

- Jeff Haanen: [00:03](#) Hello, and welcome to the Faith & Work podcast, where we explore everyday work in God's world. The Faith & Work podcast is produced and hosted by Denver Institute for Faith & Work, and I am Jeff Haanen, founder and executive director of Denver Institute for Faith & Work, and today I'm joined by two friends from The Gospel Coalition, Collin Hansen and Sarah Zylstra. Did I get that pronunciation right?
- Sarah Zylstra: [00:28](#) You did, you did. Perfect.
- Jeff Haanen: [00:28](#) Very good, very good. Thanks so much for having us on the podcast. Thank you so much for being here.
- Collin Hansen: [00:33](#) Thanks, Jeff.
- Jeff Haanen: [00:33](#) I want to hear from both you guys. We've talked with all sorts of folks about their daily work. Tell us a little bit about what you guys do and how you got into especially journalism and writing.
- Collin Hansen: [00:47](#) Yeah. I've been in journalism and writing since about 2003. That's when I graduated from college. I didn't actually think that I would stay in this field. I was pretty interested in becoming a pastor. And so the work that I do with The Gospel Coalition, really writing and editing for pastors, is a little bit of a merger of those two different callings because I strongly had sensed, after I became a Christian at age 15, a sense of calling to leadership in the church or responsibility or teaching or things like that. It was something I had done throughout college and elsewhere, and so that was a pretty natural transition, though, at one point, I thought I was going to be a sports journalist. I guess just that writing part had been ... it had been in my family. I had seen other people do it, one of those areas that I was fairly affirmed by just in my work.
- Collin Hansen: [01:35](#) Bottom line, I'm way better at reading and writing than I am at math and science, so you don't want me to be your doctor, you don't want me to work on biology or things like that. Part of that was how I discerned that process as well, but now, in this job then, I do a lot of teaching, writing, editing, managing, planning, all those sorts of things across a variety of different media, through our publications, our books, our videos, our audio, and our conferences for The Gospel Coalition. And, yeah, and one of the privileges I have then is working with Sarah for the last several years.

- Sarah Zylstra: [02:11](#) I came to journalism a little bit late. A lot of people I know, especially if you listen to other podcasts or talk to other journalists, start real early on. They start writing in grade school, they're interested. I didn't come to journalism until about the middle of college. I got involved with my college newspaper and started getting intrigued by editing and writing. After I graduated, my husband and I moved to Chicago so he could go to graduate school and, since Chicago is a pretty big market, it's almost impossible to start writing if you just come with a bachelor's degree from a small Iowa liberal arts college. I went to graduate school at Northwestern, which, handily, was right in Chicago and, when I was finished, I started working at Christianity Today for Collin Hansen and stayed there when he left to go do The Gospel Coalition and wrote for them for about 13 years. And then, a couple years ago, started working again for Collin Hansen, but this time at TGC.
- Jeff Haanen: [03:11](#) Such an interesting story, the migration away from CT. We love our friends at CT. I just wrote their cover story this month. But, yeah, that's an interesting story. Question, how has your field changed since you got into journalism? Can you give an overview of just how that's impacted your vocation?
- Collin Hansen: [03:33](#) Sarah, you want to go first on this one? What's still the same from our vocation? Go ahead, Sarah.
- Sarah Zylstra: [03:40](#) Almost nothing. From the digital changes ... I graduated in 2005 and, even then, they were starting to think about the digital, like, hey, you should be able to do video and social media along with your stories, but not that much. From the technical aspect, things have changed tremendously. Also, obviously, public perception of media has changed enormously and with our political atmosphere, even the role of journalists, yeah, it's very different.
- Collin Hansen: [04:11](#) I think we could spend the entire podcast just talking about that. That would be just a drastic change. It's changed so much, Jeff, that I graduated also from Northwestern School of Journalism, [inaudible 00:04:22] there, in 2003. They had a newspaper concentration at the time. You got to remember, the heyday of newspapers was the 1990s. They were still going strong and there wasn't really any sense that the internet was going to effectively kill them. There was a sense that there was something changing in the works, but technology drastically affected our field so much that I remember one of my professors was the woman who had founded Time magazine's

website. This was a big deal at the time, one of the first major journalistic websites, this major publication that had gone online. One of the drastic changes we've seen is just a lot of those magazines like Time and Newsweek have effectively disappeared since that time. But things were changing so rapidly that, as we were sitting in that class, we were doing things like should you trust Ask Jeeves as a search engine?

