

To be or not to be an astrophysicist, a plumber, gospel worker, or church planter?

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1. Gifts

Well, what are the gifts God has given you? This includes gifts that God gave you through your parents, your background, through your conversion and Christian maturity. You will recognise them in your interests, what you have studied, what you enjoy doing, what you do well. You may not know all the gifts you have: ask some friends what gifts they think you have; what they think you are good at doing. Don't be bashful, after all the credit for your gifts belongs to God, not to you!

God gives us gifts not so that they make us feel good, but that they are ways in which we are able to serve others. We may not be able to use all our gifts at any one time, because of our situations. That will not damage us. And we may find that God give us new gifts in new situations, because they are needed by other people. These gifts may be permanent or temporary.

The gifts you need for full-time trained gospel ministry include knowing God, and knowing how God relates to humans, deep knowledge of the Bible and of the gospel, a theological understanding of life, emotional resilience, the ability to teach and explain things in words that hearers who do not know much can understand, wisdom in working with people, patience and persistence, the ability to live without immediate results, the ability to work in a team, integrity, honesty, and love for people.

All gifts come from God, and God orders human society and also orders his church by using people and their gifts to serve others. Human community functions when we use our gifts for the benefit of others, and receive the benefits of their gifts used in our service. How did God provide your breakfast today? By using many people and using their gifts and their hard work. How does God provide roads and footpaths? By using many people and by using their gifts and hard work.

We are called to love our neighbours as ourselves. One of the ways we do that is by serving them with our gifts. This is a good way to think about any work, paid or unpaid. 'Who are the neighbours I am serving through this work?' 'How do I love and serve my neighbour by doing this work?' 'How can I do my job in a way that expresses love for my neighbour?'

Work, paid or unpaid, is a good gift of God, one of his creation gifts, and to be received with thankfulness. Our work, paid or unpaid, benefits us, benefits others, and honours God.

Understanding the gifts God has given you will help you make wise decisions about how you should serve God.

2. Character

'People are appointed for their gifts, and sacked for their character.' What a happy thought for the day! Gifts are not enough; we need to be able to use our gifts with love. And love is expressed by work skills and attitudes such as: responsibility, honesty, integrity, the ability to work hard, the ability to maintain confidentiality, and the ability to get things done, and patience with the challenges of the work. And love is expressed by people skills and attitudes such as: the ability to work with others, the ability to lead, the ability to be a team-player, and the ability to accept the leadership of others; patience with fellow-workers, a servant heart, and resilience. Different work situations have different demands, and we should choose the work we do wisely, with regard to our gifts, but also with regard to our temperament, and the demands of different work situations. There are big differences between working as part of a close team, working alone, working with close and constant supervision, and working with lots of freedom. Some work brings immediate rewards, and in some work you have to wait a long time. And some work is highly honoured and/or highly paid, and some work is not highly honoured and/or not paid well.

Any work, paid or unpaid, will test our character and our resilience more that it will test our gifts.

We are wise to get advice on the kind of work we might do, and the kind of work-place we might do it in, as well as on the gifts we have. We are wise to get some feedback on our character and our resilience, and what kind of work and work-place would suit us best.

3. Resilience

All work demands resilience. Sometimes people have the gifts to be able to do a job, but may not have the resilience to do it. How will you cope with the demands of the job, with the pace of life, with the busyness, with the criticism, with the lack of immediate rewards? How will you cope when things go wrong? How will you cope with the isolation, with moving around, if that is what the job requires? How will you cope if you do not succeed? What would this job do to your marriage, to your family life, to your other responsibilities? It is foolish not to think through these issues, and foolish not to talk with people who are doing the job you are thinking about, to get some idea of what it is like to do it. And this advice applies to the 'jobs' of marriage and raising children, as much as it does to other work we do!

4. Mistakes in thinking about 'ordinary' work and gospel work

Here are some common mistakes.

1. To value work according to how much people are paid.

This is what our society does, and it is a disaster. There is no necessary connection between what society values and what God values. Jesus Christ did not earn any money! He had to depend on other people to support him in his ministry. And having and raising children is not paid work, but what an immense privilege God gives us to involve us creating, caring for, and raising precious images of himself! There is no necessary connection between the value of what people do and the money they are paid to do it. Often our community gets these matters wrong, and seriously undervalues really important work, especially unpaid work!

