



Faith, Work and Christian Discipleship

By John Weaver

Leader's Guide

Session 6 - **Work,
community and
transformation**



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 6 Work, community and transformation

Session outline

In this final session, we consider the degree to which, as Christians, we can engage in the work of the Gospel through our daily work. This begins by recognising Christ as the Redeemer of all things – re-aligning creation and humanity with God’s intention through seeking the coming of God’s Kingdom. When our work is properly reclaimed in line with God’s purposes to what degree can it be the way in which we “proclaim Good News”?

It will be helpful to explore the models of co-operatives and profit-sharing businesses, and to discuss the concept of participating in the life and mission of God through community development, community enhancing projects, and through workplace placements.

Useful resources can be found in organisations that explore and encourage the relationship of faith and work such as: Industrial Christian Fellowship (www.icf-online.org), Transform work UK (www.transformworkuk.org), Faith in Business (www.ridley.cam.ac.uk/centres/faith-in-business), After Sunday (www.aftersunday.org.uk), and the London Institute of Contemporary Christianity (www.licc.org.uk).

Our participation in the life of God is not merely as observers and church attenders, but as those involved in the energy and patterns of the divine life through community developments such as Transition Towns (www.transitionnetwork.org) and Eco Church (www.ecochurch.arocha.org.uk) formerly Eco-congregation.

We understand the essence of Christian discipleship as reconciliation and redemption. Our work is transformed by the presence of Christ, but it can also be transforming as we go about it in a way that seeks to accord with God’s purposes for creation, for example helping trees bear fruit and nourish people.

We engage in the mission of Christ to redeem the whole of creation, which can bring about transformation in the workplace, in businesses, and in the church.

The group can begin to engage with these realities by asking the question that heads the next section.

What do we mean by church?

The Church is the community called together in Christ. Christians are the people who pray ‘Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.’ We are following Jesus and joining him in his mission of shaping the world, in the power of the Spirit. The Kingdom of God is characterised by God’s values, a way of life made possible in Christ, and we are called to live as Kingdom people living within the hope that the Gospel will transform society by the activity of the Spirit.

In Christ Christians have resurrection life now (**John 11:25-26**), and experience the presence of the Kingdom in their midst (**Luke 10:9, 11; 11:20; 17:21**). We are called to live as Kingdom people living within the hope that the Gospel will transform society by the activity of the Spirit.

We are called to be radical: looking outwards at the needs of the world and adopting a radical agenda that recognises where Gospel values are absent in politics, business, economics, and even the church. While governments, businesses and civil society can seek the transformation of society, the church has a unique approach and a unique role in seeking to bring Gospel values to a world out of step with its creator.

The Kingdom of God is holistic - restoring physical, social, economic and environmental needs. Faith-based organisations offer an alternative to secular development programmes, offering hope, meaning and purpose.²⁴ As expressed in the *Micah Statement* (www.micahnetwork.org) ‘perhaps the most critical social task for the church in our generation is to offer a compelling alternative to the unjust imbalances in world economic order and the values of its consumer culture.’²⁵

²⁴ Overcoming Poverty Together. Tearfund’s Theory of Poverty’, Tearfund internal paper, 2012, pp.31-33

²⁵ quoted in ‘Overcoming Poverty Together’ p.53

Invite the group to consider how the prayer “Thy Kingdom come” might be answered in their workplace situation? What would be different? What might we affirm as aligning with the values and purpose of God’s Kingdom?

Evangelism and social concern

Is the church’s only purpose to ‘save souls’ or should we be engaged in social transformation?

The parable of the sheep and the goats (**Matthew 25:31-46**) may suggest justification by works; the impression that if you serve the poor you are necessarily serving Christ in them. But the emphasis is on our relationship to the Kingdom and the King, and it is on this that judgement is based. A Gospel that does not show itself in the reality of Christ-like living is no Gospel. The heart of Christianity is a relationship with Jesus, which shows itself in loving, sacrificial care for others, in particular the poor and the needy. This is the call of Christ; the call to love (**Matthew 22:37-40**); to follow Jesus’ example of servant ministry (**John 13:3-17**); and to deny self, take up the life of sacrificial cross-shaped love, in following Jesus (**Mark 8:34**).

