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# The General Epistles and Work

Theology of Work Project

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## The General Epistles and Work

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### Introduction to General Epistles

The seven letters of James, 1 & 2 Peter, and 1, 2 & 3 John, and Jude are often called the General (or Catholic) Epistles because they seem to speak to the Christian church in general, rather than to individual churches. They are also united by their interest in practical matters such as organizational leadership, hard work, fairness, good relationships, and effective communication.

The General Epistles reflect the essential challenge Christians faced in the Roman Empire — how to follow Jesus in a tough environment. Early Christians faced problems such as slavery, favoritism, and abuse by the rich and powerful. They dealt with harsh words and conflicts. They dealt with the real tensions between ambition and dependence on God, and the fear that doing things God's way would put them in conflict with those in authority. In general, they felt a sense of alienation living and working in a world that seemed incompatible with following Jesus.

Many of today's Christians experience similar tensions at work. On the one hand, many Christians have more opportunity to serve God in their work than in any other sphere of life. Business, government, educational, non-profit, and at-home workplaces accomplish a tremendous amount of good in society. On the other hand most workplaces are generally not dedicated toward God's purposes, such as serving the common good, working for the benefit of others, deepening relationships among people, spreading justice and developing character. Because workplaces' ultimate aims — generally maximizing profit — are different from Christians' ultimate aims, we should expect to experience tension in our dual roles as followers of Christ and workers in the non-church workplace. Although most workplace are not intentionally evil — just as many parts of the Roman empire were not actively hostile to Jesus' followers — it can still be challenging for Christians to serve God in their work. Because the General Epistles were written to guide Christians experiencing tensions in the world around them, they can be very helpful to workplace Christians today.

The General Epistles address such practical concerns head on. Two major principles underlie the variety of items treated in these letters:

1. We can trust God to provide for us.
2. We must work for the benefit of others in need.

From these two principles, the General Epistles derive instructions that have surprisingly practical applications in the 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace. But perhaps we should not be surprised. God chose the Roman Empire as the place where God would enter human life in the form of Jesus Christ. God is also choosing today's workplace as a point of his presence.

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## James - Faith Works

James brings a work-centered perspective to the principles that we can trust God to provide for us and that we must work for the benefit of others in need.<sup>[1]</sup> If faith is real — if we truly trust God — then our faith will lead to all kinds of practical actions for the benefit of others in need. This perspective makes James an eminently practical book. We will find several places where James applies his teaching to the workplace, and many more where we can easily make the applications ourselves.

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## Depending on God (James 1:1-18)

James begins with the principle that we can trust God to provide for us. “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you” (James 1:5). It is absolutely essential to grasp this. If you doubt that God is the source of all you need, you are what James calls “double-minded.” You have not yet made up your mind whether to follow Christ or not. This makes you “unstable in every way,” and you will not be able to accomplish much for the benefit of anyone, nor able even to “receive anything from the Lord” on your own behalf (James 1:7). James is under no illusions about how hard it can be to trust God. He knows all too well the trials his audience is already beginning to experience throughout the breadth of the Roman Empire (James 1:1-2). Yet he insists that the Christian life must begin with trusting God to provide.

James immediately applies this to the economic sphere in James 1:9-11. If you are rich you must not delude yourself that this is due to your own effort. If you depend on your own ability, you will “wither away” even while you go about your business. Conversely, if you are poor, do not think this is due to God's disfavor. Instead, expect to be “raised up” by God. Success or failure comes from many factors beyond yourself. If you've ever lost your livelihood due to recession, corporate sale, office relocation, crop failure, discrimination, hurricane damage or a thousand other factors, you can testify to that. God does not promise you economic success at work, nor does he doom you to failure, but he uses both success and failure to develop the perseverance needed to overcome evil.

Notice that although James contrasts the goodness of God with the evil of the world, he does not allow us to imagine that we are on the side of angels and those around us on the side of devils. Instead, the divide between good and evil runs down the middle of every Christian's heart. "One is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it" (James 1:14). He is speaking to church members. This should make us very slow to identify church as good and workplace as bad. There is evil in both spheres — as church scandals and business frauds alike remind us — yet by God's grace we may bring goodness to both.

In fact, the Christian community is one of the means God uses to raise up the poor. God's promise to provide for the poor is fulfilled — in part — by the generosity of his people, and their generosity is a direct result of God's generosity to them. "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights" (James 1:17). This affirms both that God is the ultimate source of provision and that believers are responsible to do all they can to bring God's provision to those in need.

