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What Do I Do With My Life?

SERVING GOD THROUGH WORK

Kenneth A. Baker



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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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This study is part of In the Works, a faith formation program for adults.

Studies in this series include:

Where Do I Come In? Joining God's Mission

What Do I Do with My Life? Serving God through Work

What Do I Owe? Managing the Gifts God Gives You

How Do I Make It Right? Doing Justice in a Broken World?

How Do I Begin? Sharing Your Faith

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How to Use This Book

What Do I Do with My Life? Serving God through Work, as well as the other books in the In the Works series, offers a unique format that combines insightful daily devotions with a discussion guide for small groups. It's simple and easy to use. Here's all you need to do:

Before your group meeting, please carefully read the five daily readings that offer insights on the topic for the week. You'll find them stimulating and full of practical ways to help you serve God in your workplace. We suggest reading one devotional on each of the five days rather than reading through all five at once. That way you can take your time and reflect on what the reading says to you personally. You may want to highlight lines that speak to you or jot questions or comments in the margin.

Note: Before your first small group session, you should have received a copy of this book so you can read the daily readings for Week 1 prior to your first meeting.

During your group meeting, use the small group discussion guides found at the end of each week of readings. These self-directing guides offer plenty to talk about for forty-five minutes to an hour or more. Groups should feel free to use them selectively, choosing the questions or activities that fit the group and the amount of time you have.

Each discussion guide includes

- an **Opening** question or activity that takes group members into the topic for the session.
- a **Bible Study** of passages that relate to the topic of the week. Group members should bring their own Bibles to the meetings or arrange to have a supply of Bibles available.
- **Group Discussion** questions that take participants back into the daily readings for the week and help relate them to their daily lives. Groups should feel free to select which

of these questions they want to discuss; of course, you can always substitute questions and comments from group members for our precooked ones!

- a brief **Closing** time of focus and prayer.
- **Action Options** for groups and for individuals. These are suggestions for follow-up activities that flow from the daily readings and group discussion.

From time to time, the discussion guides offer **Options** or **Alternative Approaches**, giving groups a choice of activities or questions.

In addition, the weekly discussion guides in this book include **Case Studies** and follow-up discussion questions that relate to each week's theme. If you decide to use them, you should be aware that you'll have less time for the discussion questions that follow.

Of course you'll want someone who's willing to lead the discussion and keep things moving for each small group meeting. But the discussion guide is written for the whole group, not just the leader. Together, may you grow in your understanding of how to participate with Christ in redeeming and restoring your workplaces.

—Faith Alive staff

Introduction

For most adult Christians in North America the workplace is the *primary* arena for practicing discipleship. It is the world we enter daily. Assuming a career of forty years and an average workweek of fifty hours, we will spend over one hundred thousand hours in the workplace before retirement! By comparison, even the most active church member will devote only about five thousand hours to “church activity” over that same forty-year period. For most adult Christians in North America, the workplace is our primary arena for practicing discipleship.

Let that sink in—for every hour we are called to follow Jesus in church activity, we are called to follow him for over twenty hours in our occupations as trash collectors, corporate CEOs, small business owners, assembly line workers, middle managers, farmers, truck drivers, teachers, accountants, homemakers, students, or volunteers in the community.

Ordinarily we use the word *work* to refer to formal employment or wage-earning jobs. But that leaves too many people out of the equation—retirees, homemakers, children, students, and volunteers. So in this study we’ll be using Paul Marshall’s broader definition of work as “any effort to shape and influence the world around us, including other people” (*Heaven Is Not My Home*).

When it comes to not merely listening to God’s Word but doing what it says (James 1:22), the workplace is where our faith takes active shape. It is where Jesus asks us to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” and to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:33). It is where we “continue to work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12). It is where we must translate Sunday’s good news into weekday action. Our workplace offers the greatest opportunity

to exert influence as the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world” (Matthew 5:13, 14).

This study guide invites you to explore what it means to follow Christ in the workplace, whatever that workplace might be. In personal reflection and small group discussion you will discover what God’s Word teaches about your high calling to serve and represent the Lord every day when you go to work.

