

VOCATIONAL STEWARDSHIP
FOR THE COMMON GOOD

K I N G D O M
C A L L I N G

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Today, in cities at home and abroad, many of God's children continue to cry out for justice and shalom. Evangelical churches in America have innumerable opportunities to rejoice these communities. This will happen when our churches produce Christ-followers who live as the *tsaddiqim*.

4

How the Gospel of the Kingdom Nurtures the *Tsaddiqim*

*Jesus enticed people into a
kingdom mission from the outset.*

JAMES CHOUNG

The too-narrow gospel we studied in the previous chapter doesn't provide an adequate theological foundation for nurturing righteous Christ-followers who practice vocational stewardship. What's needed instead is a strong presentation of Jesus' gospel of the kingdom.

THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM

Jesus' gospel centered on his announcement that the long-awaited kingdom had broken into human history. Understanding what such an announcement meant to its original hearers requires reviewing what some theologians have referred to as the Grand Narrative of redemptive history.

That narrative begins with creation. In the beginning, our loving and lavish God brought into being a wonderful paradise. He set human beings in that paradise, where they enjoyed perfect shalom: peace with God, peace with self, peace with others and peace with the created order.

Tragically, the first humans disobeyed God's one commandment, not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Rather than enjoying their place as vice regents under God's gracious sovereignty, they wanted to be in charge. Their sin is known as the Fall, and it changed everything. Their relationship with God was broken, as suspicion and fear

misplaced joy and trust. Their psychological well-being was marred as they experienced disorientation and shame. Their relationship with one another became conflictual. They pointed fingers of blame at one another, and they hid from each other. Peace between humans and the created order was also shattered as God banished Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden and cursed the earth itself. As a result of the sin of the first human beings, suffering, evil, alienation, pain, conflict, toil, futility, scarcity and death entered the world.

Yet even in the midst of this cosmic tragedy, a line of God's amazing grace was visible. In Genesis 3 we see God seeking out his children. He mercifully makes them clothing to cover their nakedness. And, most importantly, he promises them a savior—a redeemer who will crush the head of evil.

From Genesis 3 to the opening of the New Testament, God's grace continues even in the face of his people's chronic sin and rebellion. God often has to bring judgment, but he promises never to abandon his commitment to full restoration. Indeed, he inspires many prophets with visions of that future restoration (including the preview passages we examined in chapter one).

And then, as singer-songwriter Michael Card put it, God spoke his "final word" in the incarnation of Jesus.¹ Jesus is God's "yes" and "amen" to all the promises of restoration and redemption (2 Cor 1:20). Jesus comes announcing that *in him* the promises of the preview passages are fulfilled. His salvation is full-orbed, dealing with every dimension of the Fall. Through his life, death and resurrection, he overcomes *all* the effects of the Fall. He pays the price for our sins and all sin, accepting God's punishment on the cross. His resurrection brings the renewed possibility of shalom between humans and God, within humans themselves, among humans, and between humans and the created order.

Yet while Jesus tells us his kingdom work has begun in the world, he explains that it is not yet complete—nor will it be until he comes again to consummate it. His evangelistic invitation is to come and enter his kingdom now, to embrace him now as the one true King whom the whole cosmos will one day acknowledge. In Jesus' gospel, salvation certainly involves the vital and glorious work of individual redemption. Those who trust Christ for their salvation receive forgiveness of their sin and a re-

stored relationship with God. They enter into the promise of eternal life. However, drawn against the creation/Fall/redemption/consummation story, Jesus' redemptive work is shown to go *beyond* saving individual souls. His redemption has accomplished nothing less than the promise of a restored paradise where shalom in all its dimensions will reign.

In 2008, InterVarsity leader James Choung did the Christian world an invaluable service when he published a new, simple diagram for explaining this gospel of the kingdom.² Choung's Four Circles illustration (see figure 4.1) tells the Christian story from this creation/Fall/redemption/consummation paradigm. Unlike the Bridge illustration, Choung's presentation centers the gospel story right away on God and God's mission in the world, rather than on humans and their sinfulness.

