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GORDON T. SMITH

CONSIDER YOUR CALLING



SIX QUESTIONS FOR
DISCERNING YOUR VOCATION

CONSIDER YOUR CALLING

Gordon T. Smith, author of *Courage and Calling*, writes: "It is a good question because our work matters to us, to others and, of course, it matters to God. Work itself is good. It is vital to our human identity; and we are most ourselves, most who God calls us to be, living in what it means to know the salvation of God, when we know the grace of work well done." However, Smith acknowledges that this is not a simple question to answer in the midst of our very complicated lives.

"In this brilliant, captivating and immensely practical meditation, Gordon Smith offers you a compass for every stage of your life."

—**Ken Shigematsu**, pastor of Tenth Church Vancouver and author of *God In My Everything*

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Question One

What on Earth Is God Doing?

Praise the LORD!

I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.

Great are the works of the LORD,
studied by all who delight in them.

Full of honor and majesty is his work,
and his righteousness endures forever.

He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds;
the LORD is gracious and merciful.

He provides food for those who fear him;
he is ever mindful of his covenant.

He has shown his people the power of his works,
in giving them the heritage of the nations.

The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy.

They are established forever and ever,

to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.
He sent redemption to his people;
he has commanded his covenant forever.
Holy and awesome is his name.
The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practice it have a good understanding.
His praise endures forever. (Ps 111)

God is a worker. God creates, God redeems and God's work of both creation and redemption is a source of delight and encouragement. Our lives are lived in praise of God's work and in response to this work. Psalm 111:2 reads:

Great are the works of the LORD,
studied by all who delight in them.

So this delight in the work of God helps us in considering our own work. We will come to understand our lives and our work in light of the God who is creator and redeemer of all things. This gives our lives meaning, hope and coherence. Indeed, our work—or vocation—is both an *act of response* to what God has and is doing and an *invitation from God* to be participants in this work. So we must then begin here and ask, “What on earth is God doing?” before and as part of coming to terms with what we are each called to be and to do.

As we consider this first question, I am suggesting that one of our critical needs is to develop “vocational imagination.”

But this will only happen if we can grow in an appreciation of the nature and character of the work of God, as the context and foundation for our own work.

First, God is the *Creator* of all things. And this Creator God invites all to participate in this extraordinary work as co-creators: to be those who understand the created order and tend the creation and reflect the beauty of the creation through the arts. Second, God is the *Redeemer* of all things. In similar fashion, we are invited to be coworkers with God in the healing of all things (see 2 Cor 6:1). There is a sense in which all work is a participation in either the creative or the redemptive purposes of God. From this perspective, work is not a curse but an extraordinary privilege. Yes, we do need to speak of the curse when work becomes an oppressive burden, when work is nothing but toil or when meaningful and good work is not available to someone. But first we need to recognize and affirm the possibility of consciously entering into the purposes of God for and in our world.

One of the deep longings of our lives is for the gift of good work—work that matters, work that makes a difference, work that is a means by which we can express our deepest longings, aspirations and convictions. And work is good. The mission of God is not to free us from work, but to redeem us for good work. The goal of life is not less work or no work—a life of leisure—but rather a life lived engaged in the work to which we are called.

Work then is good but it is not inherently good. It is only good if it reflects the goodness of God's creation and the purposes of God in redemption. But also, work is not inherently wrong or evil. To the contrary, we have been created to do good work and will find that some of our deepest joy comes in and through the process of doing good work, work that matters to God and matters to us. And this is a powerful means by which we find meaning, integrity and coherence for our lives.

Our deep joy, when it comes to our work, is to participate in God's work. And what needs to be stressed is that God is

The mission of God is not to free us from work, but to redeem us for good work.

indeed at work, as Creator and Redeemer, in every sphere and sector of our lives and our world. I grew up in a religious tradition

that often spoke of "the Lord's work" in contrast to other forms of work or engagement. The "Lord's work" did not include business, the arts and homemaking. Rather, it was assumed that *religious* work counted and mattered and reflected the intentions and purposes of God. Secular work was not bad in itself but not the ideal to which we were called.

But could it be that God is doing good work that intersects with *every* sphere and sector of society and culture? And if so, does that mean that God is not only calling people to religious work but also to the work of business, the arts, education and

indeed into the trades, the work of building and renovating homes and repairing the appliances in those homes? These each represent *good* work. Indeed, dare we say it, when a carpenter and a dentist and a farmer and a city mayor go to work they too are doing, or at least have the potential of doing, the “Lord’s work” through the very work they are responsible to do that day.

