



Faith, Work and Christian Discipleship

By John Weaver

Leader's Guide

Session 2 - **Covenant and
Contract; Work and rest**



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 2 Covenant and Contract; Work and Rest

Session outline

Not everyone will have a positive experience of work, and even if we do in our own immediate context, we recognise from various news stories that some business practices and corporate behaviours can be quite harmful and unwholesome. One way of resolving this reality with our Christian faith is to assume that the world of work is disconnected and something that is opposed to the purposes and interests of God.

The overarching theme of these studies is to suggest the opposite, but this in turn requires us to acknowledge and offer some account for why our workplace experiences can sometimes jar with our faith. The concept of covenant, and considering how this might be reflected or discarded in our experiences of work is one way of exploring how work can become more like God intends it.

Introduction

This session aims to identify and discuss theological issues that arise through our understanding and application of contracts, and to contrast this with the biblical principle of covenant. It also examines the ways in which the biblical development of covenant can be applied in workplace situations and family life. Secular views of contract, social contract, stakeholders, companies and global corporations, and the commodification of labour will be examined, together with suggestions of how these might be addressed by the Church.

The nature of many jobs has changed so that doctors ask whether they are people who heal or whether they merely deliver health care, where budgets and targets may determine their actions. To what degree has health care moved away from its biblical and Christian roots and become subject to capitalist market forces. We might also ask whether teachers enable students to learn, or are merely expected deliver courses? The latter does not guarantee the former in each case.

This session begins by inviting group participants to identify and share their own negative and difficult experiences of work. We begin by asking the degree to which work has become a 'treadmill' - a never-ending grind on a path toward retirement?

The kind of issues that people might encounter at work might include:

- poor communication
- difficult decisions
- crude language
- tiredness and stress
- lack of resources and poor working conditions
- time away from home
- uncertainty
- ethics: profit versus service

Is there a Christian response to these experiences and issues?

There is no theological body of truth that we can apply directly to the complex situations encountered at work. There will need to be discussion and reflection as we look for responses and action. We need to re-interpret our understanding of work in terms of the redemption brought through the Cross. Our work, like our lives as human beings, is in the image of God.

Does it help to consider work in terms of covenant: our covenant with God, with each other, and with the world?

Covenant and contract, an example from the nursing profession:

Oxford nurse-tutor, Ann Bradshaw has helpfully explored covenant and contract as a feature of healthcare in her book: *Lighting the Lamp: the spiritual dimension of nursing care*.² Although she looks quite specifically at the issue of nursing and healthcare, the principles she outlines can be applied, in various ways and degrees, to other areas of work.

Bradshaw traces the origins of nursing care back to an expression of spiritual care and recognised a shift during the 20th century from covenant to contract, together with a scientific approach to care and the recognition of nursing as a profession. Through careful and wide-ranging research, she has produced a clear argument for the spiritual roots of nursing. This important discussion will be of great value to the church in its pastoral concern for people. She discusses the nature of nursing care as a covenant between doctors, nurses and their patients. In the period from the early church through the Middle Ages, Reformation and into the 19th and 20th centuries Bradshaw recognises service to God and vocation as the fulfilment of God's covenant purpose. This was the moving spirit in nursing and the care of the sick.

In the last hundred years. She suggests that with an increasingly scientific approach and the development of nursing as a profession the concept of nursing care as a covenant between nurse and patient has been lost. She concludes that if nursing ignores this tradition it risks losing its identity.

In her exploration of contemporary nursing theory Bradshaw recognises profound changes, whereby the spiritual dimension is replaced by structural, functional and existential approaches. She believes that the tradition of care derived from the covenant of God with his people, grounded in God's love, needs to be maintained - the lamp, onetime symbol of nursing, needs to be rekindled.

Bradshaw believes that the Judaeo-Christian tradition of nursing survives at the deepest level, in that nursing exists for those who need care, and for those who are often at the extremity of life. The origin of nursing care lies in the absolute value attached to human beings by virtue of their status under God, and historically in early Christian practical discipleship.

