

## ROLES OF THE REDEMPTIVE ENTREPRENEUR

By Josh Kwan

Co-founder of Praxis

[www.praxislab.org](http://www.praxislab.org)

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The Christian conception of the entrepreneur's role in society should reflect a countercultural understanding of success.

Portrayals of entrepreneurs in popular media tend to hail these heroes of capitalism with a familiar range of labels. In attitude, they buck the system: Iconoclasts. Rebels. Disruptors. Through imagination, they see into the future: Geniuses. Innovators. Visionaries. With character, they fight through obstacles: Perseverance. Grit. Fortitude. These labels trace the arc of success for many of history's most influential entrepreneurs.

Christians on the journey of entrepreneurship rightly admire and aspire to many of these same traits. So what differentiates the entrepreneur who lives on the redemptive edge, who seeks to embody the gospel in creating and building a venture that leaves a meaningful impact on the world?

We encourage our entrepreneurs to consider three personas that define a narrower path for followers of Christ in the pursuit of startup success: anthropologist, custodian, and prophet. None of these labels, at first glance, appears to describe winners in the world of entrepreneurship. Still, if we propose that our way of practice and our vision for the good life radically depart from certain norms of startup culture, then our signposts and models of behavior ought to look radically different as well.

### Anthropologist

The typical Silicon Valley startup duo features an engineering virtuoso who writes code or designs products paired with an industry insider who sees a new approach to tackling a lucrative problem. One person understands the pain point for a customer, the other fashions the technical solution. It's the startup version of the buddy cop movie.

The opening scene for the redemptive entrepreneur begins with an alternative tableau. We start by assessing the world around us, studying the cultural waters in which we swim. Jesus held a deep understanding of the worldly narrative promulgated by the power structures, prejudices, and cultural mores of the Jewish and Roman worlds. What is happening in culture today, or more specifically, in your public sector or private industry, that foretells a diminution of virtue or a proliferation of vice? What sproutings of life and goodness are worth tending?

If Silicon Valley values technological visionaries who can periscope above the scientific horizon and see how consumers' lives will be altered in the future, let us Christian entrepreneurs go a step beyond and demonstrate an uncanny ability to bend the moral direction of society through products and services that anticipate where cultural trends are moving and discern either how to magnify or mitigate them.

Psychotherapists Alex Lerza and Josh Kalsbeek founded RTribe when they recognized the lack of tools at their disposal to combat addiction.

These Praxis Business Fellows studied today's cultural landscape: Through mobile phones, it is easier than ever for vices to tempt and grip their addicts. Could Alex and Josh apply their knowledge of recovery therapies and turn technology from an enabling device into a source of healing?

Jessica Rey, another Praxis Business Fellow, tried to find a bathing suit that flattered her figure and still adhered to her value of modesty. Unimpressed with her options, she researched the history of women's swimwear and traced the bikini's ever-shrinking surface

area to its physiological impact on the male brain. The actress-turned-cultural anthropologist-turned-entrepreneur founded a line of modest, yet elegant, swim attire as an alternative to the increasingly skimpy trends in fashion. Rey Swimwear's tagline: "Who says it has to be itsy bitsy?"

Redemptive entrepreneurs aim for returns beyond financial profits. If we wish to make a mark on the world through our ventures, then we must love the world the way an anthropologist loves to study the intricacies and depths of a culture. Be immersed, yet not subsumed. Understand its currents so well you can predict the water's flow ahead. Then be able to create a nonprofit or a company that ultimately redirects the stream through the fruits of our divine imagination and organizational savvy, be they tangible goods or intangible business practices and social impact models.

### **Custodian**

In the Catholic order founded by Saint Francis of Assisi, the person responsible for the well-being of a province and the preservation of holy places is called a *custos*. This is where we derive our English words "custodian" and "guardian." St. Francis, ever the humble servant, chose for the leaders of his Catholic order a title that did not signify importance, but rather a set of responsibilities—to take care, to watch, to look after.

Imagine our set of responsibilities as a concentric series of circles. At the core, we are urged by the psalmist, "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it."<sup>[1]</sup> The Message translation reads, "keep vigilant watch over your heart; that's where life starts." What we think springs forth from our minds as innovation actually begins in the heart, thus we must take custody over it. We first surrender our hearts to God; we must stand guard over what we allow to penetrate their walls.

