

Faith, Work and
Christian
Discipleship

By John Weaver

Leader's Guide

Session 1 - What is work?



Industrial Christian Fellowship

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Living it out
on Monday

Faith and work in the lives of Christian disciples

Leader's Guide

Welcome to this ICF resource, which is one of six discussion outlines about faith and work. These leader's notes are designed to be used in conjunction with the participants handbooks that can be purchased from ICF. The leaders' notes include additional study material and theological reflection. It is unlikely that the group will have the capacity to absorb or engage with all of this, but it offers further ideas and insights that you can inject into the conversation when you feel it would be helpful. Remember that your role as a leader is to stimulate and moderate discussion – you don't have to include everything that is outlined in these notes, nor should a discussion be constrained by them if it goes off in a direction that is useful to the group as a whole.

The relationship between faith and work is quite complex with many and varied aspects. We cannot cover every element of it, but the discussion starters in this series seek to introduce what we consider to be some of the most significant features. The direction and content of any discussion will depend upon the particular experiences and perspectives of those who participate in it. The task of a good group leader is to allow the conversation to flow in appropriate directions, pay attention to see everyone is included and to hold the general principle of encouraging a Christian understanding of work by relating the biblical narratives and theological reflections to the day to day experience of the group's members. This should include work in all its forms: formal and informal; manual and managerial; creative and intellectual; caring and technological and so on. This is what we might often refer to as a theology of work. These discussion outlines should provide you with the resources to begin to make connections between the Bible and attitudes to work and its practices.

Our purpose is to go further than simply encouraging people to act as Christians while they are at work (important as this is!) Rather we seek to explore work itself as an expression of Christian discipleship; consider how work might enable us to participate in God's mission to reconcile all things and to reflect on work in the light of God's purpose for human beings as stewards of creation. If you are to help others engage with these realities, they are issues that you might helpfully think through for yourself first.

The six key themes are offered as a basis from which you can develop a group discussion in which members reflect on their own experience of work. The emerging conversations will depend not only on the particular jobs that people do, but the workplace cultures in which they operate and the nature of their own discipleship journey. The atmosphere of the group needs not only to be a place of learning, but also pastoral sensitivity – work is not a positive experience for everyone, and talking about it might well reveal hurts and struggles that need to be heard with care and acceptance.

The six study guides in this series are:

1. **What is work?**
2. **Covenant and contract; work and rest**
3. **Fair remuneration for work**
4. **Faith, ethics, and work**
5. **Work and the Church: worship, church programmes, and church operations**
6. **Work, community and transformation**

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Session 1 What is work?

Session outline

The key purpose of this session is to help the group to recognise that work is more than paid employment, and to consider how their understanding of work is affected by considering it as something ordained by God and an expression of Christian service and discipleship.

Introduction

It is suggested that you begin with a word association game. I say ‘work’ and you say? This is intended to be a group icebreaker, but might also reveal the different perspectives and understandings that exist within the group. There are no rights or wrongs and it is intended to be light-hearted and fun.

Which of the following would you define as work?

- waged employment or annual salaried employment
- parental duties as a housewife or househusband
- caring for an elderly relative
- playing cricket or football
- playing cricket or football if you are Joe Root or Harry Kane
- decorating your house or attending to your garden
- being a paid professional decorator or gardener

There are obvious opportunities for discussion in the light of responses offered to the above. Do people see playing a sport differently if you are a professional – if so why? Is tending your own garden or decorating your own living room different to doing this for someone else? Can something only be defined as work if it is paid? Is payment the only reward that we receive from doing useful work?

Again the purpose of this is to recognise that our definitions of work can be somewhat fluid and easily influenced by common assumptions and ideas that we are not bound to accept. If this is the case, how is our perception of work influenced or changed by exploring it from the perspective of our faith? Some may even be surprised at the very idea of work being so closely linked to faith, but what follows suggests otherwise.

William Messenger, *Theology of Work Project* (www.theologyofwork.org), notes that his team were amazed how much the Bible says about work. They found 859 passages of scripture that relate to work in some specific way. Messenger says that he used to think the Bible was a book about religion, with a few applications to work. But it's not. The Bible is a book about God, and it turns out that God shows up where God's people spend their time, which is mostly at work.¹

We can take examples from Boaz in the Book of Ruth, from the Wisdom writers in Ecclesiastes and the Book of Proverbs, from Jesus' agricultural parables, from the lessons gained from shepherds (Ezekiel 34, John 10), and so on - perhaps you can suggest other passages.

The framework for our understanding begins in Genesis:

In **Genesis 1:26-28** we learn that men and women are created in the image of God to oversee creation with the same care as God.

The rhythm of work and rest is part of creation (**Genesis 2:1-3**, cf. Leviticus 23:3 & Deuteronomy 5:12-14).

In **Genesis 2:15** we are informed that human beings are specifically called by God to work and take care of creation.

¹William Messenger, 'The Theology of Work Project', Ridley Hall: Faith in Business Quarterly, 17.1, 2015, pp.16-19

But in **Genesis 3:17-19** we find that work becomes painful toil, because human beings have wanted to play God and seize control of their lives and the life of creation.

