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# Entrepreneurship as a Sign of Common Grace

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*The Old Fish Market on the Dam,  
Amsterdam (circa 1650)*

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## Entrepreneurship as a Sign of Common Grace

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Entrepreneurship benefits society in many ways. It delivers obvious and tangible economic blessings. The spiritual blessings of entrepreneurship are harder to see, and yet these are essential in order to arrive at a more complete understanding of the role entrepreneurship plays within a virtuous society. This article considers common grace as a helpful lens through which to view the spiritual reality of entrepreneurship and to discern the intangible contributions it provides to economic shalom. Viewed from the perspective of common grace, we can see that entrepreneurship bears witness to the beauty, creativity, power, and responsibility bestowed on God's image bearers to participate in the providence of economic shalom. Furthermore, common grace provides a context for discussion of the spiritual aspects of entrepreneurship, which can lead to a more profound understanding of business and economics than purely secular discussions can realize. Several themes stand out in this regard: multiformity, spiritual capital, beauty, civic virtue, and risk. We address these themes with special attention to the work of Abraham Kuyper. In conclusion, we see how common grace contributes to an understanding of the spiritual dimensions of entrepreneurship and how this perspective affirms entrepreneurship as a positive movement in the direction of economic shalom.

### Entrepreneurship as a Sign of Common Grace

For all the benefits entrepreneurship offers by way of economic prosperity, its spiritual dimensions have been relatively less well explored. My aim here is to explore the spiritual aspects of entrepreneurship in order to arrive at a fuller understanding of its role in sustaining a virtuous society and in propagating

movement in the direction of economic shalom. Common grace provides a useful theological context for this effort.

The material contributions of entrepreneurship to the political economy have been well noted.<sup>1</sup> These tangible benefits to the common good might rightly be considered the most direct expression of common grace through entrepreneurial activity. The key idea here is that economic prosperity can be seen as a sign of God's grace-filled blessing, which is distributed to humankind to be shared as a common gift that benefits the whole society. This is indeed an essential reason to consider entrepreneurship as a positive influence within a market economy—as true within a secular worldview as within a theological one. A purely secular appreciation of entrepreneurship, however, stops short of recognizing its greater contributions. As long as the discussion remains shielded from theological considerations, the deeper significance of entrepreneurship may go unnoticed. To draw out the implications of theological understanding is the challenging task of public theology. As Max Stackhouse says, one of the primary purposes of public theology is to earn a hearing and “give guidance to the structures and policies of public life.”<sup>2</sup> By viewing entrepreneurship through the lens of common grace, we intend to provide a venue in which to do precisely as Stackhouse suggests and give guidance to the structures and policies that nurture economic shalom.

This attempt at developing a constructive public theology will require consideration of the more imaginative and spiritual aspects of entrepreneurship, which have typically been underemphasized, if not ignored, in comparison with the tangible impact entrepreneurship has within market economies. Common grace provides a context for discussing the spiritual dimension of human flourishing and the role of entrepreneurship in society. Through the lens of common grace, we can perceive the beauty of God's creation. In the case of entrepreneurship, this entails the creative power and responsibility bestowed on God's image bearers.

The consideration of beauty within the spirit and practice of entrepreneurship opens a window of fresh opportunity for public theology to address the hermeneutical and spiritual needs of our secular age. The presumption that reality is best understood within the context of the *saeculum*, referring to the culturally acceptable and prevalent understanding of time that pervades the moral imagination of our age, dominates our cultural mores. The prevailing presumption is that we live in ordinary time, as opposed to a spiritually defined sense of time and our place within it.<sup>3</sup> Conversations that take place in the public square therefore presume the reality of ordinary time in opposition to a spiritual sense of time understood within the context of eternity and a divine *telos* that frames human history.

Because the theme of beauty breaks through the typically mundane considerations of economics and business that tend to dominate conversations in the



public square, beauty offers an opportunity to discuss the deeper significance of our lives. This is what makes beauty a compelling aspect of common grace: It invites consideration of the moral issues from a perspective that encompasses a transcendent understanding of human nature, a rationale for human flourishing, and a deeper meaning for the *telos* of the political economy.

