

Introduction

THE GLORIOUS VISION OF PROVERBS 11:10

I wept when I read the book—and felt a bit embarrassed. After all, it was a nonfiction text—a sociologist’s tome assigned in a friend’s graduate religion class. It wasn’t exactly a tearjerker. But cry I did while reading Michael Lindsay’s *Faith in the Halls of Power*.

It’s a work of fine scholarship. Lindsay spent three years interviewing some 360 evangelicals who had achieved substantive positions in their various fields—business, politics, the academy, media and entertainment. The book’s animating question concerns how these successful individuals integrate their faith and work. After his exhaustive research, Lindsay concluded:

As these leaders have climbed the professional ladder, they have not jettisoned their religious identity. Actually, according to many, the journey has deepened their faith. Yes, the leaders I interviewed fall into the same pits as their secular peers. They are susceptible to materialism and overweening pride. Yet on the whole, they remain very different from other leaders, and the reason is their faith.¹

That doesn’t sound like something that would inspire tears. But Lindsay’s research suggests his conclusion is too generous; there is little evidence provided in *Faith in the Halls of Power* of how these evangelical leaders’ lifestyles differ from those of their secular peers.

Concerning business leaders, for example, Lindsay found that “evangelical executives tend to accept the material accoutrements of an affluent lifestyle without question.”² To his surprise and dismay, almost none of his interviewees raised the issue of exorbitant CEO pay. Less than half of the

business executives reported that their faith influences how they invest their money. One CEO of a giant company admitted he never prayed over business deals. Several of the male business executives, when asked how their faith affected their work, pointed to plaques in their offices that signaled their Christian beliefs. Meanwhile, the females reported they deliberately wore crosses.

With regard to evangelicals in influential positions in Hollywood, Lindsay wrote that they “differ little from others in the entertainment industry. They drive luxury cars, live in exclusive communities, and worry that their fame and talent will evaporate overnight.”³

More than 60 percent of Lindsay’s interviewees were not involved in a local church. Very few were members of accountability groups that could help them wrestle with the temptations of power, privilege and wealth.

There were exceptions, of course, and these bright spots in the book can be inspiring.⁴ Phil Anschutz, a billionaire movie producer, has used his influence and money to bring to the big screen such greats as *Amazing Grace* and the Narnia tales. And Max De Pree, former CEO of Herman Miller, pursued justice in his firm by deliberately capping his salary at no more than twenty times the earnings of his lowest-paid worker.

On the whole, though, Lindsay’s careful research showed that the vast majority of evangelicals perched atop their career ladders in various social sectors displayed a profoundly anemic vision for what they could accomplish for the kingdom of God. And *that* made me cry, because just before reading Lindsay’s book, I’d been deeply moved by a sermon given by Rev. Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian in New York City. In it, Keller spoke briefly about Proverbs 11:10: “When the righteous prosper, the city rejoices.”⁵

Keller explained that the “righteous” (Hebrew *tsaddiqim*) are the just, the people who follow God’s heart and ways and who see everything they have as gifts from God to be stewarded for his purposes. Keller wrote, “The righteous in the book of Proverbs are by definition those who are willing to disadvantage themselves for the community while the wicked are those who put their own economic, social, and personal needs ahead of the needs of the community.”⁶

This definition of the righteous is what makes the verse sensible. Otherwise, it would be counterintuitive. After all, the text tells us that there is a particular group of people in the city who are prospering—flourishing in

their jobs, their health, their finances. This fortunate group has power, wealth and standing; they are, as Keller put it, “at the top.” And as they continue to thrive, the entire city—including those at the bottom—celebrates.

That’s a bit strange, given human nature. One could easily imagine a more plausible scenario marked by jealousy and resentment, where those at the bottom complain, “The rich keep getting richer while the poor just get poorer.”