Choung's presentation begins by asking nonbelievers their opinion on

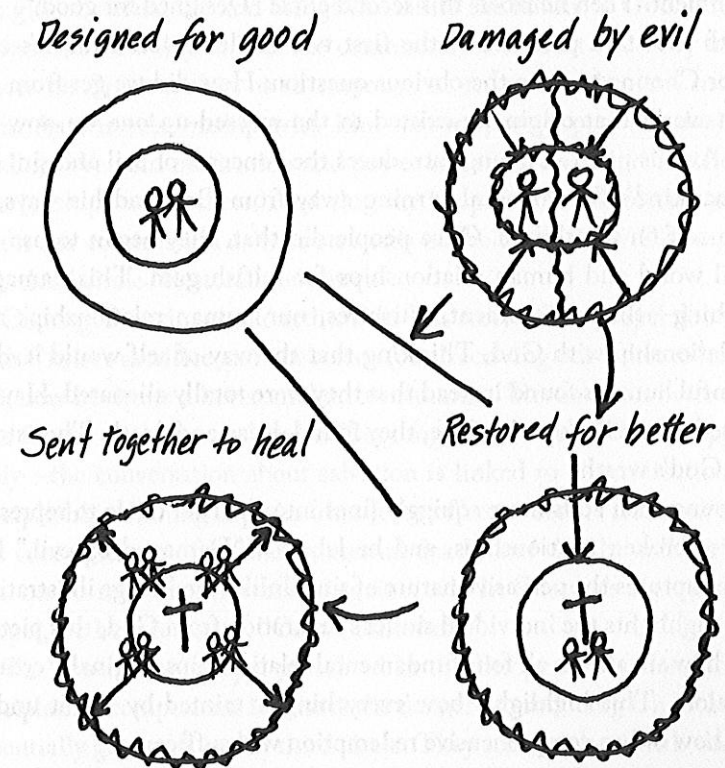


Figure 4.1. Choung's Four Circles

the state of the world—and how they feel about it. Most acknowledge that the world is deeply broken, marked by suffering, injustice and alienation. Most also admit that they feel upset over this, and wish it were different. Choung then draws a first circle representing the damaged world.

Choung then capitalizes on that universal hunger for a better world. Following C. S. Lewis's classic apologetic approach, he argues that just as the universal sense of hunger suggests the reality of food, so the universal longing for a better, more just, peaceful and healthy world suggests that either there once was one or there one day will be one. Then he announces that this is exactly what Christianity teaches.

Now he draws another circle. This one represents the good, created order of Genesis 1. He explains that God originally made a world of shalom, marked by beauty, goodness and harmony. There was peace between humans and God, between people, and between people and the created environment. Then he labels this second circle "Designed for good."

With the stark presence of the first two circles before him, it's easy now for Choung to raise the obvious question: How did we get from the perfect world that originally existed to the messed-up one we now inhabit? At this point, Choung introduces the concepts of evil and sin. Sin is humankind's fundamental turning away from God and his ways, to setting self on the throne. Once people did that, they began to use the natural world and human relationships for selfish gain. This damaged everything—the environment, ourselves, our human relationships and our relationship with God. Thinking that the way of self would lead to life, sinful humans found instead that they were totally alienated. Having departed from God's path of life, they found decay and death. They stood under God's wrath.

Choung then adds more squiggly lines into the first circle to represent all these broken relationships, and he labels it "Damaged by evil." His picture captures the pervasive nature of sin. Unlike the Bridge illustration, which highlights the individual sinner's separation from God, this picture shows how sin affects all four fundamental relationships originally created for shalom. This highlights how everything is tainted by sin; it underscores how only a comprehensive redemption will suffice.

Choung then explains to the listener that God doesn't want to leave us alone in our sin in this damaged world. The good news is that God has

mercifully returned to his planet in his Son Jesus to heal it. Jesus enters our broken world, offering the path to reconciliation, the opportunity to return to God through him. Jesus allows himself to be infected by the disease of sin (he bears it on our behalf) and courageously, sacrificially pays the penalty for it himself on the cross.

Now Choung draws a third circle with a big, vertical arrow representing Jesus' entry into our sin-ravaged world. He explains that Jesus came to start a resistance movement against all evil. Through his life-giving ministry, he starts pushing back the curse and offering people foretastes of the new kingdom he is bringing. He dies on the cross, fully paying the penalty of God's wrath against sin. And then he is raised victorious over death, ready to breathe his spirit-life into those who say yes to him.

