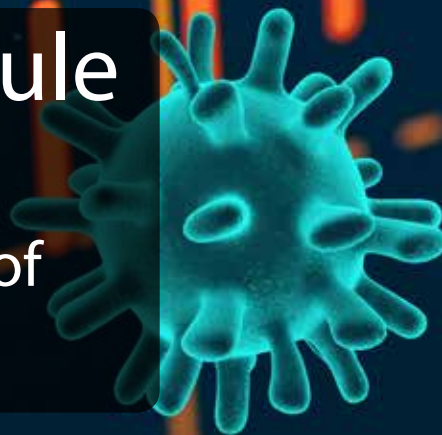


God's pandemic rule and redemption

Business and the renewal of the global economy



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A tiny virus has proved able to bring the global economy almost to a standstill. Spreading at dramatic speed, it has brought death and disease to millions and so disrupted lives, livelihoods, communities and businesses worldwide that GDP levels have plunged and debt has soared. As always in times of crisis, it is people in poverty who suffer the most. As unemployment has risen, foodbank demand has outstripped supply. Governments around the world have urged handwashing with clean running water and soap – two things out of reach to millions of the world's poor. Healthcare systems in many developing countries are so fragile that the disease could still overwhelm them. The number of ventilators in some countries can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

In short, nothing good can be said about the way this virus treats its victims. Those victims include almost all the world's population – albeit to widely varying degrees – because of the way the virus has taken advantage of our global interconnectedness. There is, therefore, every reason for a Christian response to the pandemic to be characterised not only with charity but also with deep lament. Parts of the Bible that contain such lament deserve fresh attention, not least from those involved in leading public worship.

Christians, however, are also called to faith and hope. They do so because of the comprehensive scope of Christ's sovereignty and redemption. Some of the scriptural basis for this tenet of faith can be found in the oft-repeated words 'all things,'

'everything' and 'every' in the following passage from Colossians (1.15–23), which is widely thought to be a hymn or creed used by the early Church (vs 15–20 NRSV):

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Set within its context in the epistle, Paul seems to be saying that the gospel is not merely of consequence to individuals, nor merely to the human race as whole, but to the entire cosmos. The gospel is good news because it proclaims Christ's lordship over, and redemption of, all that exists.¹

The word pandemic is derived from the Greek *pándēmos* ('common' or 'public') and is made up of *pán* ('all') and *dēmos* ('people'). This is reflected in the fact that the word pandemic can be used as an adjective to mean general, or universal. Christ's sovereignty and redemption, because they encompass all that exists, can therefore be described as truly pandemic. The coronavirus may

have the word crown (*corona*) in its name but Christians know that its power is subsumed – and will eventually be defeated – by Christ, whose crown of thorns stands as a symbol not only of his suffering but also of his all-encompassing sovereignty and redemption.

This is the background against which this article focuses on positive ways in which business is responding, or needs to respond, to the huge challenges the current crisis has presented. It is offered in the belief that the flourishing of individuals, communities and nations depends on the flourishing of business. It is the economic crisis, rather than the Covid-19 disease itself, that has brought the most suffering to the world's seven billion people. When business suffers, we all suffer but the poor suffer the most.

Response to sudden change

The key challenge to the business world is the abrupt change to the way people work, shop, learn, socialise, travel and enjoy leisure. While all these have been increasingly influenced by digital technologies for more than a decade, the global lockdown dramatically accelerated this development. With the sudden closure of most offices, stores, pubs, clubs, restaurants, gyms, cinemas, factories and centres of learning; with the cancellation of millions of flights; and with the introduction of protocols designed to limit most other forms of travel, the digital technology (DT) sector has boomed. Zoom is an obvious example. In April 2020 it surpassed 300 million daily Zoom meeting participants, a huge jump from 10 million in December 2019. Other examples include the gaming industry, and the online home fitness and exercise industry. Far from furloughing staff, such industries have been actively recruiting people, despite the challenges involved in initiating employees into their new spheres of work when they are working from home.

