



A Ministry of the Ockenga Institute of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary for Continuing Education

Equipping Your Congregation for the Workplace

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Is your church equipping people for life? Or are you just equipping them for church? Jesus is the Lord of the world and everything in it. And people who go to church — your congregation — are desperately seeking help for living life outside the church's walls.

This column is about the aspect of life called "work." The majority of adult Christians work in paid jobs and these jobs are important to them for fulfillment, community, self-respect, and money. If you also count as work raising children, volunteering in the community, going to school, or tending a flower garden — and I do — then virtually every person in the church over the age of five is a worker.

Working Christians in your congregation are struggling with questions like this every day:

- Does my work mean anything to God? Maybe God wants me to quit and become a missionary.
- How could I become a more effective leader in my organization?
- Do I have to step on other people's fingers to climb the ladder of success?
- Am I going to get laid off? What will I do if I lose my job?
- Is it lying to tell my customers (or my boss) only about the good aspects of my product (or my performance) without mentioning the bad aspects?
- Am I wasting my life staying home to raise my kids? (Or, am I cheating my kids by going back to work?)

- How come I enjoy my work more than my church (or my spouse, or my family)?
- I hate my work. Doesn't God care about me?

Does your congregation ask these questions of you? Do they imagine that God could give the answers? Do they believe the church could genuinely help them? It turns out to be easier than you might imagine to make a practical difference in your people's work lives. Here are some proven things you can do:

- **Spend half a day in a member's workplace.** Don't give any advice. Just learn what really happens. Then you'll know!
- **Preach a sermon example in which someone serves God by doing his or her job well.** Extra credit: Move

Interview someone about his or her work during the worship service, asking, "What do you do? What challenges and opportunities do you have? and How can the church support you?"

Lead a small group of people in the same line of work to meet regularly to solve "live" workplace challenges together. Don't give the answers — just facilitate the discussion.

Next time you use a negative example of work or business in a sermon, make it chillingly accurate. For instance, instead of saying, "The market mentality is drawing America away from God," say "Jeffery Skilling's attempt to hide Enron's debts through 'creative accounting' shows that there is nothing hidden that will not be revealed."

Remember that if you feel very confident about anything, it could be

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beyond the jobs of doctor, nurse, teacher, social worker, and pastor. Double extra credit: Try accountant, lawyer, or used car salesman. Real people do these jobs.

Commission people for their jobs at work, school, civic, and home life as much as for their service at church.

Find out what every church member's specific job is. Ask about it from time to time.

because it relates to your life in the church, rather than your members' life outside church.

If this seems a little daunting, that's only because it is! Equipping members for life at work is a cross-cultural mission for the church. But amazingly, 80 percent of church members are happier with a flawed, open-hearted attempt to engage their world, than with a perfect exegesis

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of yours. Haddon Robinson and I assign pastors in the Doctor of Ministry program to spend a day at work with a member of their congregation, and then preach a sermon about what they observed. Afterwards, we ask them how the sermon went. Typically they say, "I thought it was one of my worst sermons. I felt very unsure of my examples and conclusions." Then we ask what their congregation thought. "I had more comments on that sermon than any in the last five years" is a common response. "Several people said it was the best sermon I ever preached."

The workplace is also a key to church growth and evangelism. Imagine that your church members were spending 40 to 60 hours a week building relationships with seekers. Now imagine these seekers were people with the creativity, influence, and skills needed to reform American culture and economic life. Wish granted! Over 75 percent of Americans say they are looking for a close personal relationship with God. That makes them seekers. When your church members go to work — in business, government, schools, and at home — they are developing personal relationships with seekers. They are influencing the influencers. Henry Blackaby says, "God is marshalling his people in the workplace as never before in history. God is up to something. The next spiritual awakening could take place in the marketplace." And Dr. Billy Graham recently said, "I believe one of the next great moves of God is going to be through the believers in the workplace."¹

It would feel more comfortable to keep the work world at a safe distance. Last year I looked over some of my sermons from when I served as a pastor. I gave lots of examples from the workplace — my workplace! Pastors, theologians, seminary professors, and saints made up most of my examples, and nearly all of the positive examples. But I need to relate the Word of God to workplaces besides my own if I want my members to have a strong attachment to the church. If I'm trying to lead them towards a deeper relationship with Jesus, I have to invite them to bring in their entire selves, including their work.

¹www.icwm.net Click on "Faith and Work facts."

Satisfy the Customer — A case from the workplace.

The crucial challenge of workplace ministry is to get into real-life complexity. Platitudes just won't cut it. Here's a real-life case from a visit to the workplace made by a GCTS Doctor of Ministry, Christianity in the Workplace, student:

Paul is the senior accountant for a Ford dealership. Recently a customer cancelled the purchase of an Explorer. But the registration had already been submitted to the state Registry of Motor Vehicles (RMV). Paul has to submit a lien release form to the RMV to cancel the registration, and this will take two days to process. In the meantime, a new customer purchases the Explorer and says he needs to drive away with it the same day.

This situation is common at the dealership — Paul has to deal with dozens of cases like this each month. He knows that he could take a release for another car that has already been processed by the RMV and alter the document to match the Explorer. (Later, he would have to alter the release for the Explorer to match the other car, but the buyer of that car is in no hurry.) This would amount to a small forgery, but there is no intent to defraud. It is simply a matter of bending the bureaucracy to achieve today what would happen in two days anyway. Everyone would be happy. Unless the RMV audits this transaction.

1. What should Paul do?
2. Does the Bible offer a clear answer?
3. What if Paul's ethical conclusions differ with the sales manager's?
4. If Paul does it, then gets caught in an RMV audit, what should he say or do?
(This is what actually happened.)
5. Do you have more or less respect for Paul knowing this is his work environment?
6. Have you ever bought a car?

New Testament Facts

Of Jesus' 132 public appearances in New Testament, 122 were in the marketplace.

Of 52 parables Jesus told, 45 had a workplace context. Of 40 divine interventions recorded in Acts, 39 were in the marketplace.

Jesus spent his adult life as a carpenter until age 30 before he went into a preaching ministry in the workplace. Jesus called 12 workplace individuals, not clergy, to build His church.

Work is Worship - The Hebrew word "Avodah" is root for the word from which we get the words work and worship.

Work in its different forms is mentioned more than 800 times in the Bible, more than all the words used to express worship, music, praise, and singing combined.

54% of Jesus' reported teaching ministry arose out of issues posed by others in the scope of daily life.

— Lewis and Lewis, *London Institute of Contemporary Christianity, UK*¹

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