Those who respond to Jesus' invitation to enter his kingdom receive forgiveness for their sin and healing for their brokenness. He grants them the gift of eternal life and brings them into the family of God. Jesus then shows us a new way to live. He commands us to trust and obey him and places his Spirit within us to empower us to grow to become more like him. As our relationship with him matures, we experience deep inner healing. We gain motivation and power to pursue healed, reconciled, just relationships with others. And the way is opened for us to take up once again our commission as wise stewards of the earth. Now Choung labels this third circle "Restored for better."

Choung then draws a fourth circle. His story of the gospel doesn't end with Christ's sacrifice and our rescue (our "receiving our ticket to heaven"). No, now he draws a horizontal arrow from the "Restored for better" circle to a fourth circle that is labeled "Sent together to heal." Now—appropriately—the conversation about salvation is linked to a conversation about discipleship. Choung explains that Jesus offers us rescue from our sin and the consequences of it (that is, eternal death) *and* that he calls us to join him on his resistance movement against evil. In Choung's depiction of the gospel, we hear Jesus say, "Come, follow me."

The too-narrow gospel presented in the Bridge illustration lacks this discipleship component. It creates the danger of producing Christians who essentially get stuck in the third circle. They remain there with their personal ticket to heaven, in the "holy huddle," enjoying fellowship with God and other believers, but divorced from the mission of God. This is a big

part of what motivated Choung to design an alternative way of presenting the gospel. He explains,

The afterlife takes priority over the mission life in existing gospel explanations. They imply that the gospel is something that happens after death instead of now. Even if they mention a relationship with God in the present, they often emphasize what people can get out of it—joy, peace, healing, prosperity. As a result, we invite people into a relationship with Jesus without mentioning the *missio Dei*, hoping to get to it later. . . . But Jesus enticed people into a kingdom mission from the outset.³

IMPLICATIONS OF HOW WE UNDERSTAND THE GOSPEL

The gospel preached in our congregations makes a huge difference in the kind of people our members become. Specifically, congregants' understanding of the gospel affects their views of three arenas crucial to living as the *tsaddiqim*: sanctification, evangelism and mission. This is why it is crucial that missional leaders preach the "big" gospel of the kingdom.

Sanctification. The big gospel helps us understand that sanctification is a matter of conforming not only to the character of Christ, but also to his passions and identity. Missional leaders should of course be quick to affirm that seeking conformity to Jesus' holy character is absolutely essential. Personal morality and growth in the fruit of the Spirit is a critical part of righteousness, but it's also incomplete. Becoming like Jesus also means seeing ourselves as he did, as "sent ones," and being passionate about the things he is passionate about. Let's look briefly at each.

Jesus is passionate for justice and shalom. We see this as he overturns the tables of the greedy moneychangers in the temple (Jn 2:14-16), as he calls the Pharisees to account for their unjust practices (Mk 7:9-13) and as he deliberately reaches out to those society has banished to the margins: the poor, the disabled, the lepers. Jesus is also passionate about reconciliation among diverse people. He reaches across gender, ethnic and religious barriers to minister to the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn 4) and the ten lepers of Luke 17. Unity is also a core value for Jesus; consider, for example, his fervent prayer in John 17. And, like his Father, Jesus is passionate about the poor, the vulnerable, the sick and the stranger. To become like him is to adopt all these passions as our own.

Moreover, genuine sanctification means that we intentionally identify

with the *identity* of Jesus. He saw himself as the "sent one," and he calls us sent ones. Listen again to John 20:21: "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." Sanctification means growing ever deeper into our identity as sent ones—those appointed by God to bear fruit, as Jesus said (Jn 15:16). It's not just the missionaries in our congregations who are the sent ones. We are *all* sent ones.

In teaching this point, missional leaders may want to consider using an attention-getting exercise from missionary Darrow Miller. Miller notes how precious John 3:16 is to many Christians ("For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life"). In some evangelical churches, Miller reports, to help not-yet-Christians grasp the amazing significance of this great love and to personalize it, evangelists encourage people to insert their own name into the verse, in place of "the world." Thus, John 3:16 comes to say, "For God so loved [Name] that he sent his only Son Jesus that I should not perish but have eternal life."

