



## Discipleship and the Future of Work: Character and Capacity

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We face many challenges as we make healthy disciples and reach neighborhoods and nations for Christ. At a pastor's breakfast in Chattanooga, TN, I asked a group of pastors about their obstacles in discipleship. Many spoke about the busyness of daily life and the difficulties of getting folks to Bible studies and recruiting volunteers. Others mentioned the brokenness of families (we do have 10 family systems in our churches every week!). Some spoke about political and social tensions.

After a pause, one pastor shared this: "My people carry great stress about their jobs. The changing economy, huge student debt and managing finances are all part of their worries."

Something changed in the room as these words were shared. Young adults are frustrated with the gap between their (often too lofty) expectations and the realities of the job markets. Older workers struggle to find sustainable work after layoffs. Adding to these tensions is the specter of mechanization and the fact that many current jobs will not exist in 20 years. Conversely, there will be new jobs in 20 that are as yet unconceived or undeveloped.

How do we disciple amid all these anxieties and changes? The answer is not to over-spiritualize and, like King Hezekiah, rejoice that it is not our problem! As leaders of local churches, our congregants will not be gathering and serving if they are not able to work.

I have the joy of teaching seminary students. Recently I have been asking leaders in class – pastors, missionaries, superintendents and planters – one question, "How are your congregants going to eat in the next 10-20 years?" The surprised looks are confirmation that this is new territory.

There is good news! The Bible is filled with insight on how we equip God's people for ALL works of service (Ephesians 4:11-16). When Jesus said that we are called to bear lasting fruit, this includes all we do in service of God's kingdom and offer as daily worship (John 15; Romans 12:1-2; Colossians 3:17-24).



Discipling our churches for the future

How do we equip God's people for a changing world of work? There are seven principles that will help us prepare God's people for fruitful impact.

**First, we must present biblical and theological foundations** concerning daily work. From Genesis 1-2 to Revelation 21-22, the Bible presents good work as part of being made in God's image and redeemed in Christ. In other words, work is something good and comes before the fall of humankind. Work will be part of our eternal life in the new heavens and new earth! A fully biblical understanding of being human includes the goodness of work.

**Second, we must see daily work as deeply flawed by sin (Ecclesiastes 1-4) and in need of redemption through Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.** We are not affirming perfection before the Lord returns. We are aiming to see the Lord help us with our "individual iniquities and institutional injustices." (Pastor Christ Brooks) Applying Micah 6:8, **we want to equip God's people to transform any domain of life** where they are placed by the Lord.

**Third, our discipling begins with transformed character.** From the Beatitudes to the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) and the virtues of the divine life (II Peter 1:1-10), the evidence of the grace of God are people living holy and loving lives before a watching world (Philippians 2:12-16). Daily work – whether parenting at home, volunteering, laboring, leading a business, serving as a pastor – is the primary crucible of character development!

**Fourth, we need to distinguish and integrate personal vocations and occupations, so believers have a sense of identity than is greater than their current job description.** For more detail, see my essay, "Vocations and Occupations: Calling and Jobs." When disciples know their natural and spiritual gifts, understand their strengths and weaknesses and are continually learning about their context and culture, they become nimble resources that communities and companies will appreciate (Ephesians 2:10; 3:10).

**Fifth, spiritual leaders need to become the CLOs – "Chief Listening/Learning Officers" – of their communities.** In addition to blessing the good work of parents and teachers, mechanics and entrepreneurs, artists and laborers, pastors need to listen to their members about what the Lord is doing in their fields. Imagine periodically convening small groups clustered around work arenas. Church leaders attend to learn and then weave in their insights in the programs of the church. This makes every member an "intelligence agent" for the kingdom every day (I Corinthians 12-14)!



**Sixth, the local church is a great place for convening community groups and leaders and discovering what makes for a flourishing community.** Class, gender, race, vocational and political tensions will ease as people unite for economic and social flourishing. John Perkins, renowned civil rights and racial reconciliation leader in Mississippi, said, “What the world needs now in Jesus and a good job.” When our congregations commit to the common good, our witness grows, and conversions and baptisms will come (I Thessalonians 4; II Thessalonians 3).

**Seventh (and this is really part of number one): We must radically depend on the power of the Holy Spirit.** All the gifts operate 24/7 outside church meetings. We need to lean on the Lord, drink deeply from Scripture and listen to the Spirit as we work. Our worship services and prayer meetings are now charged with new energy as we commission God’s people for mission in all they do!

We live in a great moment for kingdom impact. With the Lord’s help, all God’s people can be on mission everyday – at work.

Resources:

[www.madetoflourish.org](http://www.madetoflourish.org) – for all pastoral team members

[www.oikonomianetwork.org](http://www.oikonomianetwork.org) – educators equipping leaders and churches

[www.discipleshipdynamics.com](http://www.discipleshipdynamics.com) – a vision and resource for whole-life discipleship