

October 24th, 2014

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Theology of Work Project

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## Recommended Citation

Theology of Work Project and Messenger, William, "Why Do We Need to Know What the Bible Says about Work?" (2014). *Theology of Work Project*. 43.

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## Why Do We Need to Know What the Bible Says About Work?

William Messenger

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Adapted from a talk at the Faith@Work Summit, October 24, 2014

The first time I needed a biblical foundation for my work was when I worked at a racist gas station. I was in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. If you came to our station white, you got full service. We washed your windshield, checked your oil, called you “sir” or “ma’am,” offered you the restroom key. If you came to the station black, we filled your gas. That’s it. No windshield. No oil. No restroom. No “sir.” No “ma’am.”

I felt terrible about it. I had enough biblical foundation to know that treating black people badly was wrong. But I needed the money, so I didn’t quit. The only thing I did was to treat black customers the same way I treated white customers. If you came when I was on duty, I *would* check your oil, wash your windshield, call you “sir,” or “ma’am.” That’s all I did about racism in my workplace. Looking back, I wish I had done more.

I knew that the Bible was supposed to be my guide in life. But there seemed to be a huge gap between this 2000-3000 year old religious book and the realities I experienced at the gas station. I wish someone had known how to help me find the things in the Bible that could help me at work.

For example, [1 Samuel chapter 25](#) could have helped me at the gas station. In that chapter, David, who is not yet king of Israel, demands that a landowner named Nabal “donate” a flock of lambs to feed David’s army. Nabal is a hotheaded guy. He gets angry, refuses to donate the lambs, and insults David in front of his troops. David is a hothead too. So he gets 400 soldiers ready to go massacre Nabal and every male in his clan. David is about to commit a kind of mini-genocide, which seems to me like an extreme version of the racism at the gas station I used to work at.

Here’s where it gets interesting. Nabal’s wife, Abigail, rushes out to meet David. She brings her own feast to give his army, and then makes what is probably the most courteous speech in the Bible. But the speech has a punch line, “The Lord restrain you from bloodguilt and from taking vengeance with your own hand...so that [you] shall have no ... pangs of conscience, for having shed blood without cause....” A hard message, wrapped in a polite speech. After he hears this speech, David changes his mind and calls off the attack.

In other words, Abigail brings David a present, speaks to him respectfully yet forcefully, and David actually changes his ways. I could have done the same thing at the gas station! Every day I was bringing the owner a present because I was one of only two employees who didn’t steal from the cash register, and the owner knew it and valued it. So some night when I took the cash bag to his house, I could have said, “John, the reason the money in my cash bag always matches the register tape is exactly the same reason I always treat black people with respect at the pumps. I treat you and your money with respect because it’s in my heart to treat everyone with respect. If you ever want a gas station where every

employee treats all your *money* with respect, maybe you could create an atmosphere where every employee treats all your *customers* with respect. Just an idea. Have a good night, and I'll see you at the station tomorrow."

It never occurred to me to say anything like that. I believe now, that if I had done as Abigail did, the owner would have at least listened to what I said. Who knows, maybe he would even have started changing the culture at the station. Not overnight, but gradually. But I knew nothing of Abigail's example, and I had no hope that God would be with me if I tried to talk to my boss about an ethical issue. The Bible is a powerful foundation for faith at work *if* we learn to apply it to work.

Since 2007, I've had the privilege of working on the Theology of Work Project with a mission to research and write about what the Bible says about work. Of course we aren't the first people to apply the Bible to work. Luther, Calvin, and Wesley paid attention to work. And before our project began there were some great books about the Bible and work, and there are even more now. But the Theology of Work Project was founded to approach the task in two unique ways.

1. To cover the entire Bible. As far as we can tell, this is the first attempt ever to research the whole Bible for every passage that applies to work.
2. To include as wide a breadth of the Christian community as possible. We wanted to include the wisdom and experience of people from all across the historic/orthodox Christian faith. We wanted the skills of biblical scholars, theologians, pastors, business and management scholars, and actual workplace Christians. We hoped this breadth would lead to a fuller understanding of the Bible, more realistic applications, and less danger of individual bias.

So how have we done on these two goals?

First, we have succeeded in creating a commentary covering all 66 books of the Bible as they apply to work, workers and workplaces. On June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2014 we completed the *Theology of Work Bible Commentary* online. It's available free of charge for any non-commercial purpose at [www.theologyofwork.org](http://www.theologyofwork.org). And we are in the process of releasing a 5-volume print edition for people who like physical books. The initial volume was released by Hendrickson Publishers in October 2014 and the rest will follow over the course of 2015. A series of Bible studies adapted from the commentary is also being released for small group study in workplaces, homes and churches.

Along the way, we were amazed how much the Bible says about work. We found 859 passages of scripture that relate to work in some specific way. Before we started, I would have guessed 50 or 60 passages, not 859. That's because I used to think the Bible was a book about religion, with a few applications to work. But it's not. The Bible is a book about God, and it turns out that God shows up where God's people spend their time, which is mostly at work.

