

Participation in the Divine:

A New Perspective on Entrepreneurship

John Bloomer considers the long-standing theological tradition – especially strong among the medieval theologians – of participation in the divine, and relates this to contemporary entrepreneurs. At their best the characteristics of entrepreneurs correspond to the counter-conventional gospel commands, the writings of St Paul on perseverance, and the theology of co-creation with God.

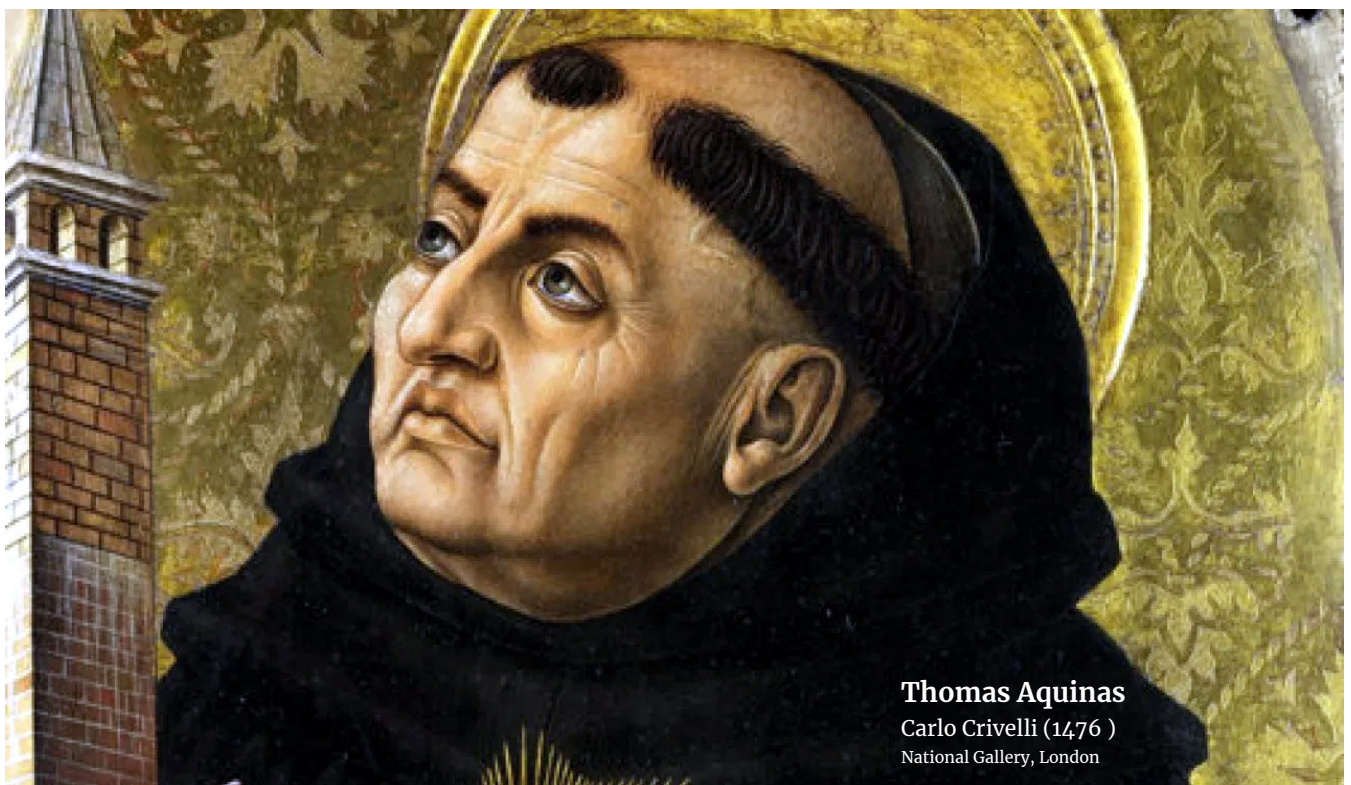
Business entrepreneurs are regarded as essential to economic growth,¹ and their particular ability to thrive in conditions of change and uncertainty,² as we are currently experiencing, underlines their critical importance today. A theological understanding of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship is therefore of particular relevance as we look to the future following the global economic shock from the pandemic.