Another huge beneficiary, the fortunes of which are closely tied to DT, has been the natural world. In late 2019, the teenage environmental campaigner Greta Thunberg attracted huge media attention for eschewing air travel in favour of motorised land and sea transport. In early 2020, with the global grounding of air flights and the widespread 'stay at home' message, it almost looked like the world had outperformed Greta in terms of green credentials. Judging solely by the sudden shrinking of our carbon footprint, we are all Thunberg-style environmentalists now. Across the world, air pollution has plummeted and many endangered species of animals and plants have come out as humans have stayed in. The picture is complicated, as will become clear below, but there are grounds for hope,

Three ongoing revolutions

The pandemic, in other words, is providing a powerful boost to the Fourth and Fifth Industrial

Revolutions, and could be providing a conducive context for the Sixth. As we know from our school textbooks, the First Industrial Revolution was largely about mechanising the production of textiles and the harnessing of steam; the Second was mainly about electricity and steel; and the Third was about mass production. Without these,

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the second set of three industrial revolutions, still unfolding today, are unimaginable. They are the Fourth Industrial Revolution, associated with the rapid development of communication technology (ICT) and artificial intelligence (AI); the Fifth Industrial Revolution, loosely associated with the 'internet of things' or 'Industry 4.0'; and the Sixth Industrial Revolution, sometimes called the clean revolution, which is associated with low-carbon technologies.

The Fifth Industrial Revolution represents a convergence of new technologies and web-based processes, such as those utilised in 3D printing. Far from the churning out of millions of identical products, typical of the Third Revolution, the Fifth Revolution involves customised goods that can be produced on a local printer and controlled from a mobile phone. Due in part to the impact of the Covid-19, the weaver's cottage, which was replaced by the factory as a result of the first three revolutions, is returning to the centre of production. This time, however, the cottage can be in an African village, where tools, spare parts, or healthcare items such as coronavirus-beating personal protective equipment (PPE) and ventilation equipment, can be downloaded and printed.

But it is the Fourth Industrial Revolution that is receiving the greatest boost from the pandemic. Not only have DT companies, like Zoom, been booming, so have companies specialising in AI and big data, especially those that are involved in the design and supply of test, track and trace (TTT) technology. Although AI and big data are the subject of many conspiracy theories, and of the misgivings of many intellectuals, this technology has proved highly effective in helping to ensure workplaces can stay open in parts of the world that have embraced it – most notably South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan. Privacy concerns do need to be addressed but the mobile tracking of potential carriers and high-risk individuals is proving a vital key to protecting public health worldwide. The same is true of robots and drones that reduce the need for physical contact. The Fourth Industrial Revolution has provided many of the tools sorely needed to promote human flourishing at a time of intense human misery.

NOTES

1. Other notable passages of Scripture that bear out this view include John 1.1–3, Philippians 2.5–11 and Hebrews 1.1–4.

2. See the report, 'Coronavirus and the Social Impacts on Great Britain' on the Office for National Statistics website (www.ons.gov.uk).

3. See Caterina Bulgarella, 'Purpose-Driven Companies Evolve Faster than Others', *Forbes*, 21 September 2018. See www.forbes.com/sites/caterinabulgarella/2018/09/21/purpose-driven-companies-evolve-faster-than-others/#1035e1c955bc; and Punit Renjen, 'The Heart of Resilient Leadership: Responding to COVID-19', *Deloitte Insights*, 16 March 2020. See www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/economy/covid-19/heart-of-resilient-leadership-responding-to-covid-19.html

4. On the role of purpose in business, see Colin Mayer, *Prosperity: Better Business Makes the Greater Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

5. Ronald Cole-Turner, 'Science, Technology, and the Mission of Theology in a New Century,' in *God and Globalization Vol. 2. The Spirit and the Modern Authorities* (eds Max L Stackhouse, with Don S Browning; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), p. 143.