Probably everyone interested in faith and work knows some Bible passages related to work, but did you realize that those passages are not rare highlights, but representative samples of the Bible? To put it in biblical words, "The cattle on a thousand hills" are the Lord's, not just the temple on the hill of Zion. Once I took off my church-polarized lenses, I saw that a lot of the Bible has to do with work.

It's impossible to summarize 859 passages in the usual three bullet points, so I don't have an easy-to-remember guide to the biblical foundations of work. My message is not, "We read the Bible so you don't have to." My message is, "If you want to know about work, read the Bible."

We hope the *TOW Bible Commentary* can help. We've provided all kinds of navigation aids to help users find relevant materials, including tags, free-text search, and topical overviews that bring together all the passages from all across the Bible. So instead of universal bullet points, may I tell you three of my favorite Bible passages about work?

In the book of [Ruth](#), a business owner named Boaz figures out how to make a profit while fulfilling his duty to improve life for an immigrant named Ruth and for other vulnerable workers. That is a topic literally right off the pages of the *Wall Street Journal* 3000 years later. (See for example, "[Elisabeth Murdoch Slams 'Profit Without Purpose'](#)" by John Jannarone, *Wall Street Journal*, Aug. 22, 2012.)

The [Song of Songs](#) is not a book that you usually go to, to find faith at work. Isn't it basically an erotic love poem? But read it more closely. What are the couple actually doing while reciting love poetry to each other? They are planting a vineyard, and working hard at it. In other words, *Song of Songs* is about a couple who start a small business as a way to make a living *and* to strengthen their love. Their work draws them together, rather than keeping them apart. I like this passage because it shows work and family life, not as a balance of competing priorities, but as an integrated way of achieving what is most important in life for these two people. (See "[Quit a Job to Spend More Time with the Family? You Bet](#)" by Scott Behson, *Wall Street Journal*, Sept. 16, 2014)

In [2 Corinthians chapter 6](#), Paul and the church wrestle with how to be true to Christ while working in a pluralistic society. Two thousand years later, we still face the same challenge. (See "[Atheists, work with us for peace, Pope says on Christmas](#)" by Philip Pulella, *Reuters News Service*, Dec. 25, 2013.)

How did we do on our second goal—including as wide a breadth of perspectives as possible? So far, the Theology of Work Project has included 138 contributors from 23 countries, on 5 continents, representing about 100 organizations. Responsibility for final approval of every passage was vested in 19 Steering Committee members from around the world. Vigorous debates arose over some passages. We learned more about the Bible from wrestling with one another's perspectives, experiences, and even biases than we ever would have from just thinking hard about the Bible individually. We're committed to including more input from as many people as possible, so every page of content has a comment section where we'd love to get your input. We've already made changes to articles based on this feedback.

All-in-all, I'd say we've done a good job of diversity, with four major shortcomings: not enough women, not enough Catholics and other Christian traditions, not enough blue collar workers, and no contributors from Latin America. I have a feeling these are challenges for the whole faith and work movement, and I hope that by working together, we can chart paths to resolving them.

What's left to do then? Our work and the work of many others give us a greater understanding of the biblical foundations of faith and work than ever before. This means there's *more* work and *more* opportunity than ever before. I see two pressing needs.

The first need is to create resources for specific occupations and situations. We need to help architects, business people, crane operators, parents, lawyers, civil servants, and every other kind of worker to figure out, “What specifically does God want me to do in my line of work?” To do this, we have to include workers in every field as we develop applied resources because they know the real challenges and opportunities people in their occupations face. One of the biggest challenges of the faith and work movement is bringing together people with biblical/theological skills and people with occupation-specific knowledge and experience.

I hope that *you* will create resources for your audiences and workplaces. As I said, we have tools on our website to help you identify relevant Bible passages for specific topics in work. And we’re inviting people who write applied materials to send them to the TOW Project for inclusion in a new section of our website. And we’ll gladly link to other websites too.

The second major task is to transmit these resources to workplace Christians on a global scale. We know that people are hungry to apply the Bible at work because we’re getting about 30,000 visitors per month to the TOW website. Eighty percent of them come to our site via a Google or Yahoo search on something like “ecclesiastes work” or “old testament concept of working.” People are searching for materials on the Bible and work, and we’ve got to connect with them.

We’ve begun using Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, podcasts, Vimeo, and a blog on the new Patheos.com [Faith and Work Channel](#), and most of you are using social media too. Still, there are hundreds of millions of workplace Christians around the world, and we’ve got to figure out together how to reach and equip all of God’s people in every kind of workplace around the globe. As those of us in the faith-and-work sphere collaborate more intentionally, I look forward to learning what others are doing, and to sharing best practices and ideas. We’ve got to figure this out together and soon.

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