

GORDON T. SMITH

COURAGE & CALLING

*Embracing Your
God-Given Potential*

THIRD EDITION



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STEWARDS OF OUR LIVES

Navigating Change with Grace and Courage

GOD CALLS PEOPLE. Whether it is the calling of Abraham to leave the land of Ur and go he knew not where, or the calling of Moses, confronted with the burning bush, or the calling of Isaiah who encountered the glory of God, or the calling of St. Paul to bring the gospel to the Gentiles, an awareness of call is both mysterious and powerful. A calling is always a demonstration of the love and initiative of God, but through vocation we also come to an appreciation that God takes us seriously.

It is helpful to understand the call of God in three distinct ways. First, there is the call to be a Christian. The God of creation invites us to respond to his love. This call comes through Jesus, who invites us to be his disciples and to know the Father through him. To be Christian is to respond to this call to know and love God, and to love and serve others. It becomes, then, the fundamental fact of our lives; everything about us is understood in light of this call. Every aspect of our lives flows out and finds meaning in light of the fact that we are a called people. And the church is made up of “called” ones. Nothing matters more to us than that we are called. It is sheer gift—an invitation offered to us in the mercy of God to become his people and walk in faith and obedience to his Word. It is, essentially, a call to God’s salvation.

Second, for each individual there is a *specific* call—a defining purpose or mission, a reason for being. Every individual is called of God to respond through service in the world. Each person has a unique *calling* in this second sense. We cannot understand this *second* meaning of call except in the light of the first. When we fulfill our *specific* vocation, we are living out the full implications of what it means to follow Jesus. Therefore, while we all have a general call to love God and neighbor, we each follow our Lord differently, for though he calls us all to follow him, once we accept his call we are each honored with a *unique* call that is integrally a part of what it means to follow him. The second experience of call is derived from the first.

Third, there is the call that we face each day in response to the multiple demands on our lives—our immediate duties and responsibilities: the call to be present to my sons when they are involved in an athletic competition, or to help out in my local church, or to respond to some specific and important need before me. These are *my* tasks—not in the sense of burdens but as those things that are placed before me today by God. It may be nothing more complicated than helping my son repair his car. But that is what God has for me today. It may be to teach a class or be present for a committee meeting. I would not speak of these as my *vocation* (which is closer to the second meaning of call), but they are nevertheless those duties and responsibilities God calls me to today.

All three distinct meanings of “call” need to be understood together.

Called of God: The Three Expressions of Vocation

- *The general call*—the invitation to follow Jesus, to be Christian
- *The specific call*—a vocation that is unique to a person; that individual’s mission in the world
- *The immediate responsibilities*—those tasks or duties God calls us to today

This book will focus on the second of these three aspects of our calling, and this is the primary way I will be using the word *calling* or *vocation*—not as an occupation or “line of work,” but something that nevertheless speaks of our engagement with the world in response to God. But we must consider this second sense of call in light of the other two dimensions noted. Our vocation is a critical means by which we fulfill the call to be a disciple of Jesus. Part of what it means to follow Christ is to accept his specific and unique call on our lives.

But we must consider the immediate duties and obligations we have as Christians, as members of families, as spouses and as friends. The daily demands on our lives are not necessarily threats to the fulfillment of our vocation—the second meaning of *call*. They are all part of what it means to be called of God.

Because vocation, in the second sense, is part of, but only part of, what it means to be a Christian, we must see our specific and unique vocations within the context of *all* that it means to be called to be Christian. This will require that we move away from compartmentalization of our lives. We are whole people, complex people, people who fulfill our callings within the whole setting of circumstances, problems and relationships that constitute what it means to be a Christian. I, for example, fulfill my vocation as husband to Joella, father to two sons, and grandfather to three grandsons and two granddaughters. This is an unavoidable and vital dimension of my life, and I cannot consider and think constructively about my work in the world apart from these realities.

What follows is a guide to thinking about calling—in the second meaning described earlier. But when thinking well about calling or vocation in this sense, we do so within the context of all three dimensions of what it means to be called by God.

NAVIGATING TRANSITIONS

Transition is one of the givens in our lives, and we only live well, we only manage our lives well, when we manage these transitions well. Our world changes; the circumstances of our lives change. The economy changes and forces change in our lives. For those of us who work in the church, the dynamics around us change and we either adapt and respond or we lose our moorings.