WEEK 1

Kingdom Work



Called to Ministry



*So God created human beings in his own image. . . .
God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and
increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.”*

—Genesis 1:27, 28

I’m a pastor. I have two sons in seminary preparing to go into “the ministry.” I have a daughter who teaches cognitively impaired children in a public school. I love telling people what my kids do. The typical response is something like, “That’s wonderful! You must be so proud!”

In my church we conduct “ordination” services for elders, deacons, ministry associates, and ministers of the Word. We “install” these persons into their respective “offices.” We call them *officebearers*. In our ordination forms we ask them if they feel “called” by God in the call of the congregation. We also “commission” other church workers, including Sunday school teachers and people who represent us on a mission trip, and talk about the valuable “ministry” they perform.

These same persons may devote twenty, forty, or more hours every week to their work as business owners, construction workers, managers, plumbers, homemakers, or Hospice volunteers. Ordinarily, though, we do not ask them whether they feel called to such work. We do not set them apart, commission them, or honor the office they hold in the workplace during the week. We don't offer special prayers or thank the Lord for their ministry in the workplace. When we hear of a son or daughter of the congregation who is heading for seminary or going on a mission trip, it stirs a sense of pride and communal joy among us that is not quite matched by word of a young adult heading for nursing school or working for a lawn care service for the summer.

Why do you suppose that is?

It's no wonder many people are inclined to think of *work* in two categories—secular work and “kingdom” work. They somehow feel that there must be a difference between working “for the Lord” and just having a job. Some struggle in the midst of successful careers with whether they should make a change and go into “full-time ministry.”

This tension is not surprising. Ever since the Middle Ages, Christians have been strangely drawn to the two-story view of life that elevates church work (“ministry”) above secular work. Back then most people thought of the ideal Christian life as living in a monastery, devoting all your time to meditation, prayer, and worship. The Protestant Reformers shattered this perspective by recovering the biblical concept of *calling* (or vocation) as rooted in the biblical account of creation.

The opening chapter of the Bible teaches that we humans are created in God's image. God gave all of us a job to do: to “fill the earth and subdue it”; to “rule over” his kingdom of creation (Genesis 1:28). We'll explore this further in Week 2. For now it is enough to recognize that this calling extends to *all* we do to care for and unfold God's creation. This is the calling or vocation of every Christ-follower, regardless of our particular occupation.

That means *every* job is “ministry” for a disciple of Christ!

Discussion Guide



Opening *(5 minutes)*

Go around the circle and have group members briefly describe their work. Remember that work encompasses more than just a paid job. It can be anything we do to “shape or influence the world around us” as a worker, volunteer, retiree, student, or parent.

Bible Study *(10 minutes)*

Read the following Scripture passages and use the questions to guide your discussion.

- Ephesians 1:15-23
What do verses 19-23 teach about Jesus Christ? How far does his kingly rule (kingdom) extend?
- Ephesians 6:5-9
This passage addresses but does not condone or encourage the practice of slavery; rather, Paul offers practical ways of dealing with the realities of the day. For our purposes, read

the passage as applying to the employer/employee situation in general. Given that, what connection do you see between the first passage and the second, with its instructions to slaves?

On the basis of Paul's instructions, do you think he considered the work of slaves to be "kingdom work"? Why or why not? What clues do you find in verses 5-9?

What does all this say about our own work and its importance to God and God's kingdom?

Alternative Approach

In place of the above, read the passages from Matthew 6 cited in question 2 under "Discussion" (on p. 26) and then discuss the question.

Case Study *(10-15 minutes)*

Each discussion guide in this study offers a case study based on actual experiences. If your group decides to use these case studies, you may not have time for all of the "Discussion" questions that follow.

Have someone read the case study below and then discuss the questions that follow.

Emily's Decision

Emily had been offered two new positions—one was managing a new nursing home for the company she already works for; the other was managing a church office. Both jobs sounded great. Today was the day she had to decide.

Maybe the chance to choose between two great jobs sounds good to you—but for Emily it was an agonizing decision.

For ten years she'd worked as a supervisor at a large nursing home. She knew she was good at what she did. The nursing staff respected her as a professional, and even more important, as a friend and mentor. She had a way of being both firm and

affirming, and the residents responded well to her. Often she had opportunity to share her faith, and from time to time the residents' family members thanked her warmly for the compassion she showed to their loved ones. Her superiors obviously loved her work or they wouldn't have offered her this promotion at the new home they were opening across town. The new position played to all her strengths, and it would mean more pay and better benefits.