Instead, the flourishing of the righteous is a cause for rejoicing. (And not just any sort of rejoicing, as we will see in a minute.) Because the *tsaddiqim* view their prosperity not as a means of self-enrichment or self-aggrandizement, but rather as a vehicle for blessing others, *everyone* benefits from their success. As the *tsaddiqim* prosper, they steward everything—their money, vocational position and expertise, assets, resources, opportunities, education, relationships, social position, entrée and networks—for the *common* good, for the advancing of God’s justice and shalom.⁷ And when the people “at the top” act like this, the whole community cheers. When the righteous prosper, their prosperity makes life better for all.

A DANCING-IN-THE-STREETS REJOICING

The word *rejoice* in Proverbs 11:10 is very important. A unique term, used only one other time in the Old Testament, it carries almost military connotations. It describes ecstatic joy, the exultation and triumph that people express in celebration when they have been delivered from the hand of their oppressors.

So *rejoice* here is a big, robust word. This is deep, passionate rejoicing—not the “happy, happy” rejoicing of a birthday party but VE-Day-type rejoicing—“the war is over and we won” rejoicing. This is soul-soaring exultation.

By this we realize that the righteous, in their prospering, must be making a remarkably positive difference in their city. They must be stewarding their power, wealth, skills and influence for the common good to bring about noticeable, significant transformation in the city. Otherwise, what would be prompting the residents there to go crazy with gladness and gratitude? Clearly the *tsaddiqim*’s stewardship is not simply taking their used clothes over to the Salvation Army Thrift Store and poor people finding them there and being pleased to get a hundred-dollar dress for five

dollars. No, this dancing-in-the-streets rejoicing occurs when the *tsaddiqim* advance justice and shalom in the city in such ways that vulnerable people at the bottom stop being oppressed, start having genuine opportunity and begin to enjoy spiritual and physical health, economic sufficiency and security.

Indeed, what the text teaches is that by the intentional stewardship of their time, talent and treasure, the *tsaddiqim* bring nothing less than *foretastes of the kingdom of God* into reality.

VE-Day-type celebrations occur at those places where King Jesus is about his grand, sweeping work of restoration. They occur at the intersections where Jesus is pushing back the kingdom of darkness and pushing in the kingdom of light. His life was one of offering foretastes of the coming kingdom's shalom; his death conquered all sin and evil that could oppose the kingdom's full realization. He came to begin the work of "making all things new." He saves us from our sins to call us into that work with him.

JESUS' KINGDOM MISSION

Jesus made his kingdom mission abundantly clear. He announced it in his inaugural address in Luke 4:16-21. Reading that prophetic passage about the time to come when the good news will be preached to the poor, the blind healed and the oppressed set free, he announced that in him, this text was "fulfilled." Jesus' central teaching theme was the kingdom. His Sermon on the Mount was about the ethics of the kingdom. He offered parables to give people windows into the kingdom's ways and virtues.

Jesus' evangelistic invitation was "Come, enter my kingdom." And he interpreted his miracles in kingdom language. For example, he cast out a demon in a suffering man, and the Pharisees were critical of it. They accused him of being in sync with Beelzebub. But Jesus responded, "If I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Lk 11:20). When he healed the lepers, it is as though he was reaching into the new heavens and new earth, where there will be no disease, and yanking a foretaste of that back into the present.⁸

Our King wants us realize that the kingdom of God has begun to break into our time and space.⁹ His work was about offering foretastes of kingdom realities—and this is the life and mission he calls us, his followers, into. The *tsaddiqim* gladly join King Jesus in that glorious mission.

PROSPERING, BUT NOT THE *TsADDIQIM*

The jarring discrepancy between this noble, inspiring vision of the *tsaddiqim* and the anemic vision of so many of the evangelical professionals Lindsay interviewed really got under my skin. How tragic that so many believers who bear the name “the prospering” could not also lay claim to the title “the *tsaddiqim*.” Why was this happening? Apparently the Christian communities that Lindsay’s interviewees were part of failed to disciple them to become people who thought well and deeply about using their vocational power to advance the kingdom. I wondered, How widespread is this problem throughout evangelicalism? More importantly, what can be done in our churches to change it? And are there any congregations of the *tsaddiqim* out there that we can learn from?

