
**INNOVATION THAT HONORS TRADITION:
THE MEANING OF CHRISTIAN INNOVATION**
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Abstract

How do Christians innovate when our credibility depends on continuity with the past and honoring tradition? Secular experts on innovation will say that the best way to innovate is to abandon the past. We cannot do that. How, then, do we create innovation that honors tradition? This is the first of two articles that begin to answer that question. This first article is about the meaning of Christian innovation, and the next one will be about the goal of Christian innovation. Each article assumes that innovation must honor tradition.

Introduction

“Innovate or die,” we hear it all the time. The iPhone camera destroyed Kodak, just as Amazon replaced Borders Books. In the same sense, since the 1960s, the American church has become more and more marginal. The problem is not the *survival* of the Church; Jesus will see to that. But the question remains: Will the church in America make a difference in the coming century? Right now it seems that the church has more in common with Kodak and Borders than with Apple and Amazon. We need Christian innovation.

The Church cannot be just like Apple and Amazon though. Christian innovation cannot be like secular innovation because it is not about making devices or apps. It is about making spiritual meaning; it is about helping people find meaning from God in the face of difficult situations. People desperately need God’s ambassadors to show them a new way to see the world, one that intertwines faith with daily life. For example, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., created a pathway for Southern African Americans that did not exist until he introduced it. Before Dr. King, they had two options

while living under the oppression of Jim Crow: They could erupt in violence, or they could acquiesce in pain. King introduced the path of nonviolence to the South. Beginning with the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, he paved a new way to respond. That is innovation. And he did it by making meaning; in other words, he gave them a new way to see the world and a new way to interpret their circumstances. When he stood in the pulpit on the first night of the boycott, society was telling his sisters and brothers that what they were doing was wrong. They wanted to fight the injustice around them, but they thought they had to break the law (and perhaps even disobey God) in order to fight for what was right. That night King changed the way they saw themselves and what they were doing. He told them that they were acting like Christians and like Americans, and he assured them that they would do both what Americans had always done and what Christians had always done. American citizens, he said, obey the law, just as Christians stand up for justice. So, he told them that they would obey the law *and* they would stand up for justice. And then he gave them an idea they had never heard. He told them about nonviolent protest. Before Rev. King, his people could either obey the law in pain, or they could stand for justice in violence. Dr. King's people did not need a new device; they needed new a new way to see the world. They found new meaning that paved a new avenue for action. King showed them how nonviolence allowed them to act like justice-loving Christians and also like law-abiding Americans. He gave them a third way that they had not considered. That is Christian innovation.

In one way, however, Christian innovation is similar to secular innovation—a way that what MLK did is similar to what Steve Jobs did. Average people do not create the devices they use; they choose from the options that others create for them. If I want a computer, I choose between an Apple and a Windows machine. Very few people create their own computer;

they choose from what is available. In the same way, people choose from a limited set of established options when they are deciding how to act in the world. Before the civil rights movement, only two options were known: violence or capitulation. That is where leaders become important. Leaders created the new options from which people choose.¹ Innovation came by legitimating an option that did not previously exist.

Let me illustrate how this plays out for the Church. Let us say that Gina is a computer programmer. In her office, there is a young man named Duc, who is in his first job after college. His immigrant parents sacrificed much so that he could get his degree. Let us say that Duc confides to Gina that the long hours and the distance from friends and family make Duc feel lonely and unloved. Let's also say that at an appropriate point in their conversations, Gina talks to Duc about the death and resurrection of Jesus. She tells him that God, in his great love, sent his Son to live and die as one of us in order that Duc might be connected to God and to other people. She tells him that instead of feeling unloved and lonely, he can experience the hope of love and community. But what happens if that gospel does not sound to Duc like hope? Perhaps he tells Gina that death seems terribly harsh and then he asks her, "Can't we talk about Jesus without all this stuff about his death?"