If we are facing a transition, it is often due to one of three factors. First, inevitable transitions flow from the normal course of a human life. We grow up; we leave home; perhaps we marry. If we marry, we may have children; if we do, this brings us yet another transition. Indeed, many parents note that it is not merely the experience of *a* child; having a second or a third brings yet another transition that calls for a faithful and hopeful response.

The transition into early adulthood is but the first of a series of changes that will intersect our lives as we make the pilgrimage through life. We grow up and grow older, and move through midlife. As young adults there are many things that we might have taken for granted that in midlife we no longer view as a given or an assumption of our lives. The biggest assumptions that are challenged may include coming to terms with our limits. On the other hand, we know ourselves better; as we grow older we come to a deeper appreciation of what matters most to us.

The transitions through our early and midadult years are but the first rounds of what for many will be the biggest challenge of our lives: the transition into our senior years. Perhaps it could be said that we only truly live well, in the end, when we graciously manage this transition into the last season of our earthly lives. Speaking of vocation, work and career necessarily means that we consider how the diverse chapters of our lives reflect new challenges, opportunities

and circumstances. And there is no other way to speak of calling but in a recognition that these inevitable transitions call for a mature and generous response.

Some will no doubt read this book hoping to find guidance and wisdom for the early adult years—the transitions out of their parents' home and into the marketplace; for others this book will be helpful as they navigate the changing circumstances of their middle years. And yet guidance is just as needed for those moving into their senior years. These are surely some of the most important years of our lives, and one of the signs of strength for both our culture and for the church is that we are a community and society that effectively empower senior members of our society to embrace the calling of God on their lives. I will speak more to this in chapter four, "The Chapters of Our Lives."

Second, another kind of transition comes with the inevitable changes in our work world. Many will be unemployed or, better stated, unwaged at some point in their lives. Some will have been let go due to problems in the workplace. Others will be released from their employment because their employers could no longer afford to keep so many on the payroll. Some farmers can no longer afford to farm because the crop they have been cultivating is now available elsewhere at cheaper prices; thus they can no longer compete given their own labor costs or other circumstances. Others, in different sectors of the employment world, have not been able to keep up with the information and technology developments, and have been replaced by a computer or are being replaced by someone younger and seemingly quicker, or who has the technological savvy to make it in the new work environment.

We can no longer assume that we will have a single job throughout our adult years. Even if that was the case a number of years or a

generation ago, it is certainly not the case now. No one, regardless of vocation or line of work, can live with that kind of assumption.

We can think about our context in this way: the economy is changing. Wendell Berry describes the *economy* as “our way of making a living,” that which, “connects the human household with the good things that sustain life.”¹ And this economy—the “way we make a living”—is changing. The changes are permanent; this is not a temporary blip on the screen. These changes will affect all of us. Everyone, literally everyone, will have job changes and transitions as a matter of course. Whether we fulfill our vocation in the church or in the world will make little difference. The organizations we work for will reflect the turbulence in our economy with downsizing, outsourcing, a “just in time” labor force and the growth of temporary agencies. But employment will be just that—temporary!

We will only thrive in this new economy when we accept this reality—turbulence and change—and then embrace what it means for us, that is, embrace it as an *opportunity* rather than a threat.

Third, some transitions come about as a result of changes in our own hearts. In many cases this transition reflects the simple fact that we are growing older and wiser, and so perhaps have a better read on ourselves and what really matters to us. This merits separate mention because for many this reflects a different dimension of their experience.

One of the things that causes my heart to ache is meeting people who simply hate their work. In some cases the workplace itself is toxic. Others may feel they are involved in an industry that cuts deep into their own personal sense of what is good and right and true. This may be because of something obvious: they simply cannot in good conscience continue to work for a casino, which they know erodes the lives of those who gamble as well as the local economy

that depends on the taxes that come from the gambling. They recognize that it is no way to build a life or an economy.

Others may feel that the product they sell or the service they provide, while good in itself, no longer fits their own personal passion and commitment. They may have for many years been glad to have a job that paid the bills, but increasingly their heart is telling them they no longer feel a congruence with this company and its values.

Something very similar could emerge in the heart of those involved in religious work. They might realize that they can no longer in good conscience identify with the mission agency they work for. This could be for any number of legitimate reasons: perhaps they are concerned that there is a one-dimensional concern for personal religious experience and no concern for social justice, or perhaps they can no longer enthusiastically participate in the work of the agency because of theological concerns.