In the modest body of theological literature on entrepreneurs, their creativity, view of the world, relationality, motivation, risk-taking and calling are perceived in a positive light. The work of the Holy Spirit in entrepreneurship is also a subject for reflection. However, the doctrine of participation in the divine appears very little in this literature. Miroslav Volf refers to work as “Kingdom

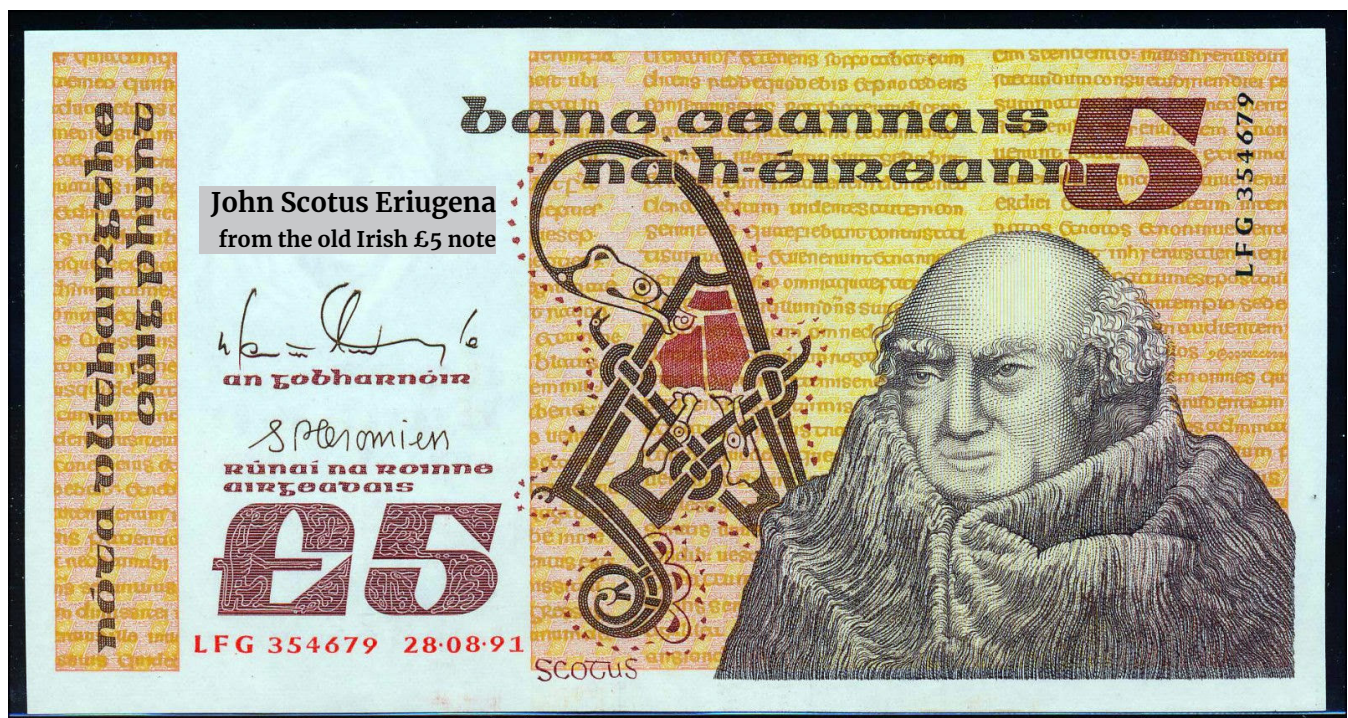
participation”³ and the papal encyclical *Laborem Exercens* describes human work as being within a “participatory relationship to divine labour”.⁴ Edward Carter refers to participation alongside entrepreneurs in his account of the “Enterprise of the Holy Spirit”.⁵

