

# A Primer on Innovation Theology



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Responding to Change in the Company of God

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WIPF & STOCK • Eugene, Oregon

A PRIMER ON INNOVATION THEOLOGY  
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# Prologue

## Do We Really Need Another App for That?

BELIEF IN PROGRESS IS more widely held than frequently expressed, at least in North America. Though some might believe the new normal is more regress than progress, the mighty winds of American ingenuity, Horatio Alger and the entrepreneurial spirit still sweep over the face of the continent.

These winds perpetuate vague suppositions that somebody somewhere must be working on it—whatever it is—and will solve it, relieving us of our apocalyptic anxiety over unsolvable problems. Such relief frees us, if only temporarily, to focus on matters at hand, at least the matters that concern our hands in our own respective niches and neighborhoods.

Winds of progress still breathe hope into the narrative broth in which North American steeps. They even have plenty of historical evidence to keep them blowing. After all, aren't we exceptional in our track record of responding to change? For all but the most despairing, progress will continue. It's an article of faith. At least that's what many of us believe, or at least hope.

Maybe so, maybe not.

Progress is often interrupted, misdirected and rarely proceeds in a straight line, to be sure. Two steps forward, one step back. More will be revealed. The new normal may be signaling that belief in growth-based progress needs revising.

Whether a revision is needed or not, the belief that things will improve relies to a large extent on the promise of innovating. The promise is

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embedded in expressions like “where there is a will there is a way” or “necessity is the mother of invention” or “if at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.” Only the most cynical doubt that we *will* build the bridges necessary to get us from today’s ugly problems to tomorrow’s elegant solutions. Why? Because we have always built the bridges and “engines of tomorrow”<sup>1</sup> with the entrepreneurial will and innovating capabilities of mankind, especially with American ingenuity.

Those experienced in commercial, social or technological entrepreneurship have come to realize, however, that innovating is demanding, draining and costly. It is far from a reliable method, repeatable formula or guarantee of success. Yes, it is partly manageable, and partly not. It is inherently improvisational in process and uncertain in outcome. Yet, despite all that, innovating remains the beast that will carry the burden of hope for progress on its shoulders. A better tomorrow banks on the future inspiration, inventiveness and innovating capabilities of the clever, entrepreneurial and determined. Whether our future is clouded with foreboding threats or basking in the clear blue skies of unlimited potential, progress will continue. Besides, what is the alternative?

If there are reasons enough to continue to believe in this master engine of progress then it may be worth taking a closer look at what percentage of innovating efforts are directed where, by whom and for whom. Are they even directed to begin with, or are we really leaving it up to the invisible hand of the market? For example, do we really want all that engineering and creative talent focused on developing another app? Do we really need another digital advertising platform? Is too much investment chasing after what is possible in virtual worlds more than what is needed in the real world? Are investments in greater consumer convenience really more important than investments in what minimizes ecological footprints, ensures wider accessibility to clean water, secures basic sanitization for increasingly concentrated populations, or recovers usable energy from waste streams? Are innovations aimed at gaining competitive advantage really more deserving than innovations in the health of local communities, the redress of economic inequalities or the alleviation of systemic poverty?

Perhaps history will reveal that the current intensity of innovation activity in virtual domains will prove necessary preparations for successor innovations in physical reality, where tangible benefits come to flesh and blood. Time will tell. However, it is reasonable to posit that too much

1. Bouderi, *Engines of Tomorrow*, 15–25.



innovating today is undirected or misdirected, except by the invisible, anxious and greedy hands of markets obsessed with satisfying individual consumer “needs,” securing an elusive sustainable competitive advantage, or seeking some kind of meaningful differentiation. What if our innovating capability was otherwise directed, perhaps by the invisible hand of the Other to care for the common good, to steward the one creation we all share and to secure a just and lasting peace between people?

What if we were able to redirect even a small percentage of our creative, inventive and innovating capability toward the needs and challenges of the common good more than consumers’ convenience? What if we were to deploy some of that creative collaborative potential where the invisible hands of God may be working already?

Looking to economics alone for the decisive reasons to innovate has left us with quantitative incentives too impatient and inadequate to inspire the courage and willingness to face, address and solve problems beyond the reach of markets’ invisible hands. Looking to the capabilities resident in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) alone has led to amazing advances. But some of these advances are still looking for problems to solve. Looking to theology, however, in combination with economics, ecology and creative applications of STEM perspectives, just might broaden the field of view to see where the hands of the Other may already be at work, and just might lead us to more fruitful progress in advancing the interests of the common good.

