



Faith, Work and Christian Discipleship

By John Weaver

Leader's Guide

Session 4 - **Faith, ethics
and work**



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 4 Faith, Ethics and Work

Session outline

In session 2, we highlighted how Jesus is recorded in Luke 4 as announcing his ministry in terms of the Jubilee and Sabbath. We might also note how the theme of justice is also a strong element in his declaration. In four short verses at the beginning of Isaiah 42 (**Isaiah 42:1-4**) there are no less than three references that equate the coming of the Messiah with the arrival of justice. In this session, the group is invited to consider how we apply Biblical principles of justice to the world of work.

Introduction

The session begins by inviting group members to identify what they consider to be the five most important ethical principles that businesses should embrace. Further discussion might centre around why these have been identified and chosen, and how these choices have been influenced by issues of faith.

In the light of these, we might consider what questions are raised for key stakeholders in the world of work. These include:

- Trade unions and workers' organisations
- Managers, directors, and shareholders
- Politicians and policy makers
- Financiers, economists and those who influence the global market economy

Independence is central to the notion of justice; work is a means to living and defines where and how we live, the nature of family, moulds our opinions and shapes our self-worth.

In a digital, global world requiring highly qualified and skilled technicians there is a scarcity of jobs for those with fewer skills. Technological change is outstripping political and legal structures, and the grand narratives of nation, class and religion are disappearing. The only grand narrative left is the global market economy, where free trade rarely leads to justice.

When does tax efficiency become tax avoidance? Is it a company's responsibility to worry about the community in which it is placed or worry about making a profit so as to make sure it provides jobs for that community?

Which concerns us most: air quality, noise pollution, traffic congestion or full employment?

Can we recognise when we might tend toward a 'not in my back yard' approach (NIMBYism)?

We need to discuss the relation between work-related issues, community concerns and the overall mission of the church; and the nature of Christian witness within the everyday life of the community outside of the church. It will be both challenging and instructive to explore the moral and ethical issues of honesty, loyalty, discrimination, corruption, tax avoidance, and stock market manipulation. As well as paying the Real Living Wage, as discussed in session 3, how can we move toward achieving justice in the workplace?

Justice in the workplace

Can we discover some ways of acting in management and production, and for workers and employers that we find acceptable as Christians?

Prof Len Collinson notes that justice differs within and between all cultures.¹⁵ In India, for example, the caste system justifies exploitation, even though this is against the law. In some countries poor working conditions and low pay are part of the culture, and, whatever we might think from our social context, are the difference between life and death.

¹⁵ based on a lecture exploring Work and Justice to the ICF gathering at Frodsham 23February 2015

Social principles apply to employers and workplaces because they are part of society. The rights that employees demand are learned in society.

Collinson maintains that justice is achieved when employee and employer can face each other and each receive what is due, because a person's needs give a right to justice.

Justice promotes social well-being and in the UK the law operates to ensure that this happens. But for the person on the shop floor justice is what feels right when you experience it - your due.

Therefore rules and laws need to be interpreted with sympathy and imagination. A warmer interpretation of the rules has led to a greater awareness of, and care for, the poor.

In study 3 we looked at an article by Richard Weaver, which identified the 'Real' Living Wage as an important measure of justice for employees.

We recognise with Collinson that status and security of employment, wages and salaries are based on custom and practice, and lead to rewards and incentives, resulting from skill differentials, personal capacities and conditions of work. For management seeking justice, action can be risky as justice will include discipline.

Management should seek to secure the spiritual, physical and emotional well-being of all employees. It is to ensure the dignity of each person. Collinson reflects on the 18th century philosopher Immanuel Kant who said that rational human beings should be treated as an end in themselves and not as a means to something else. The fact that we are human has value in itself.