## Historical Context

Before exploring the more imaginative aspects of our thesis, it will be helpful to note the historical frame of reference for the concepts of entrepreneurship and common grace. A seminal doctrinal statement of common grace comes from the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA). Together with other related denominations, the CRC in North America emphasized the teaching of common grace as originally put forth by Abraham Kuyper. Three fundamental themes emerged in this early twentieth-century statement, offering a systematic explanation of the primary ways in which common grace operates within society: (1) natural blessings of creation and providence distributed to humanity, (2) the restraint of sin in human affairs, and (3) positive acts of civic righteousness.<sup>4</sup>

It is easy to see the natural blessings of common grace in economic productivity. The evidence of abundance and fruitfulness is all around us. These blessings of entrepreneurship are common in societies fortunate enough to benefit from the innovation and hard work of entrepreneurs who deliver valuable products through a market system. The classic twentieth-century description of entrepreneurship and the crucial, irreplaceable role it plays in economic progress comes from Austrian-American economist Joseph Schumpeter in his landmark 1942 book, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*. Schumpeter describes entrepreneurship as the “fundamental impulse that sets and keeps the capitalist engine in motion.”<sup>5</sup> According to Schumpeter, entrepreneurs

reform or revolutionize the pattern of production by exploiting an invention or, more generally, an untried technological possibility for producing a new commodity or producing an old one in a new way, by opening up a new source of supply of materials or a new outlet for products, by reorganizing an industry, and so on.<sup>6</sup>

In all these ways, entrepreneurs deliver tangible blessings and contribute to the proper functioning of the social architecture.

There is nothing inherently religious or theological in this understanding of entrepreneurship. Indeed, within any given industry there is typically little obvious difference between the business activity of entrepreneurs with religious

faith and those without. This is another indication of the value common grace brings to the discussion; it invites consideration of how the blessings of God's providence might appear when viewed within a secular context.

With regard to the second doctrinal principle, the restraint of sin, entrepreneurship may be seen to play a preservative role in society, serving to buffer the effects of sin, by encouraging the formation of social constructs in which virtuous behavior is rewarded and vices are thereby constrained by social pressures. This is the line of reasoning developed by Max Weber in his classic 1905 book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.<sup>7</sup> Weber argues that the impetus of American business prowess is grounded in the pursuit of religious virtues that contribute to economic prosperity. While the economic incentives of entrepreneurship that are encouraged by capitalism do not directly restrain sin *per se*, they do indicate how entrepreneurship can serve to form and reinforce social constructs in which sinful behaviors are crowded out by the rewards bestowed on virtuous behaviors. Thus, by embodying the virtues that contribute to human flourishing, entrepreneurship can serve as a balm of some sort by protecting society against corruption and channeling human energies into productive activities that benefit the whole.

The role of virtuous business behavior in society has also been explored as a component of "spiritual capital." This is a fruitful avenue of thought that explores the cultivation of virtues through entrepreneurial behaviors. Spiritual capital may be thought of as a contributing factor in the establishment and sustainability of infrastructures and cultural norms that harness the energy of industrious souls who are willing to take risks, work hard, play fair, and see their efforts pay off in the form of economic shalom and wealth creation for society in general. To this extent, entrepreneurship may be seen as a sign of common grace through the restraint of sin and the discouragement of nonvirtuous market behavior.

Another way in which entrepreneurship may provide protection against the effects of sin is its capacity to generate solutions to pressing concerns. Disease, poverty, and natural hardships can be seen as manifestations of sin and the world's need for redemption. In the face of these trials, entrepreneurship can be a source of problem solving and economic viability, advancing human flourishing as best as can be done within the technological limitations of each passing age. Of course, entrepreneurship is neither an idealized universal good nor a perfection of virtue. Sin can and does intrude on the operation of fair and efficient market forces. The list of market failures would seem to be endless, even in societies that endorse entrepreneurial business values. Nonetheless, the point stands that entrepreneurship cultivates virtues that are generally valued and rewarded within

a free market, and entrepreneurial behavior thus helps restrain the otherwise unbounded and perverse power of sin in economic systems.

The third doctrinal principle of common grace is civic righteousness. This can be observed in the ingenuity, diligence, and sacrifice by which entrepreneurs contribute to the common good. Peter Berger sums up the identity of the “Western type of entrepreneur” in terms of individualism, responsibility, asceticism, rationality, and a strong sense of conscience that makes them reliable and trustworthy.<sup>8</sup> These attributes offer a fitting description of civic righteousness. Schumpeter highlights the distinctive contribution of entrepreneurs by saying that their chief function in society “consists in getting things done.”<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, to the extent that entrepreneurs create jobs, enhance productivity, and bring beneficial innovations to market, they bring prosperity to society. These are the fruits of their civic righteousness. Of course, this is not universally true of all entrepreneurial activity. There can also be uncivil forms of entrepreneurship that violate moral norms. Negative effects can also be induced by well-intentioned entrepreneurship, as seen in the disruptions of markets,<sup>10</sup> and in cases where profit-seeking motivates win-lose transactions that diminish, rather than build the prosperity of the whole.<sup>11</sup> Overall, entrepreneurship makes a generally positive contribution to the common good and is usually seen to be a necessary and essential component of properly functioning market economies.

