
VOCATION: DISCERNING YOUR CALLING



Dr. Timothy Keller

As Christians we are stewards of the resources God gives us for serving the human community. Our vocations are one avenue for doing God's work in the world.

Stewardship is the cultivation of resources for God. The Bible tells us that one of the most important resources God has given us is our gifts, aptitudes, talents, and abilities. One of the sacraments of the medieval church was the Sacrament of Holy Orders, which divided the world into the "religious" and the "secular." Those who went into full-time church ministry as priests, monks, or nuns were on a completely different spiritual footing from those who did not. One of the Protestant Reformation's main planks was to overturn this view with the biblical teaching of the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:9). Martin Luther insisted that *all* forms of work are God-honoring callings. To be a farmer, a craftsman, or an artist was just as much a vocation, a calling from God, as to be a preacher. Why?

ALL FORMS OF WORK ARE PARTICIPATION IN GOD'S WORK¹

God made the created world by his Spirit (Gen. 1:1-3) and continues to care for and sustain it by his Spirit (Ps. 104:30), watering and enriching it (Ps. 65:9-13) and feeding and meeting the needs of every living thing (Pss. 145:15-16 and 147:15-20). Indeed, the very purpose of redemption is to massively and finally restore the material creation (Rev. 21-22). God loves this created world so much that he sent his Son to redeem it. This world is a good in and of itself; it is not just a temporary theater for individual salvation.

If the Holy Spirit is not only a preacher that convicts people of sin and grace (John 16:8-11; 1 Thess. 1:5) but also a gardener, an artist, and an investor in creation who renews the material world, it *cannot* be more spiritual and God-honoring to be a preacher than to be a farmer, artist, or banker. To give just one example, evangelism is temporary work, while musicianship is permanent work. In the new heavens and new earth, preachers will be out of a job! Ultimately the purpose of evangelism is to bring about a world in which musicians will be able to do their work perfectly.

ALL FORMS OF WORK ARE WAYS OF SERVING OTHERS

Imagine how much time it would take to make a chair by yourself. You would not only have to cut and shape the wood yourself, but you'd also have to make the tools. To make the tools, you'd have to mine the ore to make metal. It would take months, perhaps years, to do all the things necessary to create the chair. When you share in the work of others, however, you can buy a chair with money equivalent to some number of hours' worth of your time, not months or years of effort. Even if you want to make the chair yourself, you can buy tools made by someone else.

All work, according to God's design, is service. Through work we enrich one another and become more and more interwoven. When Christians do "secular" work, they function as salt and light in the world (Matt. 5:13-16). Farming and business, childcare and law, medicine and music—all these forms of work cultivate, care for,

¹ The forms of work discussed are understood not to be exploitative or unethical.

and sustain the created world that God made and loves. We are all ministers (priests) to the human community on God's behalf.

Work is taking the raw material of creation and developing it for the sake of others. Musicians take the raw material of sound and bring the meaning of art into our lives. Farmers take the raw material of soil and seed and bring food into our lives. This means we are God's ministers in our work not only when we are witnessing or talking directly about Jesus, but when we are simply doing our work. A musician is serving God when she makes great music, not solely when she is singing about coming to Jesus.

ALL FORMS OF WORK ARE BASED ON GOD'S GIFTING

Isaiah 28:24–29 says, “When a farmer plows for planting” and “has leveled the surface... does he not plant wheat in its place, barley in its plot, and spelt in its field? His God instructs him and teaches him the right way... All this also comes from the LORD Almighty, wonderful in counsel and magnificent in wisdom.” Isaiah is teaching that anyone who becomes a skillful farmer *is being taught by God*. In Isaiah 45:1 we read of Cyrus, a pagan king whom God anoints with his Spirit and chooses for world leadership. This is remarkable. It shows that God's Spirit can equip people for work—even though they are not believers and are not directly witnessing to him. God gives wisdom, courage, and insight to people to do their work well.

Indeed, James 1:17 says that “Every good and perfect gift is from above... from the Father of the heavenly lights.” This means that every act of goodness, wisdom, justice, and beauty—no matter who does it—is being enabled by God. It is a “gift,” and therefore some form of grace, even though it is non-saving grace. What this means is that God gives all people (not just Christians) talents and abilities that will equip them for serving the human community through particular forms of work.

The Bible speaks also of *spiritual gifts* (Eph. 4, Rom. 12, and 1 Cor. 12–14) that are abilities to minister to others in Jesus' name.² As people created in God's image, Christians have natural talents, and as people regenerated by the Holy Spirit, they also have spiritual gifts that equip them for ministry in and through the church. It is not always easy or necessary to make distinctions between natural talents and spiritual gifts, since ultimately they are all from the Spirit of God. For example, in Exodus 31:1–4, we read how Bezalel was filled “with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts— to make artistic designs.” There is nothing in the spiritual gift lists of the New Testament about artistic gifts; yet, here we see that artistic skill comes from God (James 1:17 says it would *have* to come from God). In the play and the movie *Amadeus*, the character Salieri describes Mozart's sublime music as “the voice of God.” He was right.

