

Vocation, Calling and Work

Foreword

This study presents a thoughtful, biblical view of calling, vocation and work. It is based on an article, [Calling and Vocation: Overview](#), written by a group of biblical scholars led by Will Messenger as part of the [Theology of Work Project](#).

The study begins with a session based only on questions. For the rest of the study, the article has been divided into three parts, with discussion questions added. Each session is designed to take about 60 minutes. There are also links to audio files and other additional resources.

Although the language of the study focuses on work, it does not assume that you have a paid job. For instance, students should consider their time in school as their work, just as “in-the-home” caregivers should consider their efforts with children, parents or other family members to be work.

If you are doing this study with a group, we suggest that you **read** and **reflect** on the given assignment first on your own, **highlighting** what you find most important or relevant to your own situation and any **questions** that you want to discuss with the group.

Session I: Where am I now?

This session requires no reading. Instead, it asks you to reflect on your current thoughts, feelings and beliefs about work and calling.

Questions for Discussion

1. What are your thoughts about work in general? Is the idea of work generally positive or negative for you?
2. How were you drawn to your first field of your interest (not necessarily the work you're currently involved in)? Was it through your interests from childhood? Maybe influences from parents?
3. What about now? Are you working in a job that is generally pointed in a direction you'd like? On most days, does it your work seem aligned with your longings?
4. List jobs you've had (paid or unpaid) and what you learned about work and about yourself through each (e.g., paper delivery, retail of some form or another, chores, lifeguarding, tutoring, babysitting, parenting, caring for an elderly person, your first paid job, your current work, etc.)
5. Where did God "creationally" place you (e.g., family structure, geography, ethnicity)? How have these factors affected your work and sense of calling and contribution to others?
6. Describe your education, in general, from start to present, or some specific part of your education. How has this training affected your work, calling and contribution?
7. What do you like and not like about where you are today and what you're doing, job-wise?
8. What are you hoping to get out of this study, based on what you know so far?

Going Deeper

For context, consider these passages of Scripture:

- Genesis 1 – God at work; highly intentional; purposeful; excellent; we're created in His image
- Ps 90, especially v17
- Ex 31: 1-6 – Bezalel and Oholiab

Session 2: Does God call?

Introduction¹

When Christians ask about vocation (or "calling"), we usually mean, "Is God calling me to a particular job, profession or type of work?" This is a significant question, because the work we do is important to God. If work is important, it makes sense to ask what work God wants us to do.

In the Bible, God does indeed call people — some people, at least — to particular work, and gives all people various kinds of guidance for their work. We will explore biblical accounts of these "calls" in depth. Although scripture seldom actually uses the word "call" to describe God's guidance to jobs, occupations, or tasks, these occurrences in the Bible do correspond to what we usually mean by a vocational "calling." So, as a preliminary answer, we can say "yes," God does lead people to particular jobs, occupations, and types of work.

But in the Bible, the concept of calling goes deeper than any one aspect of life, such as work. God calls people to become united with himself in every aspect of life. This can only occur as a response to Christ's call to follow him. **The calling to follow Christ lies at the root of every other calling.** It is important, however, not to confuse a calling to follow Christ with a calling to become a professional church worker. People in every walk of life are called to follow Christ with equal depth and commitment.

In this article, after exploring the call to follow Christ, we will explore the calling to particular work in light of many of the biblical passages related to calling. **We will show how the cooperative work of the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit guides and models our work.**

Along the way, we will examine related topics such as:

- How to discern God's calling or guidance in the area of work
- The community nature of calling
- The calling to church vs. non-church work
- Callings to the creative and redemptive work of God beyond the paid workplace, the importance of how you work at whatever job you have and the ultimate freedom that Christians enjoy in their work.

Types of God's calling

The call to belong to Christ and participate in his redemptive work in the world

In the Bible, the word "call" is used most often to refer to God's initiative to bring people to Christ and to participate in his redemptive work in the world. This sense of calling is especially prominent in the letters of Paul, whether or not the word "call" is actually used.

¹ On this page and below, the original article is marked by a border to the left.

Romans 1:6	<i>...including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.</i>
Romans 8:28	<i>All things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.</i>
1 Timothy 2:4	<i>[God] desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.</i>
2 Corinthians 5:17-20	<i>So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.²</i>

The calling to belong to Christ goes deeper than the kinds of workplace “calling” that are the main focus of this article. For this reason, it is important to start our exploration of calling with the call to follow Jesus. It is a call to a restored relationship with God and with other people and with the world around us. It encompasses all of a person’s being and doing. It reminds us that the call to a *particular* kind of work is secondary to the call to belong to Christ and to participate in his redemption of the world.

