

Questions on an Earthen Vessel

Response to a Paper by David L. Tiede, “Wisdom Incorporated: A Theology of Institutions According to Peter Senge and the Apostle Paul”

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How ironic it is that a response to David Tiede’s paper should have been assigned to me. Catholic business professor meets Lutheran theologian. I am not sure who the conference planners were trying to weed out in this match-up, but I have the sinking feeling it’s me. Since I am no theologian, even less a *Lutheran* theologian, I assume that my job here is not so much to critique David’s paper from a theological perspective; but rather to “think out loud about it,” and to share with David and with you a few ideas and questions that his work inspires for me.

First let me say to David, thank you for writing this paper. You have outlined a helpful history of the need for a theology of institutions, peppered it with ideas that sparked my curiosity, generated a few aha! moments. Reading your paper also raised other questions for me which, though indirectly related to your topic, are very much at the center of my own thinking about organizational life and what mind-numbingly complex evolution organizations represent if they are, in fact, a 21st century version of the original communities. I have no illusions about the perfection of perfectibility of organizations, or “institutions” if you prefer. In the classroom, in administration and in private conversations with the walking wounded through the years, I have heard and witnessed enough tales from the dark side of organizational life to know that is either remarkably risky or remarkably optimistic to talk about a “theology of institutions.” I often joke that I plan someday to cap my academic career with a book of true stories, titled “Stupid Management Tricks.” (When I say this to my MBA students, hands inevitably pop up around the room, along with spontaneous offers to contribute to a chapter!)

In reflecting on David’s paper I found myself remembering two unsettling episodes from my first years at St. Thomas. The first involved a senior faculty colleague who sat directly behind me during a meeting of the college faculty. The president, speaking of his academic vision for the school, made reference to its “roots in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition.” “Catholic intellectual tradition?” my colleague sneered in a voice just loud enough for the folks around him to hear, “Isn’t that an oxymoron?” He got a big laugh, of course. But it made me feel a little sick, as though I had heard a racial slur from someone too ignorant to know what he has just said. That was my first realization of a certain type of diversity among people in the “earthen vessel” (as David would call it) that is *my* institution, a diversity that allows one to come to the table with insults for the host. More to the point, it left a scar on the earthen vessel that is *me*. It was not that my colleague’s words wounded me personally, but that, in the end, I allowed so stupid and cynical a comment to go unchallenged. It is my own silence which haunts me, and which I find hard to forgive.

A second episode was more odd than irritating. A new professor, whom I'll call "Guru from the East," upon learning of my teaching interests in organizational behavior, opined decisively that "All groups are corrupt. All organizations are corrupt. They'll disappoint you more often than not." I certainly did not share this universal disdain for groups, this condemnation of organizations. But I confess that it challenged me, made me wonder what my colleague knew about corruption and about organizations that I didn't know! He was, of course, not speaking on the basis of research data, but from his own lived experience and disappointments in organizational life. I, too, had been disappointed at times; but then I had never believed that organizations could be perfect, and had long since learned to settle for "pretty good." I like to think the Guru simply had greater expectations than I; disappointment is the burden the idealist must bear.

Why am I telling you this? First, because I want to affirm what David points to in using the words of the apostle, Paul: that institutions and the people who people them are not perfect, and not perfectible in this life. But should this stop us from seeking perfection? No. As Paul might say, when we and our organizations are inspired by a holy purpose, and faithfully pursue it, God can use us for purposes of his own, and use us to perfection. The fragile earthen vessels which are our institutions carry precious cargo, indeed. As David says, they are part of God's way of acting in this world, not merely as a God of history, but as a God of every day decisions. For those who listen, St. Paul preaches a stewardship of human institutions "that is humanly modest and theologically confident." (I like that phrase very much.) Through our own weak, cracked and scarred humanity, as ambassadors for Christ in institutional life, we can "bear(ing) the mercy and justice of the 'righteousness of God.'" That is very clear theology, not idealism. Paul is no idealist.

My second reason for talking about oxymorons and corruption comes from my observation that even an institution with a strong, shared vision, masterfully articulated by its leaders, rooted in a history of successfully integrating the lessons of experience with hope for the future, even such an institution has its nay-sayers and its nags. Institutions do, after all, hire mere humans who come with a diversity of attitudes and tolerances, at least as strong as their diversity of faiths and colors. Regarding the endeavor to develop a theology of institutions that values "what differing theological traditions bring to the task," as David suggests, raises what I would call a clarifying question, not just for David, but for all of us: Are we trying to create *one* (universal?) theology of institutions? If so, that would seem like bad news to me, because a lot of people simply will not be persuaded that institutions can be considered "good," much less as instruments of God. What does it mean, as David says, that our pursuit of a theology of institutions is an ecumenical exercise that invites exploration from every theological tradition? Do we hope to find a unified theology like that brought by the Apostle Paul to both Jews and Gentiles? Or are we speaking of a new interpretation, like Luther who addresses the reform-minded? Perhaps we are after something more like Greenleaf and Senge whose message for institutional leaders is a kind of "secular ecumenism" (if there is such a thing). In other words, does the "ecumenism" of our endeavor describe the message, the audience, or a secular compromise?