This is the moment when we see how Christian innovation has to be different from secular innovation. If Gina were a secular entrepreneur, she would listen to her "customer," find out that Duc finds Jesus' death distasteful, and innovate a new gospel that no longer has

¹ Leadership in this context does not always mean organizational or top-down leadership. Just as some inventors work in isolated garages, some Christians on the margins create new spiritual meanings. But just as those isolated inventors usually partner with established companies, so Christian innovators usually partner with established leaders and organizations to publicize their ideas. So legitimating new spiritual meaning is, as we shall see, a complicated dance between top-down and bottom-up leadership.

to talk about the shame of sin or the ugliness of death. But she cannot do that. We are permanently, inextricably (and fortunately) bound to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Gina cannot innovate a new gospel for Duc, and she cannot simply repeat to him the old ways of stating the good news. But she can innovate a new way to connect that unchanging gospel to the present experience of this person that God has entrusted to her care. Thus, Gina shows us how the needs of our current era require Christians to unite innovation and tradition; that is, to create a sparkling new future that honors the past. To put it another way: How do we maintain a rock-solid commitment to the unchanging Christian faith, while at the same time create innovative ways to express that faith?

This article has two parts, or, more specifically, the argument comes in two articles. The first appears in this issue of the *Journal*, and the second will run in the next issue. The articles together are part of a larger project. Let me explain the larger project and then describe how the two articles each move us toward addressing that project.

The larger project is an attempt to answer this question: How do Christians innovate when our credibility depends on continuity with the past and honoring tradition? Secular experts on innovation will say that the best way to innovate is to abandon the past.²

² The scholarly literature uses the term *innovation* in a number of ways. Birkinshaw describes “discontinuous innovation” and lists four kinds of research on it: research on industry structure, emerging customer needs, cognitive barriers, and internal mechanisms. Julian Birkinshaw, John Bessant, and Rick Delbridge, “Finding, Forming, and Performing: Creating Networks for Discontinuous Innovation,” *California Management Review* 49(3) (Spring 2007): 69; Clayton Christensen famously talks about disruptive innovation, starting with *The Innovator’s Dilemma: When New Technologies Cause Great Firms to Fail* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1997). Strategic innovation, as Govindarajan and Trimble describe it, is innovation that “breaks with past practice in at least one of three ways: value-chain design, conceptualization of customer value, and identification of potential customers.” Vijay Govindarajan and Chris Trimble, “Strategic Innovation” *Journal of Religious Leadership*, Vol. 14, No. 2, Fall 2015

We cannot do that. How, then, do we create innovation that honors tradition? These two articles begin to answer that question. The first article shows what we mean when we say that Christian innovation makes new meaning in the way that Martin Luther King, Jr., opened a new path for his people. The second article describes how the goal of innovation has to change if we are to address the needs of the current era. This article, then, is about the *meaning* of Christian innovation, and the next one will be about the *goal* of Christian innovation. Each article assumes that innovation must honor tradition.

Honoring the Christian Tradition

Every Christian's faith is dependent on the inherited Christian tradition. We receive the faith; we do not invent it. No Christian, for example, invents practices like prayer or beliefs such as "Jesus is Lord." We receive them both from God and from those who came before us. We are dependent on the Christian tradition. But, as the theologian Gregory Jones points out, "Tradition is fundamentally different from traditionalism." He quotes

and the Science of Learning," *Sloan Management Review* (Winter 2004): 21. See also Morten T. Hansen and Julian Birkinshaw, "The Innovation Value Chain," *Harvard Business Review* (June 2007): 2–10. This diversity leads to different takes on innovation. For instance, Sawhney, Wolcott, and Arroniz list twelve different *dimensions* for innovation, all held together by the idea that "innovation is about new value not new things." Mohanbir Sawhney, Robert C. Wolcott, and Inigo Arroniz, "12 Different Ways for Companies to Innovate" (Note: This emphasis plays off of Drucker's third question: What does your customer consider value?), *Sloan Management Review* (Spring 2006) esp. pp. 29 and 31. In addition to these scholars, prominent practitioners have shaped the conversation. Peter Drucker, writing in 1985, described innovation as "the effort to create purposeful, focused change in an enterprise's economic or societal potential." Peter Drucker, "The Discipline of Innovation," *Harvard Business Review* (August 2002): 6, excerpted from Drucker, *Innovation and Entrepreneurship: Practice and Principles* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985). The executives at Google believe that "innovation entails both the production and implementation of novel and useful ideas. . . . For something to be innovative, it needs to be new, surprising, and radically useful." Eric Schmidt and Jonathan Rosenberg, *How Google Works* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2014), 206.

the Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan: “Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.”³ And, while we all know at some level that the experience of Christianity has changed over the centuries (e.g., few current congregations chant in Latin), our tendency is to believe that the present is better than the past and that the future should look about like the present. All this makes new ideas look suspect. We are yoked to the Bible as the authoritative witness to Jesus Christ, and we are anchored by the theological reflections of the historic Christian church.⁴ But we are not shackled to the ways that gospel has always been presented.