If the theological community should become interested in this, it will need to step out of its comfort zone, become less interested in doctrinal disputes, and more interested in what its own language and methods can do to set the table for, and send out the invitation to, other disciplines for convening constructive dialogue about innovating. To do so, however, the theological community must first consider its own innovation theology.

What on earth does theology have to contribute? An answer in a sound bite might be that *theology can help us innovate for the common good*.

For a start, theology would view people not as consumers but as human beings, creatures of the Creator, not as unrelated competitors but as related neighbors. This shift in perspective—from consumer to human needs—will broaden the field of view and bring us closer to innovating in the company of God.

Theology would also look at the biosphere (creation) not simply as a set of resources to exploit but as a garden to till and to keep. Theology would

likely be more inclined to view the economy—global, national or local—as a subset of the ecology<sup>2</sup> and thus point us to innovations in stewardship and sustainability based on sufficiency more than growth. Theology would also likely insist on re-laminating exchange, instrumental and intrinsic value into a more integrated, holistic view of just what value is.

Theology would also look for lasting security not based on economic growth, healthy bottom lines or negotiated deals but on righteousness, plumb lines and covenants, all inviting us to realign ourselves in love to God, to our neighbors, and even in reconciliation with our enemies. Innovating in the company of God reemploys our visible hands, redeploys the diverse equality of our gifts, and redirects us toward sustainable solutions for the commons, care for the creation we share, cohesion in the communities we inhabit, and security for the necessities common to us all.

While the qualitative vocabulary of theology differs from the quantitative semantics of economics, the difference really may just be between the prophetic purpose of the former and the predictive quests of the latter. Both vocabularies are needed along with the more precise words of science, technology, engineering and math. It may be the Word that is able to bring all these other words together.

Theology *can* make a contribution, one that economics, science and technology alone (or combined) cannot. Such a contribution may simply be in asking where God would have us participate in the new thing God is doing in our midst.<sup>3</sup> Do you not perceive it?

Perhaps there is something to consider here, in the company of God.

2. Daly and Cobb, *For the Common Good*, 4, 21.

3. Isa 43:19.

## Preface

NOT LONG AGO I had what some might call a brainstorm. As with most storms, winds howl, rain pours and energy far exceeds visibility. Once the storm passes, the winds subside, the rain stops, and the air clears. Visibility improves.

Such was my experience with this brainstorm. When the storm passed I was left with a pesky vision. I was skeptical of my own thinking, remembering the observation of Peter Drucker that ideas born from brainstorms are the least reliable sources of innovation.<sup>1</sup> I was encouraged, however, realizing the vision was not an innovation, really. It was just an idea, one that wouldn't leave.

What I saw in my mind's eye were several conversational gatherings, each comprised of about a dozen people. Participants were those who don't normally talk to each other, partly because they live along parallel lines that seldom have the chance to meet, and partly because they may not know what to say to each other, how to say it, or even what questions to ask the other. Half the participants are theologically educated or educating. The other half are experienced innovators, entrepreneurs, economists and technologists, open to theological inquiry.

The gatherings were low profile, at least in my imagination; not a lot of promotion or glossy marketing brochures; just substantive conversations—lively, exploratory, engaging. Both halves of the room were having a lot of fun; serious, to be sure, but laughing a lot. Participants were having

1. Drucker, *Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, 130.

so much fun uncovering practical insights they decided to keep meeting, again and again.

Each participant was finding nourishment, encouragement, even inspiration from the others. It fed them all, intellectually and spiritually. The theologically educated found themselves delightfully engaged in a wider field of view than they had experienced before. The innovators found themselves encouraged, emboldened with deeper confidence, leaving each gathering with a greater clarity as to where innovations are needed and why. Others were intrigued, more than mildly. After a while, a common vocabulary began to emerge, not about doctrine or theology, really. More about value, hope and faith, and even, dare I say it, love and justice.

The initial conversations started in a few disparate parts of the continent, like the Silicon Valley, Route 128 outside of Boston, Chicago, Seattle and even Vancouver. They typically took place in a vacant classroom, one with a pristine whiteboard, which by the end of each conversation was totally filled with lines drawn between boxes and circles cryptically labeled. There were even a few equations. Before leaving most everyone pulled out their iPhones to capture for themselves the images left on the whiteboard.

