

The 100,000 Hours Colloquy

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"Retirement Service Center, this is Jenna. In order to better assist you, may I start with your first and last name please?" I say this about 70 times a day, because I am one that makes my living in a call center. I am simply a number to the company I work for. In other words, as long as I am making my numbers for them I'm allowed to take home their numbers in paycheck form. But is this all there is in the place where I spend most of my time? I will be honest, some days, yes. I am just grateful to have health insurance. But, as a Christian seeking meaning and purpose in God's Kingdom every day, it is not enough to think about my work like this. Through interacting with *Kingdom Calling*, by Amy Sherman, *Every Good Endeavor*, by Tim Keller, and *God at Work*, by Gene Edward Veith, I am beginning to redefine the meaning of faith and work and the many ways they relate.

Initially when I began engaging with these new concepts around work and faith, I seemed to have an underlying question as I approached each of readings: How does this explain the tension I feel in my job? I have this skill set, this expectation of what work should be, how I want to make a difference, and here I am answering the phone telling people their check went out (Please allow 2-10 business days for delivery). I expected to find each authors explanation on why things can be so hard to be the thing that would give me a framework. What I actually found was that although it was helpful to have those issues addressed, what was more helpful is the attempt to reframe how I think about work and faith in general. The underlying question became how do people typically understand faith and work and how does that inform what I do?

There are a few things to mention about some of the common ways faith in the workplace has commonly been practiced. According to Keller there are a many ways this has been done: to further social justice in the world, personal evangelism of colleagues, to produce skillful work, to create beauty, seek to glorify God as a means to change culture, be grateful and joyful in work, do what gives you greatest joy and passion, or make as much money as possible to give it away (Keller, 22). Keller makes the point that often times this multitude of "answers" has been seen as problematic in their contradiction. Instead, Keller thinks we should not view a certain view as *the* way to serve God in work, but to rather as *a* way. By doing this we are able to see more cohesion among different vocations.

Sherman makes a similar point, but frames it different. She uses the work of David Miller, who argues integration of faith and work typically tends to be separated into four quadrants, the first being ethics. An ethical approach tends to focus on personal virtue, business ethics, and social and economic justice. The second quadrant, evangelism, emphasizes the integration of faith and work through evangelism, which includes bible studies, prayer groups, etc. within the workplace. Quadrant 3 is enrichment, which sees work and faith as a means to personal transformation. And finally, quadrant 4 is experience, which seeks to examine vocation, calling, meaning, and purpose through their work (Sherman, 95).

Veith in his book, *God at Work*, takes it a step further in his attempt to redefine vocation beyond what we get paid for. At a very basic level Veith defines the purpose of vocation as "to love and serve one's neighbor (Veith, 39)." Our vocations go beyond one occupation, but rather we have multiple vocations. These vocations can include child, spouse, worker, citizen, or layperson. He rightfully acknowledges the dynamic nature of these vocations and does well to

allow for variance and change in each. He recognizes that there are certain seasons for things, and what we are doing now might not be the end goal.

With the exception of Veith, the way each author uses these ideas is to more set up their argument, not as an argument in itself. However, I actually found the exposure to different ways of practicing work and faith helpful in itself at a very basic level. It gives me the opportunity to look at how many typically have thought about faith and work. It provides tools to build a framework. It gives me options on how to see my work. The reality is that the truth is somewhere in the middle. To have an effective and satisfying faith life at work is going to take some integration of these different ways of viewing work and molding it into something that works within the job and the season of life.

It was helpful to have these options as a starting point, but it is beneficial to look at more specific parts of the authors' arguments. I deeply resonated with one of Keller's points in *Every Good Endeavor*, which must be expressed through a story. There are some days when I hate getting up to go to work. It's bigger than me just not being a morning person. Sometimes the hard part of my job makes me not want to work. This past summer I had the opportunity to have about 2 weeks off. One week I spent in the Cayman Islands (good choice), and the other I spent in my normal life. The first day was great. However, as the week crept along slowly, I began to go a little crazy. I had no structure to my day. I was watching reality TV, really just wasting my time. By the time this break from work was over I had sunken into a sort of pointless depression. I was aching to be doing something again, even if it was a job I hate. That first day back brought a sense of relief as I was producing something. I felt normal again.

What Keller keenly points out is that work is essential to human thriving. He is not at this point making any reference to economic thriving, but rather emotional, physical, and spiritual thriving (Keller, 37). It goes back to the garden. Work, in its truest intent, is part of the goodness and blessedness of the garden. It falls into the category of human need similar to food, water, and air. Work is a part of human nature. We are meant to produce.

Not only are we made to work, but we are also made to rest. Part of what rest provides is balance, so that work does not become the foundation of our lives. But the point I so deeply resonated with is Keller's point regarding the work to rest ratio. Work and rest is supposed to function as a cycle. The way this cycle is to be structured is heavier on work compared to leisure. It seems human have a higher tolerance for larger amounts of work than they do leisure and pleasure. In other words, high doses of leisure and pleasure is going to become problematic more readily than high doses of work. All of this is to say that although there are times when I do not like what I am doing, the answer is not to avoid doing it.