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## Working for the Benefit of Others in Need (James 1:22-28)

This brings us to the second principle of faithful work: working for the benefit of others in need. This principle is a natural consequence of the first principle, trusting in God. If we don't trust God, we easily confuse working for others with working for our own benefit because our fears skew our perceptions. James calls us to confront our fears head on, facing the trials of our trust directly. When you are facing trials — meaning that you are trusting God, as we have just seen — then let God use those trials to increase your capacity to serve others in need. "Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves" (James 1:22). If you believe that you trust God (that is, you "hear" God's word), but that trust does not lead you to act for the benefit of others in need, James suggests you are deceiving yourself. You don't really trust God. The connection between work and trust is essential, not coincidental. If you don't work on behalf of others, your inaction may point to a lack of trust. Why? Because if you aren't working to benefit others, perhaps you are too busy working to benefit yourself. And if you're busy working to benefit yourself alone, then perhaps you don't trust God to take care of you. Failure to work for others' benefit arises from a lack of trust in God. Or, as James puts it, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father [i.e., trust in God] is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress" (James 1:27). The source of James's insight seems to be Jesus himself, especially his teachings about the poor and the practical care he showed to a variety of marginalized people.<sup>[2]</sup> This can be seen, for example, in James's allusions to Jesus' teachings regarding the special place of the poor in God's kingdom (James 2:5/Luke 6:20), along with Jesus' warnings about rotting treasures "on the earth" (James 5: 1-5/Matt. 6:19).

This has direct application to work because meeting needs is the number one mark of a successful

workplace. A successful organization meets the needs of its customers, employees, shareholders, constituents, students, clients and other stakeholders. This is not James's primary focus — he is focused particularly on the needs of people who are poor or powerless — but it nonetheless applies. Whenever an organization meets people's true needs, it is doing God's work.

This application is not limited to serving customers in established businesses. It requires even greater creativity — and demonstrates God's provision even more — when Christians meet the needs of people who are too poor to be customers of established businesses. For example, a group of Christians started a furniture factory in Vietnam to provide jobs for people at the lowest level of the socioeconomic spectrum there. Through the factory, God's provision meets the needs of both overseas customers and local workers. The overseas customers' needs are not severe, yet by supplying good furniture at affordable prices, the factory does meet a genuine need they have. The local workers were previously in severe need due to unemployment. The factory has become the chief way God meets their need for provision.<sup>[3]</sup>

Christians' duty does not end with serving the poor and needy through our workplaces. Social structures and political-economic systems strongly affect whether the needs of the poor are met. To the degree that Christians can influence these structures and systems, we have a responsibility to ensure that they meet the needs of poor and needy people as well as the needs of rich and powerful people.

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## Faith and Work(s) (James 2:14-26)

James takes up the topic of work in detail in the second part of chapter 2. He invariably uses the plural "works" (Greek *erga*) rather than the singular "work" (Greek *ergon*). This leads some to suppose that James uses "works" to mean something different from "work." However, *erga* and *ergon* are simply plural and singular forms of the same word.<sup>[4]</sup> James is describing any kind of work, from works of kindness, such as giving food to someone who is hungry, to on-the-job work, such as increasing the sustainable yield of rice paddies. His use of the plural shows that he expects Christians' work to be continual.

James' focus on work has led to deep controversy about the letter. Luther famously disliked James because he read James 2:24 ("You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone") to be a contradiction of Galatians 2:16 ("A person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ"). Other leaders of the Protestant Reformation did not share this view, but Luther's objection came to dominate the Protestant reading of James.<sup>[5]</sup> Although we cannot go into the long debate about Luther and the book of James here, we can inquire briefly whether James's emphasis on work is at odds with the Protestant rejection of "justification by works."

What does James himself say? James 2:14 is arguably the centerpiece of his argument, so we will

consider this section before moving on to James 2:1-13: “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?” James bluntly answers his own question by stating, “So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (James 2:17) — as dead (as he notes in a carefully chosen example) as someone in desperate need of food who receives only empty words of well-wishing from his neighbor (James 2:15-16). James takes it for granted that believing in Christ (trusting in God) will move you to feel compassion for — and act to help — someone in need.

We have opportunities every day to meet the needs of people we work for and among. It can be as simple as making sure a confused customer finds the right item for their need or noticing that a new co-worker needs help, but is afraid to ask. James urges us to take special concern for those who are vulnerable or marginalized, and we may need to practice noticing who these people are at our places of work.

This is the heart of the book of James. James does not imagine that work is at odds with faith. There can be no “justification by works” because there can be no good works unless there is already faith (trust) in God. James doesn’t mean that faith can exist without works, yet be insufficient for salvation. He means that any “faith” that doesn’t lead to works is dead; in other words, it is no faith at all. “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead” (James 2:26). James doesn’t command Christians to work for the benefit of others in need *instead of* placing faith in Christ, or even *in addition to* placing faith in Christ. He expects that Christians will work for the benefit of others in need *as a result of* placing faith in Christ.[\[6\]](#)

The insight that Christian faith always leads to practical action is in itself a lesson for the workplace. We cannot divide the world into spiritual and practical, for the spiritual *is* the practical. “You see that [Abraham’s] faith was active along with his works,” James says (James 2:22). Therefore we can never say, “I believe in Jesus and I go to church, but I keep my personal faith out of my work.” That kind of faith is dead. James’ words, “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (James 2:24) challenge us to work out our commitment to Christ in our daily activities.

