

Losing my Religion

The role of doubt and failure in business transformation



■ by Mike Clargo

Failure in business is common enough, but failure when we were trying to bring God's kingdom on earth is sometimes devastating. Here in a very personal account, Mike examines how our own plan for God may not be the same as God's, and concludes that God is more concerned to love us as we are than to use us for his purposes.

As I sit here writing this, I am possibly at the lowest point I have been for quite a while, and that is good. It brings me back to God's feet in supplication, and it gives me the hope that He and I will write this together – a time of prayer and refocusing, and re-commissioning.

I am low because I have had a horrible day of setbacks; a very mild version of the sort of day Elijah must have had when he petulantly cried out to God '... and I am the only one left'. A comparison of which my situation is entirely unworthy, but it came to mind and the romantic in me feels a sense of connection through it.

I have spent the last two years working hard and enthusiastically to bring an idea to a place where it can be harnessed to do God's work, but now I am stalled in my tracks and the doubts and fears begin to creep in. I have been convinced that it is of God, and because of that, I believe the hours I have spent on the project have been one of worship, but have I spent enough time in prayer; or have I been scattered in the imagination of my heart? I believe that the results of my work will extend the kingdom and ease the path of busy workers to faith, but have I remained pure in my motives; or has self-interest and vanity

subverted too much of my dream? I believe that what I have been doing has been what God wants me to do, but have I done enough to seek His guidance; or am I in danger of casting a golden calf?

However, by far my biggest fear through all of this is: Are my current struggles an indication that I have disqualified myself from His service?

It is a difficult time, but I suspect that it is an experience that all readers of FiBQ must go through from time to time. We all want our faith to make a difference to business, and for business to have a positive impact on faith. We all have practical ideas of projects, initiatives, proposals and papers which we believe can make a difference; we all have to engage with the reality of pushing them forward; we all suffer setbacks; we all struggle to hear the still small voice amidst it all; and if we are achieving anything for the kingdom, we will all be subject to the attentions of the great deceiver.

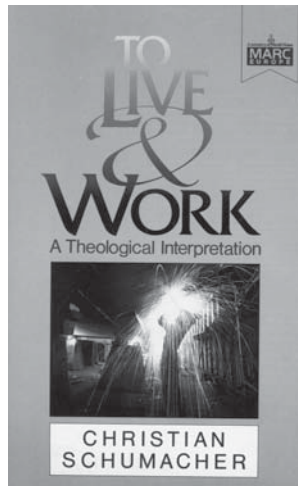
But, as I said, it has brought me back to the feet of the Lord, and that is where I need to be right now. He knows my heart, and He knows my failings, and I am sure we can work this through together.



▶▶ So what am I trying to do? I guess at its core it is pretty much what all of us, who seek to transform the working lives of those around us, are attempting.

1. Christian Schumacher, *To Live and Work*, Christian Research, 1987
 Christian Schumacher, *God in Work*, Lion Books 1998

In my case it has its roots back in a short conversation. Some time ago, a friend told me of the work of Christian Schumacher¹, and his idea that we are all born with a God-shaped hole inside of us but that the nature of work can cause us to become misshapen compared with the pattern that God has for us. As a consequence, the hole we have inside becomes distorted also, and so people do not recognise God as being what they need to fill it. This idea resonates with me and parallels my own experience of finding faith, and so I have seen my purpose as doing what I can to transform the world of work back to the pattern that God has for the lives of His children. To make work a place where it is possible that ‘they can have life, and have it to the full.’ (John 10:10)



Has God specifically told me to do this? No. Not in so many words. But as far as I know, he never told Eric Liddell to run either, but Eric Liddell ran because ‘God ... made me fast. And when I run I feel His pleasure.’ He believed that God had made him for a purpose, and while he was waiting for God’s timing on what that purpose was, he got on with doing what he ‘felt’ gave God pleasure. And I honestly believe that is what I am seeking to do. I believe it is what we are all seeking to do.

For people who are not part of a faith community (and even for some who are) ‘work’ has perhaps the greatest potential to practically reflect the wisdom of God’s pattern for their lives, and to call them into the joy of productive service as co-creators with Him.