It is less clear what positive effects the pandemic might have on the decarbonising drive of the Sixth Industrial Revolution. Anti-contagion protocols and the corresponding rise in the use of DT have certainly reduced domestic and international travel and decreased air pollution. However, there is evidence that some protocols may have increased plastic consumption, largely as a result of an increase in the use of disposable items, such as PPE. Likewise, many of the conservation projects around the world that rely on income from tourists to fund the protection of endangered

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species are faced with the threat of termination – although it is, of course, questionable what the overall environmental benefit is of projects that are heavily dependent on tourism. In the energy markets, moreover, sharp falls in demand and price volatility are militating against a rapid transition to cleaner energy. Even so, the effect of the pandemic in the UK has been an abrupt halt to the burning of coal to produce electricity. The demand for electricity has dropped to such an extent that, for the first time in history, all the UK's electricity during the lockdown has been generated from renewable sources.

Aided by the pandemic, the clean revolution now appears to be succeeding in bringing the coal industry that fired the early Industrial Revolutions to an end. Whilst the motive for putting coal-based electricity on hold may have been as much financial as environmental – electricity from renewable sources, such as wind and solar, has become cheaper to produce than from coal – the crisis presents a unique opportunity to scale up attempts to rethink how energy is produced, supplied and consumed. Most old coal mines could be used to generate green energy, for instance. When underground mines, which are situated underneath about a quarter of British homes, are abandoned they fill up with water that is heated by geological processes. This water is a low carbon, sustainable source of geothermal energy, which can be distributed to nearby homes and businesses. In short, national governments need to collaborate with each other and with business to support a recovery that accelerates the clean revolution once the acuteness of the crisis subsides. Individual actions play a vitally important role but global co-ordinated action by business and its many stakeholders is also needed – at exceptional scale and speed.

Social solidarity

Now we come to what is perhaps the most promising, yet most fragile, of the apparent gains from this dreadful pandemic, something that is crucial both to the economic performance of businesses and to business' positive impact in society – an increased social solidarity. Through the exposure of our common vulnerability, the world has suddenly seen more vividly than ever before that the fate of more than seven billion people is interlinked. A spotlight has fallen on our human interdependence. It has helped us see that the ties that bind our global human community together are only as strong as the weakest of those ties.

This social solidarity lies behind a range of initiatives in which communities have come together to improvise and innovate in caring for the vulnerable and to show support for those who support them. A notable public display of this in the UK was the 'Clap for Carers' every Thursday evening, when lockdown Britons stood outside their front doors to applaud key workers. Whereas the recent Brexit debate divided communities, the Covid-19 crisis brought them together, generating a profound sense of togetherness, even though physically it forced people apart. This shift is reflected in research findings from the Office of National Statistics. The figures show a sharp increase in the proportion of people in Britain who believe their country will be more united and kinder as a result of the pandemic.²

Ironically, therefore, one of the effects of 'social distancing' has been social solidarity. Self-isolation has become not an expression of individual self-sufficiency but a way to engage in a communal struggle against a common enemy. People have come together around a shared cause, not unlike the way an earlier generation came together to oppose Nazi Fascism. Sadly, the demands of isolation have given cause for a rise in domestic abuse and a small minority have succumbed to fearful aggression. However, the need to isolate could be leading – against all expectation – towards a renewal of the 'we' that lies at the heart of every healthy society.

What is business for?

Business is often perceived as the antithesis of the 'we' because it is where individualism, selfishness and greed have free reign. It is, however, an essentially other-oriented activity. For business to achieve long-term success, it demands a culture of service, thrift, and self-denial. This can only operate within a strong moral framework, in part because it has to be co-operative, not merely competitive, to maximise value to customers. Its pursuit of profit is at the same time a pursuit of mutually beneficial outcomes based on trust. The survival of a business is not dissimilar to the survival of other communities in a pandemic – it is about taking part in a team sport, rather than in a sprint.