KNOWING YOUR WORK

How does this work out for Christian believers? First, a Christian has to consider both of these questions: What has God called and equipped me for as my work/career? And how is God calling me to serve in and through the church?

In some rare cases, a person's church ministry becomes one's full-time career as well. Then the answers to the two questions coincide. In most cases, however, Christians must answer each question separately. Sometimes what you do in your “secular” calling is very similar to what you do inside the church. You may be a teacher or strategic planner or artist outside the church and use those same abilities inside. In other cases, you may find

² See Timothy Keller, “Discerning and Exercising Spiritual Gifts” (2011), gospelinlife.com.

God calling you to do an almost completely different sort of work in the church than you do out in the world. The banker might be a wonderful Sunday school teacher for children.

Nevertheless, I always propose a three-part method for discerning a call, whether to secular work or church work or anything else. To discern a ministry call, consult three factors: Affinity, Ability, and Opportunity.³

1. AFFINITY: WHAT “PEOPLE NEEDS” DO I RESONATE WITH?

Contrary to what many books on spiritual gifts say, do not start with yourself. Don’t start with an abstract inventory of your gifts and skills to discern your aptitudes. Aptitude tests are based on past experience and self-knowledge, and your self-knowledge is limited. Even though it is one of the ways God shows you your ministry, I don’t suggest starting there.

Rather, look at concrete *needs* in the community (context) around you. What needs do you “vibrate” to? What problems or kinds of people or ministry needs move you? Where do you discover an affinity? Paul experienced inner grief and turmoil as he saw the idols of Athens (Acts 17:16), so that led him to begin a ministry of apologetics (Acts 17:17). It is important that we get into ministry with a passion for a certain cause or unmet need.

One of the reasons not to start with a knowledge of your abilities is because gifts often “pop out” and surprise us as we participate in a great variety of ministries. For example, before I came to New York City I would never have said that I had the gift of evangelism, but I now know that this was largely because it had been years since I had been in a setting where there were a lot of non-Christians. My “teaching” gift turns out to have a strong “evangelism” component that I would never have discovered unless New York City had brought it out. I had a burden for New York, and that led me to a deeper understanding of my own heart. I did not say, “I have a gift of evangelism. Where should I use it? I know—New York City!” Of course, the longer you are a Christian, the more likely you are to know yourself well and not to have such surprises, so a very mature Christian can begin this schema of “three factors” with any one of them. For most Christians, however, it is best to start with the needs of real people.

2. ABILITY: WHAT ARE MY ABILITIES AND DEFICIENCIES?

It is important to look at your abilities. Many people become burdened to see a ministry begin, but they are not realistic about their own abilities and limitations. For example, they themselves want to be leaders even though they do not have the gift of organizing and galvanizing people to follow them.

You must be very aware of the part you are able to play in a ministry. What should you be doing, and what do you need someone else to be doing? Also, have the maturity to recognize how young or old you are in the faith. You may realize that your godliness does not cover your gift deficiencies very well, and you therefore need a strong team around you.

It is important to understand that *every* kind of ministry needs “prophetic,” “priestly,” and “kingly” gift-mixes.⁴ This is one of the many reasons why we don’t look to our abilities first. For example, it might be thought that if you have a priestly gift, you should be a deacon, but if everyone on the diaconate had only priestly gifts, it

³ These categories are derived from the works of John Newton.

⁴ See Keller, “Discerning and Exercising Spiritual Gifts.”

would be a disaster! You need vision casters and leaders and so on in every ministry. That is why we don't say, "All prophets should go into teaching ministries, all priests to mercy and justice ministries, and all kings to administrative duties."

3. OPPORTUNITY: WHERE DOES THE COMMUNITY TELL ME I AM NEEDED?

Finally, we must refuse to be individualistic in the way we discern our ministry. The doctrine of sin alone should be enough to prove that you should not be trying to make this decision yourself. Additionally, the Bible teaches that when we become Christians, we become "members of one another" (Eph. 4:25 NRSV). We cannot understand ourselves without paying attention to what our brothers and sisters can see. There may be opportunities for us to serve that we have never considered, but for which we are perfect.

Also, we are under the authority of our leaders (Heb. 13:7, 17), and we should bow to what they may tell us are the church's needs. God put us into a community, and we discern his will and calling together.

SUMMARY

Your vocation is a part of God's work in the world, and God gives you resources for serving the human community. These factors can help you identify your calling.

Affinity—"Look out."

Affinity is the normal, existential/priestly way to discern call. *What people or needs do I gravitate to?*

Ability—"Look in."

Ability is the normal, rational/prophetic way to discern call. *What am I good at doing?*

Opportunity—"Look up."

Opportunity is the normal, organizational/kingly way to discern call. *What do the leaders/my friends believe is the most strategic kingdom need?*

Your life is not a series of random events. Your family background, education, and life experiences— even the most painful ones—all equip you to do some work that no one else can do. "We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph. 2:10).

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