For many, the service, the structure and the expectations they engage with as part of their working lives provides the closest thing they

will experience to God’s pattern for: fellowship, calling, gifts, discipleship, stewardship, service, repentance, perseverance, and even forgiveness. It is an environment where people are more likely to find what they need: to engage with others to make a difference; to add value to the lives of those around them; and to deliver something significant and worthwhile. It is a place which can offer a viable framework for people to grow to their potential; to access their creativity; to build productive relationships; and to contribute something special of themselves to an outcome that makes them proud to be part of it. It has the potential to stretch us, to engage us, to inspire us, and to contribute to our sense of self-worth. Frankly, it has the potential to be more ‘church’ than many churches, and if it

lived up to this potential then I am convinced that more people would be more open to engaging with the really big questions of ‘Why are we here?’.

That is the potential of ‘work’. Whether or not it lives up to its potential is the result of a



Eric Liddell (left) winning gold in Paris in 1924

balance between different mindsets. Some of those mindsets can be ‘fearful’ in nature: leading them to be opportunistic, greedy or selfish; and some of those mindsets may be more ‘blessed’, stewarding, relational and servant-hearted.



▶▶ Most places of work fall well short of this potential, and it is our role to do what we can to reshape work such that people can re-assume the patterns that God intends for us. I believe that we should seek to rectify the elements that fall short of the picture outlined above; to shift the balance and demonstrate the power of 'blessed' management; to fix the bits that most misshape us and our co-workers and/or clients, and which draw them toward the 'fearful' mindset.

For Christian Schumacher, that misshaping was the breaking down of work into repetitive tasks that prevented people from accessing the 'creative' nature that God intends for us – he worked hard to ensure that roles reflected a complete productive cycle which spoke to our 'humanity' and of our having been formed in the image of God, rather than to our subjugation as a machine.

For me, it is the nature of meetings that provides the greatest cause for concern. Meetings, both formal and informal, are at the heart of a relational view of business. They are the everyday events in which the true potential of work that I referred to earlier can become a practical reality. In God's pattern, they could be a regular and routine experience of acceptance, excitement, brotherly love, commitment and calling. But more often they achieve the opposite: alienation; frustration; boredom; conflict; disconnection and drudgery.

The opportunity to shift the way that meetings take place has never been greater than it is today. Management theory is far more enlightened, and the weight of evidence shows that if we manage in a more 'relational' way, we will achieve greater success. Furthermore, the influence of globalisation, and the increase in 'virtual' meetings could create demand for a more participative and engaging process for meetings; and developments in technology support this with new tools for greater engagement and collaboration.

All of these things can be used for good, to shift the balance in favour of the 'blessed' mindset and improving the potential of

business in kingdom terms. These opportunities are very timely, because we are finding that the financial crisis, competitive pressures, and the volatility of financial markets have created massive pressure toward short-term results, and it is clear that many organisations are cutting staff, reducing costs, and creating extra workload which pushes managers toward the 'fearful' mindset – misshaping people further away from God's pattern for their lives. Without some way of maintaining the balance, people will be increasingly caught up in the cycle of busyness which keeps them from engaging at a level where they can begin to see God's hand at work.

I know all this, and so I feel proud that over the last two years I have published a book, developed two web-sites, proven two training programmes, developed a blog, written 12 articles, and created five videos as part of one comprehensive project to help to redress the balance.

Proud! Perhaps that is the problem. Somewhere in my joy at the giftings God has blessed me with to take on this challenge, and the fineries that I have produced as a result, I have lost my perspective on who is dependent on whom. I have begun to think that God needs me more than I need Him – that I can get on with this independently and present it to Him at the end as a love offering all tied up with a pretty bow! ▶▶



Developments in technology

Video conferencing allows greater engagement and collaboration

▶▶ What profiteth a man if he gains the whole world and yet loses his soul? Do I really think that God would let me be successful if it meant that I had secured a path that took me away from Him? Fortunately, my relationship with God means more to Him than it does to me, and so I find myself at his feet again, brought up short, brought back into a position of perspective – because He loves *me* more than *what I can do*.

The day before yesterday was great; I was on top of the world and dreaming of all the great things that would come out of this. If I had written this article then, it would have been a story of how my wonderful ideas (which God gave me) will contribute to transforming business in line with the pattern He intended for us. *If* I had written it. But the day before yesterday I had far more important things to do – in the words of Elwood (one of the Blues Brothers) I was ‘on a mission from God’, and other things had to wait.

