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**JAKE THOMSEN** is a Partner with Sovereign’s Capital, a venture capital and private equity fund that invests in faith-driven business leaders in the US and Southeast Asia. He leads fund operations and oversees venture stage deal flow/investing. Prior to Sovereign’s, Jake was in operational and advisory roles spanning start-ups to public companies.

As Assistant Vice President of Bank of Hawaii, Jake oversaw sales, operations, customer engagement, and marketing for a regional team. He went on to spend four years as an independent consultant, delivering strategy and operations advisory services to start-ups and small companies in the US and Africa. He then served as Lead Associate in the Strategic Innovation Group of consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton. While there, Jake launched an enterprise cybersecurity SaaS product, and helped to build and manage the firm’s Internet of Things (IoT) division, which developed products and services for Fortune 100 clients.

Jake lives with his wife Lauren and his twins (a daughter and son) in Washington, D.C., where he is a board member of Little Lights Urban Ministries and Trinity Fellows Academy.

### **THE 321**

#### **3 Favorite Blogs or Podcasts**

- This Week in Startups
- Tim Keller sermons
- Hardcore History

#### **2 Ways You Reduce Stress**

- Going on a run with a good 90s playlist
- Reading a left-brain book with a cup of mushroom tea

#### **1 Thing You Hope to Be Remembered For**

- Living with a long obedience in the same direction

## COMMANDER'S INTENT

BY JAKE THOMSEN

Few organizations achieve goals in the face of uncertainty like the US military. There are many reasons for this, but one input often credited with enabling the necessary, singular focus during military operations is the “commander’s intent.” The Joint Chiefs describes a commander’s intent as “a clear and concise expression of the purpose of the operation and the military end state.” It is the guiding principle of what success looks like. In the face of diverse and evolving situations, a commander’s intent equips leaders and troops at all levels to improvise, adapt, and act because they know *how the story needs to end*. It’s why D-Day worked despite a series of mistaken air drops and other miscalculations. Allied troops, many off-target and overwhelmed by the Nazi resistance, followed the commander’s intent to form into groups and take bridges and key terrain. Armed with a vision of the end goal, they prevailed.

When faith-driven leaders lack a commander’s intent for running their businesses, they lack conviction and practical guidance for joining God’s work in the world. I see this almost daily in my work with entrepreneurs. Driven, faithful leaders know *that* their work matters to God, but many don’t have a vision for *why* or *how* it matters in the big picture. Without such a vision, they struggle to improvise and act because they don’t know what they’re supposed to make of their day-to-day leadership.

To discern our Commander’s intent, I believe we must look to what success ultimately looks like in God’s grand narrative. The story of the world is one of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. God created a good world that pleased Him, but that world was broken through sin. Jesus came to pay the cost so that His image-bearers could reconcile with their Creator, and then join His work to set things right. Eventually

God will bring this work to fruition when, as described in Revelation 21, heaven will come to earth, we will be resurrected, and we will live, work, and worship on the new earth. At that time of ultimate success, God proclaims what may be His people’s most appropriate Commander’s intent: *Behold, I am making all things new*. A world made new is the end state God is working toward, the culmination of the work He has been up to since the Fall. It’s therefore what His people—His Body accomplishing His work in the world—are called to, first through Israel and now through the Church.

What does it look like for God’s people to join in this Commander’s intent of setting things right, to reflect the way the world should be and one day will be? I build on other well-articulated taxonomies to propose a simple framework that starts local and radiates globally: 1) the individual, 2) the community, and 3) the broader world. Each of these areas is fundamental to God’s creation, the renewal of each is core to God’s work today, and each is deeply impacted by the influence of business.

### Personal Renewal

Setting the world right must include individual salvation. Human beings are the pinnacle of the creation narrative, made in God’s image to do His work in the world. Personal salvation through Christ reconciles us to the Father so the Spirit can make us new—that is, like Christ, the only example of a perfect human being we have. Business provides a platform that provides consistent, deep relationships—with teams, customers, vendors, and other stakeholders—to share the hope we have, witness to our own journey of knowing Jesus, and make disciples. The business community gets this. In past generations our overly narrow focus was often to “make money to give to

the church, which saves souls.” More recently we’ve captured a vision for becoming sanctified and sharing our faith through the situations and relationships at work. This is a good focus (though it’s not the whole story).

*To be made new as a person is to know God and increasingly become like Christ.* We won’t fully be like Christ until God completes that work at our resurrection. But we worship God as we know Him and become like Him in the meantime, and help others to do the same through our business platform.

## Human Flourishing

Making things new must touch every aspect of what it means to be human—relationships, families, communities, businesses, and cultures. Andy Crouch, writing in *Strong and Weak*, points out that human flourishing is being fully alive, which only happens in communities. Whether relieving physical suffering, cultivating fair systems of justice, or providing meaningful work, God calls His people to address the needs of others. For an archetype of flourishing, we can point to God’s nature in the Trinity. Within the Trinity the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit love, serve, and meet the needs of each other in the only perfect example of community we have. There is no pain, no loneliness, no lacking. Human flourishing results when we replicate this posture as we engage others.