In particular, our work must be an integral part of our participation in Christ himself. His work of creation underlies the act of creativity and production in the universe (John 1:1-3). His work of redemption can occur in every workplace through justice, healing, reconciliation, compassion, kindness, humility and patience (Colossians 3:12). Christ’s redemptive work is not limited to evangelism, but encompasses everything necessary to make the world what God always intended it to be. This redemptive work occurs in harmony with the work of creation, production and sustenance that [God delegated to humanity in the Garden of Eden](#). The Bible does not indicate that the work of redemption has superseded the work of creation. Both continue, and in general, Christians are commanded to participate in the work of both creation and redemption (John Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975, 2008), 48-54.).

² On this page and below, all footnotes and all hyperlinks (except as noted) are from [the original article](#). If you are using a printed version of this study and would like access to these additional materials, please go to theologyofwork.org. In the Key Topics menu, select “Calling and Vocation.”

The universal call to work

Before we can discuss the possibility of God’s guidance to a particular kind of work, we must recognize both that **God created people to work** and that he **commands people to work** to the degree they are able. At the beginning of the Bible, God builds work into the essence of humanity. He creates people in his own image, and **he himself is a worker**. He puts Adam in the garden for the purpose of working it. Later, in various parts of scripture, God commands all people to work to the degree they are able. Work continues through to the very end of the Bible. There is work in the Garden of Eden, and there is work in the **New Heaven/New Earth**.

Genesis 1:27-28	<i>So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”</i>
Genesis 2:15,19-20	<i>The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it...So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner.</i>
Exodus 20:9	<i>Six days you shall labor and do all your work.</i>
2 Thess. 3:10	<i>For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.</i>
Revelation 21:24-26	<i>The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day — and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations.</i>
Isaiah 65:21-22	<i>They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.</i>

Based on these passages, we could say that *everyone* is “called” to work, as long as we recognize that in this sense “called” really means “created” and “commanded” to work. God created you as a

worker, and he commands you to work, even if he doesn't mail you a specific job offer. It can be difficult to discern the particular work God may be calling you to, but there can be no doubt that he made you as a worker and that he expects you to work, to the degree you are able.

Calling to life, not only to work

Although we are focusing on God's call to work, work is only one element of life. God calls us to belong to Christ in every element of our lives.

Colossians 3:17	<i>Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.</i>
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Our jobs are not necessarily the most important aspect of our calling or our service in Christ's work of redemption. First, we must remember that work is not limited to paid work. The work God leads us to may be unpaid work, such as [raising children or caring for a disabled family member](#) or tutoring students after school. Even if we are called to paid work, God probably doesn't call many of us to jobs that would prevent us from also serving others through unpaid work.

Even if you have a paid job, the most important work God calls you to may be outside your job. Your job may meet your need for money — which in itself fulfills part of God's command to work — but it may not fulfill all the other purposes God has for your work. We have seen that [caring for children and for aged](#) or incapacitated people is a kind of work, and many people who do it also have another paid job. On the other hand, a so-called hobby could be the most important work God is leading you to. You might work at writing, painting, music, acting, astronomy, leading a youth group, volunteering at a historical society, maintaining a nature reserve or a thousand other kinds of work. If something like this is your calling, you will probably engage it in a more serious way than someone else to whom it is a leisure activity, yet you may still earn your living in some other way. There is a distinction between work and leisure. But any given activity could be work — paid or unpaid — for one person, and leisure for another.

Second, we must take care not to let work dominate the other elements of life. Even if God leads you to a particular job or profession, you will need to set limits to that work to make room for the other elements of God's call or guidance in your life. If God leads you to be married and to be a small business owner, for example, then you will have to balance the time and responsibilities of both callings. Work should not crowd out leisure, rest and worship. There is no formula for [balancing work and the other elements of life](#). But take care not to let a sense of calling to a job blind you to God's calling in the other areas of life.

God's guidance to particular work

At this point, we are now able to delve into the possibility of God's guidance to a particular task, job, career or type of work. We have seen that:

1. Everyone is called to belong to Christ and to participate in his creative and redemptive work.

2. Everyone is commanded to work to the degree they are able.
3. God calls us to a whole life, not just to a job.

Putting these together leads us to conclude that your profession is probably not God's highest concern for you. God is much more concerned that you come under the saving grace of Christ and participate in his work of creation and redemption, whatever your job may be. Exactly what kind of work you do is a lower-level concern.