Philosopher and Praxis Mentor James K.A. Smith writes, "...the center of gravity of the human person is located not in the intellect but in the heart. Why? Because the heart is the existential chamber of our love, and it is our loves that orient us toward some ultimate end..."<sup>[2]</sup> God gives us a set of practices that orient our hearts toward Him; these include prayer, meditation, fasting, Sabbath, and Scripture. When God fills our hearts, the temptations that befall so many entrepreneurs get crowded out. Ego gives way to humility, fear gives way to obedience, and the self gives way to the Spirit.

We spend a significant amount of time at our Praxis Accelerator programs on the juggling act of being married to a spouse, raising a family, and launching a startup. Tragically, there are countless examples of brilliant founders who have sacrificed their families at the altar of impact and influence, and there will be countless more. Founders go through seasons where it's impossible to maintain anything resembling a "balanced" life; however, the hardships of startup life aren't a blanket excuse to shirk the responsibilities of being a custodian of the relationships to which we commit ourselves before the Lord.

As visionaries and risk-takers who start a new venture, we naturally feel accountable for its success or failure. This sense of responsibility can veer into an unhealthy obsession of ownership or it can be internalized as holding a temporary guardianship over a gift. Cincinnatus, a statesman and farmer during the Roman Empire, is still revered because of his attitude and actions toward power. Granted the authority of a dictator, he twice relinquished his position after defeating Rome's enemies; Cincinnatus understood he was a custodian, not an owner.

We entrepreneurs believe we are creating something new with our hands. How we then hold this object is central to how we behave toward it. Do we hold it loosely, relaxed, and effortlessly? It is not ours to begin with, so we are free to make decisions that benefit others without consideration of our own interests. Alan Barnhart doesn't believe he's the owner of Barnhart Crane, the construction company. Since he is the custodian of the venture, he can simultaneously pursue outstanding profits while giving away 99% of the company to charity. Do we grip our ventures too tightly, out of fear and anxiety, succumbing to the urge to

exercise control and exert our dominance? Can we choose to sit not as a king but as a custodian?

## Prophet

Entrepreneurs are often heralded as prophets. They usher into the world an ingenious device or create a new market from scratch, and in the process, they gain notoriety for seeing, predicting, or shaping the future, as if they have a God-given ability. This modern appropriation of the concept of “prophet” is complimentary, yet incomplete and sanitized.

In Old Testament times, the archetypal prophets were often loners who railed against the sorry state of the world. They walked closely with God, listened to His truth, and spoke out as a piercing voice in opposition to mainstream culture, often to deaf and obstinate ears. But this view of prophets in today’s world is also lacking. We are more likely to find prophetic voices at the helms of organizations created to change society from the inside-out, not as the lonely voice from the outside.

We live in a different epoch where our message and media have changed. While the role and perspective of a prophet remains a forceful analog for our current age, today’s redemptive entrepreneur aspires to be a winsome witness whose venture is a demonstrated apologetic for the Christian faith. Gone are the rod and the robe. What persists is the prophet who brings God’s vision to bear on the culture.

We start by seeking to understand the character of God and what His intentions are for the world. This requires articulating a theology of our industry—its injustices, deep patterns and narratives, and virtuous heroes. It requires reading other Christians in our field and Christian thinkers who offer frameworks that apply to our vocations. If we choose the path of redemptive entrepreneurship, we must gaze beyond profits and hone a message that offers timeless truth, just as a prophet carries truth to his audience.

Jason Ballard, co-founder and CEO of [TreeHouse](#), is a Praxis Business Fellow whose message is conveyed through retail stores. TreeHouse wants to emulate the way Whole Foods transformed how consumers think about their food. Whole Foods, over several decades of persistent messaging, normalized the terms “organic” and “fair trade,” and in the process brought forth an entire industry while raising the health consciousness of a generation of eaters.

Jason is a prophet who is educating consumers about their home improvement projects—how they can become more healthy, more energy efficient, and more gentle on God’s creation.

Prophets speak truth to power. In the Old Testament, they constantly found audiences with a king or queen. In today’s culture, entrepreneurs are role models, presidential confidantes, and public figures. Successful founders have powerful platforms from which to share their message. As “idea entrepreneurs,” writes John Butman in the Harvard Business Review, “they can influence how other people think and behave in relation to their cherished topic.”<sup>[3]</sup> These entrepreneurs write books, give speeches, and draw people into their ideas; they offer practical ways to understand, engage, and implement their ideas. If our ventures embody our values and express our cherished topics, then the organizations we build become both the platform and the message in our role as prophets.

In this moment, entrepreneurs have an outsized opportunity to shape our world. Those who follow Jesus ought to be practicing a form of entrepreneurship that points people to our faith. This narrower path may require us to act more like anthropologists, custodians, and prophets than the swashbuckling stars of Silicon Valley.