



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Articles:

- 📖 Called Out, Not Left Out  
(*Vocation*, pp. 61-64)
- 📖 Our Daily Work  
(*Vocation*, pp. 65-68)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

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### Christian Reflection

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# Called Out, Not Left Out

Christ calls all who are made in God's image to become co-laborers with God in the redemption of the whole creation. Each of us will spend most of our waking hours for the rest of our lives doing our jobs. This is a stunning fact which tells us that if Jesus Christ is not Lord of our work life, he is Lord of very little.

### Prayer

O God, in the life of your son, Jesus, and countless followers throughout the ages, we see that your call to love and serve others can be lived out through virtually any task, if we are spirit-led and kingdom-focused.

Teach us to hear that still small voice that knows us better than we know ourselves, prompting us to be whom you created us to be and to use the gifts you have given us to use.

Thank you, Lord, that you are as close to us as we will allow you to be, redeeming all our work for your higher purposes. Amen.

**Scripture Readings:** Genesis 41:33-42; Judges 4:1-8; Daniel 1:3-5, 2:48

### Reflection

Our culture often presents work as "either a drudgery or a deity," Howard E. Butt, Jr. remarks, but "either way it's a dead-end." Over against such workplace pessimism or punch-card idolatry, the gospel can take up our work into a sacred calling.

We grant that church-based occupations – pastor, evangelist, program minister, administrator, and missionary – can be valid responses to God's call, but forget that lay people (who comprise ninety-nine percent of all faithful disciples) also are called to serve God through their occupations in the world. When we exalt ministers and missionaries but ignore the call of the laity, we deny them a sense of sacred purpose as they build ministries in their daily work. Rather than "called out," lay persons may feel "left out."

Restoring an awareness of the high calling of our daily work won't be easy. We must:

- ▶ *realize that God is not principally interested in religious things.* Scripture states that "all things have been created through Christ and for Christ...and in him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:16-17). It does not say "all *religious things*," or "all *church-related things*," but "*all things*." Jesus Christ is Lord over all life and we diminish who Christ is when we consign him to Sunday school and worship services.

We do well to recall Bezalel, who was chosen by God and filled by the Spirit with "wisdom, intelligence, and skill in all kinds of crafts" (Exodus 31:1-5). He was an artist, a designer, a master craftsman, and a top-notch executive for the glory of God. Furthermore, in Jesus, as Butt reminds us, "the Almighty God, who created us all, became a human being and did ordinary, secular, hands-on work just like you and me."

- ▶ *align our vocational lives with Christ's purposes for the world.* Our various occupations matter to God. The Bible is full of examples: Deborah as the judicial leader of Israel, Joseph as prime minister of Egypt, Daniel as second-in-command of Babylon, and the



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apostle Paul as itinerant tentmaker. It takes all sorts of people to accomplish God's work in the world; it takes the varied members of the body of Christ.

When our occupational lives are taken up into the work of Christ, we can be confident that our labor will not be in vain. When the kingdom of God does come in completion, Christ's perfect work will make whole and complete all the work that we have begun.

▶ *not conform to reigning definitions of our vocations.* The workplace does not have the last word on how we go about our jobs. Wherever we are and whatever we do, we must be "ambassadors for Christ." This might mean doing our jobs differently than our colleagues. Like give examples: "A Christian lawyer like Gary Haugen founds International Justice Mission to help free Thai girls from brothels and Indian children from sweatshops; a Christian poet like Wendell Berry puts forth a vision of what it is to be authentically human; a Christian physicist like Nobel-laureate William Phillips is awestruck and grateful as a scientist as he explores the depths of creation; a Christian businessman like Millard Fuller uses his entrepreneurial abilities to start Habitat for Humanity; and a Christian pediatrician like Rev. Gloria White-Hammond brings healing in Jesus' name to the urban core of Boston."

"We are not called to fit into our profession; we are called to 'turn the world upside down' for Jesus' sake," he continues. "We are called to be co-conspirators with Jesus against the principalities and powers. God wants to use our passion, skill, and creativity to move the world toward that day when 'the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ.'"

Our challenge is to relate God's call to everyday work and to transform our workplaces so that they manifest our vocation. Then, as we work in the many ways we do, we will be working to build the kingdom of God.

### Study Questions

1. Do you see evidence that Christian vocation is often thought to involve only *religious* or *church-related* work? What can your congregation do about this trend?
2. Aligning our occupational lives with Christ's purposes for the world is a noble goal, but it can be difficult to realize. How would you describe the contribution of your job to God's kingdom? Are some careers particularly difficult or impossible to engage in as "ambassadors for Christ"?
3. Kyle Matthews' new hymn, "Voice That Calls Us Each by Name," recalls that God has summoned us "to visions of your kingdom come and gifts that we have yet to claim." In what sense does God call us "each by name"? How do we discover and take up these "gifts that we have yet to claim"?