Although getting us into the right job or career is not God's highest concern, that doesn't mean it is of *no* concern. In fact, the distinctive work of the Holy Spirit is to guide and empower people for the life and work to which God leads them. In the Old Testament, God gave people the skills needed for their work on occasion, as we have seen with Bezalel and Oholiab in the building of the tabernacle. But now the Spirit routinely guides believers to particular work and gives them the skills they need (1 Corinthians 12:7-10) He provides [guidance for both what kind of work](#) people do and *how* to do that work. (The Steering Committee of the Theology of Work Project regards all gifts, skills and talents as coming from God. The gifts of the Spirit discussed in the New Testament (e.g., 1 Corinthians chapters 12-14, Romans chapter 12, Ephesians 4:11-16, and 1 Peter 4:10-12) are not limited to the particular abilities listed in those passages. Nor are they limited only to uses in the church. This article does not attempt to prove this position, but merely to acknowledge it.)

Discerning God's guidance to a particular kind of work

Direct, unmistakable call to particular work

With the understanding that the ultimate image of calling in the Bible is the calling to follow Jesus, we are ready to explore callings to particular kinds of work. If by "calling," we mean a direct, unmistakable command from God to take up a particular task, job, profession or type of work, then calling is very rare in the Bible. No more than a hundred or so people were called by God in this sense. God called Noah to build the ark. God called Moses and Aaron to their tasks (Exodus 3:4, 28:1). He called prophets such as Samuel (1 Samuel 3:10), Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:4-5), Amos (Amos 7:15) and others. He called Abram and Sarah and a few others to undertake journeys or to relocate (which might be taken as a kind of workplace calling). He placed people in political leadership including Joseph, Gideon, Saul, David and David's descendants. God chose Bezalel and Oholiab as chief craftsmen for the tabernacle (Exodus 31:1-6). Jesus called the apostles and some other of his disciples (e.g., Mark 3:14-19), and the Holy Spirit called Barnabas and Saul to be missionaries (Acts 13:2). The word "call" is not always used, but the unmistakable direction of God for a particular person to do a particular job is clear in these cases.

Aside from these examples, very few people in the Bible received an individual call to a particular kind of work from God. This strongly suggests that a direct calling from God to particular work is also rare today. If God is calling you directly and unmistakably to particular work, you don't need guidance from an article such as this, except perhaps for the affirmation that, yes, this type of calling does occur in the Bible in rare instances. Therefore, we will not discuss direct, unmistakable,

personal calling further, but will instead focus on whether God guides or leads people to particular types of work through less dramatic means.

Questions for Discussion

1. In your own words, how would you define/describe calling? What are the major elements of this calling?
2. What are some implications that “the calling to Christ is at the root of every other calling”?
3. What do the authors mean when they say everyone is called to work (p. 4)? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
4. The authors say, “work is not limited to paid work” (p. 4). What are the implications (how does it make you think, feel or act differently) to think of vocation as something that encompasses all of life, including both paid and unpaid work?
5. What are some of the ways in scripture in which God guided people to a particular work? What are the implications of this for you?
6. How has God guided you to the work (paid or unpaid, including school work) you are doing today?

Additional Materials

Understanding God's Call on Our Lives (audio file, 12+ min). If link does not work, please cut and past URL into your browser.

<https://www.theologyofwork.org/resources/understanding-gods-call-on-our-lives>

Haddon Robinson: Discover How to Bring Meaning to Your Ordinary Workday (audio file, 13 min)

<https://soundcloud.com/theology-of-work/discover-how-to-bring-meaning>

Vocation: It's Bigger than Your Job (Four-part study was written by a team of Navigator staff. The first page can be used as a stand-alone tool for reflecting on calling.

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/sah7zkiq1ki8rxs/Vocation - It%27s Bigger than Your Job2.pdf?dl=0>

Session 3: Discerning God’s guidance to a particular kind of work (continued)

Guidance to a Job or Profession

Although God does not give most people a direct, individual, unmistakable call to a particular job or profession, God does give guidance to people in less dramatic forms, including Bible study, prayer, Christian community and individual reflection. Developing a general attentiveness to God’s guidance in life is beyond the scope of this article. But we will look at three major considerations for discerning God’s *vocational* guidance.

