



Interview: Tom Nelson

Tom Nelson has been senior pastor of Christ Community Church in Leawood, Kansas, for more than twenty years. He is a graduate of Dallas Seminary and also earned a DMin from Trinity in Illinois. He is the author of Five Smooth Stones: Discovering the Path To Wholeness of Soul and Ekklesia: Rediscovering God's Design for the Church. He serves on the boards of The Gospel Coalition and Trinity International University. Tom has been married to his wife Liz for thirty years with whom he has two grown children. His hobbies include gardening, turkey hunting, and jogging. We interviewed him recently when he spoke at a Mockler Center event as part of a national seminary tour of seminaries sharing his newest book Work Matters: Connecting Sunday Worship to Monday Work (Crossway, 2011).

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David Gill: Tell us about how you came to be pastor of Christ Community Church. What's the story?

Tom Nelson: After my undergraduate education as a business major at the University of Minnesota and the University of North Dakota I went on staff with Campus Crusade for ten years. I was at Minnesota for a year and then Kansas --- where I met my bride when she was a student, which is a whole other story --- and then was transferred to SMU. Most of my time was then in Dallas so I went to Dallas Theological Seminary. My wife also took some classes and was on staff with Crusade leading the women's ministry.

Gill: Did you become a pastor right after that?

Nelson: As soon as we graduated from Dallas Seminary in 1988 we packed up our Rider truck and moved to Kansas City with our six month old son. Christ Community Church started in our apartment --- . average people and no money but with a big God! It is one of those stories of grace from the very beginning in our apartment to where we are today.

Gill: Since then, you did a DMin at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School/University. How did that factor in?

Nelson: I actually did that almost simultaneously with starting Christ Community. From 1988 to 1997 I was church planting, raising children, and flying back and forth to Chicago a lot. In my DMin studies I was unpacking the Torah idea of integralness and integrity: what it is biblically and in its wholeness. I did research on business execs and pastors who travel 50+ times a year and what that meant to the wholeness and integralness of their soul, their life, their family systems.

Gill: Your first book Five Smooth Stones, was about individual discipleship. Number two, Ekklesia, was about the church. And now Work Matters is about the workplace. Was that a deliberate plan all along?

Nelson: No. I think I'm inclined to spiritual formation conversations, the *Five Smooth Stones* discussion. Certainly I'm also deeply involved in the church of course and I wanted to write a book on the church that was primarily right-brained, primarily metaphor, *Ekklesia* is my attempt to help people love the church and see it through the lens of metaphor. But I never imagined writing a book on work.

Gill: It seems like you have always been a church and parachurch kind of guy. Did you ever have a job as something other than as a religious professional? Like in a grocery store or office or factory?

Nelson: From junior high all the way through college, I worked at Dairy Queen, eventually managing it during the summers. It was a great leadership incubator – in managing people, relating to the public, understanding organization, finances, payroll, etc. That's what drove me toward the hospitality business educational track in college.

Gill: When did you have your awakening to the importance of workplace discipleship? Was it precipitated by particular events or encounters or something that you read? How did this happen?

Nelson: When I finished seminary, I thought I was a pretty decent teacher, and one of my primary roles was to teach God's people the Scripture and then they would flourish. But after ten years in pastoral ministry, I began to have lots of dissonance in multiple ways. The more I studied the Scriptures, especially the Hebrew of the Torah, and the more I studied the Reformers, I began to see that my theology was impoverished and not biblically defensible. So about fifteen years ago these studies set the trajectory for a discovery and awakening to the biblical view of wholeness and integrity.

A lot of things began to be disconcerting to me, I began to hear my language, and began to wrestle with what my pastoral role was. I realized that I was spending the vast majority of my time equipping people for the minority of their life. That was the tension so I began to wrestle with how theology shapes my pastoral vocation and that's when things began to really change. I remember standing before my congregation fifteen years ago and, with as much honesty I could bear, saying, "I need to ask your forgiveness today." You could've heard a pin drop. When a pastor stands up in a church and says that you're like "oh good grief, what kind of moral indiscretion or financial malfeasance has happened?" But I just said, "you have trusted me to give you a rich theological diet and I have failed you. I am guilty of theological malpractice. And so would you forgive me? From this day forward, it's going to change." And the contrast of the last fifteen years to my first ten as a pastor, is like going from black and white to full color 3-D in terms of transformation of my life, the congregation, our mission. It's been powerful.

Gill: Would we see any difference in the way your church worships because of your workplace convictions?

