

Beauty at Work (Part One)

Ever since Peter Heslam became director in 2018, Faith in Business (FiB) has focused each year on a theme. These have included well-being, investment, purpose, and work as worship. Each of these is relevant both to the world of work and to the world of theology. As such they provide points of contact between these two worlds.

Two key aims in reflecting on these themes are to help equip people of faith to engage creatively and prophetically with their predominantly 'secular' workplaces; and to help faith leaders relate to working people in more informed, meaningful, and supportive ways. All this applies to FiB's new theme: beauty at work¹. In this article, Peter provides an introduction.

Business can be ugly. It can provide ugly products, services, advertising, workspaces, buildings and environments. It can also work with an ugly *modus operandi*. It can, for instance, be dishonest, unreliable, uncaring, and exploitative. It can be like the 'dark satanic mills' sung about in the favourite hymn Jerusalem.

But business can also be amongst the 'all things bright and beautiful' that are sung about in another favourite hymn (of that name). One reason for this is that it is an activity engaged in by human beings, who have the capacity to create beauty.

It may be objected, on scriptural and observational grounds, that it is only God who has this capacity – as evidenced in Genesis 1 and 2, and in the beautiful sunsets, mountains, lakes, wild flowers and animals of the natural world. Surely all humans do is mess things up, as evidenced in the rest of Genesis, and in the ugliness of inner cities the world over. As trade lies at the origins of cities, is it not far-fetched to claim that human beings can create real beauty through commercial enterprise?

Three points can be made here in response; further points will follow in Part Two.

Beauty as human origin and destiny

Firstly, we are made with beauty and are destined for beauty. In Genesis' account of creation, God pronounces what has been made each day as 'good'. He does so even on the sixth day after creating the human beings that would have such a devastating impact on it all! On the other hand, this is the only day on which God creates something so closely resembling God's own glorious self that it is said to be made in the very image of God.

All this is echoed in Psalm 8:

*What are humans that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them a little lower than God
and crowned them with glory and honour
(vs. 4-5)*

In English, glory is generally associated with admiration, fame, prestige, pride and kudos. But in Hebrew, the word is closely associated with beauty, majesty and weight. For the Psalmist, in other words, human beings are made beautiful.

But humans are also destined for beauty. The apostle Paul writes: 'Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become

blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe' (Phil 2.14-15).

Scientists tell us that we are made from stardust. Therefore, to paraphrase what is sometimes said at funerals or at Ash Wednesday services, 'we are from star dust, and to stars we shall return'. This is, of course, metaphor; humans do not literally become stars. But humans are destined to become beautiful like the stars – not only in the life to come but also in the here and now.

Equipped for beauty

Secondly, humans are called and equipped to create beauty. Unlike God, they cannot create from nothing. But they can bring forth and enhance the beauty that God has already invested in creation. In fact, one of the reasons God fills human beings with the Holy Spirit is specifically because God wants them to draw out and celebrate that beauty.

Allow two of my best friends in the Hebrew Bible to provide biblical warrant for this assertion. They are the artisans Bezalel and Oholiab. God says to Moses in Exodus 31 that these men have been 'filled with the Spirit of God, and with wisdom, and understanding,



and knowledge and with all kinds of skills—to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze...and to engage in all kinds of crafts’ (v.1–5).

In the course of my research, I have seen this equipping work of the Holy Spirit going on in workplaces around the world. It involves designers, architects, painters, poets and musicians – people whose work is often associated with beauty. But it also involves mathematicians, engineers, accountants, technicians, administrators, mechanics, baristas, cleaners, chauffeurs, call centre staff – and business leaders.

All these people – together with most readers of this article – are the Bezalels and Oholiab of today. God fills people with the Holy Spirit not only to preach and prophesy but to work in a way that reflects God’s beauty, however

mundane that work may be regarded. As humans work in that way they imitate the God whose image they bear in becoming creators of beauty.


Seeing the bigger picture

Seeing beauty in ordinary everyday work often only comes, thirdly, from having sufficient perspective to see the bigger picture. This can best be illustrated with a parable.

A foreign visitor goes into one of the many watch-making workshops in Geneva in the seventeenth century. The visitor sees three workers hunched over their workbenches, each wearing an eyeglass in one eye. They are engaged in the same task – making tiny cog wheels.

‘What are you doing?’, the visitor asks. The first worker replies, ‘I am making a

cogwheel’. The second worker replies, ‘I am making a cogwheel that will be turned by a spring activated by a lever’. But the third worker, who is far more productive than the other two, replies, ‘I am helping to make a beautiful watch that will bring joy to its owner and will help that person serve others and live a well-ordered life’.

It is tempting to regard the more mundane aspects of our work as little more than making tiny and insignificant cogwheels. But our love for our work, and our productivity at work, will grow, if we stand back, take in the wider view, and see the beauty of what we are building, together with others, for the glory of God. To get started, we need to grasp these truths: we are made with beauty; destined for beauty; called to beauty; and equipped for beauty. 

1. Further instalments of Peter Heslam’s series in this journal on ‘God’s Investment and Ours’ will be available via the Eventide Center for Faith and Investing (faithandinvesting.com), and subsequently on the Faith in Business website (faithinbusiness.org).



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