One way that we might relate the parable of the sheep and goats to our experience of work is to invite the group to insert workplace relationships into the narrative and reflect on how they might finish the sentence. This provides an opportunity on what it means to reflect our relationship with Christ in the world of work. Examples might be:

I was your work colleague and you

I was your manager and you

I was one of your staff and you

I was your children’s teacher and you

I was your care worker and you

Christ identified with the poor; each human being is lovingly created in the image of God, and Christ, the true shepherd of the sheep, identifies with each person in his death upon the Cross, and as such is to be found in each human being that we encounter in this world. We are called to live in a way where the Gospel influences our lives by the activity of the Spirit.

When it comes to evangelism and social action Matthew presents us with two limits. He tells us that it is all down to God’s grace, God’s free gift (**Matthew 20:1-15**), and that we are accountable for how we live (**Matthew 25:40,45**)

We look for a spirituality which is biblical and radical: seeing the Bible as a radical, challenging and often subversive document, used by God to unsettle his people even as he assures them of his steadfast love. To read the Sermon on the Mount in a tower block in Gateshead or in a favella in Fortaleza or Salvador, NE Brazil, will produce a different set of questions of the reader, and will produce a different set of emotional responses to the text than may be produced in a comfortable suburban or rural location in the UK. The crucial questions of our time, whether they be about urban deprivation, Developing World debt, climate change or ethnic warfare, are likely to be addressed most sharply through a biblical exploration that allows God’s voice to be heard. When we see the ways in which the Bible addresses issues of debt, creation care and ethnic violence we can engage with these issues in a way which revitalises our confidence in scripture. A spirituality that is socially and politically earthed, will see the separation of church worship and our life and work in the world breaking down.

It is likely that those who are committed to the transformation of lives, the workplace, and society through the dynamic of loving service, will be sustained by a lived experience of resurrection which has come about through hard work and not a little suffering.

Based on the argument above, the parable of the sheep and goats does not so much argue that people are saved by their good works, but that their good works are evidence that they know and are known by God. The group might be invited to consider what actions and activities in their own daily lives might be considered as evidence of “knowing and being known by God”.

Faithful presence

Human flourishing and change in local and global communities is brought about by governments, businesses, and by civil society, in which the church plays a unique role. At local level the church heals relationships, and at regional, national and international levels addresses systemic injustice.

At international level broken relationships and power imbalances need to be restored between the developed and developing nations. Political and economic power relationships need to be addressed to create a world of true equality and partnership between nations. The church as a channel of Gospel values can model and advocate restored and healthy relationships to bring about transformation and development. As American sociologist and Professor of Religion, Culture, and Social Theory, James Hunter suggests, 'to be a Christian is to be obliged to engage the world of work and human relationships, pursuing God's restorative purposes over all of life, individual and corporate, public and private. This is the mandate of creation,²⁶ in which 'all are participants, all are enjoined to participate in ways framed by the revelation of God's word in the creative and renewing work of world-making and remaking.' Every person is made in God's image and every person is offered his grace and, in turn, the opportunity to labour together with God in the creation and recreation of the world.

Hunter argues for Christians to be a 'faithful presence' in the world. He defines a theology of faithful presence as that vocation of the church to bear witness to, and to be an embodiment of, the coming Kingdom of God. Such faithfulness works itself out in the context of complex social, political, economic and cultural forces that prevail in a particular time and place.

Christians should be living and acting prophetically; faithful rather than successful; confident in God's power to overcome, and our hope in Christ (**Ephesians 3:14-21, Ephesians 1:20**).

Christians are aliens in the world (**1 Peter 1:1; 2:11**), but nevertheless our purpose in the world is to declare the one who has brought us out of darkness (**1 Peter 2:9**). Hunter, following the Croatian Protestant theologian, Miraslov Volf, maintains that Christian difference is not the presence of something new from the outside breaking into the old, but the bursting out of the new within the old order. We are making an affirmation of God's good creation with beauty and truth, where life has significance and worth, and where all people have the ability to live in harmony with God's purposes as gifts of God's grace (whether they are Christian or not), even if this is a fallen world. So the accomplishments of non-believers are to be celebrated because they are gifts of God's grace.

Christians may be involved in world-building but we are not building the Kingdom of God on earth, but rather we are living as Kingdom people in an alien kingdom. The establishment of the Kingdom is an act of God's sovereignty and will find its consummation at the end of time. Our prayer is that God will transform works of faith in this world into something incorruptible but here again, it is God's doing and not ours. Inasmuch as Christians acknowledge the rule of God in all aspects of their lives, our engagement with the world proclaims the *shalom* to come, a foretaste of the coming kingdom.