DELIGHTING IN THE HANDIWORK OF GOD

All of this rests on the vision we have for the handiwork of God who is celebrated, over and over again as the Creator of all things and the Redeemer of all things. The Old Testament Psalms stress this point routinely—the God who is the maker of heaven and earth (Ps 121:2; 146:6)—affirming and delighting in the work of God, recognizing its inherent value. God is a worker, and our delight in the work of God leads us to appreciate our work as human beings.

God is the Creator. God is the Redeemer. But the witness of the book of Genesis points to something I have been indicating all along: as God’s creatures, created in the image of God, we are invited to be full participants in God’s work. The language of Genesis 2:5 highlights how important it is that we take our work seriously. Genesis 1 and 2 celebrate the work of the Creator who is active and engaged and delighting in this work. Again and again we read that God said it was good—indeed, at one point, we read that God said it was *very*

good. But it had yet to reach its potential; the intent of God was not fulfilled even and specifically in what God had made. Even though it was good, very good, something was missing. And this brings us to Genesis 2:5:

No plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground.

Yes, of course, until God brings the rain, the earth does not yield its fruit. But also, there is no growth until there is the tilling of the ground, suggesting that the human role or involvement is indispensable. The creation assumes—actually, the Creator assumes—the active participation of the women and men whom God will create and who will, in turn, till the earth.

So we do not merely see and observe the work of God; we are invited to be participants in that work:

To learn how to enjoy a prairie sunset—but then also enjoy the work of the environmental scientist.

To revel in the richness of a freshly picked apple in autumn—and then come to an appreciation of the power of poetry to capture that beauty in words, phrases and silences.

To watch a swallow dancing over a pond in search of food for her young—and then hear echoes of this flight in the work of Chopin or Debussy.

To appreciate the power of the human body—which, the

Psalmist says, is fearfully and wonderfully made—and then be in awe at the work of the surgeon who brings healing and wholeness to a broken body.

To see how God governs benevolently and with skill—and then appreciate the work of a manager or director of a non-profit agency in the heart of the city.

To see God in the person of Christ who was a master teacher—and then to recognize the art of a skilled kindergarten teacher or university professor.

In other words, our delight in the work of God is the backdrop for our appreciation of the diverse ways in which women and men are being called to participate in this work. Thus, Psalm 90:16 speaks of the work of God and is followed by this response in verse 17:

Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us,
and prosper for us the work of our hands!

There is a sense that our work is but an echo of the work of God who has created all things but who now, in Christ Jesus, is redeeming all things. In Christ, God is bringing about the fulfillment of his reign—his kingdom. And for the Christian, our work is necessarily a participation in the reign of Christ and the purposes of Christ in the world. Our vocation or calling is always “in Christ.” Our lives are marked by the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ Jesus and the outpouring of the gift of the Spirit. So our work in the world is

framed by the confidence we have that one day Christ will make all things well. This story—this narrative, the Christ narrative—shapes the contours of our lives. We do our work in response to Christ, the one through whom all things are created and are being redeemed.

THE WORK OF CO-CREATION; THE WORK OF CO-REDEMPTION

In Christ, some will be called into direct care for the created order in roles such as biologists, environmental scientists, gardeners or landscape designers. Others will be called toward a more direct involvement in the redemptive side of God's work—whether it is in religious leadership within a congregation, in evangelism, in the work of social justice or in agencies that respond to the needs of those at the margins of our society.

Most will actually do our work deeply conscious that what we are doing is in continuity with the call to Adam to till the garden and name the animals. At the same time, our work is a participation in the reign of Christ who is redeeming all things. In our work we are the hands and feet of Jesus, and whether we are bank tellers or teachers or preachers or salespersons or hospital nurses, we act and speak in the name of Christ. What I am suggesting is that just as Genesis 2 witnesses that the land does not bear its fruit until it is tilled, our work is vital to the purposes of God in the world. Our work matters.

