

# God's Heart for Fashion

## Identifying Calling and Using Gifts in the Workplace

■ by Simon Ward



**In this delightful story, Simon takes us through a series of failures, and shows us that God may have plans to put us in places we didn't want to be. Is the world of fashion one where Christians should not be found? Vanity, worldliness, child labour, low wages are the negative view, but Simon points out the opportunities for change, shows where Christians are working, the biblical basis, the value to emerging economies, and concludes that we have a role as a royal priesthood in the workplace.**

### Influence and failure

I blame my father and mother - if it wasn't for them, life might have been so much simpler! How so? My father was a Naval Captain. He ran dockyards rather than driving ships and was an energetic and highly organised leader who also cut a dash on the sports field. He met my mother when she was a Wren. I was never quite sure how she found herself in the Navy, as she was a creative person who was a pretty good artist and I couldn't fathom how her temperament would have fitted the military. Just as well that she did though; it was their diametrically opposed tendencies that have proved to be the key to my life story.

So I was sent off to school in Portsmouth. As with many boys, I decided early on that developing my skills on the sports field was a higher priority than grappling with the rigours of the classroom. I was reasonably good, but not setting the south coast alight with my achievement. That is, until David L. Taylor came into my life. DLT was the under-16 rugby coach and persuaded me that I had a lot more talent than I either believed or was displaying. He was my first mentor, taking time to spot and encourage latent talent, and I was soon playing rugby and cricket for Hampshire Schools, alongside those with considerably more stellar talent.

DLT was also head of the Combined Cadet Force and I soon found myself as Regimental Sergeant Major and trying my hand at a week-long selection process in Wiltshire aiming for a university army cadetship. Regrettably this fell off the rails as comprehensively as I'd fallen off the obstacle course high wire the morning after a heavy penultimate night.

This turned out to be the first in a succession of failures although, ironically, my report on the selection week for the school magazine was used in army recruitment literature for years thereafter. "A" levels fell similarly short and my gap year became a re-sit year.

Next up, after a pretty limp set of re-sit results, I found myself ambling through a Geography degree at Goldsmiths College, London (a cool establishment today, rather less so in the 70s!). One Italian girlfriend and her opera-mad family later, I discovered I had a voice and spent ten years studying privately and trying my hand at no less than 26 of the great tenor roles from Radames to Peter Grimes. It would become apparent though that this was not to be my career.

After University I had moved back home with my parents in Cheam and they persuaded me to join them at the local church, St Paul's. ►►

▶▶ Having escaped religious stuff as soon as I'd been given the chance as a teenager, this was quite a step, but the carrot was a large number of young people, and it was not unreasonable to assume this would mean a pool of potential girlfriends. I gave it a whirl and two weeks later I was invited to a weekend away with 150 young people, and quickly found myself drawn into the fellowship and to meaningful faith. I am a firm believer that when coincidences start stacking up it's no coincidence. I had moved from my university digs in Ashburnham Place, Greenwich, home to the pub where the Krays used to plan their crimes; the weekend away was at Ashburnham



*Ashburnham Place, Sussex, the well-loved Christian retreat centre where future wives and husbands find each other*

Place, Sussex, the well-loved Christian retreat. One of the 150 people I met at the weekend was Gill who, several years later, was to become my wife. God must have such fun planning all this stuff!

Soon after, I was pleased to be invited to be part of a house group by Jerry Lepine - I didn't realise you could so quickly be part of the action - and a little while later by Tony Berry to be part of the team leading a beach mission in East Anglia. Name-dropping is pretty sad in the wrong context, but you'll be picking up the theme of key people and encounters dotted along the way. A couple of years later, I was invited to take over, with Gill - now my wife - running the children's ministry for 93 seven- to eleven- year-olds.

It was too much to give this my best shot and carry on singing, so I decided the time

had come to lay down my operatic ambition. My last role was singing Don José in Carmen, the first full role I had sung 10 years earlier. It was a glorious evening in Embankment Gardens underneath Charing Cross station. My entrance was from the back through the audience and as I stood waiting, I looked across at the statue towering over me - it was Robert Raikes, the 18th Century founder of Sunday Schools. A great



### **Reassurance before failure**

*Towering Robert Raikes, founder of Sunday schools*

reassurance and another key encounter. But also another failure.