In like manner Anglican theologians, Elaine Graham and Stephen Lowe challenge the church in the UK to address questions of citizenship and regeneration, culture and globalization, poverty and justice within an increasingly urban society.²⁸ Graham as one of the authors of the Anglican report *Faithful Cities* offers further encouragement as she identifies the powerful influence of faithful capital in the long-term presence of people and networks of faith in our most deprived urban areas.²⁹ Not only are faith communities in our cities physically present, they are actively, dutifully and, sometimes passionately, engaged in caring and campaigning for those who need care most – sometimes people whom wider 'society' has forgotten. Christians have a philosophy of life, faith or worldview which, includes a commitment to something beyond serving one's individual needs.

In the light of this, invite the group to consider how as individuals and a church community we can be a "faithful presence". This might include our participation in workplace groups such as Trade Unions, committees etc.

²⁶ James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World. The Irony, Tragedy, & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*, Oxford: OUP, 2010, p.4

²⁷ Elaine Graham & Stephen Lowe, *What Makes a Good City? Public Theology and the Urban Church*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2009

²⁸ *Faithful Cities: A call for celebration, vision and justice*, 2005, published jointly by Methodist Publishing House and Church House Publishing

Transformation in a world of poverty and inequality

The work of God's Spirit is transformation, and the mission of the Church is to be the key agent in that transformation. Poverty is rooted in broken relationships and the church's role is one of reconciliation to restore broken relationships (**2 Corinthians 5:17-20**), which leads to human flourishing.

If we follow the former Bishop of Durham, Tom Wright's challenge to live as if Christ has already returned, we will reject any indifference to suffering or any tendency to emphasise the heavenly joy at the end of time and overlook present injustices culminating from other factors, such as colonialism, neo-colonialism and globalization, and to look forward to future heavenly bliss.²⁹ We will reject any worldview that believes that all nations and people have a place in the world that they should gratefully accept without practical hope for change in their present sufferings. When the Church demonstrates the presence of the Kingdom she will seek to act as a vehicle of freedom and justice for those enslaved. The presence of Christ through the activity of the Spirit will transform the lifestyles of Christians and guide them to live sacrificial cross-shaped lives, which look to the needs of others. We live as those who know that the current reality of the world challenges the God-given responsibility to neighbours both local and global.

Social change begins with personal change, but wider structural change only comes about when people come together and work for justice - to uphold the rights of others and ensure that people's needs and entitlements are met.³⁰ The Church's contribution is to build local communities of Christians, committed to Christ through worship, prayer and service of the poor, who will bring about transformation.

These are the principles, as Christians, we bring to our places of work, and all our relationships within family and community.

Hope

We live between the Cross and Christ's second coming, when God will renew the whole of creation, where all relationships will be redeemed and restored (**Revelation 21:1-4**). The now and the not yet acknowledges that we cannot resolve every issue, but nevertheless we can seek to act in a Christ-like way (**Mark 8:34**). The church can act as an advocate on behalf of the voiceless in the power of God's advocate, the Holy Spirit (**John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7-11**), speaking truth and convicting the world.

We live as those who are created in the image of God and cooperate with God's transformative action in and for the world.

We have hope based on God's purposes and promises. Creation is liberated as hope breaks in through God's Kingdom people (**Romans 8:18-23**). There are two kinds of hope: proximate and ultimate. Proximate hope is temporal, it is uncertain, incomplete, open to failure and looks to something beyond the present. Ultimate hope is God's Kingdom come, guaranteed, complete, beyond imagination, continuity and discontinuity.

Such hope is a fact of the future.

Questions to consider

1. If we understand the essence of Christian discipleship as reconciliation and redemption, in what ways might we, with others, bring about transformation in the workplace, in businesses, and in the church?
2. The Micah Network (<http://www.micahnetwork.org>) observes
3. 'perhaps the most critical social task for the church in our generation is to offer a compelling alternative to the unjust imbalances in world economic order and the values of its consumer culture.' Do you agree with this and, if so, how might your church respond?

²⁹ N.T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, London: SPCK, 2000, p.137

³⁰ 'Overcoming Poverty Together', p.41

4. Would reading the Sermon on the Mount in a favela in Fortaleza or Salvador, NE Brazil produce a different set of questions from the reader, and produce a different set of emotional responses to the text than might emerge in your study group?
5. To what degree do you think the crucial questions of our time, whether they be about urban deprivation, Developing World debt, climate change or ethnic warfare, are addressed by the key messages and priorities of churches in western countries?
6. If our understanding of Christian Discipleship is earthed in the social and political realities of our world, do you think this could help to break down the perceived divisions between the sacred and the secular?