Nelson: The first thing you would notice is the language our teaching team uses. There's no dualism, no dichotomous thinking. Language is so huge for cultural cohesion and transformation so we're "language police" in a good way. Hopefully our worship has become more biblically faithful, whether it's a song, a pastoral prayer, a benediction, or a message. At certain times you'd see commissionings and testimonies that are not just about a traditional "missionary" but someone who is in architecture or some other field. You might hear a benediction from Psalm 90:17 --- "Lord, confirm the work of our hands."

Gill: How about your approach to Christian education?

Nelson: We don't have traditional Sunday school classes. For fifteen years we have had a discipleship curriculum called Razor's Edge -- a small group program with a primer lecture and some homework.

Hundreds have gone through this spiritual formation pathway that lays the theological DNA to shape in depth the way we see Monday through Friday. We are making some changes now that we have grown to a multi-campus context. As new people get into small groups we rely some on video to get the conversation started.

Gill: Do you organize or promote anything off the church campus, like in the marketplace?

Nelson: We've encouraged that sort of vision. We have conferences and some vocational affinity groups like people meeting together more organically as architects, city planners, health professionals – having coffee together and talking about their vocation. We've not been as intentional about structuring that but it seems to flow from our culture.

Gill: Faith at work means exploring how the insights of Scripture might transform our workers' lives and businesses. What about traffic the other way on the bridge? Can business and working people bring any insights into the church?

Nelson: Very much so. First of all I think if we have a rich theology of vocation, that all of life matters and that the gospel speaks into every nook and cranny, and if we have a humble confidence and a willingness to engage and learn from everyone, then we can see that there's a common grace. It gives us a posture of teachability, engagement, and relational investment in people. It is a two-way street. I guest speak quite a bit and I often take a thoughtful congregant (I don't like the word or category "lay person") with me and we'll sit on two stools together and interact back and forth on theology and business; I engage in the language of the marketplace and my congregant engages in the language of theology. It is seamless.

Gill: Who are some of the key writers or teachers, both in theology and management/business, who have helped you grow in this arena?

Nelson: I've always had an interest in Jim Collins's work because I find such resonance with the biblical story. I think Max DePree's *Leadership is an Art* is phenomenal. His idea that the leader's first role is to define reality is extremely profound. That reality is shaped by the biblical story. I would add Augustine profoundly in his *Confessions* and Luther particularly on vocation. I had always understood the Reformation primarily in terms of the *solas*... and I had not seen the profound transformation of vocation with Luther. I love C.S. Lewis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Michael Polanyi. Dallas Willard was a great friend and teacher who we just lost. From James Davison Hunter's work on how cultures form and are changed, "faithful presence" is an important category for me. A theologian for whom I have a great respect is Don Carson, who is so good in a multi-disciplinary way.

Gill: Do you read any business literature regularly?

Nelson: I read the *Wall Street Journal* just about every day because most of my people are reading it. I often read the *Atlantic* and the *Economist*.

Gill: If you were to give some advice to a pastor who likes all of this but doesn't know where to start, what would that be?

Nelson: This may not surprise you but I'd say first and foremost be more of a student of the biblical text. It is an ongoing journey of uncovering the multiple riches of the theology laid down in Holy Scripture. What sustains our passion in the very depths of our bones, and our theological vision for all of life, is our study

and prayer around the biblical text. That's what has sustained me and helped me begin to see all the threads of integral connection.

The tendency for most of us involved with theology is to think we already have it together. But we need to relearn or unlearn some things and assume a humble posture. The more I study the brilliance of God's inerrant word, the more I'm in awe of its continuity and connectivity and how it speaks to every nook and cranny of life. What drives and sustains your soul, your heart, and your mind and your collaboration, is this rich well of theology that is being continually replenished in your life. It's the kind of discovery where you go "oh yeah, yeah, yeah! Now I'm seeing it. Oh yeah!" And that energy brings the innovation and practical creativity on how you apply it to your parish. So start with a rich theology. Get on your knees. Study your text. Listen. Begin to see the richness of the vision of the life that God calls us to in creation, redemption, and consummation. It animates your life and it begins to change how you see the world.

Secondly, let that transformation of theology then transform your language. Language is so important to cultural cohesion and mission. Listen to yourself. Have other people listen to you. Often there's a disconnect between our theology and our language. Probe the great biblical ideas and just dwell on them and let them soak into your life, marinate your life. Let your language begin to frame and fertilize and nurture the parish culture that you serve. Being a pastor is like tending a greenhouse, preparing the soil and environment for people to flourish.

Third, get involved in peoples' lives, get into their worlds. Make a rich relational investment in the various vocations of your congregants. Don't sit in your pastor's office. Get out and visit them, applaud and affirm their work. Go to learn and listen. Be humble. It will transform your life and your parish and your people will be affected. Just a simple workplace visit, asking questions and learning from them as an equal partner in this mission, will transform what you're doing.