The children's work needed full-time oversight and after 18 months I persuaded the church to employ a full-time worker. I thought this was my escape from the world of fashion that had paid the bills for the previous decade ... but someone else was chosen. Ken Hobbs was one of my application referees and when I didn't get it, he wrote a letter which I came across recently, saying I might well find that I would be used a lot more as a Christian in the secular world. Maybe, but apparently another failure. ▶▶

▶▶ A year or two earlier, I had been at a conference at a local pentecostal church. A wild weekend of worship and ministry, and on the last afternoon I was prayed over, by someone I hadn't seen before or since, that I would have a double anointing. It sounded good but I wasn't sure what it might mean so kept it quietly in my mental filing tray.

All this time, I had been working for the organisation I'm now with, the British Fashion Council. I hadn't applied for a job in 27 years, but now found myself promoted to Head of Operations, Joint CEO and, in 2010, Chief Operating Officer - in a job I'd never taken over-seriously. But over the last couple of years, I've met up with a number of Christians in the creative world including Steve Cole at Artisan, Chrissie Abbott at Burberry/HTB and Nicole Robyn at the International House of Prayer in Kansas. They have helped me to gain a much clearer vision of why I think God has kept me where I am. More of that to come.

I've learned three key things about God:

- (i) In God's economy, no experience is wasted.
- (ii) God sends individuals (and statues!) at key times to act as signposts and encouragers.
- (iii) God's not too fussed about what we see as our failures and inadequacies - the most useful ability in God's economy is availability and the biggest failure is failure to respond to His call.



*The International House of Prayer in Kansas City*

## The World of Fashion

So fashion it was to be. I didn't choose it; it appears to have chosen me! "A passion for fashion" is a hugely overused phrase bandied about by many who want to have a bit of fun with frocks, and it can give the impression that fashion is inhabited by a one size fits all



*Fun with frocks  
International Fashion week 2012*

"lurve" who thinks that the world revolves around hem lines. On the whole, though, it is an industry that draws in enthusiastic, interesting and creative people with a wide variety of experiences and backgrounds. I like clothes and I care about how I look, but it is this mix of people, the pursuit of creativity and a striving for excellence that I find attractive.

However, a lot of people have a very negative view of fashion, associating it with child labour, sweat shops, skinny models, sexual exploitation, vanity...the list goes on. I too am uncomfortable with these aspects of fashion, and if this were the whole story, I would long since have walked away. But I'm not planning on going anywhere, as (a) there's a very different perspective and (b) I believe God has put me here.

Fashion and creativity are scattered throughout the Bible. "In the beginning God created". He didn't do a risk assessment or write a business plan, He created the world



▶▶ and everything in it, including enormous variety and regularly changing seasons. The first time we hear of the Holy Spirit being given to a person is to Bezalel in Exodus 31 as he designed and made the Tent of Meeting. Then there are several chapters devoted to the design, make and deportment of the clothing to be worn by the priests. The first person in Europe to respond to the gospel is Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. And so on. Fashion is strewn across the pages of the Bible, seeming therefore to be part of God's plan for the world and reflecting the creativity of The Maker Himself.



### Lydia

*"She worketh willingly with her hands"*

*picture of Lydia by Elspeth Young,  
contemporary American artist*

<http://www.alyoung.com>

*depicted in this image as a model of the  
"virtuous woman" of Proverbs 31*

Fashion is one of the UK's biggest industries. With a turnover of £21bn, it is 15th out of 81 industrial sectors employing not far short of a million people, predominantly women, particularly in inner cities and with a hugely diverse ethnic mix. And there is a wide range of jobs from designers to models, stylists to journalists, machinists to merchandisers, jobs for all types and levels of skill. It's a key part of our economy and is also one of the first industries to be taken up by developing countries, so plays an important role in emerging economies.