2. To fail to honour the ordinary work by which God sustains human society.

Sometimes we use inflated language to get people to value gospel ministry. We give the impression that ordinary work is of no importance, or that it is second-rate. But God originally made us to be workers, and human responsibility for the good ordering of the world and of human society is part of the original goodness of creation. Work is not the result of the Fall! For Genesis 1:27-31 and 2:4-25 precede Genesis 3:17-19. Work, as all human life, including gospel ministry, suffers from the results of the Fall. If much human activity is subject to the kind of futility referred to in Ecclesiastes, then so is the teaching of wisdom [Ecclesiastes 1:16-18]! All that we do as humans has eternal significance, including our daily lives and our daily work. We can honour God and serve Christ in our daily work [Colossians 3:24]. It is a mistake to choose to do gospel ministry because of a deficient view of the value of ordinary daily work, paid and unpaid.

3. To fail to recognise the strategic significance and honour of trained gospel ministry.

Here too we are tempted to follow our society. To most unbelievers, trained gospel ministry looks the most futile if not the most destructive of human activities. But God honours trained gospel ministers, because they bring the gospel of God, teach and encourage God's people, and train and equip God's people to serve and honour God. Those who think that the gospel itself is weakness and foolishness will despise gospel ministry. But those who honour the gospel should also honour gospel ministers. Those who work in gospel ministry should be given 'double honour' [1 Timothy 5:17]. While many people of good will support worthwhile activities, only believers in Christ will support gospel ministry. And while many people of good will can be a good astrophysicist or plumber, only believers in Christ can be trained gospel ministers.

4. To fail to recognise our responsibility to make disciples of all nations.

God has a gospel plan for the world, and his plan includes providing gospel messengers, church planters, pastors, teachers and trainers, so that men, women and children will be converted and churches established, built up, and trained to do ministry. God's plan is that we do this work, and this plan is achieved by the prayers and personal ministry of all believers, and by the dedicated service of trained gospel workers. We should have a passion for gospel ministry in Australia, and a passion for gospel ministry all round the world. This includes many people groups, or sectors of society, or areas of a country, or whole nations which are 'gospel poor' [fewer than 2% people with saving faith in Christ]. And it is worth finding out if in nations which have a higher percentage of Christians, those believers are well represented throughout the nation, or are all found in one people-group or area or social group. We should also consider the gospel needs of the 'Majority world', Asia, Latin America, and Africa, which is about 85% of the world population. And there are good reasons for Australians to focus on Asia, as these people are our neighbours.

5. To fail to recognise the need for gospel workers to be trained.

Of course you don't need a theology degree to be a believer. But the more people you influence, the greater need there is to be well-trained, lest you lead people astray. Gospel workers need to be well trained in Bible, theology, ministry, and in cross-cultural awareness. I would not entrust my car to an untrained mechanic, or my body to an untrained surgeon, and I would not entrust gospel ministry to

an untrained worker. There are some very exceptionally gifted people, super stars, who don't need training: ordinary people do need it! Jesus Christ trained his disciples for three years.

6. To value some gospel ministry and to under-value other gospel ministry.

There is often an assumed hierarchy of gospel ministry, in which some ministries are highly valued, and other ministries are under-valued. It used to be the case that overseas missionary service was highly valued, and staying at home was regarded as second-rate. Now some Christians value church planting, and uni student ministry, and some Christians value practical caring ministry with those in need. Paul was a church planter, but spent a lot of his time and energy caring for local congregations and raising money for the poor saints in Jerusalem! And in 1 Corinthians 1, Paul rejoiced in the weakness of the Christians at Corinth. It is best not to assume that some gospel ministries are inherently more valuable than others, but to look at what is needed, and what your own gifts are. The fruit of the gospel is not just converted individuals: it is churches, mature in Christ and trained in godliness, good ministry, and good works. And though Paul was an apostle to the nations, he did spend a lot of time sorting out and restoring his churches! Trust the Lord of the gospel harvest, and trust him that his plan for your life is good and will mean that you fulfil his purposes for you. Different kinds of gospel ministry require different kinds of gifts. Talk with trusted friends and ministers about the kind of gospel ministry you might do and what kinds of ministry you are less suited to do.

5. Questions to think about if you are considering training for gospel ministry

Do you have the character that is required? Read Titus 1:6-9, and notice the kind of character that is required, and the strong focus on character, responsibility, integrity of life, and tried experience.

Do you have the gifts that are required? Do you have the gifts of teaching, explaining, training people, helping people learn, helping people grow, theological clarity, and the ability to encourage believers by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it? [See Titus 1:9, and read all of 1 and 2 Timothy!] If you cannot explain things in ways that others can understand, then you are not yet fitted for a ministry of the word.

Have you learnt to love people? It is not enough to love ministry, or love truth, or love teaching or preaching. We have to learn to love people, for without love, we are nothing and achieve nothing, however wonderful our gifts [1 Corinthians 13:2,3]!

Have you a secret sin which you have not dealt with? If you have, it will disable your ministry, and destroy your ability to do effective ministry. Get some help, make yourself accountable to one or two responsible people, and ask for their support and prayers.

