

VOCATIONAL STEWARDSHIP  
FOR THE COMMON GOOD


K I N G D O M

C A L L I N G

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Afterword by Steven Garber

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## Foreword

Two recent personal conversations tell the story inside the story of this book. The first one took place over dinner in my home with my older daughter. "I don't need the church coming up with anything else for me to do in order to be missional," she said. "I feel missional five days a week." Working as a Licensed Master Social Worker (LMSW) in a local hospital, she is exposed to the dark underbelly of our culture, helping people each day sort through a series of health-care options that will shape the next chapter of their lives. Lots of times none of the options are good, and people are devastated. Often she is the only person who can speak a word of hope in the situation. She is living out her faith in a place and in a way that really counts. Right where life (and death) is happening.

The second conversation took place half a continent away from me. A pastor relayed to one of our Leadership Network researchers a comment made by one of his team members after they had participated in our Missional Renaissance Leadership Community. The multiple teams involved in this leadership community include both church leaders and community leaders who figure out ways to fast-forward the church's missional engagement in their respective communities. This particular team had brought their city's mayor to a recent gathering in Dallas. On the flight back home from the experience the mayor commented to the pastor, "I have never thought of my job as mayor as a ministry—until now." I suspect no church committee assignment could compare in terms of community impact with what this guy does every single day.

My daughter and the mayor represent a growing number of people who share an awareness that kingdom assignments typically involve venues beyond local church real estate and programming. Kingdom callings take us

up increasingly complex tasks that involve people and money. Over the years he has given himself with honest humility to service in the churches where he has lived, and is a kind, loyal, thoughtful man (my reading of him, not his description of himself). With some pain, he said, "I've never had the sense that the pastor thought of someone like me when he was preparing his sermon. It always feels more like he imagines that people live in the church, not the world."

What are we to do? I refuse to be a cynic, and with Bono I believe that "tearing a corner off of the darkness" is a good life. We can all be glad that Amy Sherman has passions and commitments that have taken her into this question with remarkable theological richness. Always attentive to both the biblical vision and the challenges of ordinary life for Everyman and Everywoman, she has set forth a vision of vocation that is profoundly formed by the reality of the kingdom of God, telling stories of men and women from all over the world who see their lives and labor as callings, as integral to the *missio Dei*.

My hope is that we will never again pray "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" without remembering Dr. Sherman's very good work, calling all of us as she does to see our work as kingdom callings.

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## Appendix A

### KEY THEOLOGICAL THEMES UNDERGIRDING VOCATIONAL STEWARDSHIP

#### 1. THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM

To steward their vocations well, Christians need to have a big conception of God's redemptive work. At the heart of the gospel is the glorious message of new life in Christ, made possible by the atoning sacrifice of our Savior Jesus, who lived the life we ought to have lived and died the death we deserved for our sins. Yet this good news is even bigger: God's salvific work is not limited to individual salvation but concerns his mission of restoring the whole of the created order (Col 1:19-20; Eph 1:9). The gospel of the kingdom is about making *all* things right. It's about the creation of the new world—what Revelation 21:1 calls "a new heavens and a new earth"—a place without suffering, pain, tears, war, hunger, oppression and death.

Jesus' kingdom has been inaugurated and is *now* in definite ways because of his life, ministry and resurrection (Lk 4:21, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing"). As Christians, we have entered this kingdom and become citizens in it, and that citizenship is to shape us in every way—including in our work lives.

*Why this matters for vocational stewardship.*

1. Because it helps us avoid the mistake of thinking that the only important vocations are "full-time Christian ministry" (pastors, missionaries and so on).
2. Because it helpfully directs our attention to God's "short list" of priori-

ties (preach the gospel to the poor, bring recovery of sight to the blind, set the oppressed free—that is, evangelism, compassion ministry and justice mission).

3. Because it offers us the general goal—relevant to all vocational work—of doing that which serves as sign and foretaste of the coming kingdom.

## 2. GOD'S TELOS: "BEHOLD, I AM MAKING ALL THINGS NEW"

This is obviously related to number one above. Jesus' resurrection shows his plan for restored life. We anticipate new bodies and a new earth, the very re-creation of God's creation. These truths should lead us to reject gnostic dualism and affirm the goodness of creation, for God does not plan to send the planet to the trash heap, but to redeem and renew it. Thus the afterlife is not disembodied, and salvation is not spiritual only.

*Why this matters for vocational stewardship.* Because we are called and invited to join God's reclamation work *now* . . . and our participation in that will *last*. In short—our work *matters*. The great resurrection chapter ends with this: "Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Cor 15:58). Because of Jesus' resurrection, our work is not in vain. It won't be thrown out at the consummation. God's reclamation work extends as "far as the curse is found"; he is renewing and reconciling all things under his headship.

