

The Convergence of Work and Mission

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"[L]et your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in Heaven" (Matthew 5:16). There are two concepts in this phrase that seem to be often separated by Christians: work and mission. There is something inside of some of us that wishes we could just do good work, and not have to worry about the part where others give glory to God because of it. We must ask ourselves how our work can be done for His glory (Keller & Alsdorf 2012, 186). There are others of us who are so focused on getting everyone to glorify God that we forget how that can best be done through good work. A perpetuating factor regarding this issue is the sad fact that the "church offers little specific guidance about why [our] work matters" (Sherman 2011, 100). Work and mission are, in fact, inseparable. Each leads to the other, implies the other, or enhances the other. Sometimes this is despite the natural human inclination to keep the two separate. A proper understanding of both work and the Christian mission will lead to a better understanding and application of their convergence.

Work is not only a calling, but it is also the primary and principal way that Christians exercise stewardship over the earth and its resources (Claar & Klay 2007, 22 & 116). It is a privilege that God gave to mankind to be able to be a part of contributing to His creation (Nelson 2011, 24). He gives us the opportunity to "create new things, to uncover new possibilities, and explore new dimensions" (Claar & Klay 2007, 23). Not all work that is available, however, makes this possible. The work that does is worth getting

into and mastering. The work that does not is not. This may seem harsh, but a further explanation may add clarity and accessibility. There are many angles to this idea. More simple aspects of this work-based stewardship include feeding, clothing, sheltering, and supporting the human race (Keller & Alsdorf 2012, 4). “[I]t provides for our economic needs [and] allows us to care for the needs of others” (Nelson 2011, 60). We can now begin to see how much of the work in the world can be included in these broader categories. These basic layers of stewardship can be expanded upon and applied practically in many ways. It can be expanded into opportunities to leverage our “knowledge, platform, networks, position, influence, skills and reputation” (Sherman 2011, 20). McCloskey expands the definition of stewardship to include spirituality: The “spiritual meaning of stewardship [is] to honor what has been given to us, to use power with a sense of grace, and to pursue purposes that transcend short-term self-interest” (Block, 1993, quoted in McCloskey 2014, 116). With the inclusion of these more intangible ideas, more and more work in our world can be seen as stewardship, and therefore worthy. Conversely, we can start to imagine that there is some work in the world that does not fit into these categories, and therefore should be deemed unworthy.

Individuals can apply stewardship by bringing shalom into the world, serving our neighbors, and growing in education about the vulnerable and helping them (Sherman 2011, 21 & 54). In essence, a guiding understanding of stewardship is anything that brings aspects (both tangible and intangible) of God’s kingdom into the world around us. A clear picture of the kingdom will quickly shed light on the contrast between what the world is now and what it was intended to be. When the world was created, it was

good. It was the closest to paradise that it has ever been since. The fall set into motion a brokenness of the world that without intervention would have led into never-ending entropy. Thank God that's not what happened. Thank God that He intervened. When Christ died on the cross, He set into motion the reverse of this entropy. As He redeems us, He calls us to join Him in this redemption in and for the world. As we joined Him in this process in the beginning, it "was in our ordinary day-to-day lives of work, rest, and play that we were to flourish, to be salt and light, to be spiritually formed, and to be God's redemptive agents in the world" (Nelson 2011, 87). He now calls us back to this plan, and it is through work that it can grow closer and closer to being actualized. As foreshadowed earlier, the redemption of the physical world is not the only redemption going on. Christ saves *us*. As we are being saved, "the Great Commission remains our mandate: 'Go into the world and preach the Good News to everyone'" (Claar & Klay 2007, 58). This expands our goal at work to potentially its most important instrumental value: To "create a sphere of influence for the gospel to be lived out and shared" (Nelson 2011, 60).

The conversation around how important our work is to God has a tremendous amount of quality content. Sometimes it seems as though because there is so much to discuss on this topic, we can run the risk of crowding out the Great Commission's place in the conversation, or not remembering to include it. As we develop our picture of the kingdom of Heaven, an accurate image should influence, if not determine, our behavior in this life (Sherman 2011, 75). Such a beautiful image of God and His people should inspire us beyond what words can describe to embrace our role in the process while we

are on this planet (Sherman 2011, 85 & 86). It is impossible to miss that “our mission now is introducing people to a personal relationship with God” (Sherman 2011, 34). In fact, as previously stated, this mission is our primary mandate. It always will be.

The mission is not only a calling, but it is also the primary and principal role of the Christian. We can look to the Great Commission or other passages like it to define what mission actually means. The Bible says that it is to “make disciples,” to “proclaim the gospel to the whole creation,” and to be Jesus’ witnesses to the ends of the earth (Matthew 28:19, Mark 16:15, and Acts 1:8). There have been volumes, articles, novels, and manuals written on this subject. There have also been numerous applications to this mandate. Some have been known to promote street corner preaching, others street evangelism, and others large events with altar calls. Others don’t care how it’s done, just as long as it gets done. Many materials have been developed to help people in this endeavor. There was the bridge diagram, the four worlds explanation, and the Romans Road to understanding the gospel. One needs only to have a napkin and a pen handy, and even the waiter or waitress at the next restaurant can be her next victim (in a positive sense of the word). This mandate must be maintained, but was this the mission that Jesus was on? We cannot say that it was not, but an argument can be made that the mission of Christ was something encompassing much more.