Have you learnt to die to sin and to live to righteousness, to put to death things that are wrong, and to put into practice what is right? Doing ministry brings even more opportunities for sin, so you need to be well trained in living to God's glory.

Do you have the resilience required for ministry? It is not a good idea to do trained gospel ministry if:

- You are not able to cope with criticism, rejection, or lack of affirmation, or cannot deal with conflict.
- You need to be needed. For this will mean that you do ministry to meet your own needs, not in order to help others or honour God.
- You are not able to work wisely: if you are a perfectionist, if you take on too many tasks, if you cannot so say 'no' to requests for help, if you cannot organise yourself, if you are lazy, if you can be very busy but are not able to prioritise your life and get important things done, if you put off difficult tasks, etc.
- You do not have the 'people-smarts', that is the understanding of how to relate to people, how they function, how they change, how they respond, how to encourage, challenge, and grow them.
- You are not able to cope with hard work, and with the personal pressures of ministry along with your other responsibilities.
- You do not have the flexibility or the imagination to be 'all things to all people, that you might save some' [1 Corinthians 9:23]. You must be able to serve people who are not like you, people with a different background, different character, different life experience, different race or culture.
- You do not have a good track record of Christian ministry in your present life.
- You have not learned to be financially responsible, including handling your own money, and being able to handle money given for ministry, including responsibility and accountability, working within budgets, and being good stewards of what people donate.
- If you are married, and your spouse does not support you in this idea, or your marriage would not flourish if you went ahead.
- When you talk to friends and people you know about the possibility, they do not encourage you to follow it up.
- Your sense of call from God is not supported by fellow-believers and Christian leaders who know you well.

6. If you do decide to go ahead with trained gospel ministry

Find people who will support you in prayer.

Take on increased ministry responsibility where you are at present, to help prepare you for the future. Consider doing an internship to grow your experience of ministry.

Find a training college which provides the right theological perspective and the right balance of Bible, Theology, and Practical training, and talk to recent graduates of colleges or present students to help you find the right one for you.

Consider a range of styles of ministry, and a variety of contexts of ministry, and work out what kind of ministry you are best able to do. It is good to get advice from a Christian leader or from a missionary society.

Consider starting a new ministry by 'tent-making', that is, earning the money to support yourself in the ministry, as Paul did as recorded in the New Testament.

Ask God to give you a burden for a particular ministry, and find out all you can about that ministry. It may be a group of people, or an area in Australia, or overseas.

If you are thinking about missionary service overseas or in outback Australia, look at three or four missionary societies or denominations to see which would suit you best. They vary in matters such as selection, training and preparation, where decisions are made, the focus of their ministry, issues of financial support etc. It is best to know what you are taking on, rather than discovering that you have made a mistake!

Missionary societies are the experts in assessing people for ministry, in knowing what the needs are in different place, and in giving advice about how and where people should serve. Get some good advice!

If you are already trained and employed in a job, think about the differences between your job and gospel ministry. What gifts and abilities from your current job could be useful in gospel ministry? What are aspects of your current job which would not apply in gospel ministry? How would you need to change the way you work if you did gospel ministry? In particular, how would the way you relate to people have to change if you did gospel ministry?

Recognise that there are some situations, especially overseas, in which you cannot enter a country with an explicitly Christian purpose, and that the only way is with another job. [This is called 'tent-making ministry', and is sometimes done as the only way to get entry into a country.] If you want to do this kind of ministry, then you need to be well-trained for your public role, and also well-trained for the gospel ministry you want to do.

Study the Bible with this particular question in mind: 'How does God want me to serve him?'

Ask God to make you the person he wants you to be, to prepare you for the good works he wants to you do, and to rule your life so that you do them!

7. If you do not go ahead with trained gospel ministry, or, if you have retired or left your previous trained gospel ministry

Do not regard yourself as a failure, or as a second-rate Christian. If you do this, you will not try to be the person God wants you to be, and you will not try to achieve what God wants you to achieve. This is not a good idea! Make sure that you see the value of your daily work, paid or unpaid. See how you love your neighbour through your daily work, and pray for those you serve through your work.

Try to create a gospel-shaped strategic life. Think carefully about where to live, what church to belong to, how to live, what friendships to develop, and what activities to take on. Look to maximise gospel impact of all of these.

Be supportive of the church you belong to, and encourage others in their ministries. Pray for gospel ministry in Australia and overseas, support specific people, and/or people in specific places. Pray that God will raise up labourers for the harvest. Be generous and purposeful in your giving to support gospel ministry.

Live each day of your present life for the glory of God, and ask him for opportunities for ministry!