The problem comes when we feel obligated to stay connected to a past that was constructed for a world that no longer exists.⁵ Christians in the past could assume a condition called Christendom, where the secular society reinforced the Christian church. However, Christendom fell apart after the 1960s.⁶ As a result, we have to innovate because we can no longer rely on Christendom. But our contemporary mental models and the organizations that express them still assume this world that no longer exists. The Christian tradition is not the same as Christendom. The Christian tradition defines the way things should be. Christendom defines the way things have been. The Christian tradition says we worship, through the witness of the Holy Spirit, the God revealed in Jesus the Christ. Christendom says we express that worship by going to a service on a Sunday

³ L. Gregory Jones, “Traditioned Leadership,” *Faith & Leadership* (January 20, 2009), <http://www.faithandleadership.com/content/traditioned-innovation>.

⁴ I recognize that the very meaning of “the historic Christian church” is subject to debate. But even those who want to disclude others from the historic faith want to maintain their particular link with the faith passed on through the generations.

⁵ Birkinshaw, Bessant, Delbridge, “Finding, Forming, and Performing,” 68.

⁶ The best summary of the deep structural changes that dominate American Christianity since World War II is Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990).

morning that has hymns, a sermon, and an offering. We get in trouble when we conflate the practice of worship with our expressions of worship. We foolishly assume that the way things are is equal to the way things should be. We cannot let our need to protect Christendom prevent us from proclaiming anew the Christian tradition. To state it in the positive, “The people who bear a tradition are called to be relentlessly innovative in ways that preserve the life-giving character of the tradition.”⁷ That innovation involves creating new Christian categories built on the existing Christian tradition.

Let us consider one further example of Christian innovation. In July 1974, Ralph D. Winter addressed the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization, which gathered the leaders of missionary agencies from 150 countries. In his speech, Winter introduced the idea of “unreached people groups.” He took the most cherished biblical text for missionaries and gave it new meaning. He said that Christians misunderstand the mandate in Matthew 28 to preach the gospel to every nation because they think that the word *nation* refers to a political entity. Winter said that *nation* refers to ethnic groups and that a nation-state has within its borders many of these groups.⁸ Further, he challenged the leaders present to bring the gospel to each people group in its own language and according to its own culture. Winter innovated within the bounds of the tradition. He took an established idea, foreign missions, and gave his people a new way to see it, one that set them on a path of creativity and invention.

Winter’s idea was an innovation in Christian missions. Since that time, mission agencies have stopped thinking of the nations as political states and started

⁷ L. Gregory Jones, “Traditioned Leadership,” *Faith & Leadership* (January 20, 2009), <http://www.faithandleadership.com/content/traditioned-innovation>.

⁸ For more on the Lausanne Congress and the movement that it inspired, see www.lausanne.org.

thinking of them as people groups. Twenty-five years after Lausanne, *TIME* magazine said, “Ralph Winter revolutionized what remains (even today) the true lifeblood of Evangelicals—missionary work overseas.”⁹ He offered a new idea that changed the way missionaries saw themselves and their world, and he created avenues to action that the missionaries would not have otherwise seen. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Ralph Winter were Christian innovators. This article, then, aims to describe the meaning of Christian innovation so that we can inspire people like Gina to innovate in the ways that King and Winter did.

How the Christian Tradition Both Constrains and Enables

We tend to think of innovation as being about the creation of something that did not exist before. That can certainly be true. In the world of Christian organizations though, we will likely not create something out of nothing. We will create something using the traditional faith as our raw materials. Indeed, innovation will likely come from mixing and matching ideas that are already present with new situations in order to make new spiritual meaning for the people entrusted to our care. Ralph Winter did not invent the idea of sending missionaries to other nations, but he did reinvent the meaning of missions. In the same way, Martin Luther King, Jr., did not invent the idea of nonviolent protest. He borrowed it from Mahatma Gandhi and introduced it to a people who experienced it as an innovation. Each made meaning by combining or recombining ideas to create something new.