The doctrine of participation

Participation is defined metaphysically as “a constitutive structure whereby a



Thomas Aquinas
Carlo Crivelli (1476)
National Gallery, London



being or beings share to varying degrees in a positive quality or perfection that they receive from a donating source that alone enjoys the fullness of this quality of perfection”.⁶ Participation as a doctrine is found extensively in the writings of the Church Fathers, including Augustine of Hippo (AD 354–430), and is central in the theology of St Thomas Aquinas (1225–74). However, from the seventeenth century onwards participation has been thinly represented in mainstream Western theological literature.⁷

More recently there has been a revival in participation as a theological lens in Western Christian theology, helping to re-examine the relationship between God and the world. “Radical orthodoxy”⁸, whose central theological framework is participation, is an example of this.

Andrew Davison⁹ has provided a recent broad overview of ontological participation as a doctrine, based on Aquinas. Jacob Sherman¹⁰ outlines three participatory turns: formal participation based on Platonic thinking, existential participation based on Aquinas, and creative participation drawing on *inter alia* John Scotus Eriugena (815–877) and Nicholas of Cusa (1401–64).¹¹ Bruno Barnhart¹² provides a Christological

perspective on participation. He explains that in Christ participation in God is renewed, with Christ becoming the matrix of this new relationship between humans and between humanity and its natural environment. This leads to a new existence based on the “‘theological virtues’ of faith, hope and love as well as a fourth, world-oriented virtue: creative action”.¹³

This year, Paul Dominiak has reviewed participation as a theological lens through the writing of Richard Hooker. He reflects on the doctrine’s decline and recent retrieval. Dominiak surveys the Eastern doctrine of *theosis*, “becoming participants of the divine nature”¹⁴ expounded by Gregory of Nazianzus and Pseudo-Dionysius. He then adds a fourth, unitive participatory turn to Sherman’s existing three, describing this as the “union and assimilation with the divine through participation”.¹⁵ The four participatory turns of formal, existential, creative and unitive are presented as an “architecture of participation”.¹⁶