I realize that there are many people who simply have no choice. For any number of reasons—economic, social, marital—they do not have control of the basic elements of their lives and their careers. They cannot resign; they cannot walk into the manager’s office and say “I quit!” How they would love to do it. But they are trapped in role and responsibility that violate their human worth and dignity. Whenever the products we use, the food we eat or the benefits we experience are the fruit of this kind of work situation—shoes made by forced labor, food served by underpaid wait staff—we need to have the courage to say “no more!” And we need to be advocates on the national and international levels for just forms of labor. In the meantime the following is written to those who do have the capacity to respond to what they know is right and true, which they increasingly recognize needs to be reflected in their work.

It is important to note that this transition of the heart often comes slowly. We look back and in retrospect see that something has grown gradually in our heart, perhaps a holy discontent, and we know that in good conscience we need to ask how best to navigate this transition with a faithful and hopeful response. It will require courage; making a move might disappoint a whole host of people and lead to greater financial insecurity. But increasingly we recognize that we have no choice; we need to initiate a change. In other words, some of the transitions we experience are the natural result of growing older; some are the result of external factors that force us to respond; and some are the kinds of transitions where we take the initiative, step out and courageously inform the corporation or the organization that we are moving on. I hope that this book can be a resource to you if you are in this position; may it give you the spiritual and emotional tools to navigate this transition with faithfulness and hope.

A CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE

When transition is so much a part of our lives, one of the inevitable features of our work will be a crisis of confidence. We change and enter into a new set of opportunities, or the world or the circumstances around us change; the familiar is gone and what we once felt we might have been able to do well is no longer assumed to be part of the equation.

Robert Kegan has published a fine book that is well worth reading, but its title alone captures something that merits repeating: *In Over Our Heads*. The distinct impression we get in this new economy is that we are all in over our heads. Regardless of our line of work or responsibility, whether in business or in the task of raising children, whether it is pastoral ministry or the challenge of public education, the changing circumstances leave us with a lack of confidence that

we can accomplish what we are called to do. In this new economy we could easily conclude no one can say she is the *master* of her field or that he is a leader in his discipline. Not anymore.

I serve as the executive director of a nonprofit agency. I enjoy my work and come to it with a sense that on the whole I do it well—that I have the experience, the expertise and the determination to be effective. But what regularly impresses me and others in this line of work is that we can never keep up with all that we need to know in order to do our jobs well. The complexities of managing nonprofit organizations are such that it almost seems like sheer presumption to suggest that *anyone* can do this job well.

The word *master* used to describe the person who is at the top of his or her craft, whatever the profession. It was a title that one could work toward and with some degree of confidence ascribe to the person who was very good at what he or she did—whether it was watch making, shipbuilding, teaching or business management. But in the new economy we are all “in over our heads.” Just when we think we might have mastered our craft, the circumstances and expectations have changed. The field I work in is developing so quickly that I always feel one step behind.

In some cases this has meant that individuals have experienced failure, setback and disappointment. They did their work to the best of their abilities but were not deemed to have done it well enough, and the change in their employment situation shattered their sense of competence and even their confidence in being able to do any job at all.

While perhaps still employed, others have faced criticism or a lack of affirmation and support, which has left them with little if any confidence to be able to press on in the midst of the changes in the economy and their work situation. In some of these circumstances

the political pressures of their occupation have taken the wind out of their sails.

Still others have moved out of the waged workforce for a time, perhaps as mothers to raise a family, and now it may be as much as fifteen years later and things have changed so much that they lack the confidence to pick up their careers again or return to the roles or responsibilities they once had.

There are those who have gone into pastoral ministry, and in midlife come to a realization that congregations are changing so rapidly, especially in the way they are governed and what they are looking for in pastor, that they wonder if they really have what it takes to provide effective religious leadership.

Some have chosen a line of work or a career as a young person, but now they have come to midlife, perhaps into their fifties, and have found that what they had envisioned is no longer there. The land they hoped to farm for life is no longer theirs. Or maybe an anticipated career is gone; they trained for a particular line of work only to discover that people in that field are no longer needed in the workplace.

Yet others face retirement and struggle deeply with what it means to let go of their careers; it is so easy to feel like they are being dismissed by the organization they have worked with for many years. There are few things so painful as the feeling that we have been pushed out, and that pain in many cases strikes at the heart of our self-confidence.