This brief summary of the blessings wrought through entrepreneurial activity sketches the many ways in which entrepreneurship bears witness to common grace. The economic benefits alone, however, fail to provide a rationale capable of appreciating the deeper moral significance of market-driven behavior and the character strengths of dignity, virtue, and altruism that Christian faith has to offer. Thus, the more imaginative aspects of common grace, beauty in particular, remain worthy of exploration as important attributes of entrepreneurship.

## **Toward an Aesthetic Appreciation of Entrepreneurship**

An aesthetic appreciation of entrepreneurship is necessary for the simple reason that facile, merely pragmatic interpretations fall short of the full import of common grace. The ultimate value of common grace is to inspire appreciation for the higher spiritual truths that can be apprehended from a posture of faith. Aesthetic sensibilities open the soul to apprehend a higher plane of truth. As Dostoyevsky said so well through the mouth of Prince Lev Nikolayevich Myshkin in *The Idiot*, “Beauty will save the world.” Kuyper’s expression of common grace displays this aesthetic sensibility. John Bolt makes an incisive point when he describes

Kuyper as a “‘poet,’ a man of rhetoric and mythos,” intent on “reviving and using a Dutch, Christian-historical imagination through powerful rhetoric, well-chosen biblical images and national mythology.”<sup>12</sup>

Kuyper’s appreciation for the beauty of God’s creation displays an effervescing fascination with the astonishing variety of life:

Raise your eyes, look up at the starry heavens, and you will see not just a single beam of light but an undulating, scintillating sea of light coming from myriads of bright-shining stars, each of which the Lord calls “by name” for the simple reason that each has a name, a nature, and a substance of its own. They all differ in the speed of the light they emit and each of them sparkles along its own path. Uniformity in God’s creation! No, rather infinite diversity, an inexhaustible profusion of variations that strikes and fascinates you in every domain of nature, in the ever-varying shape of a snowflake as well as in the endlessly differentiated form of flower and leaf. Where in God’s entire creation do you encounter life that does not display the unmistakable hallmark of life precisely in the multiplicity of its colors and dimensions, in the capriciousness of its ever-changing forms?<sup>13</sup>

Kuyper has a Romantic appreciation for the wild, untamed, chaotic exuberance of life.<sup>14</sup> It is precisely this type of imaginative appreciation of the aesthetic that is necessary to overcome the rhetoric of the *saeculum*.

Richard Mouw, in his perceptive interpretation of Kuyper on the theme of common grace, recognizes the importance of thinking in terms of “the category of the *aesthetic*.”<sup>15</sup> Mouw calls our attention to the need to recognize the importance of the aesthetic as a valid witness to common grace. Aesthetic appreciation provides a window to the pleasure we may presume God takes in the beauty of his creation and in the fulfillment of his will. Aesthetic appreciation thus provides a helpful perspective to common grace, for the apprehension of beauty is common to human experience; it aims the soul in the direction of God, even if not explicitly as an outworking of specific grace.

Aesthetic awareness of common grace provides a constructive counterpoint to the dominant voices of public discourse in matters of economics, which are particularly prone to disregard aesthetics. The practical economic outcomes of entrepreneurial activity are insufficient to establish an appreciation for the greater spiritual reality at work. What we wish to endorse and affirm in the entrepreneurial spirit is neither the driving ambition to acquire wealth, nor the calculating shrewdness of marketplace victory, nor the quantifiable impacts on GDP but, rather, the deeper values on display in the human spirit that lead to civic righteousness.

This provides all the more reason to examine aesthetic qualities in entrepreneurship, to seek beauty in it, and to offer an interpretation of these aspects through the lens of common grace. To raise the level of discourse in the public square from the merely functional and utilitarian to the realm of moral discernment, one must step outside the merely economic considerations to gain a holistic vantage on life and society. This is precisely the sort of vantage point that common grace can provide. Wilhelm Röpke, a leading professor of economics, and one of the first academics to be expelled from Germany by Hitler, saw the challenge clearly. He criticized the arrogance and moral blindness of pragmatism and scientism in economics and made an appeal to transcendent values:

The ultimate moral support of the market economy lies outside the market. Market and competition are far from generating their moral prerequisites autonomously. This is the error of liberal immanentism. These prerequisites must be furnished from outside, and it is, on the contrary, the market and competition which constantly strain them, draw upon them, and consume them.<sup>16</sup>

To resist the tide of immanentism and materialism requires imagination. Beauty awakens awareness to the greater reality of transcendence. This is just as important in the consideration of economics as in any other human endeavor. To see the moral implications of the market, not to mention of life in general, requires perspective on the transcendent values of human dignity. Once the language of public life loses contact with the concepts of grace and civic righteousness, there is little more to be said concerning entrepreneurship than can be expressed in terms of metrics, laws, and moral rules of thumb.<sup>17</sup> Hence, it is important to consider the more imaginative aspects of righteousness and beauty as aspects of entrepreneurship.