Think, for example, about the “seeker-sensitive service” that became popular in evangelical churches over the last generation. The seeker-sensitive service was

⁹ “Influential Evangelicals,” *TIME* (February 7, 2005), available at http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1993235_1993243_1993320,00.html.

not something new under the sun. It was an adaptation of something that had existed for centuries—a service of Christian worship. The new thing, however, was that this service of Christian worship was designed so that it would make sense to people who were not already familiar with the contours of Christian worship. Not only that, this innovative service was calibrated to address the needs (the longings and losses) of a particular people: those who do not know Jesus but may in fact be interested in him. The service came about because some Christians decided that a particular people had been entrusted to their care, namely those who do not yet know Jesus. The service was not all that new; it included elements that had been present for generations. But it felt new to people who were used to the traditional way of doing things. Indeed, it not only felt new, but it felt to many of them as if it was not quite right. It was new and different, and new and different worried some people. That is why the seeker-sensitive service started out as such a controversial way to conduct a worship service. Now it is an acceptable part of the American Christian repertoire. How did it move from controversial to common? How did this Christian innovation take hold?

Sociologists have a term for what happened with the seeker-sensitive service. They say that the service had to be *legitimated*. It had to move in the public mind from being delegitimate (i.e., an inappropriate expression of the Christian practice of worship) to being legitimate (i.e., an appropriate expression of that practice). This idea plays off of Ann Swidler's extremely influential work on culture as a tool kit.¹⁰ She argues that humans

¹⁰ I should warn the reader now that the literature on culture is filled with mixed metaphors and competing metaphors. I will use more than one metaphor, and I will even mix them because that is what the literature has done and that seems to make the whole idea easier to understand. Indeed, in the very first sentence of the abstract of the article where Swidler introduces the idea as a *cultural tool-kit*, she also refers to them as a *repertoire*. She calls them “a repertoire or ‘tool kit’ of habits, skills, and styles from which people

do not have an unlimited set of options when we try to engage in action. Culture provides only enough tools to fit on our tool belt. We can only carry on those actions that culture deems appropriate (i.e., legitimate) for that moment. It would not, for example, be culturally appropriate for me to offer a turtle dove as a sacrifice to God as part of my Sunday morning worship even though it appears that for many years God's People were instructed to do just that. We Christians have agreed that animal sacrifice is no longer necessary because Jesus the High Priest is Himself the once-and-for-all sacrifice (Heb. 5-10, esp. Heb. 7). Likewise, it would have until recently been inappropriate (i.e., delegitimate) for Christians to speak in tongues when they prayed, or to gather in mixed company for a Bible study in a college dorm room, or to send teenagers to a foreign land on a week-long mission trip. But each of those forms has recently been legitimated. They are, in Swidler's terms, now part of the cultural tool kit that is available for Christians who wish to take action in the world.¹¹ This pertains to Christian innovation because the cultural tool kit available to contemporary Christians is constructed to support the tasks of a previous era—the era of Christendom. We are trying to make do with the tools we have, even though we are taking up tasks for which we do not have the proper tools. The process of Christian innovation will involve legitimating new cultural tools.

construct 'strategies of action.'" Swidler, "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies," *American Sociological Review* 51 (April 1986): 273–286. Cf. Swidler, *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). Note also that Swidler was a coauthor (along with Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, and Steven Tipton) of the extremely influential book *Habits of the Heart* (Oakland, Calif.: University of California Press, 1985), which lays the groundwork for talking about how culture can shape the most basic human experiences. This book is particularly important because it takes a social science approach to the questions that animate what the Western tradition has typically called the human condition.

¹¹ Swidler, "Culture in Action," 277ff.

People take action in their lives by making meaning—by interpreting their circumstances—which leads them on a path to that action. Gina interpreted Duc’s story and saw that he was more than just missing his family. She saw it as part of the longing that every human being feels to be loved and to know that he or she is never alone. She used what Swidler calls cultural tools to make that meaning. She told Duc that Jesus’ resurrection allows him to experience a hope that could never fade. So, if we want people to take new action, we will need to create for them new cultural tools. Christians innovate by making new cultural tools that are designed to help the people entrusted to our care make spiritual sense of the longings and losses that fill daily life. As such, we will need to spend some time talking about how to innovate new cultural tools.

