

The Paradoxical Organisation

by Chris Bemrose



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How can an organisation grow rich by becoming poor? Can sacrifice in business lead to new life? Is a company strong only when it is working from weakness? The Christian paradoxes are applied by Chris Bemrose to business, drawing both on Jesus' life and words and current management thinking.

Meister Eckhart, the 13th Century German preacher, writer and mystic, stated that the deepest truth of God can only be grasped in paradox¹. Paradox is central to Christianity. The cross and the resurrection is a paradox in which 'the perception of unity in the clash of opposites is realised to the highest degree'².

Paradox holds in tension 'two opposites and simultaneously points to a resolution of those opposites that includes them but transcends them.'³ Or, as Scott Peck puts it: 'At the root of things, virtually all truth is paradoxical.'⁴

Robert Greenleaf effectively applied the paradox of servant leadership to organisations through his book on the same title.⁵ This article focuses primarily on five other biblical paradoxes. For each one, there is an attempt to explore the biblical basis of the teaching and then

explore one or two ways in which it might be applied to organisations, relating them to the work of contemporary management writers.

The poor shall be rich: crunchiness and sogginess

Though [Jesus] was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might be rich' (2 Cor 8:9)⁶

Jesus is often seen as having a preferential option for the poor. He chose to come to earth in poverty and preached that you cannot serve both God and wealth (Matt 6:24). He said that the poor are blessed for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them (Luke 6:20). He told people that they could not be his disciples unless they renounced all that they had (Mark 8:34).

This approach was reflected in an article by Nicholas Colchester in *The Economist* in 1996. He described how organisations start

'crunchy'. The going is tough and decisions are difficult, but at least people know what sort of progress they are making. Small changes can have a big impact. The sense of adventure is paramount. As organisations grow and become more prosperous they become soggy. Change becomes slower and it is less clear as to how the organisation is performing.

The article argued that in both organisations and policies, the key to success is keeping things crunchy. For crunchiness and sogginess, we can read poverty and wealth.

Life in the rich organisation is generally more comfortable. With more resources, decisions on how to spend money are easier. Priorities do not need to be discussed and debated to the same degree. But feedback on how the organisation is doing is harder to come by. The development of structures and

systems means that change – whether it be gradual improvement or slow decline – is slow and almost imperceptible.

Only if the organisation begins to move into crisis and bankruptcy looms does it become crunchy again in a bid to survive.

Alternatively, a soggy company may be acquired, the acquiring company imposing strict financial controls to make it feel poor and become crunchy again.

The paradox is that if we want our organisations to be rich in material, spiritual or social terms, we need to keep them poor. The beatitudes call us to poverty, mourning, meekness, hunger, purity and peacemaking. The reverse – riches, self-satisfaction and indifference – are all signs of soggyness.



■ *The Flight into Egypt, by Vittore Carpaccio (c.1460-1526)* ■

If I'm honest, as leader of a Christian organisation, I long – at one level – for it to be rich. Then I can sit back, relax and not worry too much about the organisation in the belief that everyone and everything will drift on effortlessly. I suspect the same is true for many others. And yet, deep down, I know it is in our

difficulties as an organisation and when we have to make tough decisions that we feel closest to God. It is in going through the rapids of organisational life that we feel fully alive. It is when faced with a person or a situation where we are inclined to throw up our hands and say 'I just don't know what to do' that our sense of God – and providence – is greatest.

The challenge for organisations – and the challenge of the beatitudes – is to resist soggyness. It is that that keeps us both crunchy – and Christ-like.

The weak shall be strong: human and superhuman

Power is made perfect in weakness... whenever I am weak, then I am strong (2 Cor 12:9-10)⁸

There are many Biblical examples of the weak overcoming the strong. The Israelites escape from the Egyptians against overwhelming odds⁹. David with one pebble overcomes Goliath with all his size and body armour¹⁰. Gideon defeats an army of 135,000 Midianites and Amalekites with just 300 men.¹¹ In the New Testament Jesus escapes King Herod, despite the power and authority of the latter. He subsequently sends out the disciples as 'sheep into the midst of wolves' – with no money and just the clothes on their back.

When we feel weak, God makes us strong; when we feel strong in our own right, we find it harder to discern God's presence.

Focussing on the weak can be taken at different levels.

