

Called Out, Not Left Out

BY TODD L. LAKE

No one—other than a minister—is called to spend the bulk of his or her time serving God through the church. The lawyer, homemaker, teacher, and business professional are called to glorify God through what they do day in and day out. So why do we exalt those who are called out as ministers or missionaries, but leave everyone else feeling left out of God’s vocational call?

I have a confession to make on behalf of all of us who are ordained ministers of the gospel. We pastors trust God, but we find it hard not to let our minds wander to that third grade Sunday school class that is still without a teacher, or that youth mission trip that needs another chaperone. Of course, we ministers do need to focus on church-based work as part of our calling. We need to honor choir leaders and encourage those who run the congregation’s food pantry and clothes closet.

Yet the very ease with which we pastors can see how teaching a Sunday school class or leading a mission trip is a valid calling, is also our downfall. Because no one—other than a minister—is called to spend the bulk of his or her time serving God through the church. Instead, lay people—that is, 99% of all Jesus’ followers—are called by God to serve through their various vocations in the world. The lawyer, homemaker, teacher, and business professional are called to glorify God through what they do day in and day out. But since ministers lead the church, we often succumb to the temptation to view our own calling to church-based ministry as the best way for all Christians to glorify God. This enthusiasm for one’s own vocation is wonderful. But it becomes a liability when we who have the microphone on Sundays and Wednesdays exalt those who are

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A missionary friend of mine in Paraguay once said, "There are a lot of things that *aren't* in the Bible if you look carefully." For example, Scripture states, "all things have been created through Christ and for Christ...and in him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:16-17). Note that it doesn't

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say "all *religious* things" or "all *church-related* things"; it says quite plainly, "*all* things." There is nothing about God's work of creation or redemption that should lead us to think that God is principally interested in religious things. We diminish who Christ is and what his death and resurrection have accomplished if we consign him to be Lord only of Sunday school and worship services.

The second person of the Trinity, co-creator with the Father, and the Spirit of all things visible and invisible, intends to redeem the entire creation. God did not become human and shed his blood on the cross merely to solve our individual problems, though he does that. Nor did he undergo his baptism of death simply to immerse us in church work, as important as that aspect of Christian life is. Instead, Christ calls all who are made in God's image to become co-laborers with God in redeeming the whole creation. Each of us will spend most of our waking hours for the rest of our lives doing our jobs. This is a stunning fact which tells us that if Jesus Christ is not Lord of our work life, he is Lord of very little.

"There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'" said Abraham Kuyper, the former prime minister of the Netherlands who also served as a newspaper editor and founded the Free University of Amsterdam. "That cry we have heard, and this work, far too great for our own strength, we have taken up in reply to this call." That's why Jesus told us to pray, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done, *on earth* as it is in heaven." Jesus wants us to join him in his work, which begins with a change of heart to be sure, but does not end until we have "turned the world upside down."

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In aligning our vocational lives with Christ's purposes for the world, we ensure that when his kingdom *does* come, our work in this world will not have been in vain. For in that day, Christ will bring to perfect completion the work that we have imperfectly begun. If the trajectory of our lives is on course, then we will be affirmed when Christ comes to make all things well. Instead of our life's work being burnt up as so much "wood, hay and stubble" in the Last Judgment, we will hear from Jesus' lips, "Well done, my good and faithful servant."

The recent movie about the life of Martin Luther reminds us that the gravest danger for the church is not too little religion, but too much of the wrong kind. Luther spoke against a Church where only the clergy were considered to be called by God. He wrote, "The idea that service to God should have only to do with a church altar, singing, reading, sacrifice and the like is without doubt the worst trick of the devil. How could the devil have led us more effectively astray than by the narrow conception that service to God takes place only in the church and by works done therein.... The whole world could abound with services to the Lord, not only in churches but also in the home, kitchen, workshop, field." Unfortunately, most of us Protestants hear today what Medieval Catholics heard then: God calls ministers and missionaries, but as for the rest of us, our daily work does not really matter to God.

But we and our vocation do matter to God. The Bible is full of examples: Deborah as the judicial and military leader of Israel; Joseph as prime minister of Egypt, enacting a brilliant famine-prevention policy; Daniel as second-in-command of the Babylonian empire. In the New Testament, a variety of vocations are mentioned, including director of public works, lawyer, carpenter, tentmaker, businesswoman, and physician. Luke the physician even had the unenviable task of traveling for years with the apostle Paul, who could heal miraculously! Yet this odd pairing illustrates that no single calling is higher than another. Luke did not abandon his calling as a physician simply because Paul was able to work miracles. They both knew that it takes all members of the body of Christ, using all their gifts, to accomplish God's work in the world.

God calls lawyers and social workers, civil engineers and poets, teachers and actors, moms and dads. And they are not called simply to conform themselves to the reigning definition of their vocations. Instead, they are called to be "ambassadors for Christ" and ministers of the gospel in their respective callings. A Christian lawyer like Gary Haugen founds International Justice Mission to help free Thai girls from brothels and Indian children from sweatshops; a Christian poet like Wendell Berry puts forth a vision of what it is to be authentically human; a Christian physicist like Nobel-laureate William Phillips is awestruck and grateful as a scientist as he explores the depths of creation; a Christian businessman like Millard

Fuller uses his entrepreneurial abilities to start Habitat for Humanity; and a Christian pediatrician like Rev. Gloria White-Hammond brings healing in Jesus' name to the urban core of Boston.

We were not created in God's image, redeemed by Christ's blood, and filled with the Holy Spirit in order to "go and do religious things." Instead, we are called, like the Good Samaritan, into the world to "go and do likewise." We are not called to fit into our profession; we are called to "turn the world upside down" for Jesus' sake. We are called to be co-conspirators with Jesus against the principalities and powers. God wants to use our passion, skill, and creativity to move the world toward that day when "the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ." As Christians we remind each other of these truths, and encourage each other to turn our backs on the American dream and to work instead for Christ and his kingdom.



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