Acknowledging the validity of this, Miller then suggests that Christ-followers take another liberty with the text that links it to John 20:21. This helps us better grasp our own sentness. He suggests personalizing John 3:16 to read, "For God so loved the world that he sent me into the world."⁴

Now, it should be immediately emphasized, Jesus' sentness is utterly unique. He alone is the Messiah and God's one true redeemer. But, as John 20:21 makes clear, God intends for believers to follow his Son into the world as sacrificial servants. God shows his love for the lost and the least through his Son *and* through all his children who seek, in the power of his Holy Spirit, to be his hands and feet in compassionate service. God and Jesus have sent *us* into the world.⁵ Sanctification means following Jesus as he sends us into every place and every societal sphere, giving ourselves to the work of the restoration of all things.

Evangelism. How we understand the gospel also shapes our approach to evangelism. Our presentation will include the vital good news of personal justification by faith in Christ's atoning blood. But we will also talk about the power of Jesus in redeeming *all* our fundamental relationships (with God, self, others and the earth). Moreover, our gospel presentation will rejoice in Jesus' victory over both the penalty of sin *and* the corrup-

tion of sin. We will share the good news that through Jesus' redemptive work we can be made clean *and* whole. We will celebrate the good news that he is making us new creatures *and* that he promises the restoration of all things.

The gospel of the kingdom should also reshape the language we use in evangelism. Typically, congregants are trained to encourage seekers to "ask Jesus into their heart." However, this does not mirror the language Jesus himself used. His evangelistic invitation was, "Come, enter my kingdom." Therefore, evangelists of the gospel of the kingdom should encourage seekers to respond to Jesus' invitation to come over and join his heart. Intimate communion with Jesus occurs when we go to him. German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it this way: "It is not that God is the spectator and sharer of our present life, howsoever important that is, but rather that we are the reverent listeners and participants in God's action in the sacred story, the history of the Christ on the earth. *And only so far as we are there, is God with us today also.*"⁶

The kingdom gospel also leads us to invest more thought and energy in the missional work of *enacting and demonstrating* the heart of God in the world. We acknowledge that our lives as well as our words are messages to the watching world about God. This is what one Californian church learned as it studied and meditated for three years on Luke 10 and Matthew 10, about Jesus sending out his disciples. Pastor Ryan Bell writes,

We have . . . learned of our need to be continually converted to the gospel. Little by little, the gospel that Jesus gave the disciples to share, recorded in Matthew 10, has been replaced by a disembodied, abstract gospel about going to heaven after you die. But notice in Matthew 10 that Jesus doesn't commission the disciples with anything like a gospel of "going to heaven." He says, "proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near'" (Matt. 10:7). If anything, this is a gospel about heaven coming to earth, not us going to heaven. It's obvious, too, that this gospel is more about demonstration than presentation. Jesus does tell them to "proclaim" the good news. But how? "Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons" (Matt. 10:8). We have discovered that to be God's witnesses we need to be re-converted to the gospel of the "at-hand" kingdom of God.⁷

Mission. Our understanding of the gospel also influences our view of mission. As we already saw, the gospel of the kingdom highlights the fun-

damental call for the church to join King Jesus on his mission of offering foretastes of justice and shalom. It shapes our understanding of the church's mission in the world in four additional ways.

First, the gospel of the kingdom illuminates our Lord's top three missional priorities. As articulated in his inaugural address in Luke 4, they are *evangelism, compassion and justice*.

Second, the gospel of the kingdom draws us to holistic ministry, to addressing people's spiritual and material needs. It does so by pointing our attention not only to Jesus' death, but also to his life. A close study of Jesus' life reveals that he didn't treat people as souls without bodies. His healing ministry mattered. When he sent out the disciples, it was for the task of evangelism *and* the work of healing (Mk 3:14-15; Lk 9:1-2).

Third, the gospel of the kingdom shapes mission by encouraging us to think more "cosmically" about evil than does the too-narrow gospel. The latter focuses on individual sin and personal redemption. The gospel of the kingdom focuses on that *plus* the far-reaching ravages of the cosmic curse. It proclaims not only the redemption of individual sinners but also the destruction of the devil's work and the restoring of all things.⁸ Kingdom people thus seek Jesus' power to "tie up the strong man" and "rob his house" (Mk 3:27). They recognize that mission involves pushing back the curse, fighting evil and injustice.⁹

Finally, the gospel of the kingdom shapes the direction of our mission. With our focus on Jesus' life and ministry as our model, we come to see that while he loved everyone, his steps tended to lead him toward the poor. In this Jesus is simply following in his Father's footsteps. The Bible teaches that God "shows no partiality" (Deut 10:17). But it also paints a very consistent picture of God acting vigorously on behalf of the poor, the orphan, the widow and the stranger. He regularly exhibits a special concern for them. Our mission work should too.