Jeff Haanen: [05:25](#)

Ask Jeeves.

Collin Hansen: [05:25](#)

It was that weird. It was like how do you know if information on the internet is reliable? In many cases, the students were well ahead of the professors at the time, even if the professors actually had groundbreaking leadership experience, like this professor had. Things just have changed so much there. I didn't even think about mentioned what Sarah had brought up there about the reputation of journalists. I wonder, Sarah, if we can flip that around and say it's not merely the perceptions of journalists that have changed, I believe it's also the sense of calling and mission for journalists.

Collin Hansen: [06:08](#)

I didn't find many people, even when I was in school, I didn't find many people who went into journalism because they just wanted to be able to state the facts, they just wanted to be able to tell people the straight story on something. They usually had a sense of purpose, a sense of mission. They wanted to change things. They saw journalism as a way of being able to bring social and ethical transformation in our culture, at least that's the classmates that I had. And I've seen that even in, for example, the field of sports journalism. I don't think many sports media people are really content to just talk about sports. I think you see them venturing way more now into social commentary and sports as a parable for life in this country. That's something that's changed in terms of the self-perception of the field as well that's had pretty significant effects in the last 15-plus years.

Jeff Haanen: [07:09](#)

Yeah. I want to loop back around, especially to some of our political moment, a little bit later in this interview and how that's influenced you guys' work as journalists. But one of the things I want to chat is about is, at The Gospel Coalition, this idea of the integration of faith and work is real central. I wanted to hear why that's important for you guys and I also want to hear how you think that's important for the work of journalists, thinking about your very own story as well.

- Collin Hansen: [07:35](#) Part of our emphasis on faith and work is part of our reformed legacy, that reformed theological legacy, of seeing the Lord's work in all spheres of life. Certainly, there are distinct spheres where there are distinct callings and responsibilities, but the Lord is sovereign over all of them and He works in His providential ways in all of them in these complementary ways. That goes back to those reformational origins with Luther and Calvin, goes all the way then through to the Dutch Reform tradition and comes and is [inaudible 00:08:08] then to us there. Part of that's that emphasis then that we see from that Biblical theology, Genesis to Revelation, the centrality of work from the very beginning, of that worship even of how we engage or how we execute on God's commands for us in this world, the recognition that work is something that predates the fall and it's something that will continue into eternity in some form.
- Collin Hansen: [08:34](#) TGC's reformed legacy, our emphasis on Biblical theology, are a lot of how that's accrued down to us. And then you can even throw on top of there the corporate witness of the church and, as Christians individually, as we're perceived in the world, our work is a chief aspect of our discipleship, individually, but then also our testimony, our witness to the world. Our workplace is not only a place where we have an opportunity to testify explicitly to Christ, but it's also an essential way where we love our neighbors. Those are all reasons why it's been a major part. It's one of the five key emphases of gospel-centered ministry that we lay out at TGC. I do find, though, sometimes people are a little bit surprised by that. They don't realize that this is important to TGC and has been from the very beginning and has been especially through the ministry of people like Tim Keller, who was one of our founders and our vice president.
- Jeff Haanen: [09:30](#) And why do you think people are surprised by this? Either for you, Sarah, or you, Collin, why the surprise in this?
- Collin Hansen: [09:37](#) Well, I think the surprise is that the tendency for ... we speak to a lot of church leaders, and whether it's pastors or whether it's elders, there's still the residual expectation that what you do for the Lord is what happens inside those church walls. For example, sometimes pastors can perceive that any discussion about the things that we do to carry out our discipleship outside of church is a threat to the primacy of evangelism and is a threat to the primacy of preaching. That's normally where we get some of the surprise. It's normally where we get some of the pushback there. Even within that broadly reformed

tradition, there are some people who see the emphasis and the necessary emphasis on faith and work, and there are some who that just doesn't resonate with them as much Biblically and they would rather focus on those callings of the church, which we absolutely believe are vitally important. We just also think faith and work is important.