We’ve all experienced how business can lead to flourishing. To highlight a few influential forces, there are redemptive products and services, such as drugs that replace addictive opioids with equivalent pain relief, wardrobe apps that reduce overconsumption, and ride-hailing companies that provide safe and transparent rides to users. Then there is impact on workers when leaders provide meaningful work, offer generous benefits, and set cultures that provide a sense of purpose that overflows into the home. Once such redemptive elements are set, the attributes of growth, scalability, and innovation that are inherent in business imbue it with the unique ability to scale impact by the profit motive. As the most successful companies grow, they become ambassadors of their values and eventually exert cultural influence. Facebook, Google,

and Netflix, for instance, have reshaped how we think about such core facets of the human experience as community, knowledge, and leisure. Almost any element of a business can help make people and communities new, as we steward our businesses toward our Commander’s intent.

*Communities are made new as they increasingly reflect the self-giving love of the Trinity.* We will attain full human flourishing only in the redeemed city of the new Jerusalem, on the other side of Revelation 21. But as we seek it here and now through our businesses, we worship God by joining in His work.

## A Redeemed World

In *Business for the Glory of God*, Wayne Grudem offers a helpful framework for this third category of renewing the broader world. Grudem cites the command in Ephesians 5 to “imitate God in everything you do.” According to this and other Scriptures, we honor God when we reflect His nature back to Him. This is affirmed in Scripture time and again. For instance, we’re told to be holy because God is holy (1 Peter 1), and to be merciful because God is merciful (Luke 6). There’s something intrinsically worshipful in shaping the world around us to represent and embody God’s character. Beautiful art is beautiful because it reflects the Creator, whether or not someone is enjoying it. Creation care is important not only because it promotes human flourishing, but also because creation reveals God’s eternal power and divine nature (Romans 1). Jesus proclaims that only God is good (Mark 10), and so God seems to affirm His own character in the handiwork of His creation at the close of each day in Genesis 1. The Garden was good because it reflected the nature of God, and the new earth will be good again for the same reason.

Similarly, companies can shape the spheres within and around them to uniquely reflect God in a fallen world. Opportunities here are as diverse as the elements of a business: the justice of a fair salary structure, the beauty of a clean and intuitive website, the truthfulness of an ad campaign, the excellence of a quality camping hammock, the rest of a corporate culture that expects a full day off each week, the

knowledge contributed to the public domain, and the faithfulness in rightly dealing with suppliers. Since these all reflect God's attributes in the world, they are worship, even if they don't directly promote human flourishing (though the three categories are deeply intertwined, so clear delineations can be misleading). Such truth may be especially encouraging to individual contributors, as our Commander's intent isn't only for leaders. Those who interact with few people so can't share their hope with others, or who don't make business decisions that impact flourishing, can still reflect God's character in their work. Even if my job has me glued to building financial models every hour of every day, I can display God in the creativity (Genesis 1—2), orderliness (1 Corinthians 14), and excellence I build into those models. This is true even if my leveraged buyout model doesn't hold altar calls or dig wells in developing countries.

*A renewed world increasingly reflects God's eternal attributes.* Creation will continue to groan until God redeems it with the new earth. In the meantime, we reflect the world as it should be and one day will be, through the influence that our businesses wield. And as we do, we worship God.

In a fundamental way, then, to make people, communities, and the world new is to cultivate God's character in each of them. This is at the heart of being image-bearers—image-bearing isn't just a human *characteristic*, it's a human *role*. For the original ancient Near Eastern readers of Genesis, the concept would bring to mind armies from other lands, "image-bearers" who carried large flags portraying their conquering king, foreshadowing the coming reign. We similarly bear God's image as we shape the world around us, and thereby proclaim to all, "the King is coming, and this is what He's like." Our Commander's intent gives an actionable charge to make things new by reflecting God in the world.

### Implications for the Ecosystem

My hope is that our Commander's intent might offer a fresh lens to see our work, one that is both actionable and motivating. Beyond this, I hope it might impact

how we consider the faith-driven business movement in general: Since approaches to pursuing the renewal of all things are profoundly diverse and multifaceted, we should be an ecosystem deeply characterized by understanding and grace.

In these still early years, it's common to hear claims that businesses building life-giving internal cultures, and meeting physical needs don't "count" if they don't preach the gospel as their driving motivation. (This view treats the Great Commission as the Commander's intent, rather than as a cornerstone of it.) Or we may accept flourishing as a legitimate goal, but we write off businesses doing traditional work with a focus on reflecting God's character in the world, perhaps as too return-driven. Or we may say an investment seeking concessionary returns to share the gospel in a closed market isn't a good witness to the world, since sub-market returns are perceived as lacking excellence. But if our goal is to renew individuals, communities, and the world, then we should show understanding and grace, and even celebrate, when God uses co-laborers for different parts of the mission. We are indeed one body with many parts. As Tim Keller articulates in such tensions, our work as individuals and as a community is never "either-or," but rather "both-and." Therefore we spur each other on to discern and pursue our respective callings, step into our unique roles with excellence, and (most importantly) abide in Christ. For though it is our privilege to join in this work, the fruit of our efforts will only come by the Spirit Himself.

Our Commander's intent is a rallying cry for us individually and as a community. We know how the story ends, so we discern the work before us with wisdom and confidence. As Jesus declared, the Kingdom of heaven is upon us. It will soon be fully here, and in the meantime we steward our lives and businesses to lean into that reality as our great worship. For behold, He is making all things new.

"The parts of the body will not take sides. All of them will take care of one another. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it. If one part is honored, every part shares in its joy. You are the body of Christ. Each one of you is a part of it." (1 Corinthians 12:25–27, NIRV)