Gill: What about a workplace disciple going off to serve the Lord in software engineering or some other vocation? What are the first or second steps for them to integrate their faith and work?

Nelson: The first thing is for them to redefine work from "remuneration" to "contribution." That is fundamental. I'm all for remuneration but I want them to understand the Genesis 2:15 definition of work as a contribution to God's good world. The quality of our work is determined by the story we find ourselves in. I want them to have the biblical story animating their heart and mind whenever they walk into their workplace, whatever it is, whether changing diapers or managing a company.

Second, I want them to see that worship is intrinsic to work. The workplace is no less of a place of worship than when they gather in the sanctuary to sing a song on Sunday. Whether singing a hymn on Sunday or serving a customer on Monday --- God is their audience of one and both are acts of worship deserving our best.

Third, I'd want them to know that their work is designed by God to shape them spiritually. There's a great commercial, for Jeep I think: "the things we make, make us." That is true biblically, that the work of our hands, wherever God has us, not only contributes to the common good, but shapes us for better or worse. Work always involves some suffering and difficulty in our fallen world. But I want our workplace people to press into their work --- the good, the bad, and the ugly --- and see that God is using that work to shape them into greater Christ-likeness. Most people do not see their work as a primary means of spiritual formation. But that's where God has them most of the time. God uses the work of our hands to shape us and prepare us for the work that we're going to do in the new heavens and new earth. So work is not only about what it does for others (the common good, human flourishing, and loving my neighbor)

but also what it does to and for me and my sanctification. Our Monday through Friday work is not an impediment or detour, it is the foundation for God's work in us.

Gill: So work is or can be awesome and godly. Do you ever have to say "work is not the whole of life and we need some rest and a few other non-work things in our lives"?

Nelson: Your work matters and your rest matters too. You can work too much --- especially if it has become an idol. There is a beautiful rhythm in creation: work six days, rest the seventh. Jesus practiced a rhythm of engagement and withdrawal. I encourage people to build a Sabbath rhythm into their life.

Gill: If you could speak to seminary faculty about faith and work what would you suggest to them?

Nelson: First and foremost I think in seminary we should spend more time theologically on the bookends of Scripture, more time pressing into the richness of original creation and final consummation. There is an impoverishment by narrowly focusing on the middle --- but an enriching of redemption when seen in the context of the amazing beginning and end. Part of the seminary challenge also has to do with our language and illustrations in class. It's about communicating a vision of human flourishing and a gospel that speaks to every part of life. We want to ground our students' theology in "integralness." God is integral and his creation design is integral. The fall disintegrates that creation but I want to see how all of life is formed together in the new creation and how the gospel brings this integralness back.

Yuna Oh: I'm a youth pastor working with junior and senior high students. What are your experiences with bringing these faith at work emphases back into the way children are brought up?

Nelson: One of the things we're wrestling with is the standard children's curriculum. It's well intentioned and covers the Bible but there are some issues we want to change. Some of the spiritual development side is inadequate. We want the parents from day one of their kids' lives to think of life in a more integral way. We want to disciple the parents so their language changes. For example, for most kids their primary work is school – so what does God say about that? If you visit our children's area, we have iconography that depicts a four chapter story of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. We talk about it in terms of the "ought, is, can, will" story of life. What *ought* to be is Genesis 1 and 2. What *is* begins in Genesis 3. That is the destruction or disintegration of God's design. What *can* be is the picture of redemption --- the new life I can bring into my schoolwork and my friendships. Then there's the ultimate hope of what *will be*. The new heaven and new earth. We try to translate this in ways that they can get handles on it so they can say "the story is ought/is/can/will" and then ask how this applies in my context.

Andrew James: I spend a lot of my time with young professionals. I see in this next generation of 20s and 30s a lot of passion and desire to make an impact. To help cultivate a sense of how to move from passion to application we have tried to bring about mentoring relationships where the older generation comes alongside the younger. We've done "ask the CEO" events where they'll ask a whole slew of questions. Do you have thoughts about this next generation entering the work force?

Nelson: The number one thing that I want to share with that age group is a rich theology of suffering. We want to faithfully steward, not stamp out with cynicism, that youthful idealism. But that idealism must be tempered with hopeful realism. In any work context they're going to encounter firsthand the brokenness of the world. They need to crash through this sort of utopian idealism to a hopeful realism and see how God can make them redemptive agents in any organization. With such pervasive corruption and disintegration of God's design your heart longs for that design for life. The brokenness of the world is significant but that's not the end. You've got to navigate through the difficulty and hard places with hopeful realism.