Jeff Haanen: [10:38](#)

That's great. Sarah, I wonder if you could share a story of a pastor in your network that's [inaudible 00:10:44] with The Gospel Coalition that has gone from maybe even feeling surprised or threatened, as you just said, Collin, to this is an actually really important part of how we think about gospel-centered ministry in our church?

Sarah Zylstra: [10:56](#)

I think what helps the most is when we tell stories that other pastors can relate to, stories of churches and pastors who are valuing this and the difference that that makes. For example, I'm working on a story right now about a group called Better Together, who started as an outgrowth of Safe Families, which is a group that tries to get to families in crisis before they need foster care. Better Together wanted to go one step further than that and so they look at the poverty and they started throwing job fairs inside churches, and we've had pastors tell us that this is one of the most hope-giving, if not the most hope-giving, thing they've ever done with their congregation would be to reach out to an under-resourced neighborhood.

Sarah Zylstra: [11:44](#)

Especially if they're in one, this is a great way for them to break through those walls of the church to their neighbors to invite people to come into the church building, to have employers there, to pray for people and coach them through the process, to be able to connect them with other social services like the homeless shelter or a crisis pregnancy center or a food pantry while they're and there and to wrap around that person and to pray for them and invite them back to church on Sunday and, in that way, connect tangibly the work, the unemployment needs in the community right with the church helping with those needs, and also helping the whole person.

Jeff Haanen: [12:21](#)

That's wonderful. Collin, what have you seen amongst pastors that says, "This is actually a really important part of our ministry," when does that change happen?

Collin Hansen: [12:28](#)

Well, one of our leaders is Tom Nelson. Tom is probably maybe the lead advocate, pastoral advocate, for the integration of faith and work, working through groups like Made to Flourish. I know

you guys are all familiar with Tom and his work. One of the things Tom says is simply we're all prone to see things from our perspective in our vocation, and I think sometimes you get pastors together and it isn't really that different necessarily from when you get teachers together or you get police officers together or you get any group together. They tend to complain about their jobs. They tend to lament with each other. They tend to, "Oh, I totally understand what that's like." I just got back from a lunch with a pastor where we were doing that same thing there.

Collin Hansen: [13:18](#)

The challenge is for pastors that sometimes they can begin to think that those things they endure are unique to being a pastor, that nobody else has those same kinds of difficulties in their jobs, and I think it's one reason there is because most pastors I don't think interact with their church members in their jobs. It's more likely that everybody intersects the pastor with the pastor's job at church or at a church business meeting or in volunteering for the church in some program or a children's ministry or something like that. And also you have another factor there where pastors' lives are not easily segmented there, so it's hard even to be able to separate your life from your vocation as a pastor there. It's so all encompassing. I think that leads to a little bit of that confusion as well because so many other people are setting aside their vocation when they're interacting with that pastor in that church setting. It's difficult to be able to relate to that kind of dynamic.

Collin Hansen: [14:23](#)

One thing that was different for me though, Jeff, is that my mother was a teacher and my dad is a farmer, and both of those jobs, vocationally, have a lot of overlap with pastors, meaning you're working all the time, you're never off, especially for teachers, they're always thinking about their students, at least good teachers are always thinking about their students, they're always planning, that kind of stuff. You have to deal with people and complaints a lot in that profession. And with farmers, again, you're always on the clock. There's not any time when you're not a farmer. It's inherent to your sense of calling and mission in life. One thing that I've been able to see, bring, coming in and working with pastors, is that a lot of those things that they think are unique, some of those challenges, are actually more common than they often realize.

Jeff Haanen: [15:09](#)

So good. And, Sarah, tell me a little bit about some of the lay people that The Gospel Coalition touches as well. When does

the aha happen and what have been some of those examples of the gospel coming alive through people's vocations?

