



# Christian **Innovation**

## Descending Into the Abyss of Light

by Gary W. Oster

“The Christian is the one whose imagination should fly beyond the stars.”<sup>1</sup>

~Francis A. Schaeffer

**I**nnovation is the creative development of a specific product, service, or idea with the goal of pleasing customers and extracting value from its commercialization. To a corporation competing in the dynamic global economic environment, innovation is a matter of life or death. Innovation scholar Tony Davila observed, “Superior innovation provides a company the opportunities to grow faster, better, and smarter than their competitors—and ultimately to influence the direction of their industry...In the long run, the only reliable security for any company is the ability to innovate better and longer than competitors.”<sup>2</sup>

Beyond the struggle for corporate viability, engaging in the act of innovation allows individuals a unique mechanism to experience and communicate with God. Whether developing products or services for business clients or pursuing artistic

endeavors for personal enjoyment, innovation encourages insight. Christians do not own innovation, which has also been ably informed within many other faith traditions through the centuries. Christians do, however, have a unique perspective on the source of imagination and creativity. They possess the record of God’s remarkable innovations through the millennia as recorded in scripture, a world-view that supports and encourages innovation, and innovation methods that often contrast with those of other faith traditions. This paper surveys the unique elements of Christian innovation.

### **Christian Innovation?**

Is innovation simply a collection of methods to make customers happy and generate cash for a company, or might it be more? Can innovation be considered in the same breath as a Michelangelo painting or a Henry Moore sculpture? Should the imaginative process of

innovation be classed with the arts, e.g. design, music, sculpture, graphic arts, etc.? As renown psychiatrist Rollo May questioned, “Suppose the apprehension of beauty is itself a way to truth? Suppose that elegance—as the word is used by physicists to describe their discoveries—is a key to ultimate reality?”<sup>3</sup> As Grudin notes, “The generation of ideas involves factors that are not exclusively cerebral, factors that include the physiology, the emotions, and the outer world. We do not create, nor even learn, by conscious concentration alone...Original thought is the product not of the brain, but of the full self.”<sup>4</sup>

Faith would accordingly be included in that self. Innovation may be redemptive. Scripture and the personal experience of Christians worldwide show that God uses innovation for humans to know more of Him, to communicate with Him, and to ultimately accomplish His

earthly will for mankind. What makes innovation Christian innovation? As Francis Schaeffer said of art, “The factor which makes art Christian is not that it necessarily deals with religious subject matter.”<sup>5</sup> It also is not because the innovation was accomplished by a professing Christian. Instead, innovation is Christian when it is ultimately aligned with God’s purposes and methods.

### Creator Vs. Created

It is important to recognize that, while man can make things different or better, only God makes something entirely new. Remember that only God can imagine and make something out of nothing. In this sense, he is the only One who deserves the title of Creator. We are merely creative. That is, we can only imagine and make something out of something else—something that has already been imagined and made, whether in the creation itself, or from the work of creative people.”<sup>6</sup> Human innovation only vaguely mirrors the uniquely transformative act of God’s salvation, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.”<sup>7</sup> There is an important contrast between the creator and the created.

### Innovation Flows From World-View

Everyone has a personal world-view, which emerges from the enduring values learned by each individual. Values are constant, passionate, fundamental beliefs that propel the actions of individuals and organizations. They are acquired through education, observation, and experiences, and may be taught or influenced by parents, friends, work associates, religious institutions, community, culture, personality, and significant societal events. An individual’s values frame his or her worldview, “Worldview is the lens that people use to interpret their reality and assign meaning to events, experiences, and relationships.”<sup>8</sup>

### Thinking

Christians develop and act upon a Christian worldview. “The term means literally a view of the world, a biblically informed perspective on all reality. A worldview is like a mental map that tells

us how to navigate the world effectively. It is the imprint of God’s objective truth in our inner life. We might say that each of us carries a model of the universe inside our heads that tells us what the world is like and how we should live in it.”<sup>9</sup>

