

Faith, Work, and Discipleship

Discipleship must include a discussion of how faith and work collide.
The editors of *Christianity Today*

Most of us have not been trained to consider a person's vocation as a central element of their life with Christ or as a significant venue of spiritual formation. We've forgotten that work is where most adults spend most of their time. According to the International Labor Organization, Americans work more, take less vacation, and retire later than people in any other industrialized country. In the U.S., 86 percent of men and 67 percent of women work more than 40 hours per week.

By any measure, work is an enormous part of our lives. Our culture is more work-centered than any other on the planet and, very possibly, more work-centered than any other in history. Given this reality, those of us tasked with making disciples of Jesus Christ cannot ignore work as a critical area of spiritual formation. Two-thirds of church members surveyed by Barna, however, said they have not heard any teachings about work at their church.

At a recent *Leadership Journal* event to address this topic, one pastor asked, "Does the church really need to be talking more about work in a culture that's clearly obsessed with it?" That's a fair question, but let's apply the same logic to another cultural obsession—sex.

For generations, many churches avoided talking about sex apart from periodically condemning the culture's warped sexual values. Most ministry leaders have now abandoned this ignore-or-condemn approach to sex for more mature, biblical discussions about this inescapable part of our humanity and spirituality.

Similarly, ignoring work or condemning our culture's idolatry of it is not enough. Instead we have the challenging task of affirming the original goodness of work as a God-ordained part of our humanity without falling into the culture's trap of making work into an idol. Both generational trends and biblical faithfulness are compelling us to present a *redeemed* vision of work.

The good news is that where churches are addressing work and vocational discipleship, young adults are engaging—a group largely missing from our pews. Research from Barna has found that young adults who remain active in a church are three times more likely to say they've been taught to view their gifts and passions as part of God's calling. They are four times more likely to say, "My church teaches me how the Bible applies to my field or career interests."

"Most churches seem to leave this kind of vocation-based outcome largely at the door, unless these students show interest in traditional church-based ministry," says David Kinnaman, president of The Barna Group. In other words, most church leaders are not equipped to help young adults connect their faith and their work unless their work is similar to the pastor's. If we are to successfully engage a generation of largely unmarried young adults, then we must develop

what Kinnaman calls “vocational discipleship.” This means helping Christians connect the teachings of Jesus not just to their households, but also to the work he has called them to do in the world.

Barna’s findings were supported by the experience of a *Leadership Journal* contributing editor, Brandon O’Brien. While teaching a religion class at a community college, O’Brien asked the students to reflect on how their religion might help or hinder their career goals. He reports, “Students who consider themselves religious—most of them Christians—saw their religious beliefs having very little impact on their personal or professional goals.”

The fact that Christians don’t know how their faith relates to their work does not mean they are not concerned with the question. An overwhelming number of Christians surveyed, 75 percent, desire to live a more meaningful life. Six out of ten say they want to make a difference in the world, and five out of ten are afraid of making the wrong career decision.

In other words, the people in our churches are thinking a lot about their work in the world. Work is a source of both aspiration and anxiety. Nearly two-thirds, however, reported that it has been more than three years since they heard any teaching at their church about work or vocation, and 84 percent of Christians 18-29 years old confess that they have no idea how Scripture relates to their work or professional goals.

If we are serious about discipling people in every area of their lives and reaching a younger generation with the gospel, then we cannot afford to ignore work as both a topic and venue for ministry.

Here are several ways you can regularly incorporate work into your group discussion:

- Regularly ask group members how their work is going.
- Help group members consider what kind of worker they are: Are they reflecting God’s values with the kind of worker they are?
- Pray about group members’ work issues and relationships.
- Talk about work in general—not just about how they’re talking about Jesus to their coworkers. God cares about our work in general, not just the evangelism opportunity.
- Include work scenarios in application questions. For instance, “How might James’ wisdom to be slow to speak and slow to get angry apply to your work day?”

—This article is adapted from the [Redeeming Work Bible study](#) available from [SmallGroups.com](#); copyright 2014 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. How often do you talk about work in your small group?
2. When applying what you’re learning, how often do group members explicitly apply it to their work?
3. How might you make the topic of work a regular part of your meetings?