- Sarah Zylstra: [15:22](#) That's great. There are so many of these. I think one of my favorites is a story we just told about Frank Reich, who's the head coach of the Indianapolis Colts. His story is so fascinating to me. He started as a backup professional football player quarterback and loved the Lord and shared his testimony and wanted to learn more about Jesus and went to Reformed Theological Seminary Charlotte, sold everything for the gospel. After he was finished with his football career, went to seminary, learned everything that he could, led the seminary for three years, was an interim church pastor for a year after that, and never really felt called to it.
- Sarah Zylstra: [16:03](#) Even though he was doing what would be the textbook response of you get saved and then go into ministry, for him, it wasn't his sphere of influence. It was fine, it went well, but it wasn't what he felt excellent at, and so he moved back into the football field and you can follow him as he's moved up these different professional football teams. If you read the news stories of the newspapers in the towns where he has been, you can see the light of God following him around as he convenes Bible studies with players and with coaches, as he leads in a way where he is shepherding and pastoring those around him in a completely different field, which I thought was so great. And it was great that RTS was the school that he was at, because they 100% supported him, also believing that God works in all the inches, that this is the place where God has called you, go and be blessed and do God's work there. That was a really interesting one.
- Jeff Haanen: [17:04](#) Yeah, it's wonderful story. It makes me think of one of my friends who is in law, and he described his vocation as a shepherd to other lawyers actually, that lawyers actually in a litigious field oftentimes feel the weight of their clients' cases and he says, "I need to care for the other lawyers in my context," and he did that for years and years in our city in Denver. It was interesting to think about using even the language I hear at church of pastoring and shepherding and to apply it into the communities of people we work around.
- Jeff Haanen: [17:30](#) A broader question for both of you, Collin, we talked a little bit about this, but talk a little bit about the context in which Americans, but other people as well, are doing their work and especially some of the divides we see in our culture today. How

has our contentious moment politically even affected your work at The Gospel Coalition and what does that mean for a lot of people that may be feeling stuck or in between right and left or just in a tight spot?

Collin Hansen: [18:01](#)

Yeah, I could go a lot of different directions with that one. Let me choose to go in this way. We talked earlier about the transformations in our field. Well, you remember that Sarah and I were in journalism school years before Facebook was around, years before Twitter was around. Social media has not changed humanity, but it has revealed things about humanity and it has given certain access and rise to certain kinds of attitudes there. I was just thinking about this the other today, just looking from the perspective of our vocation.

Collin Hansen: [18:37](#)

Now for better or worse, for history until fairly recently, if you had a certain cause you wanted to perpetuate, you had to get somebody's approval. Now that person might have been a bad gatekeeper, they might've been a good gatekeeper, but you had to convince a publisher, you had to convince a television producer, you had to convince a newspaper editor or a writer, you had to convince somebody to be able to help spread your message. You don't need to do that anymore, but here's a challenge. This also then means that a lot of us think that our cause is the most important cause and everybody else who doesn't see it at the same level that we do is a problem and must be opposed because they just don't get it the way we get it.

Collin Hansen: [19:24](#)

You can just about put every single issue into that category there. It creates a pretty wild cacophony. It gives you the sense that everybody's pretty upset and angry all the time about different things and it just gives you a sense of chaos and helplessness as you encounter all of these pressing, urgent issues out there. And so just to be able to connect it vocationally, that's something that is very difficult for us is trying to feeling out any sense of priority or any sense of triage or how to understand the scale and scope of all of these many issues that press us at any moment.

Collin Hansen: [20:07](#)

But just to compare it also to the vocation of pastors for a second, one thing that we've found when it comes to faith and work and things like that is that pastors have long faced this kind of issue, that somebody comes to them and says, "We need to be the kind of church that blank," or "This church need to do more of this," or "This church has a problem with this."



Pastors have been fielding that kind of stuff forever as far as we can tell and it becomes really difficult for them to know what to do and be able to keep some sense of bearing on their call in that environment. But one thing we've found then is that if faith and work becomes just another thing that you scold pastors about, just another things that they're failing with that they need to improve, they tune you out because they're so sick of everybody always telling them what to do.