Organisational strengths and weaknesses are often related. The organisation with limited cash develops strong financial systems. The organisation which employs those seen as weak (people with disabilities or those in a minority, for example) has a broader mix of skills and experience to draw on.¹²

Similarly, just as a chain is as strong as its weakest link, so too with organisations. Northern Rock's marketing and cost control counted for little against the shortage of wholesale finance.

Focussing on an organisation's weak spots is not easy. As individuals and organisations, we prefer to dwell on areas of light rather than shadow. Nonetheless, it is usually in the areas of weakness or vulnerability (often in the organisation-customer interface) that the impact of changes in policies and procedures is often most sensitively felt.

Perhaps the area in which the paradoxical nature of strength and weakness is most apparent is in organisational leadership. Leadership that seems strong can be very weak. As John O'Donohue has written, 'many people who desperately hunger for power are weak. They seek power positions to compensate for their own fragility and vulnerability. A weak person in power can never be generous with power because they see questions or alternative

possibilities as threatening their own supremacy and dominance.¹³

An article on 'why should anyone want to be led by you' in the *Harvard Business Review* by Robert Goffee and Gareth Jones¹⁴ argued that, far from seeking to give an air of perfectionism, the best leaders selectively show their weaknesses. By exposing some vulnerability, they reveal their approachability and humanity. This echoes the words of David Watson that we all need to be more open about our weakness if



■ Govert Flinck: *Isaac Blessing Jacob* (1638) ■

people within an organisation are to become closer to one another: 'When I am willing to be open to you about my own personal needs, risking your shock or rejection, and when I am willing for you to be equally open with me, loving you and accepting you with unjudging friendship, we find ourselves both at the foot of the cross, where there is level ground.'¹⁵

In my own experience, I find that it is often in those areas where I feel most competent that I can easily find myself distancing myself from others. By contrast, in those areas where I feel less

certain and need to draw on the skills and advice of others, there is a greater sense of unity and togetherness. In this way my own personal weakness can be transformed into a source of organisational strength.

The last shall be first: the journey is more than arriving

The last will be first, and the first will be last (Matt 20:16)¹⁶

In the Bible the first do not always win all the prizes. Isaac gave his blessing to Jacob, even though Jacob was the younger than Esau¹⁷. God (through Samuel) chose David to be the successor to Saul even though he was the youngest of Jesse's sons¹⁸. Jesus warns that the person who takes the best seat may have to be moved to the lowest place¹⁹.

'First shall be last' can also be taken as a caution against speed. Jesus seems remarkably unhurried. He does not start his public ministry until relatively late on in life. Even then, he seems to have time for people, patiently chatting with Nicodemus, the woman by the well or not rushing to heal Lazarus when told of his illness. He commends Mary for spending time with him, not busying herself with chores like Martha.

Jesus would seem to approve of Carl Honoré's approach. Honoré writes that 'the things that need slowness - strategic planning, creative thought, building relationships - get lost in the mad dash to keep up, or even just to look busy.'²⁰ Just as Jesus took time out to be by himself, or with the disciples, we too need time out to look at the wider picture, to develop our imagination and creativity and review where our lives - and our organisations - are taking us.

There are also many examples when the seemingly quick organisational fix turns out to be long and drawn out, while the carefully thought out process with full consultation achieves its goals even before it is fully implemented.

This in turn requires that we do not confuse the urgent with the important. Time is required to build relationships, both within organizations and with others such as customers, suppliers and shareholders. Stephen Covey²¹ suggests that one of the most important things in our organisational lives is to develop relationships with others. Time spent doing this is likely to pay better dividends than almost anything else we might choose to do.

This can be a caution to the over-use of communication technology. Strong relationships need to be built up by spending time together. As Alvin Weinberg has said 'Technology makes it easier and easier to



■ Carl Honoré ■

disconnect from other people and from ourselves.’²² E-mails and conference calls are no substitute for face-to-face communication. As Honoré writes, ‘slower methods of communication – walking across the office and actually talking to someone face to face, for instance – can save time and money and build *esprit de*

corps, in the long term.’



■ Henri Nouwen ■

As someone who tends to be task-orientated, I try to follow the example given by Henri

Nouwen. He once commented that he used to be resentful whenever he was interrupted until he realized that often interruptions were his real work: what he originally thought was his work was there just to fill the gaps between the interruptions.

In this way the first truly becomes last and the last, first.