And it is this mindset which I refer to by the use of the word *religion* in the title of this article. A set of patterns which appear to honour God, but in which the true relationship between Him and myself may have been lost – where the practices themselves have become almost a surrogate for that relationship. The tangibility of my work to ‘honour’ Him is easier to hold on to and ‘love’ than the often ethereal and fleeting sense of His presence in my life. To me, religion and faith are two different things – things that begin together, but sadly drift apart until one becomes diametrically opposed to the other. And that is where God found me yesterday.



‘I know what He wants’

St Paul thought he knew. God had other ideas.
 Caravaggio
*The Conversion of Saint Paul
 on the Road to Damascus (1601)*
 Cerasi Chapel of Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome

Yesterday was awful. It won’t help to go into details, but the gist of it boils down to human frailty, fickleness, and inconsistency (some of it my own). I began to realise that there was no way I am going to be able to present Him with my ‘love offering’. It is the other way round, and without His help, all that I have done will be wasted.

I did not intend to grow proud, but as the size and pressure of the project grew, and the working hours mounted, I began to slip unnoticed into my own ‘fearful’ mindset, and rather than spend time with a still small voice that increasingly was not heard, I took some shortcuts. After all, I know what He wants, and I have the skills to do it, so surely it is more important to get on with it than spending time quietly with my mind racing full of all of the things that I should otherwise ‘be getting on with’.

It is somewhat ironic, don’t you think, that I have effectively fallen victim to the precise issue that I was seeking to redress? I realise now that I have been missing a feeling of God’s pleasure for some little time. Paradoxically, writing this article has become the most important thing in the world for me to do. It is an opportunity to take stock of exactly where I am with this, and how far I am fallen. It is a practical way of talking to God and saying ‘Sorry!’ and ‘What now?’. And as I write it, sat at His feet, full of remorse, I feel His smile – not of pleasure, nor of wryness (which I might expect) but of love and compassion – the sort of smile that sympathises and cares, and balms, and says ‘Don’t you know that it is *who you are*, not *what you do*, that is the most important thing to Me?’





God's smile

from Roger White's Oldspouse Texas website
<http://oldspouse.wordpress.com/>

▶▶ In writing this, I have reconnected with God. I have placed before Him the outputs of my project, but more importantly I have placed before Him myself – my intention to spend more time with Him (again), my obedience to what comes out of that, my sacrifice of confidence in an income, my acceptance that whatever ensues will be His path for me and I can do no better than that path. I have reconfirmed that the basic principles of what I am trying to achieve are sound, and that they are consistent with a Godly impact on the World, and that if God chooses to use them

in His plan, He will. And I have recast success as doing His will *with* Him, rather than achieving His purposes *for* Him.

But Jesus spent far more time with Our Father than I have been doing. If he hadn't, what then would have been the consequences? Imagine if on His triumphal entry He had seen His opportunity to take popular power, or He had used His insight to prevent Judas from leaving the upper room. Not my will but Yours.

I don't know what God will do with my project, if anything. But I realise now that the biggest part of my low point was a sense of 'being alone' in this – my affinity with Elijah was a sense of 'it is all on my shoulders' and I felt that way because I was disconnected from God.

Whatever emerges in human terms, I feel at peace and exactly where I am supposed to be – for now.

It feels different now. I say 'for now' because I am sure that I will stumble again. I am sure that I will stumble again because I have stumbled before. But each time God's grace has caught me, and loved me back into where I should be. And I guess that is why I am submitting this very personal account to FiBQ.

Because I am sure that there are many others out there just like me, wrestling with the same things, and they probably read FiBQ. It stands to reason. After all, if we are to grow more like Jesus, then we too 'have come that they shall have life and have it to the full', and many business situations fall a long way short of that. We have each been given giftings, we are all subject to the same temptations, there is a huge spiritual battle to be fought in the world of business, the enemy will do what he can to subvert progress, and we are all human. And so what I hope that I have achieved by means of this article is a reminder (should you need one) that with God, we succeed even when we fail, and that if you too are suffering experiences like this, you are not 'alone' – in either sense of the word. ■



Not my will but Yours

Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane (1583-4)
 Paolo Veronese
 Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan

Mike Clargo has spent the last 25 years consulting to large high-profile organisations on their management processes. His latest project on transforming the way meetings work can be found at iFacile.com, and he is the author of Meeting by Design – Harnessing the potential of the web to revitalise meetings, ISBN: 9780954302146.