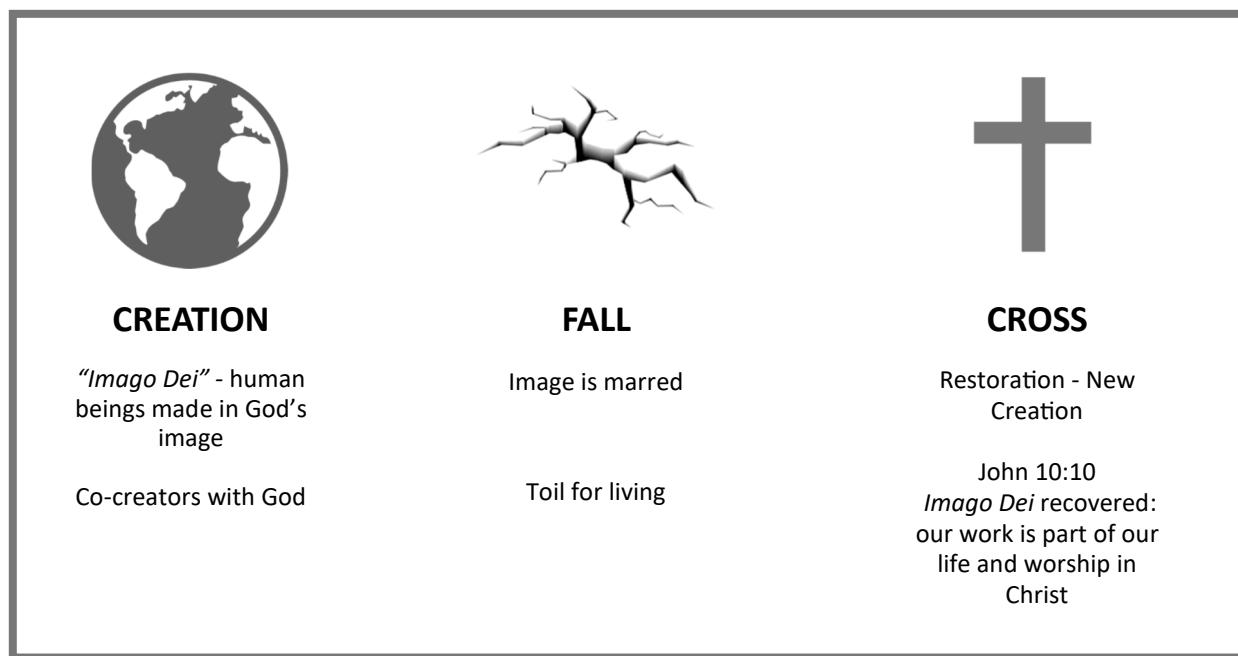
In **Genesis 4:2b-12**, in the story of Cain and Abel, we see that jealousy over types of work and the resulting produce leads to murder and further difficulty in reaping the produce of creation.

The culmination of violence and broken relationships reaches a climax in the flood and destruction of all people and animals except those of Noah's family and all the wildlife in the ark. After the flood recedes God renews his covenant with all creation and again calls on human beings to take care of creation (**Genesis 8:22-9:17**). But after a further attempt to play God (the Tower of Babel Genesis 11) there is division and disunity, a scattering of the people throughout the earth with different languages, and co-operative work in the building of the city ceases (**Genesis 11:8-9**)

What do we learn?

- Work and the care of creation are part of our humanity
- Rest is important
- We are co-creators as God's image bearers
- We are created for co-operation in the workplace

Another way of expressing and summarising the reflections above is outlined in the following diagram:



The nature of work:

Invite the group to read **Ephesians 6:5-9**

It is important to note that the term "slave" and "master" would not have meant the same as they would in our world today. If these terms prove difficult for the group, try to point out that the overall message of these sentences is the parallel between our employment relationships and our relationship with Christ.

"Obey just as you would obey Christ" (v5)

"slaves as slaves of Christ" (v5-6)

"serve as if you were serving the Lord" (v7)

"masters he who is both your Master and theirs" (v9)

The scripture passages above offer and illuminate a number of perspectives on work. Over the years, Christian thinkers have developed a number of ideas:

Work as duty

The so-called ‘Protestant ethic’ presented the view that work was a duty we owe to God in response toward God’s grace. We may wish to maintain the view that work is a response to God’s grace, but we may not wish to speak of duty, as this is often linked with notions of competition, profit and career achievement, which do not sit comfortably with our understanding of loving our neighbour as ourselves.

Work as vocation

Martin Luther suggested that all of life, including daily work, was to be understood as a calling from God. The concept of the ‘priesthood of all believers’ gave the sense that all Christians have a calling – which is expressed in the workplace, the home, as well as in church ministry (**Romans 12:1-2**).

