Most Christian scholars view their work as a calling. Some view it as missionary work, hoping that their students will become as passionate for learning as they are, or that their secular colleagues, who tend to dominate the discourse in academia, will take note of whatever truth Christ may wish to speak into their fields through the scholarly and creative contributions of Christians. We know, however, that our natural capabilities, whether humble or grand, are often inadequate to achieve the awesome works God calls us to. This was as true of Jesus’ first disciples as it is of us. Our insufficiencies may be physical, mental, spiritual, dispositional, or institutional, having to do with the policies, conditions and demands of the workplace. But, if we, his servants, are inadequate, how can the prophet Isaiah declare that when God’s Word goes forth, it successfully accomplishes all that he intends? (Is 55:11). As for the first disciples, so it is for us, the answer is prayer, and the power and presence of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1: 8, 14).

The late Ray Anderson, Fuller Seminary theologian, addresses this question in his book The Soul of Ministry, where he outlines what he believes to be a core principle for ministry: how God’s grace compensates for the gap between our inadequacies and the work he calls us to do. The key here is the power of God’s Word itself to create the results God envisions. For example, from a human perspective, what God expected Moses to accomplish when he said, “Let my people go!” was impossible. But from God’s standpoint all things are possible, even if he must bring about the desired result by creating it ex nihilo (out of nothing), which in Moses’ case entailed a string of miracles of epic proportion. Anderson places the gap between our unaided human capabilities and God’s unparalleled creative power at the center of Christian ministry, so that the only necessary antecedent for God’s will to be accomplished is his Word. The answer to the question “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” is plainly “No.” His Word will not return to him empty. By the gifts and power of the Holy Spirit, he guarantees it.

Numerous biblical stories illustrate this truth. For instance, when God called Abraham to leave his father’s house to go to a faraway land, he promised to bless him and make his descendants into a great nation. Moreover, through Abraham and his seed, God promised to bless the whole world (Gn 12:1-3 NRSV). But there was a problem: Abraham’s wife Sarah was infertile. After years of barrenness and Abraham’s failed attempts to work around this obstacle, God renewed his promise, saying, “I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.” Considering the improbability of it all, Abraham fell on his face laughing, and wondered, “Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” (Gn 17:16-17). Recounting this miracle, the writer of the Book of Hebrews observed that “By faith [Abraham] received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, ‘as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore’” (Heb 11:11-12).

The blessing of the barren womb is a strong biblical metaphor for the fruitfulness of God’s people in the face of their essential inadequacies. After Abraham and Sarah, God’s answer to barrenness was reenacted again and again in the lives of Abraham’s descendents, first with Isaac and Rebekah, then Jacob and Rachel (Gn 25:21; 30:22-24). Later in Israel’s history, an angel told Manoah’s long barren wife that she would conceive and bear a son (Jgs 13:3). This son would be Samson, chosen by God to deliver Israel from the Philistines. Then there was Hannah, who in her barrenness cried out to the Lord, and by his grace, she too would conceive, giving birth to Samuel, the faithful prophet God used to appoint Israel’s first king, Saul, and his successor, David (1 Sm 1:13-20). It is Mary, however, who provides the ultimate example of God’s power overcoming one’s inadequacy, when he calls this young virgin girl to bring his Son our Savior Jesus into the world. We know the story. The angel Gabriel appears to her, announcing that she has found favor with God and will bear a son who will be called “the Son of the Most High.” He will be great, and the Lord will give him the throne of David, and his kingdom will last forever. “How can this be,” Mary asks, “since I am a virgin?” The angel Gabriel answers, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.” Then as if to confirm one miracle with another, he announces that Mary’s relative Elizabeth, who had long been barren, had also conceived a son in her old age, affirming that “nothing will be impossible with God.” Then Mary replies, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Lu 1:28-38). Surely Mary’s response pleased the Lord. No lame excuses or dwelling on her inadequacies, but, instead, she trusted the power of his Word, knowing that nothing is impossible for God.

As it was for Abraham and his seed, so it is for those of us who are called to scholarly work. When the gap between our inadequacies and the work God calls us to do seems overwhelming, like Mary, we have his promise: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of
the Most High will overshadow you.” We have this confidence because, as St. Paul wrote, the power that is at work within us is the same power that raised Jesus from the dead (Eph 1:20). Thus, with the Psalmist we may sing,

Who is like the Lord our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down on the heavens and the earth? He raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people. He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children. Praise the Lord! (Ps 113:5-9)

Because his ways are higher than our ways and his thoughts are higher than our thoughts (Is 55:9), it is only by the power of the Holy Spirit that God’s work can be done. Our natural barrenness presents no obstacle to his supernatural power. The work of the kingdom presupposes the gifts necessary to fulfill God’s call. The range of gifts and ministries extend from rather ordinary to extraordinary signs of God’s power and grace, but the same Spirit supplies them all. In the account of Bezalel and Oholiab in Exodus 31, the provision of God’s Spirit included “ability, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze.” The Spirit had equipped these artisans for the awesome responsibility of fashioning the sacred furnishings for the tent of meeting according to God’s plan, including no less than the ark of the covenant, the mercy seat, the table and lampstand, the altars of incense and burnt offering, the priest’s vestments, and even the anointing oil and fragrant incense for the holy place (Ex 31:1-11). Gifts of the Spirit mentioned by St. Paul include wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits, tongues and interpretation, exhortation, teaching, administration, diligence, generosity, compassion, and cheerfulness (1 Cor 12:8-10, 28; Rom 12:6-8), a list that is sufficiently diverse for us to conclude that the Holy Spirit will supply all we need to fulfill our various callings in the kingdom of God.

As Christian scholars we are keenly aware of our need for faith, wisdom, knowledge, discernment, and teaching gifts. And, what serious scholar has not known seasons of intellectual and spiritual barrenness that only God can transform into fruitfulness? Above all, as members of a profession that is too often marked by arrogance and pride, Christian scholars need humility and love to season their discourse with one another, with their students, and with secular colleagues who may not yet embrace the call of Christ. As St. Paul declares, love is the greatest gift of all (1 Cor 13:13). This is why as Christian scholars we gather regularly to encourage and pray for each other in our scholarly and creative activities, especially when the going gets rough. We hope you will pray for us too, because the promises of Christ give us reason to hope that, if we wait upon the Lord, the power of the Most High will overshadow us and equip us for the scholarly and creative work he calls us to do at Azusa Pacific University.

* Don and Emily Griesinger host a bimonthly Scholars Prayer Group to encourage and pray for the faculty’s research and creative endeavors. Don Griesinger, Ph.D., is Professor, Emeritus, at Claremont Graduate University, and Emily Griesinger, Ph.D., is Professor of English at APU.