Participation – a good theological lens

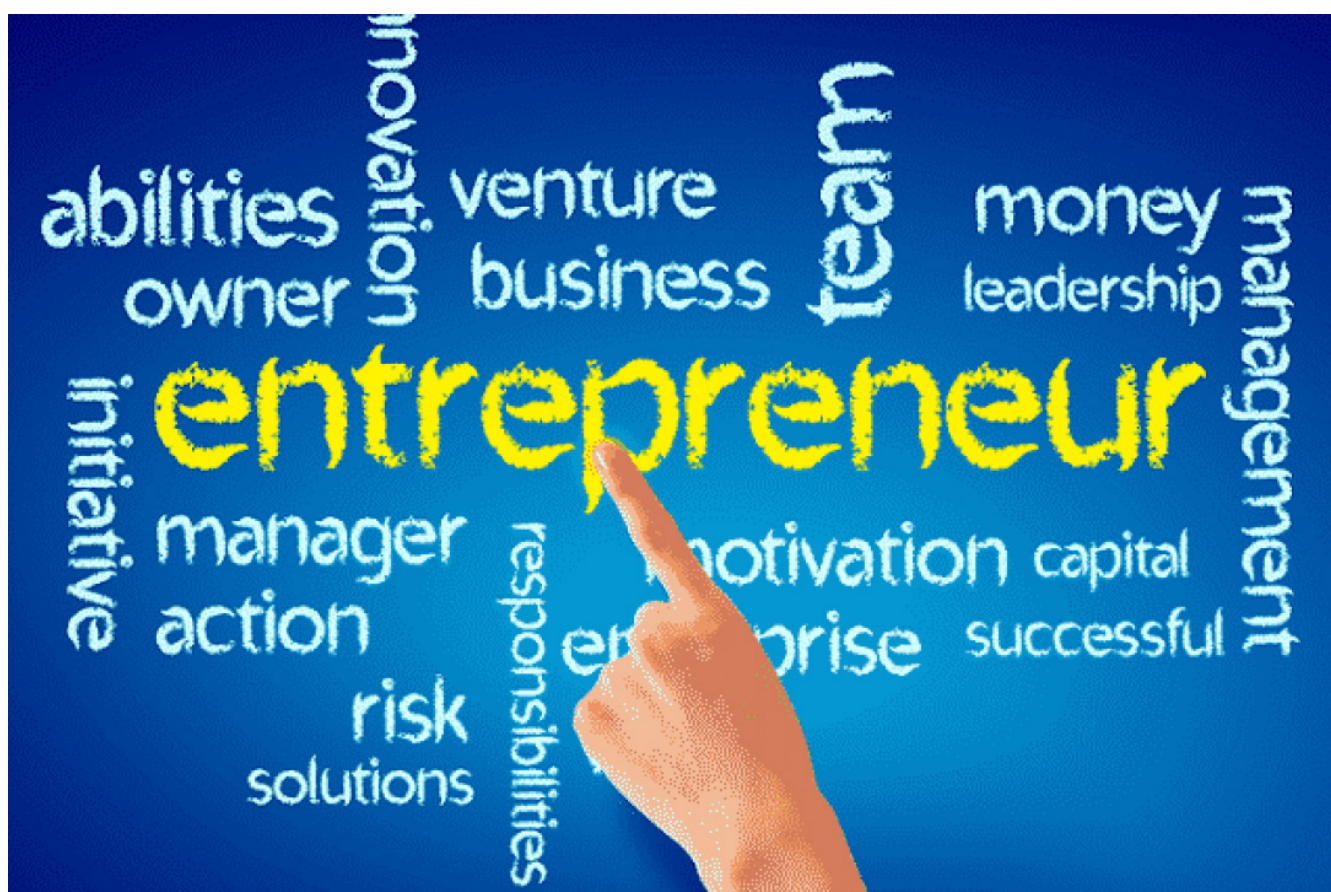
I would like to suggest that participation is a good theological lens to employ in examining entrepreneurship for three reasons.

Firstly, participation addresses the intimate relationship between God as creator and His created world. It “rests in perceiving all things in relation to God, not only as their source but also as their goal”¹⁷, including entrepreneurship as a creaturely activity.

Secondly, participation – as indicated – is experiencing a revival in contemporary theology. Participation reverses Descartes’ separation of God/the supernatural and the material world/the natural, and Kant’s subsequent minimisation of God. Thus participation provides an excellent theological means of examining the spiritual dimension of entrepreneurs to complement the economic, psychological and sociological dimensions that have been widely researched in secular literature.

Thirdly, participation offers a multiplicity of ways of bringing God and the world back into closer communion. This multiplicity fits with the complex nature of creaturely business entrepreneurship.

There are of course other doctrinal lenses that have been used in the theological literature on entrepreneurship. These include the Trinity, God’s grace and common grace, and the narrative of humankind’s creation, fall and redemption.



I see these as complementary to an approach based on participation. A Christian ethical perspective is also complementary to a doctrinal approach using participation and can be informed by it.

Characteristics of entrepreneurs

From my analysis of the secular and theological literature on entrepreneurs, case studies of real entrepreneurs¹⁸, and my personal experience in business, I propose that there are five distinctive features that most prominently distinguish business entrepreneurs from other business people. These are:

Creativity and innovation: entrepreneurs' creativity (i.e. spotting needs and opportunities) and innovation (i.e. realising those opportunities and bringing them to life and sustainability) are particularly distinctive. This is recognised as a central characteristic of entrepreneurs by economists such as Schumpeter¹⁹, psychologists, sociologists, teachers of entrepreneurship, and theologians. Their freedom and creative nature

are co-dependent. Entrepreneurial initiative-taking, problem-solving, and creation of value are also indicative of a creative mindset.