She rediscovers a covenant framework for nursing care based on: the image of God in people; the absolute value of human life; freedom and love; relationality; hope and peace. Hope and peace - health, wholeness and salvation as God's gift - is the climax of her argument. In this the caring role of the nurse - the giving of self and an unconditional love of being with the patient - is a witness to the love of God, whether the nurse is aware of this or not. However she is careful to state that the covenant perspective, with its underlying principle of freedom and love for the individual, means that the nurse respects her patient's own meanings, their own religious affiliations and experience, their own faith, agnosticism or atheism.

Bradshaw concludes that the spiritual dimension of nursing through the principle of covenant defines the meaning of nursing.

Covenant and contract in other professions:

This helpful analysis will help the Church to understand its role in pastoral care and practice. It challenges all who are involved in the care of their fellow human beings or whose work involves the nurture, affirmation and up-building of people. This analysis also serves as a challenge to other professions such as the legal profession, teaching, and church ministry, where there has been a move toward contractual employment and a loss of covenanting with others.

Have other professions moved away from their founding principles or their representative symbols?

² Ann Bradshaw, *Lighting the Lamp: the spiritual dimension of nursing care* (Harrow, Scutari Press, 1994)

When we look at the scales of justice and seeking truth, how do we react to:

- a vigorous defence of those who are known to be guilty
- the aggressive questioning of victims of crime
- so-called 'ambulance-chasing lawyers with their 'no win no fee' approach
- people found guilty on circumstantial evidence alone?

The traditional approach to teaching has been replaced by:

- pupil and school assessments with increasing paperwork
- teacher remuneration that does not realistically recognise the varying abilities of pupils
- performance standards that fail to recognise the social conditions in which the school is situated
- curricula that are set centrally with little attention given to the needs of individual pupils which is also far removed from the covenant relationship of teacher and pupil in the learning experience.

Are clergy any different with their 'badge' of office, the Cross, representing the sacrificial love of Christ? Clergy follow in the tradition of those who work in covenant with their communities and congregations in seeking God's will and God's better way for lives and for society. For this role, clergy were given a 'stipend' not a salary to enable them to devote their time in the service of God and others. How do we respond to the modern trends in clerical professionalism:

- degree level academic qualifications
- the assessment of ministry based on numbers of people attending services and the amount of money in the collection bag
- the rights of congregations or bishops to hire and fire clergy
- the formation of trade unions or their equivalent for clergy?

In shops and within the service sector we often seem to have lost the symbolic principle that 'the customer is always right' and 'we are here to serve you'. However, some who work in this sector complain that this principle can be abused, exposing them to unreasonable and at times abusive behaviour on the part of customers, who know that by making things difficult they are likely to benefit from incentives and refunds. This perhaps illustrates the mutuality of covenant, it is about both parties respecting and valuing the other. Even in the retail sector there is a mutuality between the consumer getting good service and value for money, and the provider being able to operate a viable business and thus make their services and products accessible to those who require them.

Are there symbols associated with your work or profession, and do they still have meaning? In what ways is your own area of work rooted in covenant and where has this given way to contract?

God-given rhythm for living:

From the Old Testament we understand the nature of God's covenant involvement with creation through the gift of the rhythm of time and by instigating Sabbath, the seventh day of rest. This find expression in wider society through the Sabbath year, the seventh year that gave the land rest; and the seven times seven, fiftieth year, Jubilee, when slaves were freed, debts cancelled, and the land returned to its original equal division between the people of Israel. (see **Leviticus 25:1-31**) Jubilee was intended to protect the small householder and also served to establish an economic practice for redeeming the land and the people.³ Sabbath and Jubilee give three principles for farming and food production:

- sharing – with the poor;
- caring – for the earth;
- and restraint – of power and wealth.

