

# Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good

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## *An Interview between Amy Sherman and Joseph E. Gorra*

**A**my Sherman is not some mere academic type, preoccupied with scholarly output or simply responding to the latest trends in her area of expertise. She's a skilled and insightful practitioner at heart; an educator and communicator who is attentive to the 'social' dimensions, needs and questions of life through her vocation. In this interview, we explore some of her main themes in her latest book, *Kingdom Calling*, by also seeking to articulate what 'vocational stewardship' might look like for scholars, especially Christian philosophers and theologians.

**Amy, the meaningfulness and significance of vocation looms large in your writing, and most importantly, this value shapes how your life is led in the Kingdom of God. So, let's start with this: in this season of your life, how would you describe your vocation and what does it look like for you to steward that for the good of others?**

I've been really blessed because from a young age I've had a clear sense of vocational calling: that my life was going to be about the church and the poor. I didn't always know exactly what that would look like. Over the years it has involved both direct ministry, like running an inner-city nonprofit, and indirect ministry, like researching policy questions related to poverty alleviation. My principal vocation now is that of a communicator and educator, I think. Through writing, public speaking, consulting, and training, I'm trying to be a "minister to ministries:" helping congregations and nonprofits serve their communities more effectively. My work also affords me opportunities to discover "what's working" in communities and to shine the spotlight on those activities. So, to the extent that God has gifted me in communications, I am stewarding that skill to equip His people for effective service among the poor,

to inspire believers to action on behalf of community renewal, and to raise awareness of promising practices for addressing social ills.

**How has *Kingdom Calling* shaped you thus far?**

In the course of writing *Kingdom Calling*, one of my regular prayers was “Lord, make me the first reader of my book.” What I meant was: this book is exhorting readers to live as the *tsaddiqim*, stewarding all that God has given them to advance His Kingdom. I wanted Him to show *me* fresh ways that I could live that out. And He answered the prayer. A light bulb came on for me regarding the devotional booklet I’d self-published back in 2000, *Sharing God’s Heart for the Poor*. Maybe because it’s short and cheap, it’s been my best seller! Anyway, one day I realized that over 35,000 people had been touched by the booklet, and hopefully more would continue to be as it continued to sell. So I wrote a new edition and added information in the back of it on a ministry in Guatemala that I’ve supported for over 20 years. They work alongside families in desperate poverty who live in the city trash dump. As the new edition sells, readers get exposed to this great ministry and I’m now committing half the proceeds to this ministry.

**You have a grand view of the Kingdom of God in your writing. How does that view inform your conceptualization of vocation and its significance through the church in our communities in our Father’s world?**

That’s a big question and a full answer would be far too long! In brief, the four chapter Gospel—creation, fall, redemption, and consummation—has many, many implications for our vocational lives. It helps us to better understand (when compared against the truncated gospel of only ‘fall and redemption’) what it means to live missionally through our vocations.

## How does the ‘big Gospel’ focus our attention?

The big Gospel reminds us of God’s big story. He created a paradise and invited us to steward it, legitimating all kinds of work. We blew it, but God did not retract the cultural mandate from us even after the Fall. But the Fall meant that our work would be much more difficult and sometimes feel futile. Jesus’ redemption means that the restoration project is underway. Jesus’ great salvation work pushes back every aspect of the curse: redeeming the broken relationship between humans and God, humans and themselves, humans with one another, and humans with the creation itself. *All* of that is Jesus’ work, not just “saving souls.” And the doctrine of consummation reminds us that King Jesus will indeed renew all things and that the eternal life we’re going to live will be lived in redeemed bodies on a new Earth. So it’s not going to be about being disembodied souls floating about on clouds playing harps forever and ever!

## And how does the ‘big Gospel’ shape how we work in the world?

When we take all that orthodoxy seriously, we see that all of our work—as farmers and teachers and architects and scientists and plumbers and bureaucrats and auto mechanics and secretaries and lawyers and cops and you-name-it, matters to God and participates in His work. We participate in His ongoing, sustaining work of creation. We participate in His work to restrain evil and corruption. We participate in His work of renewal. All our work has dignity; there is no hierarchy of “spiritual” work that is superior. And, according to the doctrine of the consummation, we can find deep meaning and purpose in our work because some of it will actually *last* into eternity.

**It is common for ‘careerism’ to replace ‘thinking vocationally’ about one’s life. In academic or scholarly circles, something similar seems to happen: we often describe what it means to be ‘philosopher,’ a ‘social scientist’ or a ‘theologian,’**

for example in non-vocational ways. For example, we tend to be mostly satisfied by knowing and describing these ‘roles’ in terms of just necessary and sufficient conditions for being such and such, professionally speaking, through one’s lens of specialization. **But how might your concept of ‘vocational stewardship’ offer a corrective?**

By ‘vocational stewardship,’ I mean the strategic and intentional deployment of all the dimensions of our vocational power to advance foretastes of the Kingdom of God. By foretastes, I’m referring to the marks of the future, consummated Kingdom, as we see those described in the scriptural texts that provide glimpses of the new heavens and new earth.