## Multiformity

Multiformity is one aspect of beauty that can be seen in the fruit of entrepreneurship. Kuyper invokes the idea of “multiformity” to describe the “rich profusion of the different shades of life.”<sup>18</sup> He sees it in the utter diversity of creatures, crafts, and callings as hallmarks of God’s beauty shining in the creation. From the beginning, God’s signature was revealed in diversity of heaven and earth and especially in the profusion of abundant life in the garden. Kuyper suggests that “multiformity is the undeniable mark of fresh and vigorous life.”<sup>19</sup> Multiformity is thus a telltale indicator of common grace because it offers to all a sign of God’s beautiful design revealed in and through the creation. Echoing

Psalms 19, Kuyper says, “Look about you in the theater of nature . . . which bears the signature of God.”<sup>20</sup>

Multiformity in business occurs in the never-ending profusion of innovative new products, solutions, and services that are the fruit of entrepreneurial activity. These are the fruits of the multiform gifts of talent, inspiration, and opportunity that individuals bring into the marketplace. Admittedly, not all innovations are good ones (cf. Rom. 1:30), and not all are conducive to economic shalom. The antithesis of grace is also at work in the market where sin impinges on individual freedom. Nonetheless, the antithesis does not drown out the goodness of beauty that can be seen in creative entrepreneurship. Look, for example, at the endless variety of craftsmanship in countless different trades, the variety of foods in markets, the conveniences brought about through new technologies, and the unending stream of advances in environmental stewardship and medical treatments. All these are brought forth through entrepreneurship. Individuals and small businesses are especially prolific in regard to this multiformity.

A further sign of common grace is the order that emerges from the teeming variety of the market, similar to the order evident in the vast teeming variety of nature. Kuyper discerns an organic movement in the direction of revealed harmony and order:

Life often presents itself to us as an enormous muddle, a vast multicolored miscellany of things in which we look in vain for unity. But the deep meaning of the whole of divine revelation is that the ways of God lead from all this diversity toward unity, out of this chaos toward order. It tells us that one day by his will all dissonances will dissolve into harmony . . . a kingdom of heaven all-encompassing in glory.<sup>21</sup>

Kuyper thus sees the natural order as a sign of God’s active presence that brings order from chaos. In this regard, Kuyper’s witness to the “deep meaning” found in the natural order of things is paralleled later in the twentieth century by Friedrich von Hayek’s remarks about the market economy as a sign of natural order that emerges from chaos. Of course, there is a vast difference between Kuyper’s view of God’s active presence and Hayek’s nontheistic, evolutionary naturalism. Nonetheless, Hayek’s sense of *spontaneity* can be seen to run in a direction parallel to Kuyper’s appreciation of *multiformity*. Hayek sees economic and societal “spontaneous order” emerging from the chaotic energy of human life,<sup>22</sup> while Kuyper notices the harmony that results from God’s sovereignty over the enormous muddle of life. Without acknowledging any divine power, Hayek admires the way in which a robust economy arises spontaneously to produce wealth, establishing an ordered market economy in the process. Kuyper sees

the glory of God in it. Despite their vastly different perspectives, both Kuyper and Hayek would endorse and admire the freeform, chaotic nature of individual freedom at work in the marketplace. For Kuyper, there arises from this teeming spontaneity a pleasing order to things; as Mouw observes, “Kuyper’s fondness for pluriformity ran deep. He was convinced that God himself loves many-ness. Indeed, on his reading of the biblical account, the Creator had deliberately woven many-ness into the very fabric of creation.”<sup>23</sup>

From Kuyper, we learn to appreciate the beauty of this “pluriformity” in which the endless diversity of individual talents and interests serve to build culture, create viable business enterprises and bring shalom. These beneficial displays of pluriformity point to common grace. Entrepreneurship thus points to the “infinite diversity, [and] inexhaustible profusion of variations that strikes and fascinates you in every domain of nature,” and that is “the undeniable mark of fresh and vigorous life.”<sup>24</sup>

## Spiritual Capital

There is a strong connection among the ideas of spiritual capital, entrepreneurship, and common grace. *Spiritual capital* can be used as a catchall phrase to capture the idea that virtuous business behavior and, hence, economic prosperity spring from the endowment of religiously inspired virtues within a society. Several commentators present entrepreneurship as a prime example to explain how biblical values and Christian virtues provide a foundation for virtuous business behavior that serves the common good. In other words, the blessings of common grace translate into tangible economic blessings (i.e., “economic shalom”) through virtuous business behavior.<sup>25</sup>