A New Kind of Innovation: One that Points People to Jesus

Andrew Hargadon is a scholar of innovation. His approach to explaining innovation is quite different than other scholars of innovation. As such, his approach can help us create innovation that honors the Christian tradition. Hargadon believes that innovation is usually about creating new meaning that requires new cultural tools. This is even true when he talks about secular inventors such as Thomas Edison. Having been influenced by Swidler, he explains why and how that process of creating new cultural tools works, and he shows how to construct organizations that take advantage of that knowledge. He calls the process *recombinant innovation*.¹² He builds this process around the

¹² This process is similar to the process that Paul DiMaggio calls *cultural entrepreneurship*. DiMaggio’s ideas have more resonance in sociological circles. We will use Hargadon’s term because he specifically addresses the goal of innovation; however, it is important to note that the ideas go together. In fact, Hargadon learned about creating cultural tools from a band of scholars that consciously built off of DiMaggio’s original work. So it makes sense that Hargadon discovered cultural processes similar to the ones that

cultivation of new cultural tools,¹³ especially tools that connect to the past. Innovative organizations “succeed not by breaking away from the constraints of the past,” he says, “but instead by harnessing the past in powerful ways.”¹⁴ This is good news for those of us whose credibility depends on fidelity with the past.

Hargadon begins by showing where people get their cultural tools, knowing that people who will innovate new tools need to know how tools are created. Those tools come from the networks that surround every person. All people are embedded in networks of ideas and relationships.¹⁵ Some of these are formal networks that are defined by organizational structure (e.g., the organizational chart at my office defines my relationship to my boss, to my colleagues, and to my direct reports). But these formal networks are not as important to Hargadon as are the networks that shape my ideas, or my mental models. He is more interested in interactions, especially interactions that influence how I see the world. For example, if I read the same blog every morning but only talk to my boss once a week, then that blog might be more influential than my boss, or it might be more influential on a wider range of topics than are interactions with my boss.¹⁶ Either way, I am embedded

DiMaggio first explained. See, especially, Paul DiMaggio, “Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston,” *Media, Culture & Society* 4 (1982): 33–50. See, also, DiMaggio’s influential article on the larger question of how culture shapes the way humans process information, DiMaggio, “Culture and Cognition,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 23 (August 1997): 263–287.

¹³ I recognize that I am mixing metaphors when I talk about cultivating tools. I choose to do this because the process of creating a tool like a hammer is much like that for creating a device. But the process for creating a cultural tool is much more organic; it is more like cultivating a sapling.

¹⁴ Andrew Hargadon, *How Breakthroughs Happen* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2003), xii.

¹⁵ Though there is not room in this essay to discuss the topic further, it is important to note that innovation, even innovation that honors tradition, requires individual innovation and innovative organizations.

¹⁶ From the perspective of what neo-institutional scholars call *institutional isomorphism*, the blog shapes my thinking through mimetic isomorphism,

in a network of relationships, of ideas, and of interactions. From these networks, I glean the set of choices for interpreting the world that Swidler calls a tool kit. Christian innovation is about creating new choices for people that allow them to follow Jesus and to address issues in their lives.

As a side note, in my teaching, I have found that people often become confused by the notion of a cultural tool kit, so I will offer an added analogy that tries to make the same point. Think of soup cans in a cupboard. When you want some soup for lunch, you can pull a soup can from the cupboard, or you can follow a recipe (which may involve a trip to the store to purchase ingredients), or you can improvise a recipe on the spot using whatever ingredients you have on hand. The vast majority of people choose the soup can in the cupboard because it is easiest. (Likewise, if I want a new computer, I can buy one off the shelf, or I can build my own from premade parts, or I can invent a new kind of computer that has never before existed.) Once in a while, you might follow a recipe, but that usually requires more

while my boss is more likely to influence my thinking through normative isomorphism or even sometimes coercive isomorphism. That distinction is important because only a small range of topics can be influenced by normative and coercive means. Neo-institutional organizational theory is closely tied to our interests in cultural innovation because the seminal author in each area is Paul DiMaggio. DiMaggio's work on cultural entrepreneurship precedes and strongly influenced Swidler's work on cultural tools. See, DiMaggio, "Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston," *Media, Culture & Society* 4 (1982): 33–50. On institutional isomorphism, see Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell, "The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality," in Walter W. Powell and Paul J. DiMaggio eds., *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 63–82; Roger Friedland and Robert R. Alford, "Bringing Society Back In: Symbols, Practices, and Institutional Contradictions," in Powell and DiMaggio eds., *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 232–263; and Harry Stout and Scott Cormode, "Institutions and the Story of American Religion: A Sketch of a Synthesis" in Demerath et al., *Sacred Companies*. See also, Scott Cormode, *Making Spiritual Sense*, 109, n15.

thinking ahead and a greater investment of time to cook it. Very few people have the experience and confidence to invent something new on the spot. If they do, it is likely a variation of something they already know.