The full beauty of the earth will not be displayed until

artists do their work. Unless there are those who partner with God in this good work, buildings will not be built; schools will not be established; books will not be written. As preachers we long for women and men to know the good news, but unless God brings the rain—again, see Genesis 2:5—it will not happen. In like fashion, as preachers we have to do the “tilling” to which we are called, without which the purposes of God will not be fulfilled in the lives of those to whom we are called to preach.

Thus our work as preachers, artists, business men and women, educators, designers and police officers is vital and essential and it matters. We do our work because it matters. And we do it in the name of Christ.

All work that is done in the name of Christ must take account of the commitment of God to economic and social justice. God’s call on our lives will always be one in which we are invited to enter into the longing of God for justice and peace. And so we do not do our work—whether in business or school or in any calling—in a way that enriches ourselves at the expense of others. Rather, our work must necessarily always be a participation in the commitment to be agents of God’s restorative justice.

When this is our perspective—that we are living and acting and speaking in the name of Christ as his agents—we are drawn more closely to Christ in our work. In other words, our work becomes an actual means by which we grow in faith,

hope and love; our work becomes an integral part of our spiritual journey. And along the way we will occasionally have these extraordinary moments or seasons when we have a keen sense that we are the hands and feet of Christ and that when we speak, we speak for God. We do not presume, of course; our motives and our work will never be purely one and the same as what God is doing.

What we learn in all of this is that God is calling women and men into every sphere and sector of society, and that the church makes a difference when it empowers its members to be God's people in the community and in the world. What would it mean for the church to be a garden of vocations where we recognize that the most significant thing about a church is not its size, but its capacity to empower women and men to be agents for Christ Monday through Friday in the businesses, homes, schools, art galleries, civic offices and taxis of our cities? What would it look like for the Sunday morning preaching to empower and equip people for the work to which they are headed that week, whether it is driving a taxi or launching a new entrepreneurial enterprise, whether caring for young children at home or teaching at the local university?

May you have the joy of speaking at a gathering when you sense an uncanny alignment with the Spirit. May you know the joy of working in a garden; as you plant a tree may you be aware of the alignment of the stars in that moment and sense the very handiwork of God. And may you know the

pleasure of God as you raise a child, manage a bank or fly an airplane with a precious cargo of passengers. May you know, in significant measure, that what you are doing is the *Lord's work*. And may you know this joy even in the ordinary, everyday activities of the work to which you have been called.

FOSTERING A FULL APPRECIATION OF THE WORK OF GOD

Surely one of the primary tasks of the church is the affirmation of the diverse ways in which God is calling women and men to speak and to act in the world in the name of Christ. Sunday morning sermons would then be week in and week out reminders of the grand purposes of God in the world. Sermons would not only address morality [how to be a better Dad], but rather draw us into the remarkable narrative of creation, fall and redemption, to see and appreciate the reign of Christ and be reminded weekly that our work matters because it matters to God and is part of what God is doing in our world. Each person can, in some modest way, see their work as an invitation into the mission of God.

So why not have a brief ceremony at the end of the academic year when all who have graduated as engineers or accountants or school teachers are prayed for as they enter into the work place? Why not highlight how many nurses there are in the congregation and pray that God would empower them to be salt and light in the hospital? Why not ask all the

taxi drivers to stand and bless them as they fan out across the city with the capacity to speak words of grace and peace again and again through the day? This ceremony would celebrate the first-grade teacher as much as the university professor, the bank manager as much as those who are being called to oversee the homeless shelter, seeing all as part of the wonderful tapestry of God's work in the world.

Several years ago I had the privilege to visit the Hanoi Christian Fellowship, which is an international congregation that meets weekly on Sunday morning in a hotel ballroom in the Vietnamese capital. I had served previously as senior pastor of an international congregation so I was naturally interested in this congregation and was struck—deeply impressed—by the phenomenal variety of people who had gathered for worship. It seemed from the dress and accents from all over the world that for the majority, worshiping in English was not their first language but the language that brought them together.

After the morning worship service, I asked around, eager to know what brought all of these expatriates to Hanoi, Vietnam. When I caught up to one of the leaders of the congregation, I got a response. “Well, I would estimate,” he said, “that about a third of those present are directly involved in kingdom-related ministries.” “Oh,” I said, “and what about the rest—what brings them to Hanoi?” And he gave me the expected response: that many are in diplomatic service, this

being the capital city, others are involved in business and then others are involved in education, teaching in the University of Hanoi and other institutions of higher education.