However, today there are imbalances in the world food system, there is unfair trading, and a growing industrialization of agriculture, which is destroying the environment. Instead of keeping the Sabbath some argue that we have developed a 'Sabbath-less society.'⁴

³ Chris Wright in Sarah Tillet (ed), 2005, *Caring for Creation, Biblical and Theological Perspectives*, Oxford: Bible Reading Fellowship, p.58

⁴ Peter Carruthers, 'Creation and the Gospels' in Tillet (ed), *Caring for Creation*, p.74

One of the great gifts that the Judaeo-Christian tradition can give to our stressful lives and work is the concept of Sabbath. Not just a pause for breath before carrying on consuming, and not just for humans. In Genesis 1, we find that the crown of creation is not humankind, created on the sixth day, but the Sabbath, instituted on the seventh day, when God took a rest. God did not do so because of personal tiredness, it was an act of deliberate creation. The Mosaic covenant commands regular sabbaths and jubilee seasons. We wear ourselves, and the land, out by constantly rushing. There is nothing that works against a green lifestyle more than being in a hurry. Too much of a hurry to ponder shopping choices. Too much of a hurry to walk rather than drive. Too much of a hurry to cook. Too much of a hurry to grow food. Too much of a hurry to turn off the TV and play with our children. Too much of a hurry to sleep properly and give the world a rest from our self important busyness.⁵

Finally, perhaps, too much of a hurry to have noticed the damage we have done to society, family life, and the planet, before it is too late. We need to step back and take the time to look, to learn about what we see, so that we can appreciate in more and more astonishing detail the beauty of what we see, and we can love it, if we but give ourselves the time.

We wear ourselves, and the land, out by constant activity with little time for reflection on the meaning of life, our relationships, and especially our relationship with God. The former Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks expresses the vital place of the Sabbath for Jews:

On the Sabbath, we do not work, nor are we permitted to employ others to work. All relationships of hierarchy and dominance are temporarily suspended, one day in seven. During the six weekdays, we think of ourselves as creators. On the seventh, we become aware that we are also creations - part of the natural world order, whose integrity we are bidden to respect. The Sabbath is thus the most compelling tutorial in human dignity, environmental consciousness, and the principle that there are moral limits to economic exchange and commercial exploitation. It is one of the great antidotes to commercialization and commodification.⁶

To rest on the seventh day, therefore, is not just to have time off work, it is to remember who we are, what we are, and why we are here. Every aspect of our lives individually and collectively are to be viewed in the light of the Creator's intentions for us. How we spend our time determines the quality of our lives, as well as the quality we can add to the lives of others.

The technical control of time (departing from the natural God-given rhythms) is human-centred and takes our times away from a relationship with the creator. 'The Sabbath reflects on faith in the creator-redeemer, who is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. As God consummates the work of creation, so God will complete God's purposes in redemption as the incarnate Lord.'⁷ Jesus declared the Sabbath and Jubilee principle at the beginning of his ministry (**Luke 4:18-19**) and we are called to live as Sabbath-keepers within the new covenant in Christ (**Romans 8:18-21**).

In our 24/7 society we need to consider this God-given rhythm of work and rest so that those who protect society, care for the sick, and who make sure that we have safe energy also have times of rest.

Questions to consider:

1. Do you think that you would benefit from the services of a doctor or nurse, teacher or lecturer, solicitor or barrister, vicar or minister if they considered themselves to be in covenant with you.
2. In shops and the service sector have we lost the symbolic principle that 'the customer is always right' and 'we are here to serve you'?
3. Are there symbols associated with your work or profession, and do they still have meaning? In what ways is your own area of work rooted in covenant and where has this given way to contract?
4. Does your life and work have a rhythm which includes a 'Sabbath' rest?

⁵ Based on thoughts presented in the Radio 4 sermon 03.10.10 given by Claire Foster, Chief Executive of the Ethics Academy and Senior Adviser at the St Paul's Institute for 21st Century Ethics, London, and a former National Policy Adviser in Science, Medicine, Technology and Environmental Issues to the Archbishops' Council of the Church of England.

⁶ Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World, the ethics of responsibility*, London: Continuum, 2005, p.169

⁷ James Houston in Sarah Tillet, *Caring for Creation*, p.95