**Departing Hymn: "Voice That Calls Us Each by Name"**

# Called Out, Not Left Out

## Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To consider how lay occupations, as well as *religious* jobs, can be responses to God’s calling.
2. To explore how our particular jobs and careers can participate in Christ’s purposes for the world.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Vocation (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus articles before the group meeting.

## Begin with a Comment

Share Abraham Kuyper’s comments about the rule of God, which begins: “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’...” (*Vocation*, p. 62).

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

## Scripture Reading

Ask three group members to read Genesis 41:33-42, Judges 4:1-8, and Daniel 1:3-5; 2:48 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

Our culture sends mixed messages about everyday work. Sometimes we are told it is merely a drudgery to be endured; other times work is presented as the most important area of our lives. The first message suggests that work is so bad and lowly that we should be content in our work-a-day cynicism rather than long for better days; the latter understanding encourages slavery to the “company store.” Encourage members to give examples of each message – from advertising, movies, television programs, or popular books. Perhaps they have heard each message from the pulpit! “Either way it’s a dead-end,” observes Howard E. Butt, Jr. “Over against that dismal workplace pessimism,” and workplace idolatry, “stands the gospel. The gospel by which work becomes sacred calling” (*Vocation*, p. 66).

In what way does the gospel turn our work “into sacred calling”? This certainly does not mean our jobs must be religious. Indeed, if the gospel limited occupations to religious work, then the majority of us would be “left out” rather than “called out.” The gospel disciplines all occupations and guides them toward obeying the primary gospel call – to participate in Christ’s purposes for the world. Our work is taken up into the good goals of God when faithfulness to Christ is the primary defining characteristic of our labor. The surrounding culture and workplaces do not define what is appropriate; Christian vocation is defined by Christ alone.

## Study Questions

1. Members may mention how ministers, missionaries, and other church employees are honored in worship services or Christian publications, while the labor of teachers, business people, farmers, government employees, politicians, and those who care for children or do household work, or other occupations is rarely acknowledged as a faithful response to God's call. The work of deacons or other church leaders may be honored.

Encourage members to discuss how Christian vocation is understood in relation to occupations. For whom does the congregation have "commissioning" services? Who is invited to give a testimony about how God has been at work through their job? The goal of this discussion is to relate Christian vocation to the work of all faithful disciples, not to criticize the good work done by ministers, missionaries, and others in religious occupations. Focus the conversation by selecting one or two lay occupations (teacher, businessperson, farmer, or housekeeper) and brainstorming various ways that the congregation might encourage and support those workers throughout the church year.

2. Our struggle to live out our Christian vocation through daily work is captured by Jesus' prayer that his disciples live "in the world" but not be "of the world" (John 17). Too often God's purpose for our work life is thwarted by the reigning necessities of our jobs; we find ourselves operating under the rules "of the world" rather than being ambassadors for Christ within the world. The biblical examples are profound at this point, especially Daniel who wields great power in Babylon, but risks the den of lions because of his refusal to let the empire set the rules for his obedience. In our time, some occupations seem to be more hostile to Christian convictions than others. The rules of banking, for instance, make profit the bottom line, while Christians in banking may attend more to compassion and even debt-forgiveness in some cases. Christian tradition has a long history of questioning military service for fear that national goals might trump obedience to Christ's kingdom. These are only two examples of how the Christian vocation can make our work-day lives a challenge. This challenge may be experienced in different ways by educators, politicians, lawyers, homemakers, or those in other occupations.

Encourage members to share their work experiences and how devotion to Christ's purposes for the world is made difficult or is overwhelmed in the workplace. Invite members to brainstorm solutions to these "tough cases."

3. Few of us have had a "Damascus road" experience like the Apostle Paul's in which we received God's call in a flash of light and moment of awe. Rather we have come to know the call of God in our lives in different and more humble ways: reading Scripture, praying, reflecting on our job experiences, being influenced by family members or friends, or receiving guidance from members in the local church. Because God calls each of us by name, he does so in many different and appropriate ways. But this call always involves the church, which is God's gospel messenger to the world; in it our giftedness as members of Christ's body are made known. In the church we learn to serve as we are enabled, not necessarily by our own abilities, but by the daily graces of the divine.

Members may tell how they were called to enter a particular career or form of service to others, or to take a particular job. How did they discover and develop their occupational gifts? If some members feel their gifts are undiscovered or unused in their daily work, encourage them to discuss this with the group. Others should commit to pray for those who have these uncertainties about their gifts. Some members may need encouragement and guidance in appreciating the value to God of their current labor; others may need assistance in finding opportunities for meaningful work.

## Departing Hymn

"Voice That Calls Us Each by Name" is on pp. 47-49 of *Vocation*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.