The foolish shall shame the wise: following the prophetic voice

God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise (1 Cor 1:27)²³

God is often seen in the Bible choosing odd people, or asking them to do apparently foolish things. God asks Noah to build an ark in the middle of dry land (Gen 7). Moses is incredulous when told by God that he is to ask Pharaoh to let the Israelites go free (Exodus 3). Naaman is told to wash himself in the River

Jordan to be cured of leprosy, when he would have preferred to do something more respectable.

Jesus is ‘foolish’ in choosing to come to earth in poverty and weakness, selects an apparently unpromising group of people as his disciples and in a moment of ultimate foolishness dies on a cross. It is, however, in that moment of foolishness that he overcomes worldly power to redeem humankind.

In organisational terms, ‘foolishness’ may be seen as listening and responding to the prophetic voice. The prophetic voice is the voice that is quiet, in a minority and unexpected and yet has a ring of truth about it. God calls Elijah not in an earthquake or a fire, but in ‘a sound of silence’ (1 Kings 19:12). One interpretation of the story of the Syrophenician woman is that she helps Jesus see that he is called not just to the Jews (Mark 7:24–30).

In a similar way, the prophetic voice in organisations is often quiet, small and unexpected. It can be the unsettling and difficult comment from the person who usually contributes nothing or is seen as a crank that suddenly turns a long-standing strategy on its head. It can be the sudden ‘Eureka’ moment that makes one realise that there is a different and unexpected way to solve a particular issue.

To be alert to the prophetic voice, an organisation needs to be open to hear it. So often, it can be silenced or ignored and business carries on as usual. But it will have been a lost opportunity.

The organisation also needs to have a certain courage to follow what might seem a strange or foolish route. This requires that we abandon respectability and security, which O’Donohue calls ‘the twin traps on life’s journey’. This, in turn, requires that we operate with our whole mind: ‘many people in business operate with only one side of their mind: the strategic, tactical, mechanical side, day in day-out. This becomes a mental habit which they apply to everything, including their inner life. Even



■ Edward Hicks (1780–1849): Noah’s Ark ■

though they are powerful people in the theatre of work, outside of the workplace they look forlorn and lost. You cannot repress the presence of your soul and not pay the price. If you sin against your soul, it is always at great cost.’²⁴

Anita Roddick of Body Shop was a modern-day prophet in the business world. Seen as eccentric,

she was written off by many of her competitors, at least until she succeeded in financial terms. Yet perhaps the key is that even if she had failed in financial terms, she would still have had the knowledge that she had followed her own instincts and convictions and not bowed to conventional wisdom and expectations.

Lose life to save it – the cost of commitment

Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it (Luke 17:33)²⁵

Jesus is the supreme example of losing life to save it. Without taking the risk to lose his life, he (and we) would not have discovered resurrection.

The same is true of any major organisational change. No doubt when 30 years ago the charity Dr Barnardo's stopped running orphanages to focus on other services for children, there must have been a sense of loss for many. Children, however welcoming of the changes, may have missed a connection with the past. Staff may have lost their roles and their colleagues. Yet, without that loss, Dr Barnardo's would probably not have been able to provide the much greater range of services it does now: counselling, fostering and adoption, vocational training and disability inclusion groups. Most likely, it would have gradually sunk into oblivion. So too with countless other organisations facing major change. New birth

necessitates a sense of loss. Otherwise, the change is not real.

'Losing one's life' in organisational terms can also relate to what Susan Jeffers describes as feeling the fear and doing it anyway²⁶. This is the moment of commitment, when the organisation moves beyond that time of safety when all options are open and no decisions taken, to that moment when the organisation takes the plunge, committing itself to a particular course of action without knowing how it will turn out. It can be an anxious time of waiting for the



■ Susan Jeffers ■

community', where people are pleasant to one another, but this is just superficial. They proceed into chaos as differences and arguments emerge. They then need to go through a stage of 'emptiness'. This is a stage where people need to 'empty themselves of barriers to communications such as feelings, assumptions, ideas and motives'. This can involve people emptying themselves of preconceptions and prejudices, of the need to fix people or solve problems, or the need to control or be liked.

Whatever form it takes, 'emptying oneself' can be seen as a form of losing oneself.

This stage of emptiness is like a vacuum. Scott writes that 'whatever comes into emptiness is beyond our control. It is the unforeseen, the unexpected, the new. And it is only from the unforeseen, the unexpected, the new that we learn.'²⁷ It is only after the stage of emptiness that the final



■ Barnardo's 16+ Resource Centre in east London taking part in a Regatta at Port Solent. They didn't win the race, but they did win the £6.5K prize! ■

moment of truth, seeing whether the dynamic new Chief Executive, the distinctive new product or the radical marketing campaign will meet expectations.