If it's clear that humans indeed are made to work, and it is something that necessary for thriving, then how can I make this work? As Keller gets into the specifics of his argument of how work and faith should relate he defines one point as work as service. Choosing our work is not about self-fulfillment, but rather to acknowledge that our God given talents and passions put us in a position to be called to use them as service to God and others. The question Christians should be asking themselves is, "How with my existing abilities and opportunities, can I be of greatest service to other people, knowing what I do of god's will and of human need?" (67).

The main goal here is to define how my work is service to God and others. This is an easy one for me as I am working in customer service. I talk to people every day, and not just about

the weather. We talk about money. I listen to people tell me about facing foreclosure, or their insane medical debt. They are calling me because the only possible source they have now is their 401k, an account that is supposed to be for retirement. In the monotony of my job, it is easy to overlook my influence in many of these delicate situations my customers are facing. It is easy to forget compassion when I know I'm going to hear the same story 40 times a day. It is hard to remember that often times people are talking to me often times as a last resort, so when I have to say "no" because of a certain rule, that is hard for someone to hear. When someone gets upset about a small amount of money it's probably because they are desperate enough where \$20 makes a difference. But it is my job as a Christian to remember and engage in the responsibility I have to people because of my calling in Christ. There is purpose and meaning in this work as the Kingdom of God is furthered through my interactions.

This reality that I am beginning to see in my work is also characterized by Sherman's point of vocational stewardship. Vocational stewardship is the idea that we participate in the mission of God by using the gifts and skills God has given, often times primarily in our workplaces. Sherman highlights four pathways of vocational stewardship. The four distinct pathways are summarized as follows: promoting the kingdom in and through daily work, volunteering vocational talent outside a day job, launching a social enterprise, and participating in the church's targeted initiative (Sherman, 144). With my particular situation mentioned above, the first pathway is where I find myself being the most effective.

Through the four pathways of vocational stewardship Sherman spends a significant amount of time showing how people can affect their workplaces and treat it as a way to further the kingdom and pursue the vision of the *tsadiqim* on a large scale. Being that the first pathway

is where I resonate in my work, I cannot relate in wondering how to influence the structural changes in my workplace. I am not given the power to influence the ethical decisions our company makes and how it affects businesses or society at large. This is not a problem for Sherman. She acknowledges that not everyone is in a place of power. And because of this it is incredibly significant to promote the kingdom through daily work.

Although I am beginning to see my work as containing meaning and purpose, it is much more complex than this. The job that I am in right now is neither what I want to do, nor do I feel like is using my talents. Sherman makes an incredible point when she refers to the “vocational sweet spot.” What we should pursue, to the best of our ability and resources, is a vocation that is going to integrate God’s priorities with our passions and gifts and the world’s needs.

Somewhere in the middle is the vocational sweet spot. I am someone who is in a job that I don’t particularly enjoy, that does not encompass the vocational sweet spot. However, it is necessary to acknowledge one of the reasons I am still in this job after so long. Part of my story involves education. I am in school trying to pursue my vocational sweet spot as I sense vocational ministry is where that sweet spot is. Right now I am at a job that gives me more than enough flexibility to be able to pursue that. It provides benefits, even as a part time worker. It provides income for me to be able to pursue what it is that I am excited to be a part of. It is a stepping-stone, a means to an end, and I am being taken care of through it. All of that said I am happy to do this work for now.

A final point to make that all of the literature seems to affirm, both implicitly and explicitly, is the process of discernment. In my mind this is the most important part of the entire conversation on how to integrate faith and work. There is no template to make this fit for

everyone, and there is going to be a certain degree of variance from person to person.

Additionally, most Americans have a choice in what they do. As much as that is an incredible luxury, it also opens the door to much anxiety and sometimes, empty pursuit. The literature does well to affirm the complex process of discernment and gives good boundaries and markers in how to do it well.

Moments of discernment in our work shows up in questions of ethics, questions of purpose, transitions in work, dealing with our mistakes and the mistakes of others, etc. that seem to bombard us at different points in the journey. It seems that this is normative when it comes to the work we do. The challenge is to engage this well. The tension that is felt in the midst of these processes is incredibly important, mainly because these are the times where God works best. So much of work and faith involves discernment, reimagining, and reinterpreting things in the framework of the Kingdom of God.

As we begin to look at the ways in which our work and faith is integrated we have a lot of choices. At this point I think it is enough to say the toil we engage in everyday is for something, even in a call center. What we produce is important. Why we do it is significant. But what is most essential is the posture in which we do it. Our work is a sacrament. It is worship to God. We hold what we produce as an offering, not as a measure of our identities, but as a way to use for others the skills and talents we've been given. In the midst of our choices, this must be the foundation.