Spiritual capital thus offers a rationale to advocate for new approaches to capitalism based in notions of transcendent purpose. Recent proposals based in “rethinking” the purposes of capitalism have been put forth by Bill Gates of Microsoft and John Mackey of Whole Foods. Gates advocates for “creative capitalism,” and Mackey advocates for “conscious capitalism.”<sup>26</sup> Neither of their proposals is explicitly theological, yet each proposal places transcendent value on human dignity and human flourishing—values that are sustained by religious faith, even though faith may remain tacit. These proposals have earned a hearing in business as well as in the academic community. Their appeal speaks to the trend of popular interest in seeking a rationale and pathway to move capitalism in the direction of normative recognition of the spirituality of work and an understanding of the common good that transcends the notion of maximization of profit.

Recently, Theodore Malloch has popularized the conjoined ideas of spiritual capital and spiritual entrepreneurship. He defines spiritual capital as the fund of beliefs, examples, and commitments that are transmitted from generation to generation through a religious tradition, and that attach people to the transcendental source of human happiness.<sup>27</sup>

Because the idea of spiritual capital can be applied to virtues of transcendental value and to a spiritual *telos* for entrepreneurial activity without invoking specific religious traditions or faiths, it has merit in discussions of such things in the public square. Spiritual capital can therefore be seen as an expression of common grace. The premise is the same—God’s blessings (here in the form of entrepreneurial talent, virtue, and rightly ordered relationships) are distributed to humanity, and they result in blessings through civic righteousness in service of the common good.

To the extent that entrepreneurship is motivated by virtues—compassion, creativity, honesty, fortitude, perseverance, and *caritas*, for example—it bears witness to the reality of common grace. For this reason, entrepreneurs are frequently admired for their virtue, passion, and dedication to do business with a higher calling that transcends profit. They are capable of inspiring others to transcendent purposes and higher values. Steve Jobs, for example, did not see money as the motivation to create products or do business. He explained that entrepreneurs are not motivated by the desire to make money, but rather, they desire to “make a contribution and add to the legacy of those who went before.” He saw his greatest achievement as building a company that would “stand for something a generation or two from now,” and that is why he spoke admiringly of Walt Disney, Bill Hewlett, David Packard, and the founders of Intel.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Jerry Sanders, cofounder of the Silicon Valley company AMD, said, “It wasn’t a quest for fame and fortune that drove us in those early years of isolation and struggle. It was passion—a passion to develop, proliferate, and evangelize technology to empower people everywhere to lead more productive lives.”<sup>29</sup> When people pool their efforts to do wholesome business, they bear witness to their embodied spirituality, which is a sign of common grace.

## Entrepreneurial Image Bearers

The irreducible and supreme source of human dignity resides in our status as image bearers of our Creator. It is worth considering how entrepreneurship might bear witness to the *imago Dei*. We may consider creativity, willfulness, work, and the cultivation of beauty as hallmarks of the entrepreneurial spirit. These bear witness also to the *imago Dei*. The disposition and mandate to do the original work of



cultivation in the garden (Gen. 2:5–8, 15) find expression in entrepreneurship, as do the talent and motivation to create art. Creativity and the desire to make objects of beauty and usefulness have been central to human nature for all time, and are closely aligned with God’s will for the creation. Edmund Phelps, Nobel laureate in economics, identifies this creative streak as “the better part of human nature.”<sup>30</sup> He says, “[T]he positive moral content of economics [is] to realize an anthropology that starts with innovative human nature: *homo innovaticus*, not *homo economicus*.”<sup>31</sup>

The drive of God’s image bearers to create beauty, and their inspiration for doing so, point to God who in his grace reveals himself as the ultimate and primordial Creator and as the source of all creativity.<sup>32</sup> This gift of creative passion is conveyed in four specific traits of entrepreneurial behavior:<sup>33</sup>

1. Innovation—There is an element of clever inventiveness in the application of technology.
2. Intentionality—There is willfulness to provide something, a product or service, that makes a beneficial contribution to society.
3. Pragmatism—These innovations must be delivered in an economically feasible business model that yields tangible benefits for society. Mere creativity and inventiveness, no matter how artistic or original, are not enough.
4. Newness—Entrepreneurial businesses offer new benefits that can open unforeseen opportunities for customers and society in general, occasionally offering solutions to problems previously unrecognized.