Losing one's life can also be likened to the stage of emptiness that Scott Peck suggests all groups need to go through if they are to truly come together. Groups begin as 'pseudo

stage – true community – emerges.

For managers, losing oneself can also be seen as grasping the nettle – dealing with difficult issues rather than brushing them under the carpet in the hope that they will go away when in reality they fester and become more intractable. Jesus didn't shy away from telling the truth to people, even though that could be difficult.

He turns the tables on the money changers and tells the rich young man to sell all his possessions for the benefit of the poor, even though it makes him sad²⁸.

Whether it is managers telling the truth, difficult though it may be, or trying to see something



Heinrich Hofmann and Ph. Benedelli
Christ and the Rich Young Man (c.1890)

from someone else's perspective, or organisations moving to a new stage of development, there is always some sense of sacrifice. As Scott Peck notes, 'even when we realise that sacrifice is necessary for re-birth intellectually, it is still a fearsome adventure into the unknown.'

Conclusion: The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone²⁹

The paradoxical organisation is full of life. It cannot be pinned down, institutionalised, summed up, professionalised, rationalised or ossified. It is alive, vulnerable and miraculous³⁰.

Paradox can help us see the world in different ways. The disciples were accused of turning the world upside down.³¹ Perhaps as Christians we should follow their

example. Who do we see in our organisations as the poor and the rich, the weak and the strong, the last and the first, and the foolish and the wise? In what ways do we see ourselves losing or saving our lives? The answers may help to give us surprising new insights into the organisations for which we work. We may also begin to find new ways in which the stones rejected by others can become the cornerstone. ■

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Notes

- ¹ Cyprian Smith, *The Way of Paradox: Spiritual Life as taught by Meister Eckhart*, Darton Longman and Todd, London 2004 p 27
- ² Smith, op cit, p27.
- ³ Charles Elliott, *Praying through Paradox*, Fount Paperbacks, London 1987
- ⁴ M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum: The Creation of True Community*, Arrow Books, London 1988.
- ⁵ Robert Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership*, Paulist Press, New York, 1977.
- ⁶ See also 2 Cor 6:8-10, James 2:5 and Luke 1:53
- ⁷ October 5th, 1996
- ⁸ See also 2 Cor 13:9 and 1 Cor 1:25-27
- ⁹ Exodus 3-12
- ¹⁰ 1 Samuel 17:19-34
- ¹¹ Judges 7

- ¹² They may also have particular strengths from dealing with their disabilities or minority status.
- ¹³ John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara: Spiritual Wisdom from the Celtic World*, Transworld Publishers, London 1997
- ¹⁴ Robert Goffee and Gareth Jones *Why Should Anyone Be Led by You?*, *Harvard Business Review*, 2000 Sep-Oct;78(5):62-70, 198.
- ¹⁵ David Watson, *Discipleship*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 198, p.51. Watson was writing about a specifically Christian context, but the same may be applied (with care) to other situations.
- ¹⁶ See also Mark 10:31 Luke 13:30 and Matt 19:30
- ¹⁷ Gen 27
- ¹⁸ 1 Sam 16
- ¹⁹ Luke 14:8
- ²⁰ Carl Honoré, *In praise of Slow: how a worldwide movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed*, Orion, London 2004, p210
- ²¹ Stephen R. Covey, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Free Press, 1989
- ²² Quoted in Daniel Goleman, *Social Intelligence*, Hutchinson, London, 2006 p 316
- ²³ See also 1 Cor 1 25 and 1 Cor 4:10
- ²⁴ John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara: Spiritual Wisdom from the Celtic World*, Transworld Publishers, London 1997, p186
- ²⁵ See also Matt 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24 and John 12:24-26
- ²⁶ Susan Jeffers, *Feel the Fear and do it anyway: How to Turn Your Fear and Indecision into Confidence and Action*, Vermilion, London, 2007
- ²⁷ Peck, op cit, p210
- ²⁸ Matt 21:12; Mark 10:21
- ²⁹ Ps 118:22; Matt 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; 1 Peter 2:7
- ³⁰ This comment is drawn from John MacAuslan, former chair of the Pilsdon Community
- ³¹ Acts 17:6