The needs of the world

The first consideration is the needs of the world. The single strongest indicator of what God wants you to do is probably your awareness of what needs to get done to make the world more like what God intends. This doesn’t necessarily mean huge, global problems, but simply anything in the world that needs to be done. Earning a living to support yourself and your family is one example mentioned in the Bible:

Proverbs 13:22	<i>The good leave an inheritance to their children's children.</i>
Proverbs 14:1	<i>The wise woman builds her house, but the foolish tears it down with her own hands.</i>
1 Timothy 5:8	<i>Whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.</i>
Titus 3:14	<i>Let people learn to devote themselves to good works in order to meet urgent needs, so that they may not be unproductive.</i>

Another biblical example is working so as to meet the needs of individuals around you besides your family:

Proverbs 14:21	<i>Happy are those who are kind to the poor.</i>
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1 Thess. 4:11	<i>Aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you.</i>
Luke 3:10-11	<i>The crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."</i>
Proverbs 11:25	<i>A generous person will be enriched, and one who gives water will get water.</i>
Matthew 25:34-36	<i>Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."</i>

Working to serve the good of the larger society is also a biblical imperative:

Jeremiah 29:5-7	<i>Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.</i>
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Of course, it is impossible for you to meet every need of the world, so you have to narrow it down a bit. Start with needs for which you are personally responsible, such as raising your children or paying your debts. Beyond that, pay attention to needs that you are in a good position to meet, or that few other people are willing to address, or that you find especially pressing. You might be in a good position to run for an elected office in your own city or town, for example, compared to moving away to find work. On the other hand, you might be one of the few people willing to document human rights abuses in a country half way around the world. Or you might become convinced that teaching troubled youth is more pressing than joining a band. Moreover, it might become clear that something in your life other than your job or career is the most important way you are helping to meet the world's needs. It would be pointless to get a job counseling troubled youth, only to neglect your own children.

The point is that God has given everyone the ability to recognize something of what the world needs.

He seems to expect us to notice it and get to work, rather than waiting for a special call from him. There is no biblical formula for translating the needs of the world into a precise job calling. That's why you need to seek God's guidance in the various forms of discernment available to you.

Your skills and gifts

The second consideration is your skills and gifts. The Bible says that God gives people gifts for accomplishing the work he wants them to do, and it names some of the gifts and skills that God imparts:

Isaiah 28:24-26	<i>Do those who plow for sowing plow continually? Do they continually open and harrow their ground? When they have leveled its surface, do they not scatter dill, sow cummin, and plant wheat in rows and barley in its proper place, and spelt as the border? For they are well instructed; their God teaches them.</i>
Romans 12:6-8	<i>We have gifts that differ,³ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.</i>
1 Cor. 12:7-10	<i>To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.</i>

As the last two passages show, when Paul discusses the gifts of the Spirit, he is usually referring to their use in the church. But if all work done by Christians is done for the Lord (Colossians 3:23), then we can infer that the Spirit's gifts are also given for use in the workplace. Gifts and skills therefore provide an element of guidance for discerning God's guidance.

³ This verse (Romans 12:6), by the way, was the inspiration for and source of the title under which the Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator was published, and there can be no doubt that many in the world at large regard God's gifts to be an essential element of professional calling. See Isabel Myers, *Gifts Differing: Understanding Personality Type* (Palo Alto, CA: CPP Books, 1993).

Gifts assessment tools

Gifts assessment tools can be very helpful for discerning your gifts and exploring how they relate to various types of work. The most rigorous, statistically-verified tools are typically available through professional counselors and institutions because they require qualified interpretation. Among these are the *Strong Interest Inventory*, *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*, *California Psychological Inventory*, *Work-Life Values Checklist*, and the *PDINH: Global Personality Inventory* (developed on a truly global basis). While these are not explicitly Christian in their language, they can, with a skilled, Christian interpreter become starting points for exploring God's gifts and his guidance to work. There are also explicitly Christian tools with a conscious spiritual and theological foundation. *SIMA* (the *System for Identifying Motivated Abilities*) and *MAP* (*Motivated Abilities Pattern*) are two such that require professional interpretation.

Some tools with a Christian undergirding can be used without professional interpretation, such as *What Color Is Your Parachute?* by Richard Bolles (published annually) and *Live Your Calling: A Practical Guide to Finding and Fulfilling Your Mission In Life*, by Kevin and Kay Marie Brennfleck. While these can be self-administered, it is best to use them with a trained vocational and career counselor and, ideally, within the context of a Christian church or other community. Christian career counselors can be found in most urban areas, in almost every Christian college and university setting, and in some individual churches.