Creativity and beauty are so embedded in the heart of God’s image bearers that it seems appropriate to define the fundamentally important aspect of human nature as the spirit of innovation that we see displayed in entrepreneurship. Charles Handy, writing from a secular point of view, offers this succinct summation of the fruits of capitalism: “Creativity, choice and responsibility, morality and community.”<sup>34</sup> These are indeed the same characteristics that we would expect of God’s image bearers.

## Grace and Risk

Risk taking is inherent in entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurs’ failures provide ample evidence of that fact. Many professional investors even weigh entrepreneurial failure as a paradoxical indicator of success based on the wisdom that it is better

to bet on someone who has learned humility from their mistakes than on someone who has not tasted failure.

Entrepreneurial risk taking is multifaceted. Two traits deserve mention here. First is the exercise of free will. Entrepreneurial behavior consists in a premeditated, intentional commitment to put oneself at risk for the sake of some inspired purpose. In addition to the risk of financial loss, entrepreneurs also face risks of relational, emotional, and spiritual losses. Second, entrepreneurial risk is motivated by a desire to deliver benefits to others, not merely to oneself. There is an element of grace in entrepreneurial behavior because it rests on the willful decision of an individual to commit personal time, energy, and resources in an effort to benefit others without any assurance that the self-sacrifice will reap benefits for others or for oneself.

To the extent that entrepreneurial behavior displays self-sacrifice for the sake of others, it serves as a mundane analog of divine love. We must be careful of course not to push this analogy very far. After all, there is an immeasurable gulf between the mundane reality of business risk for financial return, and the self-giving vulnerability of a loving God who chooses to be revealed in the self-emptying act of kenotic sacrifice (cf. Phil. 2:4–8). Notwithstanding the difference between the vulnerability revealed in divine love (*agape*) and the vulnerability of human actions, there remains an element of grace in entrepreneurial behavior. This connection between economic risk and other-love can be found in Augustine and other church fathers, as Anthony Percy explains:

The risky work of the entrepreneur, which facilitates an exchange between merchant and buyer, has the potential to intimate to us the risky work of Christ's Redemption. Christ undertook his work of exchange in obedience to his Father's will and out of love for man. So too, the entrepreneur, in obedience to the gifts he has been given, decides to risk his own personal wealth—to give of himself—not only for personal gain, but also for the benefit of others.<sup>35</sup>

The point here is not to glorify entrepreneurship; instead it is to notice the witness that entrepreneurship can bring to grace as a component of properly situated economic behavior. To the extent that risk-taking behavior is directed to the service of others, there is a modicum of grace present. We can see this as a transcendent value when risks are undertaken for the sake of the common good. The mere act of accepting the possibility of failure, yet stepping out in hope, is a sign of the spiritual longings of the human heart, and a pointer to transcendent values. There are of course abundant counterexamples of business motivations that are driven by idolatrous hearts and the allure of mammon (avarice), but these do not refute the presence of grace-filled longings in hearts that seek righteous-

ness. Even stained or cracked vessels may be able to carry some water. This can be true even when a thirsty soul neither understands why they are thirsty, nor comprehends the meaning of living water.

In this regard, Kuiper recognizes the essential and yet ineffable role of the Holy Spirit in “the formation of character, and the disposition of the whole person.”<sup>36</sup> The presence of grace or idolatry in entrepreneurial motivations is an interior matter of the heart and soul. Mouw addresses this mystery with a constructive suggestion about Kuiper:

He [Kuiper] acknowledges the need to account for these kinds of situations when he distinguishes between what he labels the “interior” and “exterior” operations of common grace. The latter label covers collective sorts of achievements, such as advances in scientific knowledge and the flourishing of the arts. The former, however, “is operative,” says Kuiper, “wherever civic virtue, a sense of domesticity, natural love, the practice of human virtue, the improvement of the public conscience, integrity, mutual loyalty among people, and a feeling for piety leaven life.”<sup>37</sup>

Grace is therefore present in two ways—in the outworking of risk taking for the sake of the whole and in the mysterious interior movement of the human heart toward redemption.

Sin, the antithesis of grace at work in the world, can disrupt the movement of grace in economic transactions. Self-seeking, extractive manipulations of fiscal power can become powerful forces at odds with God’s design for human flourishing. The church has a role to play here on two accounts: a prophetic role in decrying manipulative abuses, and a priestly role in pointing to the grace-filled opportunities of entrepreneurial activity that is invested in the calling to be image bearers. In this regard, the church can be a vital conduit and encouragement for the deployment of entrepreneurial gifts and for the cultivation of a virtuous society in which those gifts will bear more and more fruit. The church

“need[s] to avoid the sneer” with respect to business, and instead “to communicate quite the opposite, recognizing that entrepreneurs and investors can develop institutions fully consistent with the dignity of labor and that result in ... feeding the hungry and clothing the naked. That is God’s work just as fully as charity.”<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion

Entrepreneurship plays a crucial role in the proper function of a market economy. Its contribution to productivity and prosperity has long been recognized. The entrepreneurial skill set has become prized in modern corporations, and within the past twenty years or so, entrepreneurship has even acquired the status of being taught as a subject in its own right, in both secular and Christian business schools.