God's high charge to humankind—to serve as vice regents over creation—was not rescinded after the Fall; it remains our destiny in the New Jerusalem (Rev 5:10). Thus, the work faithful Christ-followers do in the present, whether that involves art or business or writing or nursing or engineering or urban planning or any of the other myriad professions, lasts into God's future. As Lesslie Newbigin wrote, "All who have committed their work in faithfulness to God will be by Him raised up to share in the new age, and will find that their labor was not lost, but that it has found its place in the completed kingdom."<sup>1</sup>

## 3. THE HEART OF PERSONAL DISCIPLESHIP

Christ calls us to follow him. He seeks obedient disciples submitted to his cosmic lordship. He expects us increasingly, by the power of his

Spirit, to conform to his character (displaying the fruit of the Spirit); to believe and order our lives by his truth; to embrace his passions and priorities; and to join him on his mission in the world. Like him, we are "sent ones."

*Why this matters for vocational stewardship.* Because it affects the "what" of personal and corporation mission: what we *do* matters, not just our character. Although there is no sacred/secular divide, not all secular vocations are created equal, and we should make wise choices about investing our lives in the things God is passionate about. Why give yourself and your vocational talents to firms that invent new flavors of cat food and new colors of lipstick? To the greatest extent possible, Christians should avoid the trivial and seek career opportunities that focus on the deeply significant: human flourishing, public order, creation care, justice and beauty.

## 4. OUR GENERAL VOCATION (THE CULTURAL MANDATE)

Although fallen and under the groans of the curse, creation is ordered, revelatory, meaningful and cherished by God. The Father calls his children to be stewards/vice regents of his creation (Gen 1:28). He gives us the gifts of both nature and culture, and calls us to imitate him as creative beings, both tending (protecting) and working (developing) the Garden. This cultural mandate calls us to recognize that "the Earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" (Psalm 24:1 esv) and to gladly serve as stewards of the bounty God has provided us for the meeting of our own needs and the world's.

*Why this matters for vocational stewardship.*

1. It means that we all get to participate in this vocation, regardless of our specific jobs (which may be tedious or permit little or no room for creativity). We can also live this general vocation through our avocational interests, hobbies and volunteer work, as well as through the non-work spheres of our lives, such as family life and recreation.
2. It means we are called to be culture makers, and it gives us guidance for that work.
3. It legitimizes so-called nonspiritual pursuits like art and science (and many others).

4. It means God has shared his power and authority with us; he has given us real responsibility in this world. We have a high calling.
5. It means the environment matters and we should focus on creation care and be “green” in and through our vocations.

### 5. A PROPER VIEW OF HUMAN NATURE

We need to embrace both our fallenness/sinfulness *and* our glory as people made in God’s image and as Christians who are now redeemed and in Christ, with the Spirit living inside us. As John Eldredge put it in *Waking the Dead*, “I daresay we’ve heard a bit about original sin, but not nearly enough about original glory, which comes before sin and is deeper to our nature.”<sup>2</sup>

The Bible begins with Genesis 1, not Genesis 3. We need both the humility that acknowledges our sinfulness fully (“the heart is deceitful”) and the courage to affirm that God’s divine power is alive in us through his Spirit. There are dangers in both a too-high view of ourselves *and* in a too-low view.

A biblical view of human nature also teaches us that we are made for community. The only thing that was “not good” in paradise was that Adam was alone. We are made for God, and for relationship with one another.

#### *Why this matters for vocational stewardship.*

1. Because our work matters in God’s redemptive purposes. We—though frail and always in need of his work to make us adequate (2 Cor 3:5-6)—are part of God’s plan. As St. Augustine wrote, “God without us will not, as we without God cannot.” Astonishingly, the apostle Paul calls us God’s coworkers (2 Cor 6:1). If we think of ourselves only as hopeless worms that sin constantly and have nothing to offer, we won’t believe ourselves capable of fulfilling our calling as God’s coworkers who have been designed by him for good works (Eph 2:10).
2. Because we should seek to advance healthy, just community through our work. We are not created only for work—this idea is the root of workaholicism. We are called to relationship and charged to live and act as the new humanity, displaying in and through our community life the beauty of Jesus whose Spirit indwells us.