Profit versus people and the environment:

Ian Arbon, in *Sustainability and Ethics*, notes that an economy needs four types of capital to function properly:

- **human capital**, in the form of labour and intelligence, culture and organisation;
- **financial capital**, consisting of cash, investments and monetary instruments;
- **manufactured capital**, including infrastructure, machines, tools and factories;
- **natural capital**, made up of resources, living systems, and ecosystem services.¹⁶

But the majority of models of business employed in the world see environmental and societal concerns as secondary to the need to run a profitable enterprise. This does not imply any lack of caring about other issues but, in a capitalist society (which is very unlikely to change in the foreseeable future) genuine businesses simply do not survive without making acceptable levels of profit for their shareholders. As a result we find that for most businesses dealing with 'environmental' and 'societal' issues is avoided as something that might seriously reduce profits rather than to enhance them.

The term 'bottom line' derives from the Profit & Loss Statement, which, along with the Balance Sheet, is the main document used in the day-to-day running of a business. This is, in effect, a spreadsheet, where the first row ('top line') shows the total turnover or revenue coming into the business; from this, the material, labour, overhead costs and other expenses are deducted to show what is retained by the company, i.e. its 'profit'; this is traditionally shown on the last row of the spreadsheet, or, the 'bottom line'.

Of course, the 'bottom line' purely measures the financial performance, and if a company wishes to consider the broader impacts of its operation, it will include the societal and environmental impacts. For any assessment of sustainability these should also be considered, which has given rise to the 'Triple Bottom Line' (TBL) - economics, environment and society.

Good and effective though the Triple Bottom Line approach is, there are other important evaluation criteria, namely Political and Technological, which should be taken into consideration. Adding these to a TBL analysis is known as a PESTE analysis:

¹⁶ Paul Hawken, Amory B. Lovins, L. Hunter Lovins, *Natural Capitalism – the Next Industrial Revolution*, London: Earthscan, 1999 cited in Ian Arbon - *Sustainability and Ethics* published by Industrial Christian Fellowship and John Ray Institute.

- Political
- Economic
- Societal
- Technological
- Environmental

The main aspects of each criterion are as follows:

i) Political: Political factors are how and to what degree a government intervenes in the economy. Specifically, political factors include areas such as tax policy, labour law, environmental law, trade restrictions, tariffs, and political stability.

ii) Economic: Economic factors include economic growth, interest rates, exchange rates and the inflation rate. These factors have major impacts on how businesses operate and make decisions.

iii) Societal: Societal factors include the cultural aspects and include health consciousness (including environmental pollution and associated health risks), population growth rate, age distribution, career attitudes and emphasis on safety.

iv) Technological: Technological factors include technological aspects such as R&D activity, automation, technology incentives and the rate of technological change.

v) Environmental: Environmental factors include ecological and environmental aspects such as weather, climate and climate change, which may especially affect industries such as tourism, farming, insurance and, to an increasing degree, energy sources and production.

The group is invited to consider how the firms and industries that they are involved in give appropriate priority to these different factors. This can be explored from the perspective of Psalm 24 which reminds us that everything on earth belongs to God and Romans 8 which speaks of creation “groaning for redemption”.

An ethical stance:

The environmental ethicist Michael Northcott helpfully outlines the link between growing industrialisation together with a growing population and the ecological crisis facing the world. He states that most accounts of the causes highlight the central features of the industrial economy which dominates food and artefact production, housing and transportation systems in the northern hemisphere and in growing parts of the southern hemisphere. In particular, technological enhancement of the human capacity to adapt the physical environment for human purposes has deepened and globalised the invasiveness of agriculture and artefact production into the prior order of the natural world. Globalised production systems are partly driven by the increasingly materially comfortable lifestyles of modern North Americans and Europeans. These lifestyles depend upon access to reserves of fossil fuels, timber and land for exotic crops and animal feed which represent an ‘ecological footprint’ more than double the land occupied by the people who enjoy them.¹⁷

With Northcott and others we can identify the modern separation of the world from any divine influence other than an initial creative power. We have a mechanistic cosmology of cause and effect, in which human manipulation and use of natural resources is divorced from any sense of God’s ongoing care and concern for creation.