- Collin Hansen: [20:57](#) And I feel like a lot of people are doing that now with social media. They'd rather just tune out because they feel like it's just a place where they're scolded all the time for all the things that they're failing to do are or all the wrongs views that they have and, again, that scolding seems to know no borders because everybody has their own cause on whatever side of whatever issue. Again, I could go in a lot of different directions there, but that's the one that I've been thinking about the most lately.
- Jeff Haanen: [21:25](#) Yeah, Sarah, what have you seen?
- Sarah Zylstra: [21:28](#) Oh, remind me of the question.
- Jeff Haanen: [21:34](#) Oh, just talking about our cultural moment and particularly we ended up talking about journalism and the challenges of being caught between right and left in a very divisive age and what that means broadly for our Christian vocations. Feel free to talk about journalism or whatever you'd like.
- Sarah Zylstra: [21:50](#) Yeah. Yeah. Yep. Collin's big picture, but I'm going to come in real tight on journalism. One thing that Collin and I are learning as we're doing journalism, trying to do a gospel-centered journalism, is that it doesn't look exactly like secular journalism, which might be obvious, but there's also some not so obvious changes. One of them is the things that we choose to cover. The stories that I write aren't necessarily a response or have anything to do with the headlines of the day. We're looking for places where God is at work. We don't see a lot of other people spending a lot of time and effort telling those stories of where's God is doing something [inaudible 00:22:28] and it seems to us that if that's the overarching narrative, then to plug into where God is at work is a really important journalistic story to tell.
- Sarah Zylstra: [22:37](#) It also changes how we see our sources, that when we do gospel-centered journalism, we are looking at them as image bearers of God. We want to treat them very carefully. We want to have a lot of open communication with them. We want to

come alongside them to tell their story, so my sources see my stories before they go up. It doesn't get sprung on them when the rest of the public sees it. We want to make sure they're comfortable with the story that we're telling. Now this works because we're ostensibly on the same side. We're both reaching for an honest and grace-filled story of what God is doing, so that works in that way. We're also really mindful of our readers and wanting to tell the most accurate story we can, so double-checking and being super careful and excellent with the information that we gather and going back and checking with our sources so they can fix things before we show them to our readers are that we're trying to honor the people and honor the profession.

Collin Hansen:

[23:33](#)

Let me jump on that and amplify that a little bit with the excellent, amazing work that Sarah does. There's a really good place and a necessary place for accountability journalism. There's a great place for breaking news journalism, and we have colleagues and friends who do a great job of that and it's often necessary to be able to help expose ... it's interesting. I saw somebody refer recently that the Catholic church has this hierarchy that's supposed to offer accountability to its churches, whereas Evangelicals have the media. That's basically the accountability. There isn't any other official accountability there. We think those things are necessary, however, one of the problems we've seen is, one, our particular ministry is not well-suited to be able to do that kind of journalism, and that's something that Sarah and I have just had to realize there.

Collin Hansen:

[24:27](#)

But then, on top of that, we want to be able to complement that other work by doing something that's unique, and one of the challenges we see is that so many people are discouraged because of what they see promoted and broadcast through these media channels that they lose perspective. We see surveys that show that people are actually pretty excited about what the Lord's doing in their communities, in their churches, and in their families, but when you ask them about the world or their nation, they're totally pessimistic. And it's very strange. How can we all be so happy about what's happening in our lives, but so pessimistic about the nation? I think a lot of that is because of what our media have helped to foster. If we can offer some kind of corrective, to be able to highlight those ways that God is at work that other people are not highlighting, then perhaps we've made a contribution to encourage people in their vocations to continue to serve God, whatever the broader environment and pessimistic atmosphere might be.

