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A Thin Blue Line

FRANK SHIRVINSKI

On a shelf in my office sits a picture that I have had since I was a small boy, and to this day, it remains one of my favorite scenes. In the background, a perfect full moon gleams against the night sky as Apollo 17 climbs from the earth, painting the surrounding lakes a brilliant white and blazing orange. Images of spacecraft racing to meet the stars and the names of men like Aldrin, Shepard, and Armstrong captured my imagination as a child. At night, I would often lie in my bed, wishing that my bedroom window was a tiny glass porthole in the capsule, so that I could look back as the blue-green earth vanished against the stars. Even throughout my college years, I wanted desperately to live, not just ponder, the words of pilot John Magee, who wrote:

I've trod the high untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand and touched the face of God.

Beyond the protection of the atmosphere, the great creations of humanity—the pride of our civilizations—are swallowed up in a thin blue line dividing life on the earth from the silent emptiness of space. Ironically, in our quest for significance, we have pulled together all of our creative genius, burst the shackles of this planet, put our footprint on the moon, and clearly witnessed how incredibly frail, delicate, and tenuous our life on earth really is. Perhaps we have missed the point.

But they maintain the fabric of the world,
and their concern is for the exercise of their trade.
(Sirach 38:34)

A BLURRED LINE

Corporate culture in the United States is as diverse as the products and services that it creates. Like any social culture, corporate identity is more than the sum of its profitability statements, stock reports, and other objective statistics. Hopes, dreams, ethics, and personal conceptions of success are blended with the “bottom line” in an interesting mix of human community and independent legal identity. On one hand, the work, experience, education, and talent of each contributing member define the corporation. Yet, the establishment of a separate legal identity creates a pseudo-independent moral entity, which has the ability to conceal questionable moral practices under the rubric of corporate profitability and the greater good of the stockholders and employees.

During my years as an aerospace engineer in Los Angeles and corporate vice president in Atlanta, I witnessed a number of technological and financial *successes*. And, during those same years, I was confronted with *significant* moral challenges that invariably colored those successes¹ and raised a number of interesting questions:

1. Who is morally accountable for the actions and omissions of the corporation?
2. How do the economic and social goals of the corporation square with the various theological or ethical perspectives of those who comprise the corporation?
3. How has the advent of corporate culture shaped the individual's perspective of work? That is, if the existence of the corporation is based upon financial profitability, how will each member of the corporation define "work?"
4. When a corporation is established as an independent legal agent, where does the theological and moral distinctiveness of the individuals who make up the corporate entity find expression?

Because the landscape of corporate life is not likely to change in the near future and the structural, financial, and cultural diversity of each corporation makes any set of assumptions incomplete at best, I have decided to focus my attention upon the human element that helps to define corporate culture. Whereas at a cultural level, the line between *success* and *significance* may have become blurred in recent years, we may do well to reconsider the depth of the "thin blue line" that encompasses the purpose, meaning, and significance of human work.

Do your work in good time,
and in his own time God will give you your reward.
(Sirach 51:30)

A LINE IN THE SAND

From the first phrase of the Hebrew Bible, God works. In many cases, modern readers of the beautiful creation narrative in Genesis 1 assume that the author intended to provide a detailed account of the order and duration of God's creative activity. However, if the *means* of creation is all that is gleaned from Genesis 1, far more is lost than gained. The repetitive literary structure of the narrative seems to highlight the *kind* of work God performs, rather than provide a distant reflection upon one creative event.

The work of God, which infuses both energy and matter, and pushes what is potential into the domain of reality, continues to create and re-create. That is, perhaps the ancients were not as interested in the "how" of creation, as learning more about "Who." What kind of God creates like this? What kind of God, *works* like this? After all, someday, "the how" of this creation will be gone; the "Who" will not.

When considering the Genesis 1 narrative, the six days of creation are often assumed to be arranged chronologically. After all, each is a "day." However, as many have noted, there are inconsistencies in this approach. For example, how did light exist before the luminaries? Or, how was a day marked before the instruments that marked time were created on the fourth day? Although a detailed analysis of each of the days of creation lies well beyond the scope of this brief study, the literary parallelism of the narrative leading up to the first *tôlêdôt*² may provide a window into the ways that ancients saw the ongoing work of God.

As noted in Table 1, the first three days of the Genesis narrative are paralleled with days four, five and six. On the first day, light and darkness are given boundaries. When light is created, darkness is not eliminated but delimited. On the second day, an expanse³ was created to separate "the water which was below the expanse from the water which was above the expanse."⁴

The use of water here is noteworthy. In the Ancient Near East, water was symbolic of chaos and dread. In both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, God demonstrates his sovereignty by delimiting or striding across the waters, symbolically bringing order, *šālôm*⁵ and security.⁶ Similarly, when Jesus commands the sea to "be still" in the Gospels,⁷ he once again brings order out of chaos and continues the creative act of the second day.