For Christians, faith influences their entire lives. As theologian and philosopher J. P. Moreland asserts “To live Christianity is to allow Jesus Christ to be the Lord of every aspect of my life. There is no room for a secular/sacred separation in the life of Jesus’ followers.”<sup>10</sup> Similarly,

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philosopher Francis Schaeffer agrees “It is not only that true spirituality covers all of life, but it covers all parts of the spectrum of life equally. In this sense there is nothing concerning reality that is not spiritual.”<sup>11</sup> Holmes similarly noted, “To bring our every thought into captivity to Christ, to think Christianly, to see all of life in relationship to the Creator and Lord of all, this is not an optional appendage of secondary importance, but is at the very heart of what it means to be a Christian.”<sup>12</sup> And Noll adds, “The much more important matter is what it means to think like a Christian about the nature and workings of the physical world, the character of human social structures like government and the economy, the meaning of the past, the nature of

artistic creation, and the circumstances attending our perception of the world outside ourselves.”<sup>13</sup>

In all things (including their innovation efforts) Christians are called to think and to act like Jesus. Making decisions in business is not a simple function of running anticipated actions through a formula or process...We are called to be like Christ and to think like he would think (Philippians 2:1-8). Christians know that this is made possible by the presence and inner work of the Holy Spirit, not by our efforts alone.”<sup>14</sup>

### God’s Innovation Reveals Himself to Mankind

Our first glimpse of God in scripture says, “In the beginning, God created...”<sup>15</sup> God’s character is revealed to mankind through His innovation, “Significantly, the world he created is complex and elegant – filled with clues about the character and nature of its creator. The more we learn about this created order, the more sophisticated its designer appears. The magnificent design of the solar system and all the many galaxies we are now able to observe make it clear just how creative the creator must be.”<sup>16</sup> We cannot possibly ignore the elegance of God’s innovation.

As Scripture says, “He has made everything beautiful in its time,”<sup>17</sup> “We are God’s masterpieces, poems...”<sup>18</sup> and “Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God will shine forth.”<sup>19</sup> As Michael Card noted, “A thousand examples speak of a deep, inner hunger for beauty that, at its heart, is a hunger for God. We hunger for beauty because it is a beautiful God whom we serve... The deep-down interior of a red-wood or a geode or the DNA molecule or, for that matter, our own body, is a song of elegance.”<sup>20</sup>

### Engaging God Through Innovation

We are not satisfied to observe God’s innovative perfection, but seek to lovingly mimic Him, “Creativity is worship insofar as it is, at its essence, a response...In the call to be creative, a call that goes out to all God’s children, we sense the call to listen to him and, in childlike naiveté, to imitate our father by creating works that will magnify his

praise,"<sup>21</sup> Grudin says.

But independent insight in all fields involves in some way the experience of beauty. In fact, the thrill conveyed by inspiration in any field is perhaps best described as coming from a sense of participation in beauty, a momentary unity between a perceived beauty of experience and a perceiving beauty of mind."<sup>22</sup> Our response to God's glorious innovation is praise-filled creativity, "A Christian should use these arts to the glory of God, not just as tracts, mind you, but as things of beauty to the praise of God. An art work can be a doxology of itself."<sup>23</sup> The Apostle Paul noted that everyone is given unique abilities to engage God through innovation, "Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits. All kinds of things are handed out by the Spirit, and to all kinds of people!"<sup>24</sup> At specific times throughout history, God has chosen to communicate with and direct man during the innovation process.<sup>25</sup> Through our own innovative efforts, we find a special way to connect with our creator, "All artists experience the unbridgeable gap which lies between the work of their hands, however successful it may be, and the dazzling perfection of the beauty glimpsed in the ardor of the creative moment. What they manage to express in their painting, their sculpting, their creating is no more than a glimmer of the splendor which flared for a moment before the eyes of their spirit. Believers find nothing strange in this – they know that they have had a momentary glimpse of the abyss of light which has its original wellspring in God."<sup>26</sup>