- Jeff Haanen: [25:29](#) Yeah, that's so good. Collin, I'd never thought of the connection between how pastors see all of this stuff that's coming at them from their congregation and all that we see coming at us from social media and I think there is that tension, that we look at the news today, it can overwhelm and there's this anxiety and it can get pessimistic. In an age where all local newspapers are dead, is there a way though that Christians can take a look at stories that are eminently beautiful and just to say there's something good, there's something beautiful, and it makes you wonder whether a possibility for a redemptive angle of journalism can be ... can something beautiful push out the anxiety and the noise and the pain? Can we do that? As Augustine said, can we elevate our loves and see discipleship in that context? I think that's a fun challenge for, well, folks like us here at Denver Institute, but, of course, you guys doing your fine work at TGC, thinking how can we tell the most beautiful stories.
- Collin Hansen: [26:28](#) And a lot of that, it's very important for those of us who have been professionally trained as journalists to be able to interrogate that training and run it through a Christian theological grid. There's a couple things about our field in particular that are assumed I'm not sure how many people realize. One of them is that journalism has an inherent bias toward the new, the new, the different, the unusual. Sarah and I have both-
- Sarah Zylstra: [26:56](#) The conflict.
- Collin Hansen: [26:56](#) Yeah, and conflict, exactly. If it bleeds, it leads. And so Sarah and I have both sat through those classes where you assess the newsworthiness of a given topic. And so there's an inherent kind of progressive narrative that says we are contributing to those things that are overturning the historic oppression that has afflicted humanity. It's just an assumed narrative in journalism. You come into other story with a, just like Sarah said right there, you expect that there's always going to be conflict. I'm always fighting against the mayor. I'm always fighting, as a journalist, against so-and-so. And we all know that those abuses are out there and so you need some of that conflict. The challenge is it contributes to these bigger problems that we're talking about there of just how you assume that everything must be bad and there becomes just this inherent progressive narrative or regressive narrative that, unless we intervene and change, then nothing's going to ... we're the ones who have to be able to pursue justice here through our journalism, which can be good, but can also be really destructive.

- Sarah Zylstra: [28:05](#) Another thing, objectivity and neutrality are the guiding, I don't know, false idols or goals of secular journalism. But if you look at journalism from a gospel perspective, well, even if you don't, even if you work in secular journalism for a little while, you can't even get out of graduate school without realizing there is no objectivity. No person is perfectly neutral and not every side deserves a fair hearing. If you think about this is the world that God made, there is good and evil, there is a narrative arc, there is truth that we can find and tell, then that's also a change.
- Jeff Haanen: [28:41](#) So good. Let me end with this question. It's for our listeners today that are thinking about what does it look to serve Jesus with my work? Really, practically for your own lives as you wake up in the morning, you have, what, 500 emails in your inbox or whatever it might be, how do you think about what is the step I am going to take today to serve Christ and the wellbeing of my neighbor and work and what might that mean for our listeners?
- Collin Hansen: [29:08](#) Yeah. What drives me essentially are the basic two commandments of Christ, what does it look like for me to love God with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love my neighbor as myself. In some ways, that's not very practical. That's pretty open-ended there, but the one thing that it practically does is it helps me to see that this day is not about me. This is not about my wants or my supposed needs or my supposed frustrations. This is about the Lord who loves me and goes before me in my work and has prepared things that I have not even fathomed for me in my work. That perspective, coming from straight from Jesus himself, I think, can practically reorient us to that famous probably apocryphal quote from Martin Luther as well, that God doesn't need our good works, we're justified by faith alone, but our neighbors do. Our neighbors need those works and we do them in grateful appreciation for what God has done for us.
- Sarah Zylstra: [30:10](#) Yeah. I agree with all of that. I would also add that I think a lot about holding things loosely, holding stories loosely. They're not my story to tell and, ultimately, it's not even my source's story to tell. It's God's story to tell. Trying to follow best where he leads us, being open to the stories that he brings us. There are always so many more stories of God at work than we can tell, so to be sensitive to his leading and to hold things loosely, to know they're not ours, is something that is really helpful for me.
- Jeff Haanen: [30:39](#) Wonderful. Hey, Sarah and Collin, I really want to thank you for joining us on the Faith & Work podcast.



Sarah Zylstra: [30:45](#) Thanks for having us.

Collin Hansen: [30:46](#) Thanks, Jeff.