With the waters properly bounded, God sets further limits on the seas so that land may appear and produce vegetation. The power and mystery of that boundary where the oceans come to an end and the

land begins should not be underestimated. Eight thousand times a day the battle of boundaries rages across an invisible line drawn in the sand, leaving nearly 4 percent of the earth's surface covered in the foam of retreating waves. Each moment that a new wave curls around your feet, an area equal to the entire continent of North America is hidden beneath bursting and fading foam in an ongoing battle for the boundaries.⁸ On these sacred shores, the moment that God gathered up the seas and dry ground first appeared is replayed once again.

Boundaries and limits are never to be underestimated. In each of the first three days, chaos is immediately subdued by the work of God. So much of life, perhaps more than we expect or dare to admit, is defined by that place where chaos and order meet. From the chaos and dread of the crucifixion come the re-creation of new life and the establishment of a new order and a new way. For the disciple of Christ, the work of salvation is more than a future expectation; it is an ongoing journey. Each day, regardless of the time, location, or type of work we perform, we continue God's work of bringing order from chaos among the winds and the waves of daily life.

For thus says the Lord,
 who created the heavens (he is God!),
 who formed the earth and made it
 (he established it;
 he did not create it a chaos,
 he formed it to be inhabited!):
 I am the Lord, and there is no other.
 I did not speak in secret,
 in a land of darkness;
 I did not say to the offspring of Jacob,
 "Seek me in chaos."
 I the Lord speak the truth,
 I declare what is right.
 (Isa 45:18-19)

Table 1

<p><i>Day One</i> Light is separated from darkness</p>	<p><i>Day Four</i> The lights in the heavens move in accordance with God's purposes</p>
<p><i>Day Two</i> The waters above are separated from those below</p>	<p><i>Day Five</i> The animals of the waters above and below are commanded to fill the earth</p>
<p><i>Day Three</i> The waters are separated from the land</p>	<p><i>Day Six</i> The land animals are commanded to fill the earth</p>

PARALLEL LINES

Once chaos has been brought under God's rule, the elements of creation are redirected to *work* as participants in God's creative purposes. On the first day, light and darkness are given boundaries. On the fourth day, the static boundaries are set in motion, given specific tasks and called to actively participate in the work of the creator. Likewise, the motionless boundaries between the heavens and seas established on the second day are swarming with living creatures, which fly across the face of the heavens and plunge through the depths of the waters on day five.

The new inhabitants of the heavens and seas are then given specific tasks; "Be fertile and increase, fill the waters in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth."⁹ Finally, the sixth day witnesses the creation of the animals that fill the spaces created by the restriction of the seas. Humanity is included in this final day and given authority and responsibility to fill and master the earth.

Within the literary structure of the creation narrative, the author provides at least two images of the beginnings of work on the earth. First, God limits and orders chaos. Then, once chaos has been delimited, God sets what he has ordered into motion in accordance with his will and sovereign direction. Both of these actions are considered "good" in God's final analysis. Yet, a further evaluation is made once all of creation is complete. "And God saw all that He had made, and found it very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day" (emphasis mine).¹⁰ Why does God make a distinction after the sixth day? Perhaps the appearance of humanity upon the creative stage adds the final capstone to the creative order. However, on the whole, the actions of humanity upon the earth have been far from "good" for creation, much less, "very good." Consider the mocking rebuke found in the opening chapter of Isaiah.

Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth;
for the Lord has spoken:
I reared children and brought them up,
but they have rebelled against me.
The ox knows its owner,
and the donkey its master's crib;
but Israel does not know,
my people do not understand.¹¹

So, why is the entirety of creation "very good?" What makes the completed order greater than the sum of its parts?

Once complete, creation can create.

Now, the creation can continue that work of invention and innovation that the creator has set in motion. Our collective goodness is found in our ability to continue the work (and image) of God; work that is good enough to be shared with the next generation. Typically, an object, event, or action is judged by the value that will be added to our life or that of our immediate community. In God's corporate economy, however, value seems to be determined by the ability to continue the self-giving, self-limiting love of the creator.

Even when the created order finally comes to an end, God will invite his guest to the great eschatological banquet. What type of bread will be served at the table? The same bread that has always been served—bread is considered good—bread that has been broken throughout the generations on behalf of the world.

GENERATIONAL LINES

Do not hate hard labor
or farm work, which was created by the Most High.
(Sirach 7:15)

According to many experts, we are living in the midst of the greatest cultural shift in the last 500 years. Admittedly, a definition of post-modernity remains elusive. After all, how do you define something that is still defining itself? Is the postmodern era spawned by economic forces, scientific discoveries, a cultural fad, religious skepticism, or a publisher's dream? In the absence of a definition or exact origin, a call to listen to the voices speaking from the borders of our culture must once again be heard.

What is success and what is it worth? Does my job really matter? Am I morally accountable for the actions and omissions of my work? If, for more than 40 hours each week, I actively participate in a community that is founded upon the financial profitability of a separate legal entity, what is my personal and social commitment to my coworkers? Are they my friends or simply other "human resources?" Can the creative distinctiveness of my life find expression, or am I merely another cog in a vast, unseen machine? A skeptical and curious generation asks, "Why work?"