**Do you have some examples of these ‘foretastes’?**

Some examples of Kingdom foretastes are beauty, justice, wholeness, and truth. I believe people in each vocation need to consider which Kingdom foretastes they might especially have opportunities to advance. Medical professionals, for example, obviously bring the foretaste of health and wholeness while architects and artists can bring beauty. Academics also can focus on bringing beauty and on advancing truth. They can also pursue justice—such as when a historian choosing deliberately to focus on subjects that others have ignored.

**Let’s further contextualize your thesis to scholars, since EPS readership mostly consist of philosophy/theology scholars and students. For example, how might Christian scholarship (especially work in the humanities) be more attentive to the ‘social’ and, indeed, help to advance foretastes of justice and shalom in and through our classrooms and communities.**

Well, this is the sort of thing I was getting at in my answer just now about what a historian can do.

When I think about academics stewarding their vocation, my mind runs along two kinds of tracks. One has to do with the *content* of what's studied – like the historian's choice to raise awareness of the contributions made by people that perhaps have not had their full due in the literature. Philosophers, I think, can participate in God's work of restraining corruption when they labor to discern and expose patterns of thought or ideologies that are harmful to genuine human flourishing. They can also participate in God's work of renewal by encouraging the cultivation of wonder and imagination in an age marked by too much irony and suspicion.

### **How might these endeavors jive with the ethos of 'academic freedom'?**

Academics have freedom to decide their research agenda—and they should steward that freedom well. They need to attend very seriously to their intellectual investments—avoiding studying something just because it's a “hot topic” or the thing likely to get one a spot in an academic journal. Their research agenda should be informed by God's priorities and the needs of the world.

### **So, 'vocational stewardship' is a way of prioritizing how a Christian scholar can approach their work. Is there an additional way to think about this stewardship?**

The second track has to do with intentional choices about sharing knowledge. When we invest tons of time in research, when we tackle intellectual or theological conundrums, when we publish, who benefits? Do we know? Have we thought about how to widen the circle of our beneficiaries?

### **Can you offer an example of what this looks like?**

Here's a little analogy. I like to challenge lawyers to think about the legally underserved. It's not like every Christian lawyer has to go work for International Justice Mission or the local legal aid clinic. Some really are called to Wall Street or big corporate firms. But there's a lot of lawyers out there to meet the needs of well-paying clients, and there's a lot of underserved folks in need of legal services. So I believe that Christian lawyers ought to be intentional to invest some of their time seeking to serve those folks. Similarly, academics should stretch their thinking a bit regarding the beneficiaries of how they are investing their talents, and mull over whether they are missing out on serving some "underserved" folks.

**I want to concretize this stewardship of the scholar one step further. Imagine you have some Christian philosophers and theologians in the room and you are asked to offer some advice about their future writing projects in light of the themes in *Kingdom Calling*. How might you encourage them to develop some 'philosophy of' and 'theology of' your project?**

We need a lot more good thinking, preaching, and writing on the theology of work. We have so many Christians in "secular" jobs that feel like second-class citizens. We also need more theological reflection on the practical meaning of the consummation for daily discipleship. I'm more and more convinced that the people who are the most earthly good are the ones who are the most heavenly minded – and who have a really robust, biblical understanding of our coming life in the new earth. We need way more preaching and teaching on this! We also need smart folks thinking about the ways in which some modern work is alienating and what changes can be done to mitigate that. I'd also love to see more writing along the lines of *Shop Class as Soul Craft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work*.

I deeply appreciate Crawford's *Shop Class as Soul Craft*. I am glad that you mentioned this example. Let's close this interview by having you offer advice to *pastors of scholars*. How would you encourage such pastors to help their scholars deploy their vocational power in their communities?

*First*, remember to affirm them in these vocations: this work matters to God and to society and to the Church! *Second*, encourage them to get together with others in their discipline in order to discuss the ethos and trends in that discipline: what's healthy and where are there corrupting influences? What I mean here is encouraging them to take up the kinds of questions that Andy Crouch's excellent book, *Culture Making*, helps us attend to. For example: How can they act as "cultivators" in/through their vocational sphere? How can they, in their discipline, help "create the conditions for good things to survive and thrive?" And what weeding do they need to do—"sorting out what does and does not belong?" *Third*, they should encourage these scholars to reflect on the affects of the Fall on their particular discipline. In what specific ways has the corruption introduced into the world by the Fall affected this vocation? What are the particular kinds of sin or idolatry that characteristically seem to mark these professions? *Fourth*, they should encourage these scholars to ask: What are the most important needs (in our local community and globally) that people with our vocational calling and power might uniquely address? How might we work together to address those needs?

**Dr. Amy L. Sherman** is a Senior Fellow at the Sagamore Institute for Policy Research and author of six books, most recently *Kingdom Calling: Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good* (IVP, 2011). Her articles have appeared in such publications as *Christianity Today*, *First Things*, *The Public Interest*, *Policy Review*, *Philanthropy*, and *Books & Culture*. Her undergraduate degree is from Messiah College (political science, 1987) and her MA and PhD from the University of Virginia (international economic development, 1994). Since 2005 she has volunteered as a Senior Fellow with the International Justice Mission.