Fashion is extremely high profile, with media coverage of London Fashion Week alone worth more than most international news and sporting events. This gives Fashion huge power of communication. But it's also a place to whip up controversy, as witnessed by the skinny model story of a few years back. More recently fashion has found itself at the forefront of adverse coverage about unpaid internships as a result of the taxman choosing to make an example of fashion to

try and change a widespread practice across many sectors.

Fashion is something at which Britain leads the world. We've got the most envied high streets; our colleges are undisputedly the best, attracting students from every continent; and our designers attract an international following that brings a spotlight on Britain. What goes on in the UK fashion industry has global significance.

Fashion is hugely important to a substantial proportion of the population. If you don't understand how this can be, you must be a man (!) so can I suggest you think "football for women" and that may help. Fashion affects how people see themselves and each other and is therefore a significant aspect of identity.

Drawing all this together, I believe that fashion presents a huge opportunity for the gospel.

However, in the aggressively secular environment prevalent in the creative world, making headway will require industry-wide vision, bold action, and a framework of organised prayer and support. Under the leadership of my friend Chrissie Abbott, Client Development Director at Burberry, a Fashion Group has been set up under the auspices of Holy Trinity Brompton. This now has an international Facebook network of over 300 members and growing.

At the February 2012 London Fashion Week (LFW), a day of prayer was held in the appropriately named Salt Room at LFW's HQ at Somerset House. This was a hugely encouraging day when several pictures (visions sounds rather too grand) were received, indicating that spiritual walls had come down and the land was ready to be taken. The day ended with the launch, at the Royal Courts of Justice, of a new label by my friend and prayer warrior Nicole Robyn, designing and making bags with women in India who have been rescued from sex trafficking. I was privileged to sing "God of Justice" and "Amazing Grace" immediately outside the Lord Chief Justice's court where the abolition ▶▶

▶▶ of the slave trade had been brought to fruition centuries earlier. Those coincidences again.

Immediately prior to LFW, I had sketched out a ten-point plan of some issues I thought might be on God's heart for Fashion.

1. All those working in the industry to be **paid** for their work;
2. **Opportunities** to work in fashion to be extended to all those with the ability and desire, regardless of background;
3. Particular emphasis to be placed on **access** for school leavers and young people with the introduction of a new framework of apprenticeships and other support schemes;
4. **Ethically** sound sources of production, whether in the UK or globally, to become the norm within 3 years;
5. **Attitudes** within the industry to be given a complete overhaul, with the elimination of all snobbery, backbiting and unkindness;
6. Immediate attention to be paid to the effect of the industry on the wider community including attitudes to **"beauty"** and body shape and their impact on young people;
7. Global **recycling** schemes to be introduced to ensure unused clothing is easily and quickly moved to areas of need around the world;
8. Social **ownership** schemes, whereby employees have a greater say in the business for which they work, to become the norm;
9. A review of **Sunday trading** laws to be undertaken;
10. British fashion to become a leading **force for good** in the UK and around the world..

Let me focus on two of these. Access to school leavers shouldn't be rocket science but it's often who you know that opens doors. Within a fortnight of having sketched out the Plan, I

found myself invited to lead a working group looking at apprenticeships, internships and fair access to not just fashion, but the whole of the creative industries. Is this God at work ... opening doors? I'd like to think so, but a lot of hard work is now needed to change the prevailing culture and give young people from all backgrounds the opportunity to work in a field they have a passion for.

Changing attitudes will be a considerable challenge, but a lot of the other points flow from it, so there it was and into it we prayed. We shouldn't be surprised, therefore, when the most talked about feature of the newly launched London men's fashion week ("London Collections: Men") in June 2012 was the amazing friendliness and co-operation throughout the three-day event. Do we have the confidence to believe that a similar transformation can take place at its big sister, London Fashion Week ... and across a whole industry?