In 1999, the motion picture, *The Matrix*, burst onto the silver screen and placed these questions squarely before us. The film is set around the end of the 20th century. Humanity has celebrated the creation of a self-aware computer system that creates an entire race of machines. Soon afterward, the humans and the machines are locked in a battle for control of the planet. As part of the struggle, humanity blackens the sky in an attempt to sever the machines from their central source of power, the sun. With the skies darkened, the machines turn to an alternate source of power—the energy generated by the human body. While a small remnant continued to survive in a city near the earth's core (aptly named "Zion"), the remainder of humanity is "grown" in pods by the machines, which harvest energy from their body heat in massive power plants. To keep the "crop" of captive humans from revolting, the machines mentally network each person into an interactive, computer-simulated, virtual world called "the Matrix." Trapped in a perpetual dream that imitates life in the twentieth century, all humans connected to the Matrix believe they are living out their normal lives when they are in fact strapped into a small pod, fueling the very power source that keeps them enslaved.

The story of *The Matrix* utilizes various philosophical undertones, driven forward by a strong connection to Jewish and Christian apocalyptic imagery, to offer a pointed critique of both our social and corporate cultures. Are we all living in a "dream world" of our own design? Do we rise each day, make the commute to work, serve our time in a cubical or "pod," and return home only to repeat the processes tomorrow and continue our role as a perpetual slave to the "machine?" Are we little more than human batteries and our work nothing more than raw energy with little creative power of its own? The real irony of *The Matrix* is that humanity is enslaved by the very system that it created to bring freedom from the mundane drudgery of work.¹² After all, if machines can do our *creative* and *re-creative* work for us, what is the point of our existence? But then again, what else would be expected from "human resources?"

THE BLUE LINE—REVISITED

Everyday, Sister Benedicta awakens to the same cries and the same mundane work. Everyday, her hands will change sheets soiled by dysentery, her ears will hear the stories of crime and hunger, her eyes will see the misery of leprosy and her arms will cradle the dying. Every day, the iron gates of the compound are opened wide to welcome those forgotten by the world and left to die alone.

Yet, as Sister Benedicta moves from room to room she shares her life—and their stories. With a silent smile and grace-filled touch, she peacefully holds the hand of a frail man, as he holds onto the last few precious days and hours of his life of suffering and chaos. At the door, a small boy rocks back and forth in a corner, tightly curled into a ball to shut out a world flooded by cruelty and pain. As we pass by, the Sister tells us his story of the streets and the brutality of the bandits who took not only his possessions but also his eyesight. Yet, the sound of her voice and a gentle pat on the back bring new light to a world of darkness. She is here for him today and will be again tomorrow, by the grace of the One who came to a world of heartache for both of them.

Today, like every day, 650 lives will fill this home. Some will recover and return to the streets. Others will leave on the death truck as it makes its daily journey through the streets of Addis Ababa. *Success* here is not determined by life and death, but by the significance of shared compassion, love, and humanity. Our work, along with the rest of creation, is *significant*. As the author of Genesis 1 points out, our work is more than the sum of our parts, our work is ultimately *re-creative*; not because of what we produce or secure, but for what we can provide and share.

Many miles and years have passed since I looked out of my bedroom window in Indiana and dreamed of bursting the shackles of this planet and putting my footprint on the moon. During that time, I have also witnessed that—despite all of our technological, financial, and academic success—life upon the earth remains frail, delicate, and tenuous. Yet, through the good work of creative souls such as Sister Benedicta, God continues to burst the shackles of humanity, put his foot upon the earth, and clearly bear witness to how incredibly firm, deep, and tenacious life—and work—really are with him.

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Mr. Shirvinski is a former aerospace engineer and executive who now serves as an associate minister with the Chaparral Christian Church in Scottsdale, Arizona.

ENDNOTES

- 1 With deep gratitude, I owe the dichotomy between *success* and *significance* to Dr. Robert Wetzel of Emmanuel School of Religion.
- 2 Hebrew *tōlēdōt* literally means “generations.” In Genesis, the *tōlēdōt* is used to signal major breaks in the narrative.
- 3 Hebrew *rāqīaʿ* is traditionally translated as the “firmament.”
- 4 Gen 1:7a, Tanakh.
- 5 The fuller, Hebraic sense of *šālōm* representing peace, completeness and wholeness is intended here.
- 6 Job 38:8-11, Ps 33:6-7, Isa 40:12, Matt 14:22-33, Mark 6:45-52, and John 6:15-21.
- 7 Matt 8:23-27, Mark 4:35-41, and Luke 8:22-25.
- 8 Annie Dillard, *For the Time Being* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 108-109.
- 9 Gen 1:22, Tanakh.
- 10 Gen 1:31, Tanakh.
- 11 Isa 1:2-3
- 12 The motivation behind the creation of AI (artificial intelligence) is not directly stated in the film. However, the imagery and symbols used would seem to point in this direction. Especially poignant is the scene where Mr. Anderson is confronted by his employer regarding his work ethic.

