

AT WORK FOR THE COMMON GOOD

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“WHEN THE RIGHTEOUS PROSPER, THE CITY REJOICES”

(Proverbs 11:10). While a number of American evangelicals seem to be prospering, it’s safe to say there are many people in cities across the country who are definitely not rejoicing. Why? Too many believers have an anemic vision of both God’s Kingdom and their role in ushering it in.

The Church is to go into every sector of society—arts, the media, commerce, health care, politics, education—and work there for *shalom*. Through their vocations in all spheres of social life, believers have the opportunity to advance the common good and restrain corruption. But too often, churches fail to equip their parishioners for deep, creative, intentional, vocational stewardship.

Jesus made His Kingdom mission abundantly clear. Our King wants us to realize that the Kingdom of God has begun to break into our time and space. His work was about offering foretastes of the future New Heaven and Earth. Jesus is making His salvation known “as far as the curse is found.” The “as far as” means Lebanon and Wall Street, Botswana and the Ivy League. His Gospel is about making us individually new creations. But it’s also about making all things new—science and farmland and courtrooms and schools and everything.

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Jesus has invited His followers to participate with Him in this comprehensive mission of restoration. This has enormous significance on our daily work. Christians have been called to live missionally through their vocations—to steward their skills, knowledge and networks in ways that advance Jesus’ *shalom*.

Traditionally, pastors have taught that faith/work integration involves ethics and evangelism. These are critical. Christians ought not to be defrauding their clients or sleeping with their secretaries, and they should pursue winsome, friendly ways of sharing about God’s love with their co-workers. But living missionally through that vocation means even more.

The “righteous” (in Hebrew, *tsaddiqim*) described in Proverbs 11:10 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. As the *tsaddiqim* prosper, they steward everything—their money, vocational position and expertise, assets, resources, opportunities, education, relationships, social position—for the *common* good. 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.

The missional key to this little text is the word “rejoice.” Used only one other time in the Old Testament, it connotes the joy that comes when God relieves one from oppression. The rejoicing that Proverbs 11:10 envisions is not just a happy-birthday party. It’s the jubilant dancing on the streets of Paris on VE-Day.

Only remarkable transformation of a community can prompt that level of celebration—when neighbors experience justice, reconciliation, beauty, wholeness and economic flourishing. This is the work of the

Church—so everyone, especially those at the bottom, enjoys new life.

Pastors encourage this process when they inspire and equip their congregants for “vocational stewardship”—the intentional, creative and strategic deployment of one’s skills, knowledge and networks to advance God’s Kingdom. They can start by identifying real-life examples so congregants can see what faith/work integration looks like. Stories like the following can inspire congregants toward their own fresh expressions of vocational stewardship:

- Perry is a real-estate developer in suburban Chicago. To advance the Kingdom virtue of community, he designs his neighborhoods with extra-wide sidewalks and multiple green common spaces. Nearly

every home has an oversized front porch. To express creation care, his homes are built so “green” that he guarantees owners won’t spend more than \$400 per year in heating costs.

- Anne is a historian who’s chosen to research aspects of the African diaspora and slavery in order to glean insights for effective racial reconciliation today.

- Dave and Demi are business owners who know the value of family. Their office complex boasts a room for nursing mothers and a playroom for kids who come on-site to enjoy lunch with mom or dad. Their firm’s health insurance provides excellent maternity care—and they supplement this with their own financial aid to help employees who can’t have their own children pursue adoption.*

In addition to casting vision among parishioners for vocational stewardship in and through their daily jobs, pastors can also create more strategic on-ramps for congregants’ volunteer service. For example, they can encourage vocationally oriented short-term mission trips. Grace Church in Noblesville, Ind., has done this with its IT professionals, sending them to a cash-strapped partner seminary in Nairobi. Crossroads Church in Cincinnati has sent its lawyers and researchers to serve abroad with International Justice Mission. Church leaders can also facilitate the formation of vocationally based small groups that get congregants brainstorming how to redeem their fields. Redeemer Presbyterian in New York City boasts 17 such groups. Its entrepreneurs’ fellowship has helped incubate several new social enterprises advancing “gospel-centered renewal” in the city.

In Israel, important public business was conducted before the “assembly at the gate”—the elders who decided matters for the commonwealth. These elders were the *tsaddiqim*. When Paul searched for a word for “church,” he chose *ecclesia*—the word used in the Septuagint to mean “the assembly at the public gate.” For Paul, “church” was never meant to be extracted from the larger community. The Church—the *ecclesia*, the assembly of *tsaddiqim* at the gate—is to give itself for the flourishing of others. Today, church leaders can advance that mission by calling their members to new intentionality in stewarding their vocations. ¹⁷

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