THE *MISSIO DEI*: WE HAVE A ROLE

The big gospel presented through tools like James Choung's Four Circles puts the mission of God, the *missio Dei*, front and center. We see that God is on the move, doing his work of restoring all things. Such a vision should provoke our awed worship: How amazing a savior is our God, who is conquering all evil and is about the work of re-creating paradise! But it should

provoke another response as well. Namely, it should move us to a startled, humbled-yet-confident embrace of our own personal role in building for the kingdom.

Australian missionaries Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch make this point so powerfully in their book *The Shaping of Things to Come* that it is worth quoting them at length:

We Protestants have generally struggled to affirm our place in God's plan of redemption for fear of developing a salvation by works. In our efforts to ensure that God's sovereignty remains unsullied, we have tended to downplay the vital part that God has set for humanity in the redemption of the world. We have tended to make a formula of "all of God" and "we are nothing." Not only is this highly questionable theologically, loaded as it is with dualistic self-hatred, but it has not necessarily brought God any glory. In actual fact it might actually have served to diminish the sheer value of the investment he has made in human freedom and the preciousness of his image that he has placed in the human being. . . .

We partner with God in the redemption of the world. *This is not just an issue of theology or spirituality; it is an issue of a thoroughly reorienting missiology. It will provide God's people with a new sense of purpose, a divine connection to daily actions. We need to grasp the fact that in God's economy our actions do have an eternal impact. We do extend the kingdom of God in daily affairs and activities and actions done in the name of Jesus.* We live in an unredeemed world. But out of each human life that is given over to God and committed to his creation, a seed of redemption falls into the world, and the harvest is God's!¹⁰

As N. T. Wright said, "[Christians] are not just to be a sign and foretaste of [the] ultimate salvation: *they are to be part of the means by which God makes this happen in both the present and the future.*"¹¹

God's plan is to bring shalom to this broken world, but he wants to do that in partnership with us. This can sound absolutely astonishing to those of us deeply schooled in the realities of our own sin. I attend a church where we confess our sin every Sunday. This is appropriate, but it can risk communicating to believers that the Christian story began in Genesis 3 instead of Genesis 1. We were made with original glory; all human beings bear the dignity of being made in God's own image. Sin has greatly marred that image but has not extinguished it.

Moreover, believers redeemed by Jesus are called saints throughout the New Testament. A proper understanding of our (new creation) selves is that we are saints who sin. As one of my former pastors liked to say, we are crooked sticks, but God can strike straight blows through us. If we think of ourselves only as hopeless worms who 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).

Now, God doesn't *need* us—let's be clear on that. He is omnipotent. It is not from some lack that he looks to us as partners. No, we are his partners because he has chosen to act with us. We are his partners because of his invitation. It's simply the way that the all-wise Creator of the universe has determined it to be.¹²

Meanwhile, though we have this calling to join him in his kingdom work, we are utterly unable to do so apart from our total reliance on him. So God still gets all the glory. The laborers labor in vain if he doesn't build the house. We only do the "greater things" Jesus predicted in John 14 if we abide in the vine. "Apart from me," he warns us, "you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5). Affirming the strange and wonderful partnership that God has designed between himself and us frail humans to get his work done in the world does not diminish his glory. It accentuates it—for how loving it is of our Father to invite us into such collaborating.

The story told of the Christian's life in the too-narrow gospel does not capture this awesome reality and privilege that we—saved sinners—are part of God's plan to heal the world. The too-narrow gospel tells us what we've been saved *from*: sin, hell and death. And that is very good news indeed. But the gospel of the kingdom tells us not only what we're saved from, but also what we're saved *for*. We have a purpose, we have a sacred calling, we have a God-given vocation: to partner with God in his work of restoring all things.

What could be more exhilarating than that?

²¹Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, p. 19.

²²Ibid., p. 211.

²³A word on 2 Peter 3:10-12 may be in order here. There the apostle talks about the world being consumed in fire. We need to recall that fire in Scripture typically means a refining fire. It's more often about purification, not annihilation. More to the point, Peter himself speaks in 2 Peter 3:13 of "a new heaven and a new earth." The word *new* there is *kainos* (new in nature or quality) not *neo* (new in time or origin). Therefore, Peter means "new" in the sense of *renewed*, not brand new.