A number of tools have been developed to help people discern their gifts and make use of them in workplace settings (see "For further exploration"). However, it is easy to pay *too* much attention to your skills and gifts. The present generation of westerners is the most gift-analyzed in human history, yet this penchant for analysis can lead to self-absorption, crowding out attention to the needs of the world. These passages say that God gives gifts for the common good, not personal satisfaction. Besides, in many cases, God gives his gifts only *after* you take the job in which you'll need them. Paying too much attention to the gifts you already have can keep you from receiving the gifts God wants to give you.

Nonetheless, the gifts you already have may give you some indication about how to best meet the needs of the world. It would be narcissistic to declare that God has called you to be the world's greatest pianist, and then expect him to download the necessary talent into you after years of mediocre piano playing and lukewarm practicing. Career guidance via skills and gifts is a difficult balancing act, which is why it must be sought in the midst of relationship with God and fellow Christians.

Here again, we must not become focused on work to the exclusion of the rest of life. God also gives gifts for our family life, friendships, recreation, volunteering and the whole breadth of life's activities.

Your truest desires

Finally, the Bible says that your truest or deepest desires are also important to God.

Psalm 37:4	<i>Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.</i>
Psalm 145:19	<i>He fulfills the desire of all who fear him; he also hears their cry, and saves them.</i>
Matthew 5:6	<i>Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.</i>
John 16:24	<i>Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.</i>

Christians sometimes expect that if God calls them to some job, it will be something they hate. Otherwise, why would God have to call them to it? One morbid Christian fantasy is to think of one country you would hate living in, and then suppose that God is calling you to be a missionary there. But the best missionaries have a great desire for the place and people they serve. Besides, who says God wants you to be a missionary? If God is guiding you towards some kind of job or profession, it's more likely that you may find a deep desire for it in your heart.

However, it can be exceedingly difficult to get in touch with your truest or deepest desires. Our motivations become so confused by sin and the brokenness of the world that our apparent desires are often far from the true desires that God has implanted in the depths of our hearts.

Romans 7:8, 15, 21-23	<i>But sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead.... I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate....So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.</i>
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For this reason, we cannot just say, "Do what makes you happy." What makes you happy — or seems to make you happy — might be far from meeting the needs of the world, or using your skills and gifts for the common good, or even from fulfilling your true desires. And the opposite is often true. The work that would fulfill your true desire appears at first to be undesirable, and may require great sacrifice and difficult labor. And your truest desires may be met in many areas of life, not necessarily in work. Knowing what you truly desire requires spiritual maturity, perhaps more than you may have at the moment you're facing a decision. But at least you can get rid of the idea that God only calls you to something you hate. In this light, Frederick Buechner writes: "The place God

calls you to is where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." (Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper, 1993) under "Calling.")

Questions for Discussion

1. God gives everyone special gifts and abilities. How would you describe what you are gifted to do? Which of these abilities have been affirmed by those who know you best?
2. How might you use these gifts and abilities for the common good?
3. Who has God placed in your life that you are uniquely poised to impact with the gospel?
4. As the article states, "it can be exceedingly difficult to get in touch with your truest or deepest desires." As best you can, how would you articulate the desires you have concerning your future?
5. When you look at the world around you, what needs do you see? Which ones resonate most with you? Why?
6. Describe for the group where you think "your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

Additional Materials

Reducing the Divorce Rate through eHarmony

<https://www.theologyofwork.org/resources/reducing-the-divorce-rate-through-eharmony>

Johnny Cash on Gifts and Calling

<https://www.theologyofwork.org/resources/johnny-cash-on-gifts-and-calling>

The Gathering Testimony: Joanna Gaines

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t7iPEDnqwm0>

Session 4: Freedom in Christ

These three considerations — the needs of the world, your skills and gifts, and your truest desires — are guides, but they are not absolutes. For one thing, in a fallen world, you may have very little ability to choose your job anyway. Throughout history, most people have had the job of slave, farmer or homemaker, and that is still the case in much of the world outside the most developed countries. It is hard to imagine that — residents of a few developed countries aside — God wants most people to be slaves, farmers or homemakers. Rather, it seems that circumstances prevent most people from choosing jobs they truly desire to do. This is not to imply that some people don't or shouldn't enjoy farming, homemaking, or any other kind of legitimate work, but rather that the circumstances of the world dictate that many people work in jobs they don't like. Yet, under God's care, even being a slave can be a blessing (Matthew 24:45-47, 1 Corinthians 7:21-24). In no way does this legitimize slavery in today's world. It simply means that God is with you wherever you work. It may be better to learn to like the job you have — and to find ways to participate in Christ's work in it — than to try to find a job you think you'll like better.