Initial gatherings lasted for only a couple of hours. Soon, however, some stretched into the evening or took up a whole day. Regardless of the time, participants in these gatherings wanted to continue, as each conversation generated an energy and momentum all its own.

That's the vision that stayed after the storm in my brain blew through.

In the immediate aftermath of this brainstorm I thought the leftover vision a bit fanciful, like a daydream. The only problem was that this one didn't go away. It hung around for several weeks. In hindsight, its stickiness probably made some sense. From 1978 to 1982 I was an ordained Presbyterian minister, and since 1982 I have been a consulting facilitator to large commercial corporations attempting to invent and innovate. Some refer to me as an "innovation midwife."<sup>2</sup> Regardless of the label, I have had the rare privilege of living and working between two domains that seldom interact: theology and innovation.<sup>3</sup> These two parallel domains rarely touch, listen or speak to each other, at least publicly.

2. Vincent, "Innovation Midwives."

3. On the innovation side, mostly with STEM-intensive innovating efforts (STEM = Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) of commercial corporations; on the theology side, mostly in the context of a Reformed theological tradition as an active Presbyterian layperson.

The lack of interaction is not really surprising, at least from a conventional perspective. From a theological perspective, however, I sense both omission and opportunity, since both theology and innovation have much to say about responding to change, have to do with value and value creation, are ways people attempt to make sense, and shape human culture with positive or negative implications.<sup>4</sup>

Not knowing what to do with this pesky vision, I did what seemed like the obvious thing to do. I registered the domain name: [innovationtheology.org](http://innovationtheology.org). It didn't escape my notice that .net and .com were available also. I thought that would take care of it and I could go on to other things. Even such a small act as registering the domain name, however, seemed to make the vision stick even more. So, I gave into it, which was when I realized the vision had a gaping hole in it.

Suppose these gatherings *did* occur.<sup>5</sup> What on earth would those gathered talk with each other about? This primer might offer a beginning answer.

4. Such implications are often long-lasting on both creatures and the creation.

5. See [www.innovationtheology.org](http://www.innovationtheology.org) for current status of these gatherings and conversations.



## Acknowledgments

MAKING SENSE IS NOT a solo activity. This is particularly the case when it comes to making sense of uncharted territories, like innovation theology. In fact, it may not be possible without acknowledging that most everything we know, or think we know, we have received.

Such grace came to me from a greater cloud of witnesses than I could possibly acknowledge. However, there are a few who have been in the foreground of this effort, without whom I would still be wandering in the wilderness. Their theological curiosity and practical support proved essential.

Fortunately I have been blessed in this endeavor by several generous and thoughtful souls who gave their time, attention and devotion to early drafts. Substantive suggestions came from Anne Badanes, Barry Brown, Rebecca Buckley, Greg Gudorf, Amy Hassinger, Austin Leininger, John McIntyre, Matthew McNeil and Jennifer Whitten.

Subsequently Stuart Brown, Ron Gammill, Greg Gudorf, Marilyn McIntyre, Jack Swearengen each gave later drafts much close examination for which I am deeply grateful. Their advice has been both invaluable and encouraging.

Kathy Bairey brought the fresh, critical eyes of an editor to uncover what I could not see in making this a more readable set of essays. (What remains less readable is a function of my blindness, not Kathy's editorial skill.)

This effort would have languished in the wishful thinking of my mind and never made it onto the page without the encouragement, friendship and prodding of these souls. I am deeply grateful for each and every one.





# Introduction

ORGANIZATIONS RESPOND TO CHANGE in different ways and for different reasons. Individuals do too. Certainly there are significant differences between what applies to an individual and what applies to an organization.<sup>1</sup> But what individuals do in response to change and what collectives do can prove instructive to each other.

Of course *responding* to change is different than *reacting* to change. Without a mindful pause in between the stimulus of change and our response we simply react. When we respond, we have a choice and make it. When we react, we also have a choice, but don't make it.<sup>2</sup> The following speaks to what we might do in this pause.

Possible responses to change range from *absorption*, where individuals and organizations have sufficient resources, momentum or clout to absorb change without adapting, to *defensive* responses where preservation and conservation are the main activities, to *innovation*, where conscious choices to respond to change create new value for others. In the case of a commercial enterprise, nonprofit or social service agency, innovation might include trying something truly new—a product or service. In the case of an individual, the new value created for another might involve the risk of doing something extra ordinary for the other.

1. Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, xxii–xxiii: “Our contemporary culture fails to realize the power, extent and persistence of group egoism in human relations.”

2. Ackoff, *Differences That Make a Difference*, 108.

## INTRODUCTION

Given the continuum of possible responses to change, why innovate at all? Cost/benefit calculus rarely adds up to anything but a clear warning *against* innovating. Why would anyone—organization or individual—take on the greater demands, uncertainties and risks that accompany innovating? Why attempt to respond to change in such a way to create new value?

Numbers are only one of many considerations. “The conviction of things unseen, the substance of things hoped for”<sup>3</sup> is another. This capability to believe what is not seen is an essential trait of the entrepreneur and innovator. That entrepreneurs and innovators use more of this capability is arguably what distinguishes them from the rest of us.<sup>4</sup> But whether a defining characteristic or not, believing plays a central role in the experience of innovating.

If theology<sup>5</sup> is thoughtful reflection on believing experiences, particularly where God is believed to play a role, then the experience of innovators innovating is well within what should interest theologians.

Another reason, especially now, is the sheer number of recent publications on entrepreneurship and innovation. Even a cursory survey of this abundance reveals that more than enough has been written on *how* organizations should innovate. Little, however, has been said about *where* innovations are needed and *why*. Some conversations related to where and why, however, are beginning. The economies of the United States, Europe and Japan, along with many organizations and individuals within them, continue to drift in the doldrums.<sup>6</sup> Corporate sails droop, weighed down with unprecedented piles of cash, either uninvested or underinvested. Even the US Defense Department—a traditional sponsor of many major innovations—is expressing worry that its defense contractors are not innovating like they used to.<sup>7</sup>

The doldrums have remained since the gale-force winds blew through in September 2008. Some economists suggest we are in the quiet after

3. Heb 11:1

4. Vincent, *Prisoners of Hope*, xi.

5. Unless otherwise stated, use of “theology” and its derivatives assumes biblical theology.

6. “Since 2008 corporate investment in America, the euro zone and Japan has fallen short of cashflow . . . making firms net savers rather than borrowers. This reflects both subdued expectations about near term sales and a more deep seated belief that, as populations age, markets will shrink and good opportunities for investment will become rare. Rising inequality may aggravate the process: the rich save more than the poor. Efforts by emerging markets to hold down their currencies and plough the resulting trade surpluses into rich-world bond markets do further harm” (Ip, “Dangers of Deflation”).

7. Cameron and Barnes, “Pentagon Presses Contractors.”

another storm of “creative destruction.”<sup>8</sup> However, there remains much anxious money on the sidelines. What may be even more troubling than all the sidelined money is the absence of vision, hinting at the relevance of the biblical proverb “where there is no vision, the people perish.”<sup>9</sup>

Looking back on the past three decades of involvement in innovating efforts convinces me that we need more compelling answers to the questions of where to innovate and why, answers beyond the parochial interests of the innovating organization. The answers I imagine reflect more purposeful innovations that reside in the making of meaning more than money, the pursuit of substantive more than superficial value, the quest to contribute more than simply be different, the fostering of righteous more than merely efficient outcomes, the creation of just more than merely commercial success, the stewardship of common more than shareholder’s interests, and the kind of growth that is faithful more than acquisitive.

Typically we confine innovation and entrepreneurship to commercial and economic endeavors. Recently “social venturing” has extended innovation and entrepreneurship into noncommercial fields. Principles native to profit-making sectors are now being applied to opportunities for positive societal impact, not just financial gain. Many propose that one can do good while also doing well.

Seldom, however, do we recognize that theology might have something to contribute to the principles and practice of innovation and entrepreneurship, whether defined traditionally, extended to social spheres, or both. But when we realize that the essence of innovation and entrepreneurship is *creating new value for others* it opens the door to theological perspectives. The goal of what follows is to invite theological inquiry into the field of innovating and its management. What motivates such an invitation is both intellectual curiosity and practical utility.

Responding to change is fraught with uncertainty and fear. Fear afflicts both the powerless and powerful though in different ways. Neither is immune to the anxiety that comes with unsolicited change, especially when the response is aimed at creating new value. Such responses require courage. Theology suggests that faith and love are effective countermeasures to fear. “Perfect love drives out fear.”<sup>10</sup>

8. Also called “Schumpeter’s Gale.”

9. Prov 29:28 KJV.

10. 1 John 4:18.