### Christians in the Workplace

The idea of how our ministry in the workplace resembles Old Testament priesthood came from Nicole, my praying friend in Kansas. I was intrigued and have dug around to discover some key roles of a priest, starting in Genesis 14 with the priest Melchizedek who anointed, prophesied over and blessed Abram - and ▶▶



**Righteous Melchizedek**

7th century mosaic, Basilica di San Vitale, Ravenna



*The Walls of Jericho falling down*  
Gustav Doré  
*Illustrations for the English Bible (1866)*

▶▶ all in two verses. The time and motion people would have loved him!

In Exodus 19, the Israelites are described as “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” which is echoed by Peter as he reminds the newly founded church of their identity: “We are a chosen people, a royal priesthood”. (1 Peter 2.9)

Priestly garments get the whole of Exodus 28 to themselves. In particular, the Ephod and Breastpiece both had stones with the names of the sons (tribes) of Israel sewn into them, symbolising the fact that Aaron was representing all Israel when he ministered before the Lord.

In Leviticus, we find detailed rules on how a priest should live, summarised by “They must be holy to their God and must not profane the name of their God.” (Lev 21:6)

By the time we reach Deuteronomy (20:2), we see the priestly role being carried out in the workplace: “When you are about to go to into battle, the priest shall come forward and address the army ... “Do not be faint-hearted or afraid ... For the Lord your God is the one who goes with you ... to give you the victory.” This is echoed as Joshua takes the Israelites over the Jordan and it is the priests who lead them around the city of Jericho, with the walls falling to the noise of trumpets (the sound of worship), not canon fire.

In Deuteronomy 31:9-10 the priests read the law to the people, so the people can learn to fear the Lord and follow the Law.

Jumping to Hebrews (4:15), Jesus is presented “as a high priest who is able to sympathise with our weaknesses, but unlike us was without sin.”

Now, you may have spotted that the Old Testament figures referred to above are priests and you are therefore quite right to query what any of this has to do with non ordained types in our workplaces. I would

suggest that the answer is to be found in the Great High Priest, Jesus Christ, who didn’t just perform the role of priest, but embodied it in His daily life and of course His death. As followers of Christ we are called to follow Him, carrying on His work in the power of the Holy Spirit. And His commissioning in Matthew 28 is for all of us and not just the “professionals”. Indeed there is opportunity for lay people to be the hands and feet of Jesus reaching out to a needy world to a degree that reaches beyond what is available to those who are ordained. Their role in equipping the saints for their daily



*High Priest's garments with Ephod and Breastpiece*



▶▶ workplaces therefore becomes all the more crucial. Our challenge is to identify how God has equipped and positioned us to carry out a priestly role in our workplaces. Here are some suggestions:

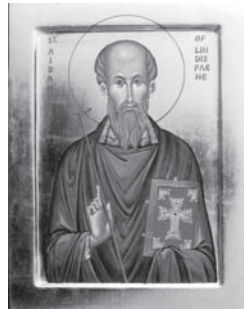
- Know that we are a chosen people, all of us members of a royal priesthood belonging to God, and embrace that calling.
- Be holy and take care to live a lifestyle free from the entrapments of sin.
- Live out a prophetic lifestyle, seeking discernment into what is going on around us and bringing a heavenly perspective to all that we are part of.
- Bring blessing to others, both believers and unbelievers.
- Teach Christians with whom we have influence how the Word is relevant to everyday lives in our specific workplaces.
- Come alongside and intercede (boldly) for work colleagues.
- Anointing is the act of consecration for a task so, in a modern work environment, this might include mentoring someone to prepare them better for their God-given role in the workplace. And as I scan back to some of the key influencers in my life, I have to ask myself how intentional I am being in passing on the baton and being an encourager.
- Reflect the holiness of God to our colleagues.
- Be bold in our expectancy of what God wants to do, spending time to wait on Him and listen.
- Be prepared to grapple with the practicalities of what God wants us to be and do in our various areas of influence.

There's another ten-point action plan!