The Incarnation brings into focus both the presence of God in creation and God’s desire to redeem a broken world. In the prologue of John’s Gospel, we find that the cosmic Christ is not only Lord of the lives and bodies of Christians but Lord of the whole created order, and the implications of the resurrection extend beyond the lives of Christians to reveal God’s intention to restore the righteous peace, or *shalom*, of the whole of creation.

Without an understanding of God’s presence in creation and of God’s ultimate purposes for creation, ethics becomes anthropocentric and focused on the good or harm for human beings. This finds its outworking in consequentialist ethics, where the focus is entirely on human life with no regard for creation and the environment.

¹⁷ Michael S Northcott, ‘Ecology and Christian Ethics’, in Robin Gill (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, Cambridge: CUP, 2001, p.210

The approach of businesses and industry in the United Kingdom affects the whole world. Christiana Figueres, head of the UN climate convention (UNFCCC) speaking at the Barbara Ward Lecture in London on 9th March 2012 noted that nearly half of the world's population live on less than US\$2.50 a day; one in seven have insufficient access to clean water; over one third of the world population are without a decent energy source; and one in six suffer from chronic hunger. All this is morally unacceptable. She criticises the "business as usual" attitude of many governments. But she added that however people are brought out of their various types of poverty, it must be done in ways that are sustainable.

In June 2012 the United Nations held the Rio+20 summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. *Rio+20: The Future We Want* – aimed to encourage people to build a future that promotes prosperity for everyone without degrading the planet's natural environment; as the world faces food insecurity, water scarcity, energy shortages, climate change, increasing greenhouse gas emissions and unhealthy oceans.

Action for Christian disciples:

i) On the individual level

What marks out a Christian lifestyle as different? apart, that is, from attending a church building on Sundays. Dave Bookless of A Rocha UK - Caring for God's Earth (an environmental charity) writes

If we are to worship God with heart, soul, mind and strength and love our neighbours as ourselves, then we need to change our lifestyles radically. At present, the average Briton uses such a large amount of the earth's resources that we would need more than three planet earths if everybody in the world wanted to live the same way. This is both an issue of justice for the world's poor and an issue of worship, as this excessive consumerism is actually an idolatry of greed, pure spiritual cholesterol.¹⁸

We might add that we are also building up our physical levels of cholesterol!

Changing our lifestyle will not be easy, probably those beginning to establish their lives as adults may find it easiest, along with those who are older and have retained the more frugal approach to living that first developed in them during post-second World War rationing. Being tied to mortgages, work, dependent children and parents will limit the changes that can be made immediately.

A Rocha UK suggests 'Living Lightly' believing that this is God's world, entrusted to our responsible use and care, and that living sustainably is part of Christian worship and mission.

Living lightly includes:

- living lightly in using resources as a matter of justice
- examining and changing my values, choices and lifestyle decisions
- joining with others in community in modelling a sustainable way of living

To these we may wish to add a concern for the poorest of the world; a commitment to the purchase of fairly traded goods (although we may also need to examine the sustainability of the transport of these goods); and encouraging government action to achieve such ends.

We should not seek to live lightly out of duty, fear or guilt but out of love: love for our neighbours, love for our fellow creatures, love for future generations, and at the deepest level of all love for God.¹⁹

ii) On a corporate level

Can we find a principle for a Christian approach to business?

In his October 2009 blog, Dr Peter Heslam, Director of Transforming Business at the University of Cambridge, wrote:

towards the end of last term at Harvard, in the world's most renowned business school, some students began to address this mistrust head on. With help from two professors, they created an MBA oath that

¹⁸ Dave Bookless, *Planetwise. Dare to Care for God's World*, Nottingham: IVP, 2008, p.117

¹⁹ Bookless, *Planetwise*, p.120