To view entrepreneurship through the lens of common grace opens the way to a fresh understanding of its spiritual dimensions. Entrepreneurial activity bears witness to the sorts of virtues, behaviors, inclinations, and impact that are to be expected of God's image bearers. This is a helpful contribution to the mundane considerations that dominate public discourse and to the typically unspiritual rationales put forward in consideration of public policy pertaining to the health of political economy.

We have briefly highlighted the ways in which entrepreneurship bears witness to the blessings of common grace—beauty, multiformity, spiritual capital, image bearing, and risk-taking behavior for the sake of the common good—all give evidence of common grace. These are vital ingredients for economic shalom.

If we wish to see the beneficial effects of common grace bring more economic shalom to more people in more places on earth, we should therefore pay more attention to fostering entrepreneurship. Indeed, there would seem to be no more effective way to cultivate and produce the fruit of economic shalom than to inspire and nurture entrepreneurial image bearers. Our exploration of the links between entrepreneurship and common grace allows us to imagine how the entrepreneurial spirit may be nurtured and to see how the free market can bestow the blessings of common grace.

Given the decline of religious dialog in the public square, and the tendency in public discourse to reduce capitalism and economics down to bare metrics shorn of transcendent values,<sup>39</sup> there is a vital need for constructive public theology to uphold transcendental truths.<sup>40</sup> Dealing with similar concerns in his own time, Abraham Kuyper pointed the way forward by encouraging Christians “to continually expand the dominance of more noble and more pure ideals in civil society by the courageous action of its members in every area of life.”<sup>41</sup> We may take at least one step in that direction by exhorting and encouraging the higher aims of entrepreneurial behavior.

## Notes

1. Peter L. Berger, *Pyramids of Sacrifice: Political Ethics and Social Change* (New York: Basic Books, 1974); George Gilder, *Wealth and Poverty* (San Francisco: ICS Press, 1993); Michael Novak, *Business as a Calling: Work and the Examined Life* (New York: Free Press, 1996); Theodore Roosevelt Malloch, *Spiritual Enterprise: Doing Virtuous Business* (New York: Encounter Books, 2008); Kenman L. Wong and Scott B. Rae, *Business for the Common Good: A Christian Vision for the Marketplace* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011); Robert A. Sirico, *The Entrepreneurial Vocation* (Grand Rapids: Acton Institute, 2012); and John Bolt, *Economic Shalom: A Reformed Primer on Faith, Work, and Human Flourishing* (Grand Rapids: Christian's Library Press, 2013).
2. Max L. Stackhouse, *Public Theology and Political Economy: Christian Stewardship in Modern Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), xi.
3. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007), 54–55.
4. The seminal pronouncement of these systematic themes came from the 1924 meeting of the Christian Reformed Synod of Kalamazoo; see John Bolt, "Common Grace and the Christian Reformed Synod of Kalamazoo (1924): A Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Retrospective," *Calvin Theological Journal* 35 (April 2000): 7–36, reprinted by the Protestant Reformed Churches in America's official website, last modified January 29, 2013, <http://www.prca.org/resources/publications/articles/item/324-common-grace-and-the-christianreformed-synod-of-kalamazoo-1924>.
5. Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1950), 83.
6. Schumpeter, *Capitalism*, 132.
7. Max Weber, *Protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (1905), trans. R. H. Tawney as *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1930).
8. Peter Berger, *The Capitalist Revolution: Fifty Propositions About Prosperity, Equality, and Liberty* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 107–8.
9. Schumpeter, *Capitalism*, 132.
10. Schumpeter invokes the idea of "creative destruction" to describe the short-term negative consequences of entrepreneurial innovations. See Schumpeter, *Capitalism*, 83.
11. Joseph E. Stiglitz labels these self-serving excesses of market power as "rent-seeking," to imply that they neither increase productive capacity nor produce any value to society but merely extract "rent" from the system. See Stiglitz, *The Price of*

*Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers our Future* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012).