Finally, for some the crisis of confidence comes from the dashing of grandiose ideals—the young woman who was certain that by her midthirties she would have her own successful business and have made her first million, or the young pastor convinced that in no time at all he would master what it takes to have a congregation that is the

envy of all other pastors, or the team of individuals who longed to do great deeds for God in the inner city only to discover that the very ones they longed to serve actually rejected their help. These kinds of ideals often need to be set aside, and sometimes there is nothing to do but accept the disappointment and honestly see that our illusions about ourselves are just that, illusions. We were trying to be heroes, and the sooner we let that dream go, the better. But however much we needed to face up to our illusions, it still is painful, and we are still experiencing a crisis of confidence. Sometimes it hurts so much that we wonder if we can ever do anything well again.

STEWARDS OF OUR LIVES

Part of the reason why we feel these transitions so keenly is that we know that our lives matter. Yes, there is the obvious: we only have one life to live, and so we naturally want to live well. But we need to probe this more deeply.

Living well, surely, is a matter of taking seriously the life that has been given to us—the opportunities and challenges that are unique to us, to our lives, our circumstances. Taking our lives seriously means that we respond *intentionally* to these circumstances and the transitions of life. But we will only do so if and when we recognize three things. First, our lives are of inestimable value. Second, living our lives to the full is precisely what it means to be good stewards of our lives. Third, we live fully by living in a way that is deeply congruent with who we are.

The worth of human life. In the Scriptures there is a clear proclamation of what it means to have human identity—a person created by God, with worth and significance. But it is also the case that the field or discipline of psychology has enabled many to appreciate the full significance and weight of this scriptural insight. Erik Erikson

helps us appreciate more fully what it means to become an adult—mature in one’s personal identity. Viktor Frankl effectively argues that deep within the psyche of each person is a longing for meaning that needs to be expressed in hopeful work and purposeful activity. Rollo May, recognizing the essential worth of each person, appreciates the power of crisis and stress to undermine personal identity. He helps us see that the resulting emptiness and anxiety can only be overcome through the power of love, which enables us to live with freedom and courage. And Abraham Maslow gave us the language of “self-actualization”—as the ideal or goal toward which each person strives, to realize our potential in our work and relationships, and to be able to do so even in environments and contexts that threaten our capacity for inner strength, authenticity and courage.

Yet what is so significant in all the profound insights of these writers is that so much of what they are saying lies within the ancient text of Holy Scripture. The Bible affirms the essential worth and significance of each person, created in the image of God, chosen and elect of God, and thus as having incomparable worth and significance in the eyes of God.

No lives are dispensable; of none can it be said that their lives or work do not matter. Each person brings beauty, creativity and significance to the table. And in this I am speaking specifically of the individual. Yes, we must speak of community. And yes, we need to always speak of the individual as only truly flourishing insofar as he or she is in community and an integral member of society. All true. And yet what must not be lost is the inherent value and potential of the individual person who is loved, called, and equipped or empowered by God to do good work.

Thus, when we speak of calling we do so with the appreciation of the extraordinary potential of each person to make a difference

for good. By this I do not mean that everyone needs to be a hero, but rather, in the midst of the simple ordinariness of everyday life, the work we do has the capacity to be good work that has profound worth and significance.

Living our lives to the full. There is an oft-quoted line from the church father Irenaeus: “The glory of God is the human person fully alive.” The perspective captured in this simple declaration must be affirmed: the human person brings glory to God, not by self-abnegation but rather precisely through the affirmation of the human person. Yes, we must speak of denial—the negation—of all that is not of God. In particular we need to affirm and actually insist that the human person is not God; as persons we live in radical dependence on God. But when God is seen as clearly and wholly God, humans are free to be precisely who they are called to be.

To put it differently, we are not the center of the universe! Children as often as not assume that the world revolves around them, but part of growing up includes the growing realization that they are but a thread in a tapestry, one member of the team, an integral part, no doubt, but still only a part of the whole. Thus it is sad to meet those adults who still assume they are the center of not just their parents’ world but everyone else’s too. The observation is often made that children in a one-child family struggle most with coming to appreciate this; they missed out on having siblings to keep them in their place! But we all need to learn this as an essential part of moving toward personal and spiritual maturity.

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams observes that the biblical ideal is not so much that we need to deny the self as to decenter the self: to see the self in truth, as an integral member of a community and society in which the only indispensable one is God.

