

Ministry and Work

When God created people, He placed them in the garden and told them to multiply and subdue the Earth. He directed them to develop their towns and cities and to produce goods and services for the enjoyment and sustenance of all. God invited them to assist Him in the continuation of His creation. He intended from the beginning that work was to be a part of people's lives, and this is affirmed throughout Scripture in both the Old and the New Testaments.

God intended for man to participate in providing for himself and his family right from the beginning.

Genesis 2:15-17: The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

God assigned something for Adam to do on a continual basis that would lead to meeting his needs. I find it interesting that in the same breath, He gave him the first warning and opportunity for obedience. This is another verse that shows that work and how we do it is still important to God:

Ecclesiastes 3:9-13: What gain has the worker from his toil? I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, He has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man.

It's noteworthy to see how Solomon saw the opportunity for man to have work to provide for himself and his family as a gift from God.

We'll look at some different aspects of work in the next section, but I first want to define what I'm referring to by the word *work*. Work in this context is talking about the activities that people engage in to earn a living. It may be by rendering services or producing a product or both. It may be a hands-on activity, or it may be in an administrative role. Work is an important part of every society and is an activity ordained by God by which individuals can provide for, or contribute to, meeting the needs of their families and their society.

Nothing is simple, which is why it's important to try to understand the why and how of things. It's much easier to work on the solution to a problem when you understand the cause. My lengthy explanations and introductions are all intended to bring some clarity into the complex and interconnected economic, political, and moral-cultural conditions that create challenges in every society. Hopefully, they'll help to inspire creativity in communicating the Gospel and discipleship in national churches, because a better understanding is essential of how those challenges can be quite different in cross-cultural settings.

The Three Governing institutions

Much attention has been given to building infrastructure and giving money and material things to people in hopes of making life better for them and of demonstrating Christian love and

compassion through these acts of kindness. Much time has also been invested in theological education for pastors and lay leaders, but I believe there's a missing link that's hindered the growth of many churches throughout the world. It all relates to society's three interconnected systems.

Every society, no matter how materially wealthy or poor, has three different systems or institutions that comprise its governance: economic, political, and moral-cultural. Wikipedia defines economics like this: "An economic system, or economic order, is a system of production, resource allocation and distribution of goods and services within a society or a given geographic area. It includes the combination of the various institutions, agencies, entities, decision-making processes and patterns of consumption that comprise the economic structure of a given community."

*The economic system is directly influenced by the political and moral-cultural systems because politics and the moral-cultural system determine the rules regarding how the economic game is played.

*The political system defines the process for making official decisions in the society. This may be a formal government with a constitution or other defining documents or a traditional form of leadership structure, such as a chiefdom.

*A brief and very generalized definition of a moral-cultural system is a given society's values that are generally held or accepted by the majority of the population and that dictate what's right and what's wrong.

The formal rules of the political system and the informal rules of the moral-cultural system play a large part in the success (or failure) of the economic system. Trying to address the economic woes of a people or country without addressing the issues in the political and moral-cultural systems will never result in any real change in the people's economic system. I believe that, for many people, the real reason why underdeveloped nations remain underdeveloped has never been fully understood, and this has resulted not only in many underused resources but also in many missed ministry opportunities. We're still learning about the many facets to the big picture, but we've managed to put together several interconnected pieces that I hope will assist others to have a much greater impact in strengthening churches and growing God's Kingdom in their various cultural contexts.

The absence of a Judeo-Christian moral authority that's transformed the hearts and minds of the moral-cultural system of a society leaves the political and economic systems unhealthy, unprincipled, and therefore, dysfunctional. In many cases, Christianity has entered a society and grown to huge proportions in numbers of churches and individuals who would call themselves Christians, yet the transformation of hearts and minds has not happened. With this in mind, any attempt to solve the problems of poverty in a society without addressing the heart issues is like treating a serious disease symptomatically with pain relievers. Even though there may be some temporary relief from pain, the disease continues its negative effects on a healthy body, or, extending the metaphor, it continues creating hindrances to forming healthy and productive societies.

People don't live at church; people live and work in all kinds of places and relationships all week long. They go to their jobs in business, in education, in medicine, in government positions, in law enforcement and in the judicial system. They work their farms, sell goods in the market, drive taxis, and engage in all kinds of activities all week long that aren't in church. I mention this point

because most people in the nation where we lived, and, doubtless in many other places, see serving God as something that we do in church. For many people it's being an usher, singing in the choir, teaching, or attending Sunday School and Bible studies, attending all-night prayer meetings, etc., but the idea of serving God at work and in all the other activities we engage in in life is a pretty foreign concept. In fact, it's called the sacred/secular divide, the idea that there are some areas that God really cares about and some that He doesn't.

The Different Aspects of Work

Work can and should be seen as a ministry in the life of a Christian that God can use in powerful ways for His glory.

A common idea surrounding ministry is that it is, as I previously mentioned, something that occurs in the context of the church, and yes, it is. It is important to understand what the church is to better understand this in order to be able to maximize our effectiveness in ministry. We know and verbally agree all the time that the church is the people, members of the body of Christ, and not the church building itself. However, for many of us there is a difficulty in separating the idea of ministry and the church building or some other activity directly related to it. The idea of church life and our personal lives outside of that building are somehow disconnected from each other.