### 6. APPROPRIATE SOBRIETY ABOUT “THE WORLD, THE FLESH AND THE DEVIL”

Our culture is shaping us in all kinds of ways that we are often unaware of or inattentive to. Evangelicals sufficiently schooled in a robust biblical worldview may be equipped to recognize evil or unbiblical ideas. But the same Christians can sometimes fail to see evil or unbiblical cultural forms and patterns. Reformed theologian David Wells has shown how evil tendencies are embedded and affirmed in our public institutions—and these manifestations of worldliness can affect us to an even greater degree than the behaviors traditionally associated with worldliness (drinking, promiscuity, gambling and so on).

#### *Why this matters for vocational stewardship.*

1. It encourages us to be sober about how very difficult it actually is to change the world.
2. It reminds us that prayer is fundamental.
3. It warns us (in terms of our culture making) about fighting only in the realm of ideas and not in the realm of institutions.

### 7. WE ARE ALIENS AND STRANGERS IN THIS WORLD AND ARE TO LIVE ACCORDINGLY

*Why this matters for vocational stewardship.* This obviously affects the “how” of our work: we are to be certain kinds of bosses and employees, acting on biblical virtue and rule, which is different from the way the world operates. But it also should shape the *ends* of our work and creativity. Vocationally we want to be about the work of helping people to flourish, but we need a biblical definition of “human flourishing” rather than the world’s definition.

### 8. A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF POWER—AND OF BLESSING

Power is a gift (one that is often abused, but that is not inherently evil, as some Christians think). God grants us power—and charges us to use it responsibly. He has also blessed us richly. We need to know the purpose for which God has given us power and blessings.

*Why this matters for vocational stewardship.* We American Christians have relatively more power, wealth, opportunity and privilege than most

of the rest of the world. Especially those in the academic and professional disciplines have great opportunity to contribute to human flourishing (more than do the world's destitute who struggle simply to survive). Since we are the recipients of such power and privilege, we are especially accountable for its right use ("from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked," Lk 12:48). Our vocational opportunities—the fact that we have vocational choice—is a gift, a privilege and a form of power, one that we must take very seriously and be very intentional about.

### 9. A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF STEWARDSHIP—AND OWNERSHIP

In the Bible, being stewards is fundamental to our human nature and our general vocational calling. Stewardship is about devoting all that I am and all that I have to God, recognizing him as the ultimate owner of everything (ourselves, our lives, our time, our money). As members of one body, as humans created for community, God calls us to fight the ingrained selfishness with which we all struggle and to recognize that his gifts are given to all for the common good.

*Why this matters for vocational stewardship.* For some Christians, it seems that stewardship is only about the use of our money. We need basic teaching on whole life stewardship. People need to know that they are accountable for how they steward their work life and vocational abilities.

### 10. GOD'S HEART FOR THE POOR, THE ALIEN, THE WIDOW, THE OPPRESSED AND THE ORPHAN

God's passion for the poor and his hatred of injustice are two central divine character traits. He goes so far as to say that there is no true worship without doing justice (Is 1); that "religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (Jas 1:27); that caring for the needy and doing justice are central to what it means to know God (Jer 22:16); that the kingdom of God "belongs" to the poor (Lk 6:20); and that we can even find Jesus in the face of the poor (Mt 25:45).

*Why this matters for vocational stewardship.* While we are called to do many diverse things through our vocations (such as making scientific discoveries, creating beauty and defending truth), God does have a special

emphasis on justice and compassion for the poor, and that priority of his should influence our vocational stewardship in some way.

### 11. COMMON GRACE

God gets his work done not only through his church, but also through a wide variety of other created institutions and through nonbelievers of goodwill. As John Calvin argued, nonbelievers have achieved significant works of insight in many fields. We Christians are to note such achievements as praiseworthy and as coming from God, who left gifts in human nature "even after it was despoiled of the true good."<sup>3</sup> In his graciousness, God also restrains evil through common grace, working to maintain order in social life.

*Why this matters for vocational stewardship.* Because it means that Christians, and churches, can legitimately partner with those outside the church in pursuing the common good. God can advance his sovereign purposes—for beauty and justice, wholeness and peace—through secular institutions, and we must discern all the places where he is at work.

### 12. THE ONE CHURCH

The Apostles' Creed affirms that Christians believe in "the holy catholic church." The apostle Paul used the image of one body to describe God's church and instructed us never to undervalue a part of that one body that is different from us. We are interdependent (1 Cor 12:21, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!'" ). We belong to one another (Eph 4:25).

*Why this matters for vocational stewardship.* Because in our efforts to deploy our parishioners for vocational stewardship, we should be mindful of the efforts of our brothers and sisters in other congregations toward similar ends. We should be ready to partner, to listen and to learn from other churches that are also seeking to advance God's sovereign, good purposes in the world.