12. John Bolt, "Abraham Kuyper as Poet: Another Look at Kuyper's Critique of the Enlightenment," in *Kuyper Reconsidered: Aspects of His Life and Work*, ed. Cornelis van der Kooi and Jan de Bruijn (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 1999), 30–41, 34.
13. Abraham Kuyper, "Uniformity: The Curse of Modern Life," in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 34.
14. Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, 19.
15. Richard Mouw, *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 37.
16. Wilhelm Röpke, *A Humane Economy: The Social Framework of the Free Market* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1971), 126. I owe thanks to Joseph Baldacchino for bringing this quote to my attention. See Joseph Baldacchino, *Economics and the Moral Order* (Washington, DC: National Humanities Institute, 1985), 21.
17. As Marilyn Robinson deduces, when the character of generosity (grace/*caritas*) is removed from public discourse, the sole motive of capitalism is reduced to "grasping materialism." See Robinson, *When I Was a Child I Read Books* (New York: Picador, 2012), xiv–xv.
18. Kuyper, "Uniformity," 25.
19. Kuyper, "Uniformity," 25.
20. Kuyper, "Uniformity," 34.
21. Kuyper, "Uniformity," 21.
22. Nicholas Wapshott, *Keynes Hayek: The Clash That Defined Modern Economics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011), 43.
23. Richard J. Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper: A Short and Personal Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 17.
24. Kuyper, "Uniformity," 25, 34. Mouw reinforces this connection by mentioning business activity as a realm of "sphere sovereignty," in which Kuyper's ideas of freedom and common grace would obtain. Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper*, 24.
25. See Deirdre McCloskey, "Avarice, Prudence, and the Bourgeois Virtues," in *Having: Property and Possession in Religious and Social Life*, ed. William Schweiker and Charles T. Mathewes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 312–36; Nicholas Capaldi and Theodore R. Malloch, *America's Spiritual Capital* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2012); J. Coleman, "Wealth Creation, Social Virtues, and Sociality: Social

- Capital's Role in Creating and Sustaining Wealth," in *The True Wealth of Nations: Catholic Social Thought and Economic Life*, ed. Daniel Finn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 199–225; and Ken A. Eldred, *God Is at Work* (Montrose, CO: Manna Ventures, 2009).
26. See M. E. Kinsley, C. Clarke, and A. V. Banerjee, *Creative Capitalism: A Conversation with Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, and Other Economic Leaders* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008); John Mackey and R. Sisodia, *Conscious Capitalism: Liberating the Heroic Spirit of Business* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press), 2013.
  27. Malloch, *Spiritual Enterprise*, 11–12.
  28. Walter Isaacson, *Steve Jobs* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 569.
  29. Michael S. Malone, *Betting It All: The Entrepreneurs of Technology* (New York: Wiley, 2002), vi.
  30. Edmund Phelps, "Economic Justice and the Spirit of Innovation," *First Things*, October 2009, 31.
  31. Phelps cites Silicon Valley as an exemplary model of this sort of innovation and concludes that "capitalism's dynamism offers to human experience and human benefit the true moral dimension of economics ... [and] it allows human beings to realize their true nature as creators and innovators." Phelps, "Economic Justice," 31.
  32. For a recent discussion of this seminal idea, see Steven R. Guthrie, *Creator Spirit: The Holy Spirit and the Art of Becoming Human* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011).
  33. I have elaborated on these traits previously in Bruce Baker, "Silicon Valley and the Spirit of Innovation: How California's Entrepreneurial Ethos Bears Witness to Spiritual Reality," in *Theology and California*, ed. F. Sanders and J. Sexton (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2014), 163–88.
  34. Charles Handy, *The Hungry Spirit: Beyond Capitalism—A Quest for Purpose in the Modern World* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998), 53.
  35. Anthony Percy, *Entrepreneurship in the Catholic Tradition* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 136.
  36. Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri de Vries (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1900), 24.
  37. Mouw, *He Shines*, 43. Mouw references here Abraham Kuyper, "Common Grace," in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, 181.
  38. James R. Rogers, "Business and the Way of the Cross," *First Things*, August 28, 2012, <http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2012/08/business-and-the-way-of-the-cross>.

39. Deirdre McCloskey diagnoses the problem aptly: “Economics has lost its ethical bearings, which is no wonder considering its fierce secularism.” See McCloskey, “Avarice, Prudence, and the Bourgeois Virtues,” 318. She catalogs the unfortunate consequences of this problem in McCloskey, *The Bourgeois Virtues: Ethics for an Age of Commerce* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).
40. Joseph Bottum elaborates the story of the decline in religious understanding and the deleterious influence the “spiritual anxiety” of our age has on America’s cultural ability to address the morality of capitalism and public policies. See Bottum, *An Anxious Age: The Post-Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of America* (New York: Image, 2014), 39, 83–86.
41. Kuyper, “Common Grace,” in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, 197.