, not masters. As Miroslav Volf has argued in juxtaposition to a vocational view of work as 'duty', work is to be seen both as a means to earn a living and to socialise. It is an end in itself which provides enjoyment and self-realisation that



▶▶ come by employing the dynamic and multiple gifts one has received in the context of God's ongoing creation.¹⁵ Volf adds that 'when one values work, one will resist pressure to produce frantically and instead take time to delight in work. Human beings are called to achieve something efficiently as well as gifted to enjoy the process of achieving it.'¹⁹ This suggests that work needs to be promoted as an end in itself which allows workers to play, to enjoy, and to fulfil their humanity by means of intellectually, emotionally, and physically exploring their own creative potential (whether artistic, numerical, organizational, or whatever): people can work for work's sake, for according to the opening chapters of Genesis, work has God-given value. As Paul Stevens put it, 'Human work is a participation

in God's outgoingness'.²⁰ Perhaps creativity is more sanctifying than we credit it to be.

Stewardship, participation, ownership; risk-taking, rotation, and creativity. Based on the relational being of God, and in the light of the call upon humanity to collaborate in God's ongoing creative mission, this article aims to reclaim community and creativity as the backbones of business life. This is not an easy endeavour in a day like ours. As it is said, 'all beginnings are hard, to which I would add, 'and costly'. But God has a peculiar capacity to bring surprising outcomes from humble beginnings, and sharing bread is certainly one them. And as we celebrate his kingdom coming, we thus ask *dona nobis panem... cum panem*.²¹ Amen. ■

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- 1 See, e.g., Jean-Claude Garcia-Zamor, "Workplace Spirituality and Organizational Performance," *Public Administration Review* 63, no. 3 (2003): 355-363; Mark S. Schwartz, "God as Managerial Stakeholder?," *Journal of Business Ethics* 66 (2006): 291-306; David Kim, Dan Fisher, and David McCalman, "Modernism, Christianity, and Business Ethics: A Worldview Perspective," *Journal of Business Ethics* 90 (2009): 115-121.
- 2 Anthony F. Buono, *Emerging Trends and Issues in Management Consulting: Consulting as a Janus-Faced Reality (PB)* (North Carolina: Information Age Publishing, 2009), 80.
- 3 Although coming from a secular angle, even Harvard Business School enthusiasts like Michael Porter and others have recently touched upon the problem of divorcing profit making from community development. See Michael E. Porter and Mark R. Kramer, "Creating Shared Value," *Harvard Business Review* 89, no. 1/2 (January 2011): 62-77.
- 4 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 199. Leonardo Boff prefers to think of "Three Persons and a single communion and a single Trinitarian community. . ." See his *Trinity and Society* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988), 133.
- 5 This is a term commonly employed by Michael Schluter and David Lee, *The R Factor* (Hodder & Stoughton Religious, 1993).
- 6 See 'Criticism of political and clerical monotheism' in Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 191 ff. The biblical idea of *covenant* implies partnership, mutual relationship, and even friendship between God and man (139-44).
- 7 Ibid., 202.
- 8 Ibid., 144.
- 9 Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 1-8, 129 ff.
- 10 Ikujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi, "The Wise Leader," in *Harvard Business Review* 89, no. 5 (May 2011): 58-67.
- 11 A potent survey of this understanding of governance and management is offered in Dow's *Governing the Firm: Workers' Control in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- 12 E.g., see Michael Albert, *Moving Forward: Program for Participatory Economy*, (London: AK Press, 2002).
- 13 Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel, *Looking Forward: Participatory Economics for the 21st Century*, (Boston: South End Press, 1991), 42.
- 14 See Michael Schluter and David John Lee, *The Relational Manager: Transform Your Workplace and Your Life*. Lion UK, 2010, 29-40.
- 15 Nonaka and Takeuchi, "The Wise Leader", 64.
- 16 For an assessment of this possibility, see Dow, *Governing the Firm*, 110-14, 166-72. See also www.distributistreview.com for a myriad of material in support of the Distributist approach.
- 17 Peter Heslam, *Transforming Capitalism: Entrepreneurship and the Renewal of Thrift* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2010), 24.
- 18 Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1991), 189-99.
- 19 Ibid., 198.
- 20 Paul R. Stevens, "Towards a Trinitarian Work Ethic," *Vocatio* 1, no. 1 (1998): 15-19.
- 21 Give us bread...with bread