A mindset of viewing the world in a different way from "conventional wisdom": this is a recurring feature in psychologists' analysis of entrepreneurs, especially that of Saras Sarasvathy.²⁰ This guides entrepreneurs' view of risk and their opportunity orientation. It is often expressed as strong vision, and is a source of energy, as identified by Carter.²¹

Resilience and perseverance: are identified as key characteristics of entrepreneurs, especially a "remarkable resilience in defeat"²² and "determination in the face of adversity".²³ This is evident in their focus and is maintained by entrepreneurs' vision and energy.

Relationality at multiple levels: is identified by psychologists, sociologists and educators²⁴ as team working and networking; it includes integrity and reliability and attentiveness to needs.

Motivation: non-financial motivation is a distinctive feature of entrepreneurs (making money is rarely their primary motivation), and interweaves with their creativity, mindset, relationality and resilience.

The five features from a participatory perspective

Let us then look at these five distinctive features of entrepreneurs from a participatory perspective.

Creativity and innovation

Creativity and innovation is at the core of how entrepreneurs operate. Entrepreneurs' creativity results in new products and services to meet the needs of others, and new ways of doing things. They create new jobs and wealth that support the wellbeing of others, creating both financial and social capital. Entrepreneurs are prolific creative beings.

Creativity is a particular feature of the participatory framework outlined by Sherman and Dominiak. Sherman introduces a "creative turn" to

participation, with human creativity described not as imitation of God but as participation in God's creative powers, "the human as *homo creator*".²⁵ In the reflections of Nicholas of Cusa (1401–64) on the infinite Divine Mind, Sherman identifies human knowledge as a "finite mode of participation in the infinite divine activity"²⁶ so that our "relative creative powers are themselves a participation in God's absolute creativity".²⁷

Dominiak, drawing on Aquinas, underlines that the concept of human creativity as participation in God's ongoing creative activity flows from humans being made in the image of God.²⁸ This gives them high potential for creativity: in the act of creating, human beings most realise their gifted status of *Imago Dei*. Dominiak characterises creative participation as seeing "the human participant as a divine gift, an ongoing work and co-worker with the divine, rendering human beings as *homo faber* (the fabricating human)".²⁹

As highly creative beings, entrepreneurs therefore reflect strong participation in God's creativity and are God's co-workers. But to truly fulfil

God's creative purposes the creative motivation of entrepreneur needs to be fundamentally virtuous. The more virtuously creative they are, the more they fulfil God's creative purposes.

A different mindset

Entrepreneurs tend to view the world differently from other business people. They "see something that others miss or only see in retrospect".³⁰ They process information and perceive situations differently. Entrepreneurs think effectually rather than causally³¹; tend to think more about what they can rather than they can't do; are more optimistic and less fearful of risk. The mindset of a true entrepreneur tends to be visionary; they see the world more as a place of abundance³², full of opportunities to meet needs and create value. Many other businesspeople see the world in a more conventional way, as full of limitations, scarcity and risks: they do not see the same opportunities.

This unconventional entrepreneurial mindset often leads to entrepreneurs setting themselves against the conventional wisdom of the world of business, markets, and economics.

Peter Heslam describes successful entrepreneurs as "challenging conventions".³³ Coupled with their creativity, this forms the disruptive tendency of entrepreneurs, what Joseph Schumpeter called "creative destruction".³⁴ Entrepreneurs tend to turn conventional markets upside down.

This characteristic reflects two participatory perspectives: participation in God's abundance and participation in the wisdom of Christ, the Word of God. Firstly entrepreneurs participate in God's abundance by viewing the world as full of opportunity and pursuing value creation. As Carter points out, "God's abundant provision underpins the teaching of Jesus about the Kingdom of God and the behaviour of human beings within that kingdom"³⁵, as in Matthew's Gospel.³⁶ The worldview behind classical economic and management theory reflects the finite world's conventional wisdom of limitations and scarcity of resources, requiring their careful selection and allocation to achieve a particular goal. The mindset of an entrepreneur aligns more with a faith worldview of abundance than the conventional economic worldview.



'Entrepreneurs participate in God's abundance by viewing the world as full of opportunity and pursuing value creation'

Oskar Schindler's derelict factory about to be turned into a museum thanks to Daniel Low-Beer, a descendent of the original owners.