When Swidler talks about tools, she means something like these soup cans. If Gina wants to talk to Duc about the gospel, she has three choices: She can use language she has heard before to explain tried-and-true ideas, she can invent new language to explain tried-and-true ideas, or she can invent new theology on the spot. It would be exhausting if we had to invent a new strategy for every situation we encounter in life. That is why Gina repeats to Duc the language she has heard from other Christians. Inventing a new strategy for every encounter would be like having to invent a new recipe every time we eat. Humans have learned, instead, to select from a limited array of choices.¹⁷ You can call them a kit full of tools or a cupboard full of soup cans.¹⁸

¹⁷ On the importance of having a limited set of choices in order to make good decisions, see John Tierney, “Do You Suffer from Decision Fatigue?” *New York Times Magazine* (August 17, 2011). Tierney is a science columnist for *The Times*. His essay is adapted from a book he wrote with the noted psychological researcher Roy F. Baumeister, *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012).

¹⁸ Indeed, one of the key characteristics of *cultivated instincts* is the judgment to know what requires attention and what can be safely ignored. This limits the number of variables that an experienced practitioner has to address in determining a course of action. Think of walking into a hospital room to see a patient. A nurse will pay attention to one set of variables, while a pastor will pay attention to a different set. But each one uses her experience to make sense of the situation before she has walked the few feet from the door to the bedside. She then selects from a limited set of options for action based on the data she has already received. That is what experience does for us. The purpose of Christian meaning making is to get the people entrusted to our care to pay attention to Christian categories even when they are not in specifically Christian settings. For example, a recent M.Div. graduate founded a catering company built around the Christian practice of hospitality. Paying attention to hospitality in every setting, whether providing food or giving an estimate, changes the way the owner engages in business because hospitality is not normally one of the categories that small business owners are taught to notice.

Either way, we select from strategies for action that are already legitimated for us.

So, we could say that the reason the American church is more like Kodak than Apple (i.e., the reason we need to innovate) stems from the fact that the soup cans we have in our Christian cupboard are not satisfying the spiritual hungers of the people entrusted to our care. When our people want to figure out how, for example, to spend their money or work through a conflict at work, the soup cans on their shelf are not ones created from Christian ingredients. Those Christian soup cans disappeared from secular society when Christendom waned. For example, we could say that Christian virtues like putting other people first were once in the moral cupboard for most Americans. When people needed to decide how to work through a conflict at work, they used to open the cupboard and one of the things they saw was “Deny yourself.” The American Church (which includes me and my congregation) has over the last few decades done a poor job of creating soup cans (or tools) to replace the ones we lost when Christendom ended. In the few places that the American church has innovated new soup cans in the last few years, the church has focused on curtailing bad behavior rather than enabling good behavior. Because of this, most Americans hear Christian messages as negative (e.g., “It is wrong to...”) and disconnected from the questions that those Americans ask each day. We tell people what not to do, but we do not tell them what they should be doing with the hungers that fill their days. An American like Duc may have a Christian soup can that says “Don’t have sex outside marriage,” but he no longer has tools that help him know how to love the grumpy coworker in the next cubicle. Instead, he receives from the secular culture tools that reinforce his selfish perspective. These cultural tools say things like “Do your own thing” and “Just do it.” We need to innovate because for most Americans, the Christian cupboard is bare.

These choices, whether we call them soup cans or cultural tools, become particularly important for Hargadon as he discusses innovation. Innovation happens when someone creates a new soup recipe by mixing and matching ingredients in creative ways. The ideas of nonviolence and people groups were new soup recipes, and their ingredients come from the kind of networks that Hargadon studied. The networks provide the raw materials for building new ideas and new avenues for action, just as Martin Luther King, Jr.'s network included Gandhi's work. Our interactions (and the ideas and mental models they furnish) create for us what the Nobel laureate Herbert Simon called "the network of possible wanderings." Think of the innovations that are possible as the paths that we can possibly explore to discover tools, or as the rooms in a house, where each room contains a different kind of tools (e.g., the kitchen has different tools than the garage or the medicine cabinet). Dr. King had rooms that included Mahatma Gandhi, just as Ralph Winter had rooms that included experiences in one country (Guatemala) that had many people groups. Innovation comes from exploring new rooms.