God has created each of us with a unique combination of gifts, talents, and skills, likes, and dislikes, desires, and interests, all given to us to be used as His body for His glory. A very important reason for developing a better understanding of the idea that the church is the body of believers with Jesus as its head is that the body isn't just the body when it's inside the church building or at some other organized church gathering. The church continues to be the body even as its members disperse into their communities when the meetings and worship services come to an end. The setting of ministry may change but our serving God should continue.

Ministry at Work

A commonly held view of what most Christians think about when they think about ministry at work is that they may be surrounded by people with whom they can show the love of God to and with whom they can share their ²faith. From this perspective, they think about opportunities to develop relationships and share the Gospel as ministry, but they may not think about their actual work itself as a ministry.³

Ministry of Work

Our work has spiritual value for reasons well beyond providing income to support our churches and missions. Our work itself is a ministry to which we're called. Most Christians in general think that a ministry "calling" means being employed in some capacity as a professional in ministry, such as pastors and missionaries or in other Christian organizations, but all work is holy and ordained by God. Through it we exercise dominion and stewardship of the world and fulfill the creation mandate. Through it we serve our fellow man as we provide goods and services that others need and, as such, our work becomes a ministry to others done unto God.⁴

Ministry to Work

God has certainly put His people into positions in which they can introduce others to Him, but His desires go further. We are to be salt and light in the world in order to redeem all that's in it. As we read in Colossians 1:19–20 last week.

Matthew 5:13-16: You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It's no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill can't be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Other verses also point out that not only is work important and ordained by God, but it's also part of His plan for our own provision and for giving to others.

2 Thessalonians 3:10-12: For even when we were with you, we'd give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

Christians can be an influence as redeeming agents in the workplace in both its organizational structures and their policies. They can influence how business is conducted in the marketplace and politicians can influence how legislative decisions are made. In so doing, their behavior and actions can work to redeem the schools, governments, churches, and businesses themselves.

One may think that it may seem a bit ungodly to dive so deeply into the ideas of politics and economics in a discussion about ministry, but here are some points and observations that will help bring it into better focus.

First, as a reminder, this material is designed for the purpose of spreading the Gospel and strengthening the church; it isn't about the money. However, as mentioned earlier, we all recognize that there are people living in this world who are materially poor and who struggle with everyday issues of food, healthcare, education, and general living conditions. People everywhere want pretty much the same thing: to be able to feed, clothe, educate, and otherwise provide a decent life for their families.

God's intention from the beginning was for humanity to thrive in the world and in relationship with Him. Much of ministry already revolves around the "meeting of needs" around the world as missionaries and short-term teams go to various countries. These trips include building projects or distributing food and clothing and many other activities regarding the physical needs. Many of these trips and ministries may also introduce Bible teaching, children's programs, showing the Jesus video, and many other spiritual activities. However, again, I think there's a huge opportunity to have a much deeper and more effective ministry by helping people and churches (as a group of people) make a much greater impact themselves in sharing the Gospel and growing into stronger churches by introducing lay people to, and equipping them for, ministry opportunities they may have never thought about before.

Many things should be understood to really grasp the need for this idea and to understand some of the complexities of cross-cultural ministry. Our mission team (Converge people in Cameroon) always focused on ministry goals for evangelism and discipleship. We put much time and effort into growing our knowledge and expertise as cross-cultural workers so we could

increase our effectiveness in God's hands to accomplish those ends.

The following topics will help establish a better understanding of some of the whys and interconnections between things that are hidden to many who want to help spread the Gospel in the cross-cultural context.

^{3,4}Eldred, Ken (2009). *God Is at Work: Transforming People and Nations Through Business* (pp. 78-79).

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Theme: Work is not separate from ministry—

it is a primary context for discipleship, redemptive influence, and spiritual capital.

Every believer is called to glorify God through their vocation.

Grounding Scripture:

Colossians 3:23–24 | *“Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord...”*

Genesis 2:15 | *“The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden... to work it and keep it.”*

Ephesians 4:28 | *“...let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands...”*

1 Thessalonians 4:11–12 | *“...work with your hands... so that you may walk properly before outsiders...”*

Puzzle Piece:

Insight: Many believers compartmentalize faith and work—seeing ministry as church-based and work as secular. But, scripture reveals work as a divine assignment, a place to reflect God’s image and resist corruption. This piece is vocational: how do we reclaim work as worship and witness?

Challenge: When believers disconnect their faith from their profession, spiritual capital is lost. Corruption thrives when Christians remain silent or passive in the workplace.

Bridge Thought | connection

- The idea of a bridge from sacred to secular is false.
- Whole-life discipleship equips believers to live redemptively in every domain—including business, education, government, and trades.

Toolbox | Practical Tools

Vocational Discipleship Framework: Teach believers to see their work as ministry.

Integrity Group Integration: Form workplace-based groups for support, accountability, and witness.

Spiritual Capital Tracker: Help believers identify how their work builds or erodes trust, justice, and dignity.

Reflection Prompts

1. How does your work reflect God’s character—productivity, responsibility, creativity?
2. Where have you felt tension between your faith and your profession?
3. What would it look like to treat your job as a mission field?

Action Steps

- Equip believers to live visibly and courageously in their workplace.
- Form Integrity groups within sectors—business, education, healthcare, government.
- Teach churches to affirm and commission believers for ministry in the marketplace.