²⁴Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, p. 193, emphasis in original.

²⁵Ibid., emphasis in original.

²⁶Ibid., p. 208.

²⁷Ibid., p. 211. Wright continues: "This will of course be radically different from the kind of work we would engage in if our sole task was to save souls for a disembodied heaven or simply to help people enjoy a fulfilling relationship with God as though that were the end of the matter. It will also be significantly different from the kind of work we might undertake if our sole task was to forget any God dimension at all and try simply to make life better within the continuation of the world as it is."

²⁸D. Michael Lindsay, remarks at the Following Christ conference, Chicago, Ill., InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, 2008.

²⁹D. Michael Lindsay, *Faith in the Halls of Power: How Evangelicals Joined the American Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 191.

³⁰Ibid., p. 221.

³¹Ibid., p. 130.

³²Ibid., p. 192.

³³D. Michael Lindsay, "A Gated community in the Evangelical World," *USA Today*, February 11, 2008. Available at <www.rev.org/article.asp?ID=2991>.

³⁴This was the finding of South African scholar Charles Villa-Vicencio and the personal experience of Beyers Naude, one of the most prominent white conservative Christians to join the resistance movement. By "real encounter," Villa-Vicencio meant that white Christians had become personally acquainted with the real-world living conditions of blacks under apartheid, and they had developed peer relationships with blacks (critical since at that time most whites dealt with blacks only in master-servant relationships). See *Resistance and Hope: South African Essays in Honor of Beyers Naude*, ed. Charles Villa-Vicencio, Beyers Naude and John W. de Gruchy (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).

³⁵Cassidy, *This Passing Summer*, p. 224.

³⁶Ibid., p. 227.

³⁷Ibid., p. 473.

³⁸Ibid., p. 239.

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¹See Michael Card's song "The Promise," *The Promise* (Brentwood, Tenn.: Sparrow, 1991).

²James Choung, *True Story: A Christianity Worth Believing In* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2009).

³Ibid., p. 198.

⁴Darrow L. Miller, *Servanthood: The Calling of Every Christian* (Phoenix: Disciple Nations Alliance, 2009), p. 95.

⁵Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch emphasize that our sentness is tied to our discipleship to Jesus: "Jesus defines us totally. . . . Our connection with the Trinity is through its Second Person. This has many implications, but for one it means that we can never get beyond the fact that we are disciples and therefore people directly connected to the messianic purposes in the world." *The Shaping of Things to Come* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2003), p. 113.

⁶Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Faith in Community* (New York: HarperCollins, 1954), pp. 43-44, emphasis added.

⁷Ryan Bell, "Witnessing to God's Reign," *Spectrum*, August 4, 2008 <www.spectrummagazine.org/print/845>.

⁸The apostle John wrote, "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil" (1 Jn 3:8 esv).

⁹Jesus charged the original disciples with such labor: "One day Jesus called together his twelve disciples and gave them power and authority to cast out all demons and to heal all diseases. Then he sent them out to tell everyone about the Kingdom of God and to heal the sick" (Lk 9:1-2 NLT).

¹⁰Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things*, p. 115, emphasis added.

¹¹N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), p. 200, emphasis added.

¹²"There's a riddle in the Talmud that goes like this, 'If God intended man to live on bread, why didn't he create a bread tree?' . . . The answer is that, in fact, God . . . prefers to offer us a grain and invite us to buy a field and plant the seed. He prefers that we till the soil while he sends the rain. He prefers that we harvest the crop while he sends sunshine. . . . Why? Because he would rather we become partners with him in creation. Of course, God could simply supply our every need and solve our every problem. But our God invites us into a creative partnership with him. He supplies the earth, the air, the water, the sun, and our strength and then asks us to work with him." Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things*, p. 159.

Chapter 5: Integrating Faith and Work

¹Doug Sherman and William Hendricks, *Your Work Matters to God* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1987), p. 16. Sherman's organization did a survey of two thousand Christians. Ninety percent had *never* heard a sermon relating biblical principles to their work life.

²Nancy Lovell, "An Interview with David Miller," FaithInTheWorkplace.com <www.christianitytoday.com/workplace/articles/interviews/davidmiller.html>, emphasis added.

³Pete Hammond, R. Paul Stevens and Todd Svanoe, ed., *The Marketplace Annotated*