Yet, do we need a broader view of vocation in our modern world, where it is unusual to follow one job for life? Do we need a concept of multiple or changing vocations in our world of redundancies, retraining and job-sharing or is vocation something that overarches and transcends any single occupation or role? Christians would have a particular view of ‘vocation’, where a vocation is not only between the individual and God, but involves a Christ-like life amid the contemporary social and economic structures of accountability, and interdependence. Is our vocation as Christian disciples something that people perceive as distinct from their paid employment or life-role, or is it expressed through work?

Work as service

Writing in the early years of the 20th century, a German theologian, Karl Barth spoke of work in terms of human action. Barth suggests that we understand human activity by reflecting on how it corresponds to God’s activity. In defining God’s activity as ‘service’ Barth takes for his basis the action of Christ, who as servant, gave himself for the world. So, in Christ, we are called to be servants, and to see human activity primarily in terms of service to God and others.

Barth also sees God’s activity as loving provision and continuing care of the world. Our work, as those created in God’s image, is therefore about caring for the world, and the well-being of creation.

Another 20th century German theologian, Jurgen Moltmann, takes this theme further, arguing that work needs to be understood in the light of the pain and struggle of the Passion of Christ. The work of redemption in Christ crucified sets all our work in a new context. We are to have the mind of Christ (**Philippians 2:5-11**). This is a particularly attractive perspective that through our work and self-giving, we participate in the lordship of Christ in the world and thereby become co-workers in God’s kingdom which completes creation and renews heaven and earth.

Integrity at work

It is in the workplace and in our own homes that people see us as we really are. Work can be an intensive environment where not only our skills, aptitudes and experience are exposed, but where we spend significant time in the proximity of often a relatively small group of other people. For Christian disciples this is the place where people might (or might not!) see the difference that Christ makes when we fail or succeed, when we are irritable and annoyed, where we deal with gossip and blame. Here they will see whether our honesty and integrity matter, whether God matters to us or not.

Christians may only be 1 in 15 of the population, but that is an enormous resource. The fact that a Christian at work spends 40 hours a week with, on average, 50 people represents both a huge opportunity and a significant responsibility. There is a high probability that the only exposure that many of those 50 or so people have to Christian disciples is through working alongside them. The message of our lives in work is likely to have a far more significant and lasting impact than any of the activities or messages of our local church. Equipping us to live as Christian disciples in the workplace might well be the most significant contribution our church can make to effective, on the ground, mission.

If our work is seen as a form of our obedience to God's calling to us as human beings, it can never be done or justified for its own sake. Work is for the service of, and glory of, God. Work finds its meaning in God's grace, and consequently work is seen in the context not only of production, but of human existence before God. Therefore we should find an affirmation of our humanness in our work and not anything that is dehumanising. Work that ruins individuals physically or morally is to be seen in terms of exploitation, and raises questions for the armaments industry or the sex trade in its various guises. Work should also have a community building aspect rather than the isolation and opposition, which marks many aspects of work today. Work in today's world illustrates all too clearly the gulf between God's purposes for us and the reality of our lives. When work is marked by competition which becomes conflict we have forgotten that work finds its meaning in the fellowship within which our true humanity is realised. We therefore look for economic and social structures that maximise co-operation and fellowship, where there is profit sharing and worker representation and co-operatives.

Rest

We are not instruments but persons, with both a reflective and performance aspect to our work. There must be space to reflect on who we are and what we have done, and are doing. Work should be limited so that there is space in our lives where we are free for God. That space can include leisure and play, or simply quiet. We set ourselves free to hear God, and so this space will include prayer and worship, and enjoying the world and its creator.

This is clearly the pre-Fall picture of walking with God in the garden in the cool of the evening.

Work and our humanity:

The ideas outlined above might well reflect the outcome of Christian thinking, but this does not necessarily mean that they will be reflected in how Christian believers today experience work. There is an opportunity for the group to explore the resonances and dissonances between different understandings of work and their own experience by exploring questions like the ones below:

- What meaning do you find in your work?
- Do you have things you'd love to be doing instead of what you're doing now?
- How does your work fit into what you want to get out of life?
- How significant do you consider your work to be?
- How do you see what you believe and practice on Sunday relate to Monday morning?
- What do you think God thinks about your job?

Participants are encouraged to engage in pairs to consider the nature and place of work within human existence, and explore the influences of our social context, family and faith experience on our understanding of business, management, employment and our community.

Share personal stories about ordinary people doing extraordinary things in their daily living, which bring transformation to the workplace, the home, the community, the school, the college, and the firm's production. Stories can also be found on the Transform work UK website (www.transformworkuk.org).

Questions for further discussion:

1. How do you think work fits with your personal development, selfworth, and leisure pursuits?
2. If we are co-creators with God as God's image bearers (**Genesis 1:27-28**), and new creations in Christ (**2 Corinthians 5:17-20**), describe where you feel that you are creative, and consider the ways in which you are or may become a channel of reconciliation and transformation.
3. A Street Pastor challenged her church by saying: 'Just remember that you are the only Bible that most people will ever read.' Where and in what ways is it appropriate to share our faith in the workplace?