

Faith, Hope & the Global Economy: A Power for Good

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by Richard Higginson

■ reviewed by Sally Orwin

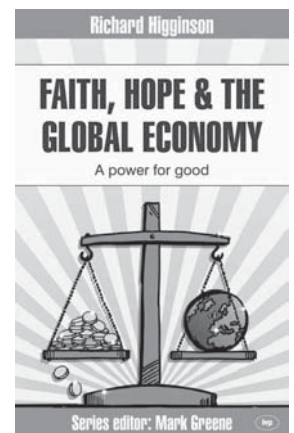
We have reviewed many books and published a number of articles in FiBQ addressing the crisis in the global economy which erupted in Autumn 2008. None of these comprehensively addresses the underlying issues that prompted the crisis. Nor am I aware of any one book which offers a 'one size fits all' manual on how the business world can address the issues which had been building up and broke through that year.

Richard Higginson's book touches on aspects of how business has been affected by many years of skewed motivation, immoral behaviour and poor practice in global business. His primary concern in *Faith, Hope & the Global Economy* is not, however, to offer a forensic analysis of how things went wrong and what can be done about it in terms of policy recommendations. Rather, it is to bring to our attention a paradigm which is rooted in biblical wisdom, mined carefully from a deep understanding of Scripture. Higginson brings together his experiences of this paradigm at work over many years of observing and influencing effective transformation in the world of business across the globe. As he says in his opening paragraph, 'The Christian faith, *rightly understood*, can be an enormous power for good in the global economy' (p.13, my emphasis).

Higginson is a theologian who has spent the past 23 years running *Faith in Business* at Ridley Hall, Cambridge. It is the sharp focus on how theology meets life in the real world of business that shapes his book. He opens with a brief view of the state of contemporary global Christianity mindful that even where the Christian church is growing numerically '... it has failed, by and large, to make fruitful connections between faith and business' (p.15).

Higginson's objective is to look behind the five key criteria which he believes mark Christianity out as a power for good: stimulating enterprise, reducing poverty, promoting integrity, encouraging sustainability, and fostering discipleship (p.20ff). His concern is to unpack 'the underlying beliefs that people have about God, humanity and the world' (p.20). Moving on through a brief outline of the cultural and historical influence of the Protestant work ethic, he begins the process of mining Scripture. Showing how distorted theologies (prosperity theology, anti-capitalist theology and what is known as the sacred-secular divide) have undermined the concept of biblical calling or vocation, he introduces *hope*, the paradigm through which he observes and critiques the many examples in his book of where, how and when particular businesses have had a tangible transformative effect on people and the world. *Hope*, he argues, lies in understanding that the sweep of salvation history turns on the resurrection of Christ and points relentlessly forwards to the new heaven and the new earth.

Introducing Jürgen Moltmann's classic work, *A Theology of Hope*, first published in the 1960s, Higginson sets out his thesis that it is this great biblical hope that informs and compels the Christian to engage in business *now* because it matters for the *eternal* kingdom of God, 'Alongside the Hebrew Scriptures, we must do full justice to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus ... The exciting news is that we are active participants in the drama: the ramifications are consequences that it is our responsibility to work out' (p.218). This is a courageous expression of faith in the practical outworking in business of biblical truth and reality in a



▶▶ post-modern, post-Christian world in which Christians are liable to succumb to the spirit of the age and resist any concept of meta-narrative, let alone the biblical meta-narrative.

The four volumes already published in IVP's Faith at Work series are:

Get a Life by Paul Valler (reviewed in FiBQ 12:2);

Working it Out by Ian Coffey;

Ten at Work by John Parmiter (reviewed in FiBQ 15:2) and

Working without Wilting by Jago Wynne (reviewed in FiBQ 13:3).

Working Models for our Time has been commissioned from Mark Greene.

From chapters three to nine, Higginson adapts Moltmann's paradigm of working through the biblical drama from Genesis to Revelation in seven acts: launched in hope (creation), from hope to despair (fall), hope for a nation (the Old Testament narrative of Israel), hope in a son (King Jesus), the death and resurrection of hope (the gospel of Jesus), a people of hope (God's kingdom come, albeit not yet fully) and finally hope for the future (the new heaven and the new earth). In each act, Higginson gives examples of contemporary business practice across the world where there is a clear touchpoint between the reality of 'now' and the motivational power of looking to the 'not yet.' He shows how business people are at work dealing with all kinds of human issues: subduing the earth, powering electricity, alienation, exploitation, pride, earthquakes, debt, interest, bribery, corruption, tax, poverty, executive pay, fair trade, corporate structure, worship. None are dealt with at great length, but are aired in such a way as to stimulate the individual conscience and collective debate.

Higginson is not naive about the challenges faced by new models of business. He gives a 'considerable proportion of space to types of business that fall outside the mainstream: social enterprise, fair trade, micro-credit, cooperatives and eco-friendly companies... none of them is a panacea' (p.219). The eschatological paradigm Higginson brings to bear on these models gives scope to reflect on failure in business as much as it does on success: 'Corporate demise is not necessarily deserved. It is often the experience of a small company that is by definition vulnerable. In a recession, especially, little companies very easily fall foul of circumstances and become the victims of others' manoeuvrings' (p.153). How much more can we make sense of this when we also understand that Jesus himself 'saw his death as an essential component of his life's work' (p.149), and we can look ahead 'to the excitement there will be when God brings his great work to completion!' (p.215). The

Christian in business does not submit to hopeless passivity. Jesus died, then he rose again. Christians share the suffering of others who fail in business, and thereby mysteriously Christ arrives to bring new life out of failure. In the face of failure Christians don't collapse in recriminations or blame, and this encourages those around them to feel that failure in business is nothing to fear. One might therefore add 'redemptive sacrifice' as a sixth criterion marking Christianity as a force for good.

Higginson's experiences mean the book tends to feature smaller, entrepreneurial enterprises. He gives the example of Ashish Raichur who set up *New Creation Information Technologies* in Bangalore alongside All Peoples Church where he is pastor: 'I watched in open-mouthed astonishment as he moved effortlessly with a minimum of fuss from giving instructions to his church secretary to discussing a software problem with an engineer .. no sacred-secular divide here!' (p.182). He also touches on what it looks like for an employee in a larger corporate business to exercise the same qualities. In a section entitled 'Effective Christian Witness', he outlines the work of Jim Wright (former Human Resources Director for R&D at what is now GlaxoSmithKline) who spent much of his career witnessing to colleagues and engaging in the work of the kingdom of God creatively and entrepreneurially in a context of corporate hierarchy and structure (see pp. 210-211).

Many of the examples Higginson highlights have been profiled in *Faith in Business Quarterly* over the years; many of the business people he introduces have spoken at *Faith in Business* conferences. The process of writing the book reflects the process of God at work in his creative and redemptive purposes, not in comprehensive policy but in the individual narratives of specific people and businesses participating in the great eschatological hope. Anyone looking for the answer to 'what shall we do about it now?' will be compelled to look into their own heart in the context of their own circumstances, and like Ashish Raichur and Jim Wright, ask of themselves 'what can I do now where I am in the light of the hope of eternity?' ■

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