Even in the developed economies, many people have little choice about the kind of work they do for a living. The Christian community would do well to equip people both to make choices about their profession, and to follow God's leading in whatever work we find ourselves doing. Whatever your job, God's gifts enable you to work for the common good, to find more contentment in your work, and to overcome or endure the negative aspects of your situation. Most importantly, God promises eventual liberation from work's toil, sweaty labor, and thistles.

Even if you do have the freedom to choose your job, the three considerations we have been considering — the needs of the world, your gifts and skills, and your truest desires — are guides, not dictators. In Christ, believers have perfect freedom:

John 8:36	<i>So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.</i>
2 Cor. 3:17	<i>Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.</i>

That means you have the freedom to take risks, to fail, and to make mistakes. God might lead you to a job you know nothing about, have no present knack for, and don't think you'd like. Would you be willing to take that job? Conversely, you might discover late in life that you missed God's professional calling for you. Take heart, at the end, you will not be judged on getting the right job or fulfilling your God-given potential. You will be judged on the merits of Jesus Christ, applied to you only by God's grace in giving you faith. The calling to belong to Christ is God's only indispensable calling.

The body of Christ on earth is the community of believers (Romans 12:5). Therefore, freedom in Christ means that God’s calling or leading is best discerned in dialogue with the community, not in isolation. We have already seen that the needs of the world (a form of community) are important as you discern *what* kind of work God is leading you towards. The community is also an important factor in *how* you discern God’s leading. What do others perceive as God’s leading for you? What do they experience as your gifts and skills, the needs of the world, and the deepest desires they discern in you? Engage in discussions about God’s leading with those in your community who know you well. It may be wise to talk with a spiritual companion or advisor, to gather feedback from people you work closely with, or to ask a group of people to meet with you regularly as you discern God’s leading.

The community is also an essential element in discerning *who* is led to the different kinds of work needed in the world. Many people may have similar gifts and desires that can help meet the needs of the world. But it may not be that God wants *all* of them to do the same work. You need to discern not only the work God is leading you to, but also the work he is leading others to. The community needs a balanced ensemble of workers working in harmony. For example, physicians bring powerful gifts and skills — and frequently a deep desire for healing — into the world’s great needs for physical healing. Yet in the US, at least, there may be too many specialists and not enough primary care physicians to meet the community’s needs. One by one, medical students are matching their gifts, desires and the needs of the world to discern a leading toward medicine. But all-in-all, the ensemble of physicians is becoming a bit unbalanced. Discerning God’s calling is a community endeavor.

Is Church Work a Higher Calling?

Many Christians have the impression that church workers — especially evangelists, missionaries, pastors, priests, ministers and the like — have a higher calling than other workers. While there is little in the Bible to support this impression, by the Middle Ages, "religious" life — as a monk or nun — was widely considered holier than ordinary life. Regrettably, this distortion remains influential in churches of all traditions, even though the doctrine of virtually every church today affirms the equal value of the work of lay people. In the Bible, God calls individuals both to church-related and non-church-related work. For example:

Calls to Church Work

Exodus 28:1	<i>Then bring near to you your brother Aaron, and his sons with him, from among the Israelites, to serve me as priests — Aaron and Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar.</i>
Mark 1:16-17	<i>As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea — for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people."</i>

Acts 13:2, 5	<i>While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John also to assist them.</i>
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Calls to Non-Church Work

Deuteronomy 31:14	<i>The LORD said to Moses, "Your time to die is near; call Joshua and present yourselves in the tent of meeting, so that I may commission him." (Moses and Joshua were both primarily military/political leaders, not cultic/religious leaders. They were both exceptionally close to God, but that doesn't make them religious leaders. Rather it shows that God calls people in all walks of life.)</i>
1 Samuel 16:12-13	<i>He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The LORD said, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one." Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.</i>

Given the Biblical evidence, it would be inaccurate to think that God calls church workers but not other types of workers.

Some confusion arises because many churches require that their individuals be "called" to be ordained or to serve as pastors, priests or other ministers. Often the word "call" is used to describe the process of selecting a minister or the decision to enter church work full-time. However, as in the Bible itself, these situations are rarely direct, unmistakable, personal calls from God. Rather, they may describe a strong sense of guidance by God. As we have seen, God's guidance can occur just as strongly in non-church-related jobs and professions. Since the Theology of Work Project does not take church work as one of its subjects, we will not attempt to evaluate whether "callings" to church work are more intense, more direct, more evident or more necessary than callings to non-church work. We *will* affirm that church work is not in general a higher calling than non-church work, and that the term "call" applies just as much to non-church work as to church work.