May God grant us the grace to not be overly taken with ourselves.

But then, with this as the essential context in which we view the human person, we rightly must ask: how then, in the economy of God, can this person flourish, thrive and succeed, and we ask this precisely because we long to see this life, this person, be a living witness to the glory of God. In other words, the flourishing of the human person is not a threat to the glory of God; to the contrary, God longs for us to be, precisely, all that we are called to be.

Further, the Scriptures unequivocally affirm the significance of the *actions* of each human person. Our work and our actions make a difference to God. God called Adam to name the animals and till the earth, and since then God has continued to take seriously the actions of each person. From beginning to end the Scriptures affirm the all-encompassing glory of God and his work. But this is never portrayed in such a way that it reduces human activity to meaningless or even to mere robotic actions that have no inherent value or significance.

For many Christians, the human person is nothing and Christ is everything. They speak of themselves as “channels only.” They insist that they are only a means of grace, and the ideal is that the Christian should be but an “instrument” in the hands of God. The repeated emphasis is captured in the notion that as Christians we should become less and less, that we would “decrease” so that God can work. The less of us the better, so the work of God can be magnified. By implication, you and I are an obstacle to the glory of God.

But is this really what is reflected in the accounts found in Holy Scripture? When I watch Abraham and Jacob contending with God, wrestling with God, when I see the dynamic personal communion of David with God, when I watch the prophets and see their capacity even to confront God, it is clear that we need to rethink this understanding of human persons. Contrary to the view that denies the significance of humans and of human actions, the Scriptures have a

different message. They speak of the human person as a coworker, a partner with God—even an ambassador for God (2 Cor 5:20). Human actions matter greatly; our choices and decisions make a difference. St. Paul urges Timothy to fan into flame the gift of God, quite simply because if *he* does not do it, the gift will not flourish (2 Tim 1:6-7 NIV)! Timothy is urged to be proactive, to take responsibility for his life and his actions, and he is urged to see the significance of these actions. The patterns of his life would make a difference in the church and in the world.

Those who argue that the ideal is for the human person to “decrease” often do so on the basis of the text in John 3:30 where John the Baptist speaks of his own joy in the coming of Jesus and affirms that “[Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease.” Unfortunately, to extrapolate from this that humans therefore have little significance misses the point. John was speaking *vocationally*. His work was that of a friend of the bridegroom, not that of the bridegroom, and so, naturally, when the bridegroom appears, it is only appropriate that the friend of the bridegroom step aside, and this is his joy (and surely that of the bride as well). This principle is valid, though, in the affirmation that we are called to lose our lives if we are to gain them, that if we are to be great, then we must be servants of all. But do not fail to note that implicit in these affirmations is the recognition that we have a life to give, and that in giving our life we gain it, and that through this giving we achieve greatness. The assumption is that the individual human life, before God, has the potential for greatness. When the disciples wondered who would be great in the kingdom of God, Jesus’ response was not to scold them for desiring greatness but rather to point them to the way of service. And Jesus called his disciples into his service precisely because of his confidence that in his grace and in the fullness of his Spirit they would

make a difference. Further, in John 15 Jesus makes the remarkable statement that his disciples are not merely servants; they are friends, for his work with them includes the extraordinary reality that he is making known to them what the Father is doing (Jn 15:15). We are not merely “channels” or “instruments in the hands of God.” We are, in the language of Paul in 2 Corinthians 5, *coworkers* with God in the work of God in the world, knowledgeable and informed participants in that which matters to the Creator.

In the chapters that follow I am making a basic assumption: that each person is responsible for the choices he or she makes, and that these choices are meaningful and significant. They make a difference. Without God, such a thought would only lead to despair—as it has for many twentieth-century existentialists. But *with* God and with faith in God, we are empowered by the thought that our actions are meaningful and that our lives can make a difference. We make our choices in response to God, and we make our choices knowing that God is Lord of the universe.

