

Vocational stewardship

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Many Americans have a clearer idea what they will do on summer vacation than how they will fulfill any God-given sense of vocation. Some Christians see vocation as limited to a select few—mostly ministers and missionaries.

"A job is what we do to make a living. A vocation is what we do to make a life," says Jim Denison, theologian-in-residence with the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Even those who see a larger calling for all Christ's followers sometimes wonder if talk about vocation represents an elusive reality in an economy where a lot of people just would be glad to find a job—any job.

So, is vocational stewardship an ivory-tower concept divorced from real life? Or is it an imperative calling for all citizens of God's kingdom?

Understanding vocation

Christians first must begin by understanding the difference between a job and vocation, according to Jim Denison, founder of the [Denison Forum on Truth and Culture](#).

"A job is what we do to make a living. A vocation is what we do to make a life," said Denison, theologian-in-residence with the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

By definition, Denison noted, vocation implies a sense of calling to some larger purpose that provides significance and direction.

"Here's a practical way to tell the difference," he said. "Would you do your job whether you were paid or not? If money were no object, and you knew

you couldn't fail, what would you do with your life?"

Even beyond Christian circles, people ask those kinds of questions. Speaking at spring commencement at Tufts University, Eric Greitens—a Rhodes Scholar, Navy SEAL and humanitarian relief worker—told the graduates, "The best definition I have ever heard of a vocation is that it's the place where your great joy meets the world's great need."

Greitens' statement reflects a variation on Christian author Frederick Buechner's reflection: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."



That point of intersection reflects the "sweet spot" where a Christian's passions and gifts are used to accomplish God's priorities in a needy world, according to Amy Sherman, author of [*Kingdom Calling: Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good*](#).

Making choices

Realistically, she recognizes some Christians may see that as a luxury they cannot afford.

"Tough economic times can make it difficult to live in the sweet spot, as can

other factors such as family responsibilities that limit one's geographic mobility or mean that the job must come with great health benefits—and the sweet spot job may not," said Sherman, director of the [Sagamore Institute's Center on Faith in Communities](#).

"Nonetheless, compared to most of the world, American believers do have a significant degree of vocational choice, and so we need to be very intentional about how to steward that freedom."

The "decision-making grid" for Christians should be larger than for nonbelievers, said Sherman, a senior fellow both at the Sagamore Institute and at Baylor University's Institute for Study of Religion.

"It should focus our attention not simply on the personal benefits the job opportunity affords—perks, salary, prestige, etc.—but also on the opportunities it affords to serve others, the way in which it might direct our talents toward underserved populations, the scope it might afford for managing others—and thus having great opportunities to live out winsome, diligent, loving servant leadership as a supervisor—and so forth."

Maximizing in-between times

It may take years of preparation and planning before a Christian can be equipped and ready to serve in the ideal place where the worker's joy and the world's needs meet, Sherman acknowledged.

In the meantime, she recommended, a follower of Christ should view each season of life as a learning opportunity—even if that involves coping with tedium, boredom, irritating coworkers or unreasonable bosses.

"Every job affords the opportunity for personal growth in Christ-like character," she said.

In any job, a Christian should look for opportunities to show servant

leadership, as well as increase skill-levels and knowledge, Sherman noted. Even junior-level employees have the potential to become change agents in the workplace, she added.



"Perhaps there is an opportunity to volunteer on the firm's community charitable committee that makes decisions about where to invest charitable dollars," she suggested. "Perhaps the firm has an internship program. Who does that benefit? Could the junior employee suggest changes to the program that would extend its benefits to minority or low-income students?"

Even if a paying job does not offer opportunities for a Christian to develop skills for service in God's kingdom, the believer could gain that experience through volunteer service, she added.

Recognizing a kingdom assignment

When Christians acknowledge God's sovereignty over every aspect of life, it puts vocational choices in a different perspective, Denison noted.

"In the Bible, God is a king. In our culture, he's a hobby. If God is your king, you're wearing his clothes, breathing his air, walking on his planet. He's your king on Monday, not just Sunday," he said.

"If he's your king, your assignment in his kingdom is your highest priority. Everything you do should be viewed as fulfilling this assignment."

God reveals his assignment to kingdom citizens through circumstances, people, Bible study and personal worship, Denison explained. "His assignment is best for you, whatever the economic circumstances of the day," he said. "If you want to know his assignment for your life, you may ask him."