I was stunned by this response. The implication, however subtle, was that those in diplomatic, business and educational interests were not in “kingdom-related” ministries, by which I suspect he meant those who were in community development or some kind of religious work.

We urgently need churches, in the West and the East, North and South, that embrace a vision for all the ways in which God is at work—in our cities, towns and villages—calling women and men to participate in “the Lord’s work” of bringing about his kingdom purposes for our world in our time.

In our worship, we delight in the work of God as Creator and Redeemer.

And in that same worship we empower God’s people to be players in the work of God in the world. Our sermons and hymns and prayers are not escapist; rather, they very intentionally respond to the world in which business people, artists and educators actually live and work and then, with equal intentionality, speak to, empower and encourage those who are called into the shops, schools and studios from Monday through Friday.

In our worship we empower God’s people to be players in the work of God in the world.

FOSTERING A VOCATIONAL IMAGINATION

What all of this suggests to me is that one of our great challenges is to foster what we might call a “vocational imagination” in our preaching, in how we illustrate our sermons or in the way that we profile the diverse ways in which people are called into service for God and for the kingdom of God. In our homes and in our churches we need to foster a theological literacy, a grand vision for the purposes of God in the world.

Surely this fostering of a vocational imagination begins at home. One of the most powerful gifts we give our children is to expose them to all the diverse ways in which women and men participate in the work of God. We can take them on visits to carpenter shops, artist studios, small businesses and factories, or provide opportunity to see scholars at work in libraries, pastors attending to the concerns of a congregation and chefs in the kitchen of a busy restaurant. As parents we should delight in each and assure our children that they would be affirmed and celebrated in whatever line of work to which they are called. We make our homes places of a wide and gracious vocational imagination, celebrating all the possible ways our children might be called of God.

Some homes, unfortunately, have a very narrow vocational imagination. It is so easy for parents to lionize one vocation over another. In my growing up, my world tended to profile the missionary who went to another culture and country. The assumption was that the only good outcome for children was

religious work. But I know others who grew up with a father and grandfather who were medical doctors, so those friends lived with the continual expectation that John III would also follow in their footsteps, and that all their children would enter into the “professions.” They were not exposed to or encouraged to consider other possibilities, to see what it is that captures their imaginations.

We all long for significance, and one of the most powerful sources of that longing arises from our family or origin. We long to be significant in the eyes of our parents, our community and our society. And each culture and each subculture has a script: if you follow this script, then you will be a significant person.

Ask yourself: What is the script that was promoted, explicitly or subtly by my parents, by the preachers on Sunday or by my religious subculture? What was that vision of human success? And then, as God grants you grace, step back and consider, weigh carefully. Take full account of your home and upbringing and get a good read on what your culture affirms and honors as worthwhile and significant professions.

If you sense that God’s purpose in this world is more all-encompassing, then have the courage to go against the grain, taking in the full scope of God’s own work as Creator and Redeemer of all things. Crucial in this regard is that our vocational imagination take account of God’s commitment and priority to justice. What is it about the work of God in the

world that captures your imagination, that stirs your heart and beckons for participation?

So what on earth is God doing? What all of this means is that our story—our personal story, the journey of our life and work—is informed by and shaped by and given meaning by another story, namely, the God-story. The narrative that makes sense of it all is the story of God as Creator and Redeemer. In our worship we come back to this story again and again—the story of God who in Christ is bringing about the peace of all things and making all things new.

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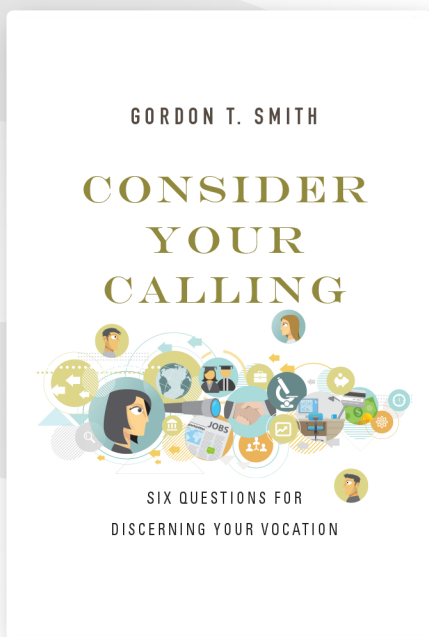
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