Our only hope for a genuine and full response to our current life circumstances is a theology of the Christian life that takes our full humanity seriously, which means that we have an intentional theology of human actions and human responsibility. I cannot help but wonder if the fear of Pelagianism—the doctrine which suggests that human beings are capable of obedience to God through their own strength and willpower—while understandable, actually undercuts our capacity to embrace human responsibility. We must affirm the priority of divine action and grace, but we also need to do so in such a way that both calls and enables us to respond fully to God’s grace. As Gary Badcock aptly puts it, “A theology of response does not need to be Pelagian; it need only be a theology in which the reality of the *human* is taken seriously.”²

To take humanness seriously is to recognize the power and destructive reality of sin, and thus the fact of what St. Paul calls the “old self,” which is corrupted and deluded (Eph 4:22). But it also embraces the *new* self, which has been “created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph 4:24). We are called to deny the old self, but to live in congruence with the new self, which finds its origin in God’s creative act. This is the true self, created to respond to God: the self that is given generously in service and is found in community. It is estimated that over 80 percent of the books published in any given year are about the self. We could easily say that we are consumed with our “self.” And for some, what follows will merely be another book on the self. But there is a critical difference. We will be absorbed with ourself if we cannot, in response to God’s grace, find moral grounding, a clear sense of authentic identity and, in the end, clarity regarding our own vocation. Only then can we turn from self-absorption and self-centeredness, and know the grace of generous service to others. This book is designed to enable us to make that turn, that is, to become fully converted, to move from self-absorption to becoming selves that are centered in God and true to our own identity and call.

Intentional stewards of our lives. Notice then the sequence here: if each person is of inestimable worth, and, further, if we can ask how each person can flourish, it naturally follows that we recognize all of this requires intentionality: we need to ask, What can we do to be good stewards of our lives, of the gifts, talents and opportunities that God gives to us? This book provides guidance for this kind of intentional stewardship. We can rightly ask, What does it mean to take responsibility for my life in response to the way God has made and called me? The response to this question is that we learn how to work with the hand that we have been dealt. The card-playing metaphor really captures the point: we are not being asked to take responsibility for

anything other than the hand that has been dealt to us—including, well, everything! Our gifts, talents and potential, of course. But also the range of setbacks, disappointments and limitations that have been thrust on us. I like the way that golf handicaps a player so that in the end I am not actually playing against my sons (whom I would love to beat, though the chances of that diminish each year), but against myself. All I am being asked to do is to take responsibility for what I have the capacity to bring to this stroke, this hole, this round of eighteen.

By implication, then, I am not responsible for the lives of others. Yes, of course, we look out for others, we encourage others, we teach and equip others, and we live in a way that allows as many as possible to flourish. But in the end we are not God to them, and we cannot take final “adult” responsibility for the other. Indeed, the wise course of action is to stop trying to run or manage others’ lives. Rather, we must ask, In this situation and set of circumstances, what is my particular calling which, yes, might be for the sake of the other but is still only what I am being called to do.

This principle applies to my sons; I am there for them, but in the end they are responsible for their own lives. Of course, my work and responsibility also includes supporting, encouraging and equipping others in their lives and work. But in the end they will only flourish if they learn how to take personal responsibility for their lives. This is part of what it means to be an adult; we live in mutual interdependence in society and community.

When we speak of being the steward of our life, something else must be stressed. We are called to be the steward not of some ideal life or even the life we wish we had; rather we are called to be steward of the life that we have on our hands.

What follows is a study for people who are prepared to think honestly about their lives—willing to acknowledge the gifts and abilities

that they have from God, willing to be honest with themselves, willing to make some tough choices, and willing to do so in partnership with others. One of the temptations that will arise as you read will be to have regrets about the past. All of us can identify things that we would have done differently—mistakes we made, choices that were not wise decisions and so on. But we cannot confidently face the future if we are locked in regret. This book is for people—young and old, in college or in midcareer, or even facing retirement—who want to make an honest appraisal of their lives, but more, who want to look to the future and be all that they can be, to the glory of God and for the well-being of Christ’s kingdom. Without regret we will look to the present and the future conscious of the tremendous potential that we have because of the grace of God. This book is for people who, in hearing the parable of the talents, want to invest their talents—whether it is one or ten—for God, and to do so in a way that recognizes that our point of departure is not the ideal life but our actual life, with all its complications.

GOOD CONVERSATION

We talk about our work all the time. It is rare that a conversation with a person we have recently met does not at some point lead to the inevitable question, What do you do? By which we mean, How do you spend your life and days? What is the work that this person does, that, ideally, God has given him or her to do?

But this is only a point of departure in our conversations with others. When I meet with friends, we of course speak of family and the joys and sorrows of children, grandchildren, the well-being of our favorite sports teams and whether the coming national election will lead to a change of government. Sure. But then, as a rule, the bulk of our conversation is about our work. This is not inappropriate;

indeed, in chapter two I will speak of the significance of our work. Consequently, it is no wonder that we talk about it. It matters.