The most innovative people, according to Hargadon, are not necessarily the people with the most innate intelligence¹⁹ or the liveliest creativity. Instead, they are the people who have the most extensive network of paths that they can explore: the most rooms in their mental house and the greatest access to the most diverse kinds of tools. "Entrepreneurs and inventors are no smarter, no more courageous, tenacious, or rebellious than the rest of us," Hargadon concludes. "They are simply better connected."²⁰ They have more rooms to explore in their house, and more ways to mix and match ingredients to make new kinds of soup. This insight

¹⁹ "There is little evidence that innovative behavior is an innate quality in some elite set of organizations," including Thomas Edison's labs. Hargadon, *How Breakthroughs Happen*, 11.

²⁰ Hargadon, *How Breakthroughs Happen*, 11.

changes how we prepare innovators. Rather than “pushing people to think outside the box,” Hargadon concludes that we should be “helping them think in other boxes.” Rather than inviting people to see new nooks and crannies in their current room, we should invite them to wander into rooms where they (and perhaps the church) have never been or to explore rooms they have long forgotten. Rather than teaching people to serve old soup in new ways, we should introduce people to new ingredients that help them dream up new recipes. To encourage innovation in Christian organizations, Christian leaders can open new pathways for their people to explore. This is what Steven Johnson (echoing Simon) calls the *adjacent possible*.²¹

At this point in our investigation of how to create new cultural tools, we need to bring together the work of two scholars: Steven Johnson and Andrew Hargadon. Each has a piece of a puzzle, but neither has the whole picture. Hargadon describes how the networks of ideas and interactions that define us create “small worlds” that we then inhabit, and he shows how to expand those small worlds. Steven Johnson comes to a similar conclusion when he shows how those who share similar networks of possible wanderings form “subcultures,” and he shows how those subcultures both empower and constrain people. Hargadon’s small worlds are akin to Johnson’s subcultures. They empower people by creating a space for them to work with like-minded people, and at the same time, they constrain people by limiting the number of legitimate options available to them. Or, in terms that explain why the American church is becoming more like Kodak than Apple, the small worlds that most

²¹ The network of past wanderings defines the “network of possible wanderings,” or what Johnson calls the *adjacent possible*. Hargadon describes not only how the adjacent possible works, but, more importantly, how to expand the adjacent possible. He says it happens by expanding your network, especially the network that builds on the strength of weak ties. Cf. Johnson, *Where Good Ideas Come From* (New York: Riverhead Trade Books, 2011).

Americans inhabit do not include Christian ways of seeing the world. Most people move through their day drawing on behaviors that were constructed using secular ingredients. The Christian faith does not provide them with helpful avenues for action. Our innovative task, then, is to create new pathways that allow people to use Christian perspectives to make sense of their everyday lives.

Christianity is just the kind of small world that Johnson and Hargadon describe, and that small world of Christianity both enables and constrains us. Let me explain how that affects innovation. On the one hand, that Christian world enables us because we begin every conversation about Jesus with a rich vocabulary of ideas. When Gina is talking to Duc, she does not have to improvise, say, a discussion of the atonement. She is part of a Christian tradition that already knows that there are historic theories of atonement. Even if she herself cannot name “ransom theory” or even “substitutionary atonement,” the people who put the soup in the can knew those ideas and supplied to her a vocabulary that takes into account these theories. Even if Duc has never thought before about what it means to say that “Jesus died for your sins,” Gina can draw on this rich vocabulary (just like pulling prepackaged soup cans off the shelf). So on the one hand, the rich Christian tradition provides Gina with options so that she does not have to invent something to say to Duc on the spot. On the other hand, that language constrains her. There are only four theories of atonement, which is just like having only four types of soup in the Christian cupboard).²² And Gina is not free to invent one on the spot just to make the gospel more palatable to Duc. Gina cannot innovate a new form of atonement where it

²² The theories of atonement I have in mind are the Moral Influence Theory, the Ransom Theory, Substitutionary Atonement, and the *Christus Victor* Theory.

is no longer necessary for Christ to die.²³ She can, however, change how she presents that soup. We need new and better soup cans for people who are hungry for the gospel.