Secondly, entrepreneurs' counter-conventional worldview exhibits participation in the wisdom of Christ, the Word of God, in his radical turning the world upside down, challenging conventional wisdom. Christ's counter-conventional message is expressed throughout the Gospels, as in the Magnificat and the Beatitudes³⁷.

Participation in Christ is also important to entrepreneurial flourishing. Entrepreneurs' counter-conventional mindset of abundance means they tend to have a more optimistic perspective on the world and are less fearful about risk. While entrepreneurs are often perceived as being 'risk takers', it is more the case that their way of processing information leads them to perceive risk differently, e.g. as "affordable loss".³⁸ They take appropriate actions to mitigate risk and therefore are not held back by the prospect of potential failure.

This approach to risk can lead to a bias of over-optimism, which can in turn lead to failure. As mitigation, successful entrepreneurs display humility, a mindset that differs from conventional business wisdom where self-confidence and strong ego are seen as sources of success. Christ modelled humility in his life and teaching, meeting the needs of others and exemplifying servant leadership.³⁹ Successful entrepreneurs participate in His humility, counterbalancing more ego-driven behaviours and reducing the risk of derailing. Humble entrepreneurs

understand that they are only as successful as the people and elements they assemble to realise opportunities; they accept when they are going in the wrong direction and adapt accordingly.

Perseverance and resilience

Being an entrepreneurial leader is challenging. Leading the process of creating and building a new business venture, often from nothing but an idea or a vision of an opportunity, and counter to conventional wisdom, is hard work and risky. An entrepreneur needs significant perseverance and resilience in order to swim against the tide and not be disheartened or derailed by risks, setbacks and challenges. This is sometimes described as 'digging deep'.

Entrepreneurs' perseverance and resilience reflect existential participation and participation in God's strength. Firstly, entrepreneurs' perseverance and resilience can be a demonstration of existential participation. As Aquinas expounded, we are continually held in being by God through participation in His creative power. While the many challenges and setbacks encountered by entrepreneurs may make them feel that their very existence is in jeopardy, they are sustained by their participation in God's creative power.

Secondly, successful entrepreneurs' perseverance and resilience reflect participation in God's strength. This provides a deep spiritual strength

beyond worldly physical strength, at the heart of "digging deep". A depth of spiritual strength allows entrepreneurs to withstand the intense pressure they face, and prevail. St Paul proclaims God's power: "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power". He exhorts us to "take up the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you will be able to stand your ground, and having done everything, to stand".⁴⁰ The concept of standing your ground – to just remain in existence – is a profound expression of perseverance and resilience. The Epistle to the Hebrews also exhorts us to "run with perseverance the race that is set before us".⁴¹

Furthermore, the whole concept of participation as sharing in God as someone greater, with one's strength being derived from God rather than oneself, provides entrepreneurial leaders with both humility and a perspective that invites patient resilience. This is reflected in Goossen and Stevens' Christian model of entrepreneurship where "focus is not on personal or horizontal strength, but rather on strength that comes through God".⁴²

Finally, as explained above, entrepreneurs' participation in God's abundance contributes to their perseverance, by underpinning an optimistic and hopeful mindset where difficulty and failure provide opportunities for learning.

Relationality

Entrepreneurs are highly relational in how they operate (e.g. in terms of networking and team-working) and depend strongly for their success on healthy relationships with customers, suppliers, staff, stakeholders and even competitors. Successful entrepreneurs tend to be relational in more dimensions than other business people. They engage with potential customers to understand their needs and identify opportunities, and assemble the necessary people and resources to realise these opportunities.⁴³ Recruitment, team-working, using experts and social networks are key to sustainable entrepreneurial success.⁴⁴

Relationality is central to the doctrine of participation, as it considers the relationship between God, as creator, and created beings. As Davison explains, “If all things come from God, as their common source, they come forth *related*.”⁴⁵ He further explains that creatures are naturally relational as they bear a likeness to their source, “to God as Trinity, who is constituted by relation.”⁴⁶ Davison points out that participation in a relational, Trinitarian God also results in relationship by choice “such as friendship, business partnerships and marriage.”⁴⁷ Humans’ participatory relationship with a Trinitarian God is then mirrored in their participatory relations with other humans in an “intra-finite participation.”⁴⁸ Dominiak points to “participation in God implying real relations transcendently with God and laterally with other creatures who participate in God”,⁴⁹ in contrast to less relational Cartesian-Kantian thinking which leads to a greater emphasis on individualism.