On the other hand, the opportunity to work for the church pulled strongly at Emily's heart. The job as office administrator at a large downtown church would mean less pay and fewer benefits than the new nursing home position, and in some ways she was probably overqualified for the position. But ever since she'd committed her life to Christ in college, Emily had felt a tug toward working in ministry of some kind. As a single mother she couldn't afford to go back to school for a ministry degree. But this would give her the chance to be part of a dynamic staff and be involved in full time "kingdom work." The thought of working in a Christian environment seemed almost too good to be true. What a boost it would be to her faith! And what an honor to be part of a ministry team and make a difference in the lives of so many people!

Emily glanced at the clock. Time was running out. For the umpteenth time she stared at her list of pros and cons. How she wished God would just send her a vision! Better yet, a personal letter! As the deadline approached, she couldn't help but wonder if she were missing something important in her considerations. But what could it be?

If you were a friend of Emily's, what issues would you want to explore with her? What reflection, insight, or Scripture passage from the daily readings might be particularly relevant to these issues?

On the basis of what you know of this case and the issues involved, what would you advise Emily to do? Do a quick survey.

Discussion (20 minutes)

1. According to the reading for Day 1, *all* work is ministry. What difference does it (or could it) make to view your daily work as a ministry that God calls you to perform?
2. In Matthew 6 Jesus warns of the distractions that can keep us from seeking first God's kingdom. Storing up treasures on earth is one (verses 19-21). Being consumed by worry is another (verses 25-32). As you think about your own life, what are the things that most distract you from seeking first the kingdom of God in *your* daily work?
3. The reading for Day 3 points out that Bezalel is described as being "filled with the Spirit of God." What difference does it make to you to know that the talents and abilities that you use in your daily work are given to you by the Holy Spirit?
4. According to the reading for Day 4, *all* work is "holy to the Lord"—even changing smelly diapers. What aspects of your own daily work do you have a hard time viewing as sacred? What difference would it make to consciously offer those tasks as part of your daily offering to God?
5. Share one insight from the daily readings you found particularly helpful for the way you view your daily work.

Closing (5-10 minutes)

You may want to read this quotation from William Diehl's book *Ministry in Daily Life* as a summary of today's session:

Many times it has been said that the church should go into the world. The fact is that the church already *is* in the world. It is present in the many Christians who daily labor

in factories and farms, who are faithful husbands and wives, who are caring parents, who uphold society's laws, and who vote on election day. And they minister to others in acts of kindness, by caring for the environment, in love for family, in honesty, and in many other ways. They minister when they are the bearers of hope in a hopeless society.

Have group members share any prayer requests or thanksgivings they may have related to their daily work. Then pray for each other, asking God to give each of you a sense of calling as you serve him and others in your respective workplaces.

Action Options

Choose one of these suggestions for extending the session into the week ahead:

Option 1

Frame each day of your week around the following habits. At the beginning of your day take a couple of minutes to center your thoughts around Jesus' words in Matthew 6:33: "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness." Pray for the Spirit of Christ to guide and empower you in your "kingdom work" for that day. At the end of your day take a few minutes to reflect on what you did that day. As you mentally replay the "video" of your workday, take note of the big or little ways you were able to live out your calling to seek first God's kingdom that day. You may find it encouraging to jot down your thoughts and look them over at the end of the week.

Option 2

Pray this prayer at the start of each workday this week or throughout this study.

Lord Jesus, as I enter this workplace, I bring your presence with me. I speak your peace, your grace, and your perfect order into this workplace. I acknowledge your lordship over

all that will be spoken, thought, decided, and accomplished here.

Lord Jesus, I thank you for the gifts you have deposited in me. I commit to using them responsibly and well. Give me a fresh supply of truth and beauty to draw on as I do my job. Anoint my creativity, my ideas, my energy so that even my smallest task may bring you honor.

Lord, when I am confused, guide me. When I am weary, energize me. When I am burned out, infuse me with the light of your Holy Spirit. May the work that I do and the way I do it bring hope, life, and courage to all that I come in contact with today.

And even in this day's most stressful moment, may I rest in you. Amen.