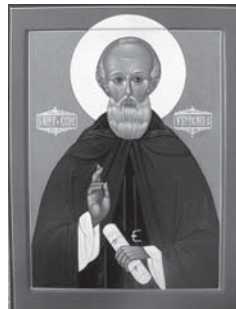
### Putting it into practice

As I look back on where God has been leading me, I can now see better what was being said all those years ago about a double anointing. It was not a supercharge of power, rather a bringing together of the two sides of who he has made me to be. A worship leader and business administrator. This is not always a comfortable combination as it is my creativity that absorbs me and is where my heart longs to be, whereas business is where I spend most of my time, have to concentrate hard, and often feel inadequately equipped and ill at ease. But I'm pretty sure this is where God wants me and I wonder if we would all be significantly more useful to God if we explored with greater purpose how the full range of gifts God has given us might interact enabling us to function more completely as the people God has made us to be.

So this is where I find myself, and I have embarked on a journey to see how the "two me's" fit together so that  $1+1=3$ , rather than



*Aidan*



*Bede*



*Cuthbert*

$1+1=1/2!$  With this in mind, I have started sharing with colleagues on the HTB Fashion Group Facebook site weekly thoughts about how the Psalms apply to our modern working lives. And I have been setting them to music as I go. The inspiration for this came from a recent trip to Holy Island where I picked up two books. The first tells the story of Saints Aidan, Bede and Cuthbert, who used to go about their ministries encouraging each other by reciting from memory all 150 Psalms. That's some serious memorising, but it makes for serious meditating! And their ministry was ▶▶

▶▶ not just sweeping floors, it involved travelling many miles preaching the gospel, helping the poor and healing the sick - a priestly role in their workplace. The other was a book of reflections applying scripture to everyday life by William Wilberforce, a hero of mine who achieved a wide range of social reforms as well as abolishing the slave trade. Throughout the busiest parts of his life, he actively sought to work out what it meant to stand between God and man - a priestly role in his workplace.

Here are three examples of my travels through the Psalms:

Psalm 1 is short and uncomplicated. It emphasises the clear distinction between the priorities and prospects of the wicked - who should be avoided like the plague - and the righteous man - us in our priestly calling. The righteous man dwells deeply on the Word of God who watches over him and from whom he will find nourishment and strength for life's challenges. The wicked have made their choice and will be blown away like chaff - scarily, it's as simple as that. This is set to my take on a Gregorian chant, throwing focus through the mind onto the simplicity and clarity of the words. If you haven't done this yet, I heartily recommend that you memorise chunks of scripture - it may transform how you respond to life's daily challenges. And the Psalms are as good as it gets.

Psalm 42 is very different. It is a cry from the heart, pleading to Abba Father in a time of struggle, an outpouring of the downcast soul trying desperately to cling to an ingrained confidence that times will improve. This does not sit easily with the British stiff upper lip and possibly even less so with what is expected of the business leader. But, time and again, we need to grasp hold of the fact that we are beloved children of God as we engage with our work colleagues often on an un-level playing field, and as we seek to avoid selfish ambition, backbiting, taking short cuts, transparency, honesty, gentleness ... If King David can let rip on God, so can we, and this

will not just act as a safety valve when we're on the fraught side, but will open a door to knowing our real selves and discovering just how close God stands alongside us through all the joys and sorrows of life's journey.

Psalm 67 is, at first glance, a straightforward celebration of praise. But, actually, it's the gospel in a nutshell - God has blessed us so we can bless others by sharing with them the good news. Simple, if only we'd step out and do it - and then we'd see nations transformed.

And there's the challenge. Do we hear and will we respond to our calling as a royal priesthood to stand between God and humanity, in the situations where we find



*They are like trees planted by streams of water. Psalm 1:3.*

ourselves day by day? Do we believe that God wants each one of us to dream bold dreams of what our places of business could look like if godly values and God Himself were at the centre? Are we prepared to explore how God might want to use all aspects of our varied gifting and experience - whether it's comfortable or not? What of whole industries? Are we grappling with key areas that need transformation - whether seemingly achievable or not? And our nation? Dare we rest as the phrase "post-Christian" echoes around us? I hope not.

"May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine on us, so that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations." *Psalm 67.* ■

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