### Obligations of Christian Innovation

The freedom God provides to Christian innovators comes with concomitant obligations, "The artist as a Christian is free, but not with a purposeless freedom. He is free in order to praise God and love his neighbors."<sup>27</sup> As the Apostle Paul said, "Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others."<sup>28</sup> This certainly extends beyond the wise use of God-given abilities,<sup>29</sup> efficient acquisition of revenue for a corporation, and even beyond the "Do no evil" admonishment of Google, Inc.,

"Those who perceive in themselves this kind of divine spark which is the artistic vocation—as poet, writer, sculptor, architect, musician, actor, and so on—feel at the same time the obligation not to waste this talent but to develop it, in order to put it at the service of their neighbor and of humanity as a whole."<sup>30</sup> As Barna summarizes, "God encourages us to show genuine love by blessing others through affirmation and encouragement, by meeting their physical and emotional needs, and by living and working in a faith-driven community."<sup>31</sup>



Photo by: Sarah Stanfield

All innovation begins and ends with the needs of end-users. Christian innovators cannot have customers, with the disposable mentality the word implies. Instead, they have clients, with a special relationship of deep concern ordained by God and specifically outlined in the Bible, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another."<sup>32</sup> In the Gospel of Luke, we read, "And he [Jesus] answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and

with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself' (Luke 10:27, NASB).

The Greek that we translate in Luke 10:27 is *agapao* which carries with it a sense of doing the right thing at the right time for the right reason, or in other words, loving someone like a friend. The word occurs 110 times in the New Testament, specifically for behavior between people."<sup>33</sup> *Agapao* love consistently focuses upon the best interests of clients, "This Greek word refers to a moral love...to love in a social or moral sense, embracing the judgement and the deliberate assent of will as a matter of principle, duty, and propriety."<sup>34</sup> *Agapao* love that a concerned innovator has for clients has been described as being "selfless," "altruistic," or "unconditional." Whereas, "Agapao love is alive and well today and may be best understood in light of the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you, and even more to do with the Platinum Rule of Do unto others as they want you to do unto them."<sup>35</sup> Christian love for clients is the context for care for them, "The goal is thus to be broadly benefits driven—constantly searching for, investing in, and mastering the technology that will bring unanticipated benefits to humankind."<sup>36</sup> Because of *agapao* love, corporations are obligated to develop an innovation agenda that not only meets profit targets but also intentionally aligns with the actual needs of clients and society as a whole. As Chewing demonstrates, "Business should approach customers as people of dignity whom they genuinely want to serve. From God's perspective the purpose of business transactions is to serve people."<sup>37</sup>

### Windows To God

In consideration of the innovative media of literature, C. S. Lewis says, "Each of us by nature sees the whole world from one point of view with a perspective and a selectiveness peculiar to himself...We want to see with other eyes, to imagine with other imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well as with our own... We demand windows. Literature as Logos is a series of windows, even of doors..."<sup>38</sup>

As Card adds, "If what we create, write, dance, or sing can open up such a space in time through which God may speak, imagine the possibilities! Painting might



become a window through which a confused world looks and sees the sane order of God's creation. Music could become an orchestrated echo of the Voice the tired ears of humankind have longed for ages to hear. This is art through which God is seen and heard, in which he is incarnate, is fleshed out in paint and ink, in stone, in creative movement...The art that naturally flows out of our obedient response to the call of God on our lives, as a result of the imprint of the creative mandate, can, by grace, become water to wash the feet of sisters and brothers, cold water to quench the thirst of an unbelieving world."<sup>39</sup>

The work of our hands and the example of our being should draw others to God. "The Christian's life is to be an art work. The Christian's life is to be a thing of truth and also a thing of beauty in the midst of a lost and despairing world."<sup>40</sup> Pope John Paul II notes, "As Genesis has it, all men and women are entrusted with the task of crafting their own life: in a certain sense, they are to make it a work of art, a masterpiece."<sup>41</sup>