David's paper draws from a wide variety of sources -- St. Paul and Luther, Greenleaf, Trueblood, Specht and Broholm, Senge and Hecló. Yet there remain so many other voices that could speak to us in pursuit of a theology of institutions, voices that have much longer experience with institutional life than any of us possess. Between St. Paul and Martin Luther, for example, lie 1500 years of Christian institutional life and history. Acknowledging that some of that history is scandalous, we must also acknowledge that some of it is remarkably good, and enduring. What might we learn from institutional founders and leaders in the first 1500 years of Christianity? What might we learn from their language, practice and organizational philosophies? I do not speak here of the institutional Catholic Church per se (although it is hard to justify omitting it), but of monastic orders and societies, dating to the 5th century, whose purpose and work were among the most powerful forces for social development during the medieval and renaissance periods, and arguably, continue into the 21st century. Many of those organizations and the universities and communities they founded still thrive. Shouldn't we look to them, too, for insights on institutional life that could help us create a theology of institutions?

As a business professor, my theological views are certainly simpler and less nuanced than David's and that of his fellow theologians. Theology's language and its parameters as a discipline, are not entirely clear to me. Reflecting on David's paper unexpectedly reinforced some aspects of this uncertainty for me, and also helped clarify a few concerns and questions about our work (referenced in the title of this conference) and about what we hope to accomplish. Maybe there are others in this audience who share my curiosity and questions – questions like these:

- Why do we need a theology of institutions (beyond, the obvious fact that we need a theology of everything)?
- How will the world be better if we have a theology of institutions? Will it change anything at Chrysler or General Motors, or Bear Stearns or the businesses and nonprofit organizations where we work?
- Will a theology of institutions serve primarily to occupy theologians, or will it also affect institutions and the lives of people?
- Is an ecumenical theology of institutions a real possibility? (When I look at the plurality of religious perspectives within my own institution, or just within its theology department, the task seems insurmountable -- worthy, but insurmountable.)
- Overall, what is it we expect to achieve in developing a theology of institutions? Are we looking for God in institutions? For a way of talking about God in institutions? For a way to legitimize our work by finding a deeper meaning or purpose for institutions?

What, in fact, do we mean when we use the term “institution?” In everyday conversations and even in this conference, we seem to imply a good many things, applying “institution” variously to faith, e.g., the Christian church; a particular Church, a seminary; a university; a prison; a government body; a body of knowledge (e.g., science); community, marriage; and family. What common elements among these entities allow us to call all of them

institutions? And if some of them are not the institutions served by a theology of institutions, which ones do not count and why?

Finally, just as David's Lutheran tradition, with its attendant success at institution building, influences his thinking about a theology of institutions, my Catholic tradition influences mine. Writings of the late John Paul II address issues of work and work communities using philosophical arguments as well as arguments from scripture and tradition. JPII centers his work on an understanding of the human person who, made in God's image is the same in every age and every situation, an approach that helps me to understand the power of his ideas as an integrated whole. Is this kind of wholeness something that we too should strive for? Can we develop a theology of institutions relevant for all types of institutions – secular or sectarian, private or public, government or religious? Could such a theology, for example, apply equally to the seminary that prepares people for ministry, and to the entertainment company that produces internet pornography? What would a robust theology need to have?

As I understand it, "theology of institutions" is, in one sense, simply a new branch on an old and venerable tree. Speaking from a management perspective, I hope that branch bears fruit: luscious, juicy tempting fruit that will attract leaders, managers and workers of all kinds, inviting them to integrate their faith and work more fully through a deeper understanding of their organizations. I hear in David's paper an appeal to people to rediscover the idea of calling in their work, to bring God and appreciation for his goodness as creator into – or back into -- our organizations, and to recognize the divine spark God placed in each of us to inspire our own creativity. If a theology of institutions will help us do these things, wonderful!

On the other hand, if a theology of institutions will only help us think about what an organization can be at its best, or how, theoretically, organizations can serve God, or how God can use us for his own purposes wherever we are -- if that's all a theology of institutions can offer, well that's pretty good too. I could settle for that. But then, I am no idealist.