The intensity of relational behaviour of entrepreneurs towards other people

and other elements of creation reflects participation in God in this highly relational sense. Entrepreneurs thrive through their relationship of participation in God and their mirrored healthy participative relationships with others.

Motivation

Business entrepreneurs need to create a profitable and hence sustainable enterprise. However, while financial gain may be a motivating factor for some entrepreneurs, many successful entrepreneurs’ primary internal motivation is not financial. Their deepest motivation is more the pure joy of creating and building something new, the desire to make a positive difference for the common good, the sense of freedom, or the need to strive and achieve for its own sake.

These virtuous entrepreneurial motivations contrast with those of non- or less entrepreneurial business people such as managers, traders, financial investors and speculators where the financial motivation tends to be more prevalent. They also contrast with the motivations of less successful entrepreneurs, described by Bolton and Thompson as “entrepreneurs in the shadows”.⁵⁰ The narratives of these less successful entrepreneurs suggest motivations such as accumulation of wealth and material possessions, securing an ostentatious or celebrity lifestyle, ego, self-publicity or personal prestige, or power/influence over others. In many cases these entrepreneurs derailed and failed or their enterprises were not sustainable, caused to some extent by their motivations.


I would like to make two suggestions related to entrepreneurial motivation. Firstly, while the internal motivations of entrepreneurs do not guarantee success, they make a significant contribution to the sustainability of an entrepreneur’s

success. Secondly, the virtuous motivations of successful entrepreneurs have a sense of goodness and purity, and reflect a participation in God in Christ.

Christ teaches the critical importance of what is in the heart or the core of our being. His teaching on the fulfilment of the law⁵¹ emphasises the need to go beyond the law governing our actions and examine our deepest motivations, seen by God “who sees what is done in secret”.⁵² An example is the extension of the prohibition against murder being extended to anger: “I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgement”.⁵³

Christ models the purest of motivations: incarnate selflessness, humility, sacrifice, love of God and neighbour, and striving for the common good. Virtuous motivations driven by a participation in God in Christ will help to sustain positive outcomes from an individual’s actions. Less virtuous motivations, such as selfishness, greed, arrogance, and lack of love of neighbour, may not be detrimental in the short term but create greater potential risk for an individual to derail and fail eventually.⁵⁴ The motivation of successful entrepreneurs conveys a sense of participation in Christ as the divine model of the deepest motivations that are truly good and lead to the most sustainable human flourishing.

Entrepreneurship and participation in the divine

To conclude, participation as a doctrine can reveal enlightening perspectives on the character and creaturely activity of business entrepreneurs: their creativity and innovation, unconventional mindset, perseverance and resilience, relationality, and motivation. Current participatory thinking identifies the profound role of Christ in unlocking the best in our humanity, and entrepreneurs can provide vivid examples of this. As we strive to build back the world economy in a better way following the pandemic, entrepreneurs participating in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit will play an important role. 