But it is crucial that in our conversation we learn how to speak well about our work, with new acquaintances, but more, with those who are closest to us—with our spouse if we are married, with our children and parents, with friends and associates, colleagues and neighbors. If we are speaking regularly about our work and the joys, sorrows, setbacks and successes of our work, then it only follows that we long to speak well about our work. We want to speak about our work in a way that is deeply informed by a biblical and thus Christian vision for doing good work.

We need this conversation. We need conversation that is marked by wisdom and hope. It is so easy to speak of work in a way that disparages it—thanking God that it is Friday—and thus speak of work through a posture of complaint. Yes, work is difficulty. Yes, there are significant points of stress, difficulty and setback. But what we urgently need is conversation partners who know how to speak of work in a way that is deeply and thoroughly informed by grace.

This book intends to foster this kind of good conversation. You will certainly find it helpful to read this book on your own; I am confident of this. But you might find it of greatest value if you read it in the company of another, so that together you cultivate a way of speaking of work in a manner that is informed by a biblical theology of work and is marked by grace and hopefulness.

I will speak of conversation more in chapter twelve. But for now consider this: when it comes to our work we likely need at the very least three conversation partners. Two of these should ideally be peers—perhaps one who is in a similar line of work (e.g., a fellow nurse who knows the unique challenges of this profession), another who is from another line of work (e.g., the pastor who is strengthened and encouraged by regular conversation with a person in business).

The third person, ideally, is someone a generation older, or, as we move into our senior years, someone who is at least ten years older than we are.

If you have these kinds of people in your life, you have a huge gift and extraordinary resource—a source of wisdom and encouragement. If you don't have this, then find it, work at it, cultivate these kinds of friendships and community. For, indeed, our work is our work. No one else will do it for us, and at many times along the way we will feel the inevitable loneliness that comes with doing good work: the athlete who trains alone for hours, the preacher who spends the required hours in solitary preparation, the businessperson who knows that there is no making this business work without many days of diligent engagement with his or her own enterprise, the artist who works alone on a quilt that in the end will be enjoyed by many, but no one will fully appreciate the lonely hours of tedious work that lies behind the completed project.

But though we work alone, in the end we will only be faithful and good in our work if we have the grace that comes from others: their wisdom, support, guidance and encouragement.

And so we join the conversation; we talk about our work. But let's seek to do so as those who learn from others who have gone before us. This book is an invitation to join a fascinating conversation about vocation, work and career—a conversation that draws on the accumulated wisdom of a number of threads of conversation as they relate to this topic. In what follows, as much as possible, I have summarized this wisdom. I have been impressed time and again by how pertinent all of this is for everyone. For missionaries and pastors, but also men and women in every walk of life. For young adults but also for those in midlife and in their senior years. For women as well as for men. The principles outlined in the chapters that follow are universal—equally applicable to all people, regardless of their religious

or faith orientation. In other words, my perspective is Christian and my outlook will come from the vantage point of Christian faith with an outline of implications for Christian experience. However, individuals of all faith persuasions should find this helpful.

We long to find and do work that is meaningful, that makes a difference and needs to be done. Further, we long to find a balance between work and leisure, between our responsibilities in the world and in the home, between the church and the society in which we live. We need to be able to manage competing demands and in so doing manage our lives, our time and our priorities.

We also long to make sense of the organizations we work in—to know when to accept a position and when to resign, to know the grace of being engaged with our work in an organization without being married to the company.

We all want to grow in our capacity to work with others—with people of other cultural backgrounds and with the opposite gender, as well as with people who are both older and younger than we are.

Finally, we earnestly long to be able to manage the transitions of life as we move through the different chapters of our adult careers.

For each of these points of longing, the way forward is by a conscious reflection on what it means to have a *vocation*, based on a good theology of work, of vocation and of self. What follows is meant to encourage that reflection and conversation. The biblical foundation for this study is the assumption that we are called to be stewards of the gifts and abilities and opportunities that God gives us. In the language of the second epistle to Timothy: “Fan into flame the gift of God” (2 Tim 1:6 NIV). This study endeavors to do that by considering the question, How can we, individually and in community, be all that we are called to be? How can we fan into flame that gift of God that enables us to respond with creativity and strength to the opportunities before us?

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