Because of my own sense of vocational calling, I couldn’t let go of these questions. For nearly twenty years, I’ve been trying to help churches grow in loving their neighbors near and far—especially their vulnerable, lower-income neighbors. My life’s work is to help churches live out Micah 6:8: “He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” Toward that end, I’ve served on my own church’s staff, founding and running a Christian community-development nonprofit serving one lower-income neighborhood in Charlottesville, Virginia. I’ve trained ministry leaders in mapping their community’s needs and assets, designing effective responses and evaluating progress. I’ve written books and how-to manuals to aid congregational leaders in mobilizing and deploying their people in holistic community ministries.

Keller’s vision of the *tsaddiqim* completely entranced me. Proverbs 11:10 gave some new, exciting language to my work. I realized that what I’d been trying to do all those years is help churches “rejoice” their cities—whether those churches were in little cities like my hometown of Charlottesville, or in megapolises like Miami, or in communities abroad like Nairobi or Guatemala City. I also realized that the glorious vision of Proverbs 11:10, coupled with the sad evidence from *Faith in the Halls of Power*, meant that accomplishing that “rejoicing” requires at least two big things.

First, it means that many churches need to have a more robust, comprehensive view of what they should be aiming at missionally. If we’re going to actually “rejoice” our cities, we need to candidly assess what we’re doing.

Are we engaged in efforts that are relevant to the groans of creation and the cries of the poor? Are we producing disciples whose work is contributing to profound transformations that set people to dancing in the streets? Have we joined King Jesus on his grand, sweeping mission of restoration? In cooperation with him, are we bringing foretastes of justice and shalom—or are we largely engaged in mere charity?

Second, it means that churches need to take vocation much more seriously. Proverbs 11:10 tells us what our prosperity is for. Most middle- and upper-middle-class American evangelicals can be labeled “the prospering.” True, we’re not Bill Gates or Donald Trump. But compared with many of our neighbors and with the billions of poor all over the world, we are indeed privileged and wealthy.

A vital part of that prosperity is our vocational power. Unlike so many in the world, we have choices about what work to do. We are well educated and skilled. We have networks to draw on, platforms to use, knowledge to share. Many of us are working in institutions—schools, media, government agencies, corporations—that significantly influence the quality of life in our nation. God has lavished all this on us for a reason: that we would use it for the common good, not for individual gain.

Clearly, learning how to steward our vocational power is a major component of growing as the *tsaddiqim* who rejoice our cities. By vocational stewardship, I mean *the intentional and strategic deployment of our vocational power—knowledge, platform, networks, position, influence, skills and reputation—to advance foretastes of God’s kingdom*. For missional congregations that desire to rejoice their cities, vocational stewardship is an essential strategy. To accomplish their big vision, they need to capitalize intentionally on the vocational power of their members.

I decided to try to write a book to help missional leaders do just that.

INTENDED AUDIENCE

I’ve never known of a church that doesn’t encourage its people to serve God with their “time, talent and treasure.” Nonetheless, very few congregations—even those sold out to the *missio Dei*—are actually facilitating “serving God with your talent” in an intentional, sustained, practical and strategic way that pays attention to members’ vocational gifts, passions and power.

Dr. Don Simmons has been assisting churches with their “equipping” ministries for decades. Based on observations of scores of congregations, he reports,

There are very few churches that have strong, intentional systems for deploying their people’s time and their talent. Churches would not consider doing a stewardship campaign for money and not having systems in place to be able to gather it in, to disseminate it, to report how it’s being used, and report back to the people that were giving it. But they don’t think of people’s service of their time and use of their talent in the same way.¹⁰

Congregants in our pews need to know that they should—and can—connect their workaday world and their faith. So often they feel that God is just a Sunday God. Sometimes we as church leaders exhort our people to “live for Christ’s kingdom” but fail to explain adequately what that means for their lives Monday through Friday, nine to five. We must do a better job of inspiring our members about the role they can play in the mission of God and equipping them to live missionally *through their vocation*.