- 1 Donald Kuratko and Richard Hodgetts, *Entrepreneurship: a contemporary approach*, Mason OH, South Western, pp 3–23.
- 2 Martin Ricketts, 'Theories of entrepreneurship: historical development and critical assessment' in *The Oxford Handbook of Entrepreneurship*.
- 3 Cited in John Hughes, *The End of Work: Theological Critiques of Capitalism*, Blackwell, 2007, p 26.
- 4 John Hughes, *The End of Work*, p 19.
- 5 Edward Carter, *God and Enterprise: towards a theology of the entrepreneur*, p 43.
- 6 Jorge Ferrer and Jacob H. Sherman (eds.), *The Participatory Turn: Spirituality, Mysticism, Religious Studies*, State University of New York Press, 2008, p 82.
- 7 See Paul Dominiak, *Richard Hooker: the architecture of participation*, p 16.
- 8 See e.g. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward, *Radical Orthodoxy: a new theology*, Routledge, 1999.
- 9 Andrew Davison, *Participation in God: A Study in Christian Doctrine and Metaphysics*, CUP, 2019.
- 10 Jacob H. Sherman, 'A genealogy of participation' in Ferrer and Sherman (eds.), *The Participatory Turn*.
- 11 Jacob H. Sherman, *Partakers of the Divine: Contemplation and the Practice of Theology*, Minneapolis MN, Fortress Press, pp 142–148.
- 12 Bruno Barnhart, 'One Spirit, one Body: Jesus' participatory revolution' in *The Participatory Turn*.
- 13 *ibid*, p 274.
- 14 Paul Dominiak, *Richard Hooker: the architecture of participation*, p 4.
- 15 *ibid*, p 10.
- 16 *ibid*, p 11.
- 17 Andrew Davison, *Participation in God: A study in Christian Doctrine and Metaphysics*. p 1.
- 18 See especially Bill Bolton & John Thompson *Entrepreneurs: talent, temperament, technique*, Elsevier, 2000, chs 4, 5, 6, 9; Richard Higginson & Kina Robertshaw *A Voice to be Heard: Christian entrepreneurs living out their faith*, IVP, 2017.
- 19 Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, Harper, 1942, p 132.
- 20 Saras D. Sarasvathy, 'Causation and Effectuation: Toward a Theoretical Shift from Economic Inevitability to Entrepreneurial Contingency.' in *The Academy of Management Review*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2001.
- 21 Carter, *God and Enterprise*, p 45.
- 22 Bolton & Thompson, *Entrepreneurs*, p 20.
- 23 Higginson & Robertshaw, *A Voice to be Heard*, p 174.
- 24 Bolton & Thompson, pp 65–68.
- 25 Sherman, *Partakers of the Divine: Contemplation and the Practice of Philosophy*, p 93.
- 26 *ibid*, p 147.
- 27 *ibid*, p 178.
- 28 Genesis 1.26.
- 29 Paul Dominiak, *Richard Hooker*, p 10.
- 30 Bolton & Thompson, *Entrepreneurs*, p 17.
- 31 Sarasvathy, 'Causation and Effectuation'.
- 32 Carter reflects on the contrasting world-views of scarcity and abundance in *God and Enterprise*, pp 17–25.
- 33 Peter Heslam, *Transforming Capitalism: Entrepreneurship and the Renewal of Thrift*, Grove Books, 2010, p 15.
- 34 Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, p 33.
- 35 Carter, *God and Enterprise*, p 24.
- 36 See eg Mt 6.25–34; Mt 19.29.
- 37 Lk 1:46–55; Mt 5.3–11.
- 38 Sarasvathy, 'Causation and Effectuation'.
- 39 Phil 2.3; Mk 10.43; John 1.15.
- 40 Eph 6.10; 6.13.
- 41 Heb 12.1.
- 42 Richard J. Goossen and R. Paul Stevens, *Entrepreneurial Leadership*, IVP, 2013, p 57.
- 43 Bolton & Thompson, p 34.
- 44 Bolton & Thompson, p 65–68.
- 45 Davison, p 367.
- 46 *ibid*.
- 47 *ibid*, p 370.
- 48 *ibid*, p 369.
- 49 Dominiak, pp 16–17.
- 50 Bolton and Thompson, ch 9.
- 51 Mt 5.17–6.24.
- 52 Mt 6.4, 6.18.
- 53 Mt 5.22.
- 54 Psalms 37 and 73 also point out that those who are estranged from God and do not participate in his goodness may flourish and prosper for a time but eventually fail.



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