We also affirm that non-church work is as much "full-time Christian service" as church work.

All Christians are called (that is, commanded) to conduct everything they do, round the clock, as full-time service to Christ:

Colossians 3:23	<i>Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters.</i>
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Before concluding our discussion on this point, we should note that one stream of thought views 1 Timothy 5:17-18 as contradicting the view we have just laid out. According to this perspective, being a church elder (roughly equivalent to a pastor or priest in modern church usage) is in fact a higher calling.

1 Timothy 5:17-18	<i>Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching; for the scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves to be paid."</i>
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Under this view, being a pastor is a “double honor” compared to other professions. But most Bible **commentaries** reject this interpretation. (I. Howard Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 610ff.) A more accurate reading is that elders who do their work well are worthy of a double honor (or honorarium) compared to elders who do their work merely adequately. Alternately, the contrast may be between elders who volunteer in their spare time and elders who work full time for the church. (William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 46, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 309.)

The Old Testament quotations about pay further reinforce the sense that this passage is about rewarding high-performing or full-time elders, not about comparing church work to other work. It means that elders who work full-time for the church, and who do it well, deserve to be paid well by the church. The passage’s true comparison is among pastors, not between pastors and lay people.

The only jobs that do not have equal status in God’s eyes are those that require work forbidden by the Bible or are incompatible with its values. For example, jobs requiring murder, adultery, stealing, false witness or greed (Exodus 20:13-17), usury (Leviticus 25:26), damage to health (Matthew 10:8), or harm to the environment (Genesis 2:15) are illegitimate in God’s sight. This is not to say that *people* who do these jobs have lesser status in God’s eyes. People whose circumstances lead them to illegitimate work are not necessarily bad people. Deuteronomy 22:21 condemns prostituting yourself, for example, yet Christ's response to prostitutes was not condemnation, but deliverance (Luke 7:47-50; Matthew 21:31-32). Jobs of this sort might be the lesser of two evils in certain situations, but they could never be God’s desired work for someone.

A call to ministry or church work is no more sacred than a call to other types of work. What matters most is not one's job title or place of work, but obedience to God, the one who calls us.

Changing jobs

If God leads or guides people to their work, could it ever be legitimate to change jobs? Wouldn’t that be rejecting God’s guidance to the work you already have? Martin Luther, the 16th century Protestant theologian, famously argued against changing jobs. This was based largely on his understanding of this passage:

1 Cor. 7:20	<i>Let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called.</i>
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Luther equated “condition” with occupation, and concluded that it was not legitimate for Christians to change occupations. However, Luther’s contemporary John Calvin did not accept this interpretation — and most modern theologians do not either. For one thing, it doesn’t seem to take sufficient account of the very next verse, which suggests that changing occupations is legitimate, at least in some circumstances:

1 Cor. 7:21	<i>Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. If you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.⁴</i>
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Miroslav Volf has written that since the factors by which God guides people to work may change over the course of a working life, God may indeed guide people to change their work. (Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, 109.) Your capabilities should grow with your experience in serving God. He may lead you to bigger tasks that require you to change jobs. “Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master” (Matthew 25:21).

Conversely, if you become a Christian later in life, might God *require* you to change jobs? It might seem that finding new life in Christ means getting a new job or career. However, generally, this is not the case. Since there is no hierarchy of professions, it is generally a mistake to think God wants you to find a “higher calling” upon becoming a Christian. Unless your job is of the illegitimate type discussed earlier, or unless the job or colleagues threaten to keep you stuck in unchristian habits, there may be no need to change jobs. However, whether you change jobs or not, you probably need to do your work *differently* than before, paying attention now to biblical commands, values, and virtues, as happened with Zacchaeus the tax collector:

Luke 19:5-9	<i>When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “Look, half of my</i>
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⁴ “Avail yourself of the opportunity” is the alternative reading given in the NRSV footnote. The main reading is more ambiguous: “Make use of your present condition now more than ever.” The NRSV alternative reading is congruent with most modern translations, including NIV, TNIV, NASB and NEB, as well as with the King James.

possessions,

Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” Then

Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham.”