Based on what I’ve learned about congregations that are doing this, it is clear that vocational stewardship produces exciting results. Congregants experience newfound joy, meaning and intimacy with Christ. Simultaneously, the church significantly improves its effectiveness in bringing to neighbors near and far a greater foretaste of shalom.

This is a book primarily for pastors and ministry leaders—particularly those already committed to leading missional churches (that is, churches that seek to follow King Jesus on his mission of making all things new). I also hope pastors will hand it out to individual congregants who are struggling to integrate their faith and work. Hopefully believers who want to understand better how to advance kingdom purposes through their vocations—whether they’ve got fifty years on the job or are just starting out—will find this book helpful. I also pray that readers still in college or graduate school find some relevant wisdom in these pages about their future work.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

Part one, “Theological Foundations,” provides the biblical underpinning for both the “foretaste-bringing” mission of the church and the strategy of vocational stewardship. Based on a study of the “preview” passages in Scripture that describe the new heavens and new earth, I argue in chapter

one that a “rejoiced” city is a place where ever-increasing foretastes of justice and shalom are experienced realities. I explore several specific dimensions of justice and shalom, and I describe how Christians today are advancing those kingdom values through their work. Nurturing a rejoiced city is a glorious and daunting task.

Chapter two describes the *tsaddiqim* who try to undertake this labor. They are utterly humble, God-dependent, spiritually mature people who seek to live righteously in and through their work. Chapter three examines the obstacles that have kept many Christians from living as the *tsaddiqim*, and chapter four discusses how churches can respond to those obstacles.

Part two, “Discipling for Vocational Stewardship,” provides practical how-to guidance for church leaders. It begins in chapter five with a look at the current state of evangelical thinking on faith/work integration—and the shortcomings therein. Then I outline three key tasks necessary for equipping parishioners to become people who steward their vocational power intentionally as the *tsaddiqim*.

Chapter six, “Inspiration,” offers a concise biblical theology of work that should undergird any vocational stewardship initiative. Chapter seven examines the task of discovery—helping congregants to identify their passions, “holy discontents”¹¹ and the dimensions of their vocational power. Chapter eight then addresses the critical task of formation—that is, the necessary shaping of congregants’ inner life that enables them to be effective, humble and wise stewards of their vocational power.

Part three gets into the meat of vocational stewardship. First, I offer a brief introduction to four pathways for deploying congregants in the stewardship of their vocations: (1) blooming where we are planted by strategically stewarding our current job; (2) donating our vocational skills as a volunteer; (3) launching a new social enterprise; and (4) participating in a targeted initiative of our congregation aimed at transforming a particular community or solving a specific social problem. Here I also talk briefly about the temptations inherent in each pathway—potential stumbling blocks for which church leaders must prepare their members.

Chapters nine through twelve take up one pathway each. Each shows what vocational stewardship looks like in the lives of actual believers and gives examples of specific churches that have learned lessons in how to equip and deploy their members along that pathway.¹²

THE PINK SPOON

Several years ago, Rev. Jeff White from Harlem New Song Church taught a workshop at my church. He talked about the work of King Jesus in bringing restoration and held up one of those tiny pink taste-test spoons from Baskin-Robbins. You know, the spoons that offer you a foretaste of the ice cream to come. Jeff challenged attendees to see themselves as such spoons, for our role in the world is about offering foretastes of the kingdom to our neighbors near and far.

Missional church leaders call their people to live as pink spoons. But they need to *show them* what that actually looks like. I wrote this book because, to a significant degree, being pink spoons means stewarding our vocational power for the common good.

American workers, on average, spend forty-five hours a week at work.¹³ That's about 40 percent of our waking hours each week—a huge amount of time. If church leaders don't help parishioners discern how to live missionally through that work, they miss a major—in some instances *the* major—avenue believers have for learning to live as foretastes.