### Completing God's Kingdom

Judaism has long held an interesting concept called Tikkun Olam, which originated in the early rabbinic period. Although altered in modern times to support primarily social goals, the Hebrew phrase refers to "repairing" or "perfecting" the world. In brief, it was thought that God intentionally left undone some creative work in the world so that mankind could joyfully partner with Him in its completion. God continues to use humans, no matter how frail or unprepared, to innovatively accomplish even those things which are "exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think."<sup>42</sup> Like the Psalmist of old, to those who yield their minds, hearts, and hands to His will, God will "Put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God."<sup>43</sup> We can be the instruments of God's innovation, "With loving regard, the divine Artist passes on to the human artist a spark of his own surpassing wisdom, calling him to share in his creative power."<sup>44</sup>

### Innovate Yourself First

A person who is eager to enhance their

relationship with God through innovation must first intentionally innovate themselves. Specifically, they should ask God to use their innovation efforts to provide insight, and then be open to whatever His response might be. They should carefully study the Holy Bible to learn how God has innovatively changed people and circumstances throughout history.

Next, they should set quantum objectives for themselves and intentionally confront wicked problems that often confound



Photo by: Matthew Osier

people. They should study and engage new and unusual things, let their natural curiosity run wild and "get wet" by diving deeply into other cultures, ideas, relationships, and localities. Similarly, they must learn as much as possible about current and prospective clients.

Finally, Christian innovators should journal about their efforts to see God in innovation and communicate with others who share the same journey.

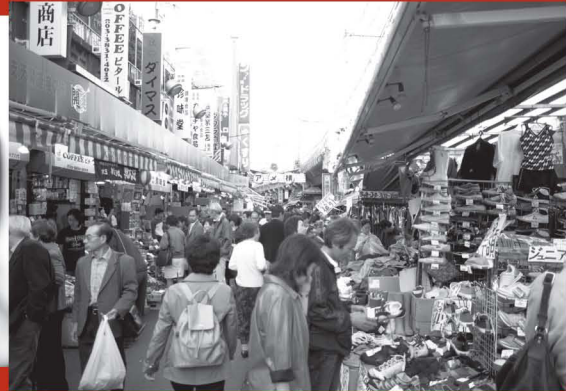
### Rough Road of Innovation

Christians willing to be innovative and willing to do God's will on earth must have courage: "Creativity is dangerous. We cannot open ourselves to new insight without endangering the security

of our prior assumptions. We cannot propose new ideas without risking disapproval and rejection. Creative achievement is the boldest initiative of mind, an adventure that takes its hero simultaneously to the rim of knowledge and the limits of propriety."<sup>45</sup> Because of the Fall, people have a natural and sometimes rabid antipathy to any change brought about through innovation. As Von Krogh said, "People are loath to accommodate new knowledge that undermines or runs counter to their stories, especially if that knowledge is conveyed by other group participants with different backgrounds,"<sup>46</sup> mirrored by Grudin when he noted, "Many valid new ideas endanger the interests vested in established theories and no professional field, no matter how enthusiastically it endorses innovation, is free from a nagging and purely self-interested resentment of newness."<sup>47</sup> Might we occasionally fail in our innovation efforts? Absolutely! As Grudin clarifies, "To think creatively is to walk at the edge of chaos. In thinking the original, we risk thinking the ridiculous. In opening the way for a few good ideas, we open the way for many bad ones, lopsided equations, false syllogisms, and pure nonsense dished up by unhindered impulse."<sup>48</sup> Schwartz similarly echoes, "Failure is the rule rather than the exception, and every failure contains information... Perseverance must be accompanied by the embrace of failure. Failure is what moves you forward. Listen to failure."<sup>49</sup> Failure is neither a reflection upon the intensity of our faith nor of the power of the One we serve, "a God who makes all things new."<sup>50</sup>

Innovation, like all other elements of our lives, must be considered in its eternal context, "The purpose of your life is far greater than your own personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness. It's far greater than your family, your career, or even your wildest dreams and ambitions. If you want to know why you were placed on this planet, you must begin with God. You were born by his purpose and for his purpose."<sup>51</sup> Creative innovation is a path we may take to know, praise, communicate, and partner with the remarkably innovative God who made us all.

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