The pandemic is working, therefore, as a stimulus for companies to consider their social impact. This belongs, in business thinking, to the realm of purpose – what (beyond profit) is a company for? In a recent survey of business leaders, 79 per cent said that a business' purpose is central to its success; yet 68 per cent said that purpose plays little role in their business' decision-making processes.³ Making decisions that align with a company's purpose is particularly important during a crisis, when financial pressure is combined with pressure from stakeholders. Research suggests that purpose-driven companies thrive in a crisis because they have engaged employees determined to meet the changing needs of their customers. Again, companies are not unlike other organisations (and individuals); their response to adversity is determined to a large extent by their sense of purpose.⁴

This crisis is presenting to company leaders an opportunity to rethink and reimagine 'business as usual'. As with the post-Second World War generation of business leaders, they have an opportunity to shape the way things develop in the post-Covid-19 world. Whether or not they take it, that world will be different than the one before. The truth of the quip, 'The future is not what is used to be', means that they cannot afford to assume that everything will go back to normal.

There will, indeed, be a new normal. The 'norm' in normal comes from the Latin word *norma*, meaning a carpenter's square. This tool allows a woodworker to produce straight edges and accurate right angles. The mounting debate about the 'new normal' must, therefore, be more than about things like the use of facemasks and two-metre spaces in the workplace. It must also encompass the question what business wants its benchmarks, its metrics, to be. What norms, in other words, need to govern the rapid and far-reaching decisions it will need to take as it emerges from the crisis? What values will it put at the heart of its operations?

The true scale of the fallout of this pandemic to countries, communities and individuals is impossible to calculate. The damage can only be assessed in retrospect. But, however severe it turns out to be, the scope of the economic disruption it has caused is unparalleled. The world will only fully be able to function properly once a vaccine is found, or effective measures are in place to prevent the spread of the virus. That means people will continue to suffer, especially the poor – we all need business but the poor need business the most. Everyone has a duty to support the business sector, as all sectors of society rely on the material wealth that the business sector creates. This is the only way the long-term interests of the people and their planet can be met. Necessity being the mother of innovation, business will find ways to respond to the pandemic, as well as to the climate crisis that may in part have been its cause.

There are many examples of this happening already. Commercial employment agencies specialising in helping clients find work in the hospitality industry have been turning their focus to employment opportunities in farming. Alcoholic beverage companies have been turning some of their expertise and processes to the production of hand sanitisers. Manufacturers of cars and vacuum cleaners have been producing ventilators. Major multinationals have assigned vast resources to assist struggling healthcare services and small businesses. When a fearful scarcity mentality is displaced by a hopeful abundance mentality, it is amazing what new capacities and capabilities can be found to meet a new set of needs.

Instead, therefore, of seeing business as essentially individualistic and concerned with private interest, Christians ought to value business for its positive social potential and come to hold it in a similar regard to the way they hold their churches, neighbourhoods, voluntary organisations, schools and hospitals. If they were to do so, they would still find plenty wrong with business, but the attitude of trust that would spring from such regard would mean that any judgements and moral demands they were to make would be more likely to be heeded. Otherwise, as Ronald Cole-Turner puts it:

It is altogether too likely that the church will marginalize itself in the role of chaplain, picking up the pieces, caring for the bruised, mopping up the damage, but never engaging the engines of transformation themselves, steering, persuading and transforming the transformers.⁵

Without an appreciation of what Christ's pandemic rule and redemption means for the potential of business, it is unlikely that the Church will be able to construct a viable vision for post-Covid-19 society. This is because business is, whether it likes it or not, a key agent of social transformation. It is an institution to which the world has become increasingly committed, as seen in particular in the emerging economies of Africa, Asia and Latin America.

The extent to which the post-pandemic global economy supports human and environmental flourishing depends in part on how radically and creatively business people follow Christ into the global marketplace, seeking to pervade their business activities with his truth, liberty and justice – with his *shalom*. With its buildings having been shut during the lockdown, the Church is coming to a new appreciation that it exists as a dispersed community in which most of its members have opportunities to promote God's sovereignty and redemption in their daily lives, including those that work in business. Their work will help bring about positive social change from the bottom up through a norm-based renewal of the global economy.