Mark writes that Jesus’ own proclamation of the “gospel” was, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand” (Mark 1:15). The kingdom of God is at hand. So is the gospel still everything previously mentioned? Yes, and the gospel is also partnering in bringing the kingdom of God into this world. Let’s be clear that this is by

no means at the exclusion of the Great Commission. In fact it is still central and primary in giving people around us an experience of Heaven. "Evangelism that leads people to follow Jesus offers new believers a foretaste of the intimacy with God they will one day experience for eternity" (Sherman 2011, 34). There is, however, more. There is discipleship, there is sanctification, and there is work. Stewardship. All of these things are foretastes of the kingdom, and so built in to the gospel. If we took this mandate seriously, we would not miss so many "opportunities to do evangelism through our work-based relationships" and through our work itself (Sherman 2011, 34). Bringing a true foretaste "of the kingdom of God into reality" means also that Christians are consistently committed to good stewardship of what has been given to us and to loving the people around us (Sherman 2011, 18 & Keller & Alsdorf 2012, 215).

Worthy work at its best is something that, in some way, helps to bring aspects of the kingdom into the world. Likewise, the Christian mission is all about bringing the kingdom to earth, according to Jesus Himself. Through the pinnacle of the kingdom of God, the two seemingly opposing ideas converge. In shamelessly combining the two concepts, Tim Keller states, "The particulars of how much the gospel works out in each field are endlessly rich" (Keller & Alsdorf 2012, 164). Conversely, the particulars of how work works out through the Christian mission are also numerous.

It is worth saying that an argument can be made for the idea that there are times when "work" and "mission" do oppose one another. This is because sometimes the idea of what work is falls outside of the mission of bringing the kingdom to the world. Work is broken in our individual lives no matter what we do. We will sweat doing it and it will

often times seem as though it is working against us. It is, however, also broken in a much broader way. Some things that the human race qualifies as “work” seem only to work *against* the mission and toward more sin and brokenness, thus promoting the fall. Other options that qualify as vocations seem to be doing nothing at all in either direction. It can be strongly asserted that this can be dangerous. In fact, Jesus tells a parable to illustrate this harmful idea. In Matthew chapter 25 Jesus tells the story of a man who goes away on a trip, but leaves some money behind with three of his servants to take care of. He entrusts them to be good stewards with what he has given them. The first two took the money, invested it, and doubled it by the time their master returned. He was obviously very happy with their decision to double his money, despite the risk in the investment; A risk that was no doubt wisely assessed and leaned into according to the rules of good stewardship. The third servant, afraid of his master, buried what was given to him to steward, in an effort to preserve it. This made the master furious. This seems odd. The servant did not lose his master’s money. It was all there. It seems as though the master is angry because of the effortlessness of his servant. All his servant did regarding effort was dig a hole... twice. Hard work. The master, in his anger, reveals that there was at least the simple option to put the money into an account to gain a little interest on it. “[F]or the Christian economist, ‘just killing time’ is not good stewardship (Claar & Klay 2007, 56). Someone that this parable represents is someone who is not necessarily doing anything bad, but is also doing nothing to bring the kingdom into the world.

There is a reason that work sometimes does not fit into the Christian mission. It is an issue of priority. Christian mission is most important, and work is secondary. This may

come off as unfair, but further explanation may help. In the Christian life, should what work is in our lives ever be changed and formatted to fit within the Christian mission of bringing the kingdom into the world? Of course it should. Also, if someone is still in a position in their life where they have options for what their work will be, because of the "gift of vocational choices," they should choose work that fits within the mission (Sherman 2011, 107). Conversely, in the Christian life, should the mission ever be manipulated or changed to fit within the conception of work? A proper understanding of the mission and all that comes with it leaves no room for the answer to be "yes." In the ever-fluctuating culture of work, the Christian mandate will stay as stable as it has always been. Therefore, the mission of the Christian should be the starting point, and then work should be chosen, changed, or formatted to fit within the confines of the kingdom come.

The understanding that these two ideas are inseparable is vital. God is calling those in church leadership "to the work of equipping the saints for ministry" (Sherman 2011, 116). For an exercise of the true image of the kingdom, we must believe that all people are "in ministry" no matter what their work is. Further, the vast majority of the congregants in a church spend much of their time at work. If ministers have trouble seeing work "as a way of making culture and of cultivating creation, they will fail to support, appreciate, and properly lead many members of their congregation" (Keller & Alsdorf 2012, 51). Those in the congregation need to understand this because of the joy that it will bring them to know how their work brings hope to those their work serves, and it gives glory to God (Sherman 2011, 111). They will not only know that what they are doing is bringing the kingdom into this world, but will also know the importance of

using work to share the love of Jesus to those in their spheres of influence. "Faithful work indeed means some kind of public identification with Jesus, in such a way that a coworker might want to know more about [H]im" (Keller & Alsdorf 2012, 4). Finally, it is vital to understand this convergence for the sake of... everyone else. If we are to truly engage in the Christian mission of the kingdom come in the world, then we must be fully present in all places and with all people within it (Nelson 2011, 59). Further, if the church puts this into practice, then they may likely find that their own congregation will grow as a byproduct (Sherman 2011, 178). For the benefit of the world and everyone in it, "Our Father in Heaven... [may] Your kingdom come" both through us and despite us (Matthew 6:9-10).

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