Discerning God’s guidance for how you work

How you work is at least as important to God as what job or profession you have. In every job, you have at least some opportunity to meet people’s needs, to employ your gifts and skills, and to express — or discover — your deepest desires. Your decision every day to serve God *today* is more important than positioning yourself for the right job tomorrow. In fact, the little you may be able to do in God’s service today is often the key to being able to do more in the future. “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much,” said Jesus (Luke 16:10). Over a lifetime, you can serve Christ best by making the most of every job for his purposes, whether you feel called to every job or not.

Conclusions about calling

We take seriously God’s calling and guiding of people to various kinds of ordinary work. In doing so, we are trying to correct the long-standing tendency to regard ordinary work as unimportant to God and unworthy of his calling. But it would be equally wrong to elevate the importance of your job or profession to a position of idolatry. Getting the right job does not bring salvation, or even happiness. Moreover, the true aim of work for the Christian is to serve the common good, not to advance his or her own interests. Over a lifetime, serving the common good comes far more from doing each day’s work to the best of your ability in Christ, than it does from finding the best job for yourself.

Questions for Discussion

1. Imagine three circles that overlap at one spot. Label these three circles – the needs of the world, my gifts and abilities, and my truest desires. Review for the group what you would put in each circle. Now, ask the group to describe your “sweet spot” where these three circles overlap.
2. What other communities could help you discern your “sweet spot”?
3. How do you envision yourself serving God and the common good in your current life situation, even if it’s not a sweet spot (pg 12)? What changes might be valuable to make?

4. Some people have constructed a “two tier” view of work (higher/lower, sacred/secular, religious/non-religious, etc.) How would you defend the statement, “all work that is legitimate in the sight of God is of equal value”? If you do not agree, how would you argue against it?
5. What does it look like to walk with God and make disciples in your current context?
6. What are some of the conditions in which you might consider changing your job?

Additional Materials

William Messenger: What does calling mean if you hate your job? (audio, 40 min)

<https://soundcloud.com/theology-of-work/william-messenger-what-does>

Paul Stevens: What is the work of the Lord? (video, 3 min)

<https://www.theologyofwork.org/resources/every-christian-called-to-full-time-ministry-r-paul-stevens-video>

The importance of being prepared when it comes to choosing a job, or walking away from one (audio, 12.5 min)

<https://soundcloud.com/theology-of-work/the-importance-of-being>

Why You Shouldn't Change Jobs Every Two Years (article)

<https://www.theologyofwork.org/resources/why-you-shouldnt-change-jobs-every-two-years>

FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

Historical-Theological Perspective

For a historical-theological perspective on vocation at greater length than is possible in this article, see *Vocation in Historical-Theological Perspective*, by Gordon Preece.

The Legitimacy of Various Professions

Banks, Robert. *God the Worker: Journeys into the Mind, Heart and Imagination of God*. Sutherland, N.S.W.: Albatross Books, 1992.

Pope John Paul II. *On Human Work (Laborem Exercens)*. Vatican Translation. Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1981, especially chapters 6, 9, 10, 21 and 22.

Richardson, Alan. *The Biblical Doctrine of Work*. London: SCM Press LTD, 1952, especially chapters “Creative Craftsmanship and Skill,” “Work as Divine Ordinance for Man,” and “‘Vocation’ in the New Testament.” Richardson generally takes a dimmer view of ordinary work than this Note does, and his biblical approach reflects a 1940-50s sensibility that seems dated today. However, he compiled an excellent collection of work-related scripture, given the book’s brevity, and his chapters discuss many of the most important faith-work topics. Also, like the Theology of Work Project, he used a process designed to invite wide participation and response, which is incorporated in the published draft. We do not necessarily agree with his conclusions or biblical views, but we find his book highly thought-provoking.

Stevens, R. Paul. *Doing God's Business: Meaning and Motivation for the Marketplace*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006, especially chapters 1 and 2.

Career Guidance and Discerning Gifts

Banks, Robert. *Faith Goes to Work*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999.

Mackenzie, Alistair, Wayne Kirkland and Annette Dunham. *Soul Purpose*. Christ Church, NZ: NavPress, 2004.

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Calling in Christian Thought and Practice

Guinness, Os. *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life*. London: Word Publishing, 1998.

Hardy, Lee. *The Fabric of This World: Inquiries into Calling, Career Choice, and the Design of Human Work*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990.

Placher, Williams C., ed. *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005.

Preece, Gordon R. *The Viability of the Vocation Tradition in Trinitarian, Credal and Reformed Perspective: The Threefold Call*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1998.

Stevens, R. Paul. *The Other Six Days: Vocation, Work, and Ministry in Biblical Perspective*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000.

Volf, Miroslav. *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001.