Parameters for Christian Innovation

Our credibility depends on creating innovation that honors the Christian tradition, and that innovation will come from exploring the adjacent possible. It will not likely come from making a deeper investigation into what we already know. Peter Drucker has said, “Innovation in any one knowledge area tends to originate outside the area itself.”²⁴ As we move out of our comfort zone to look for interesting ways to create new tools, we will need guidelines or parameters for innovation. This paper will conclude by offering these parameters. The paper in the next issue of *JRL* will then describe a goal for innovation that fulfills all of these parameters.

1. Innovation must honor the Christian *tradition*.

We have established already that the Christian tradition provides ballast for our innovation. Without honoring the Christian tradition, we run the risk of floating away on every wave of whim.

2. Innovation must impact people’s *daily lives*.

The best scholar of American religion, a sociologist named Robert Wuthnow, studied the decline that the churches have experienced since the 1960s. He found that the primary reason for the decline is that American churches stopped

²³ Even the Moral Influence Theory recognizes that Christ died, although some progressive versions of it do gymnastics to downplay the necessity of his death.

²⁴ Drucker, *Managing in a Time of Great Change* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2009), 201; cf. Drucker Institute, “The Virtues of Cross-Pollinating,” <http://www.druckerinstitute.com/2011/08/the-virtues-of-cross-pollination/>.

connecting faith to the daily concerns of everyday people.²⁵ The church became more interested in culture war issues like school prayer or other people's morality than it was about how their congregants navigated issues like money, family, and work. Any innovation will have to dig deep into our people's lives and experiences. The whole point of creating innovative mental models is to give people the cultural tools to navigate their daily lives.

3. Innovation must be *embodied*.

As we describe mental models and making spiritual sense, it would be easy to drift into a kind of disembodied thought about religion, one that never resulted in action. James K. A. Smith calls that disembodied thought *intellect*, and he distinguishes it from imagination. Smith is interested in changing how people act, and he knows that such a goal requires him to understand the connection between thought and action. Over the course of two books, Smith explains that embodied action comes from making meaning, and he joins together *meaning making* with *action-oriented* in order to show how meaning making leads to action. In an embodied existence, he argues, meaning making begins with the data we take in through the senses and ends with the action that is the enactment of our sense making.²⁶ So, for example, Gina listens to Duc's story (mediated through her ears), feels compassion (i.e., makes sense of the story), and responds with love (in this

²⁵ Robert Wuthnow, *The Crisis in the Churches: Spiritual Malaise, Financial Woe* (Oxford University Press, 1996).

²⁶ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009) and *Imagining the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2013). On intellect and imagination, see *Imagining*, 109; on meaning and action, *Imagining*, 113; on imagination and making sense, see *Imagining*, 16–21 and 103ff.

case, by telling him of the free gift of grace that God offers to him). The three parts—the listening, the sense making, and the action—cannot be separated. Any approach to Christian innovation must be embodied; it must have a clear connection between thought and action.

4. Innovation must be *both top-down and bottom-up*.

We have so far emphasized the role of leaders in shaping innovation. That is important, but we have to recognize that leaders cannot impose their ideas. When we say that leaders make meaning, for example, we are not saying that they impose their meaning. Ultimately, leaders provide the tools that the people use to construct their own meaning. Ralph Winter did not impose the idea of people groups, but when he said it, it resonated with the people who heard it, and they made it their own. I have said in other contexts that vision emanates from the leader, but it is not vision until it resonates with the people. If Ralph Winter's audience of mission leaders had not found the idea of people groups palatable, it would have died there that day. It took off only because he gave voice to something that resonated inside his audience. Innovations will require a leader to proclaim them, but the innovations will not be innovative unless the people make them their own. Innovation must be both bottom-up and top-down.

5. Christian innovation is *biblical*.

We began these parameters with a statement about the Christian tradition. We end it by tying innovation to the Scriptures. "The acceptance of these specific writings by a community," Luke Timothy Johnson writes, "is the most fundamental

identity decision the church makes.”²⁷ For that community to change, meaning for the Church to innovate, we must stay rooted in the witness of that community-defining text. We will certainly change how we interpret the Scriptures, but we cannot abandon them altogether. They will always be the most important ingredients in whatever soup we serve.

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²⁷ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1996), 36–37.