The rest of the letter gives practical applications of the two underlying principles of trust in God and working to benefit others in need. Given our assessment of James 2:14-26, we will proceed with the perspective that these applications are outworkings of faith in Christ, valid in James’s day and instructive in ours.

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## Discriminating Against the Poor and Currying Favor with the Rich (James 2:1-13)

James applies both of the underlying principles as a warning against favoritism towards the rich and powerful. He begins with the second principle — working for the benefit of others in need. “You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’

But if you show partiality, you commit sin” (James 2:8-9). The sin is that when you favor the rich and powerful, you are serving yourself rather than others. This is because the rich and powerful have the potential to bestow a bit of their riches and power on you. The poor can do nothing for you. But they are the people in need. James illustrates the point by depicting the special treatment a wealthy, well-dressed person might be given in church, while a poor, shabby person is treated with contempt. Even in something as simple as coming to church, the poor are in need of a word of welcome. The rich — being welcomed everywhere — are not in need.

James draws on Leviticus 19:18 — “love your neighbor as yourself” — to indicate that showing favoritism towards the rich and excluding or slighting the poor is no less an offense against God’s law than murder or adultery (James 2:8-12). Doing this means that either you are not treating your neighbor as yourself, or you are failing even to recognize that a poor person is your neighbor.

James is talking about church gatherings, but there are workplace applications. At work, you can pay attention to people who can help you or to people who need your help. In a healthy workplace, this might be merely a matter of emphasis. In a dysfunctional workplace — where people are pitted against each other in a struggle for power — it takes courage to stand on the side of the powerless. Refusing to play favorites is especially dangerous when you are faced with socially-entrenched favoritism such as ethnic discrimination, gender stereotyping or religious bigotry.

Although James couches his argument in terms of working to benefit others in need, this application implicitly raises the principle of trusting in God. If you truly trusted God for your provision, you wouldn’t be tempted to favor the rich and powerful so much. You wouldn’t be afraid to associate yourself with the unpopular crowd at work or school. James is not exhorting you to do good works *despite* lacking faith in Christ and trusting God’s provision. James is demonstrating how good works *are made possible* by faith in Christ. Ironically, the poor themselves already live this truth on a daily basis. “Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?” (James 2:5).<sup>[7]</sup> The poor are not inheriting the kingdom because they are better people than the rich, but because they put their trust in God. Lacking the means to depend on themselves, or to curry favor with the rich, they have learned to depend on God.

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## Listening Well and Taming the Tongue (James 1:19-21 and 3:1-12)

James continues his practical guidance with words about listening (which actually appear at the end of chapter 1, though closely related to chapter 3) and speaking (in chapter 3). Christians need to listen well both to people (James 1:19) and to God (James 1:22-25). “Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger” (James 1:19). You listen, not as a technique to influence anyone else, but as a way to let God’s word “rid *yourselves* of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness” (James 1:21, emphasis added).

Interestingly, James suggests that listening to others — and not just listening to the Bible — is a means of ridding yourself of wickedness. He does **not** say that other people speak God’s word to you. Instead, he says that listening to others removes the anger and arrogance that keep you from doing God’s word spoken in scripture. “Your anger does not produce God’s righteousness....Welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls” (James 1:20-21).

What is the result of listening to others and to God’s word? Action on behalf of people in need. “Care for the orphans and widows,” James says (James 1:27). Jesus’ followers work on behalf of those who cannot meet their needs through their own work. This could mean charity, or it could mean making it possible for people to meet their own needs, or both. Today’s orphans (and widows) could be tomorrow’s workers. Starting a company that employs people in need may be a more effective way of looking after orphans and widows than donating money, especially in societies with high unemployment.

As we noted earlier, James’ advice applies to all kinds of work and workplaces. Listening is well established in the business literature as a crucial leadership skill.<sup>[8]</sup> Businesses must listen well to their customers, employees, investors, communities and other stakeholders. In order to meet people’s true needs, organizations need to listen to the people whose needs they hope to meet. This reminds us that the workplace can be fertile soil for God’s work, just as the Roman Empire was, hardship and persecution notwithstanding.

Speaking is the flip side of listening, and it’s no surprise that James warns against bad speaking as much as he encourages good listening. “If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless” (James 1:26). In James 3:1-12, he picks up the theme with some of the fiercest language in the book: “And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell...It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (James 3:6, 8). James is no doubt well aware of the Old Testament proverbs that speak about the life-giving power of the tongue (e.g. Proverbs 12:18, “Rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing”), but he is also aware of the tongue’s death-dealing powers. Many Christians rightly take care not to harm others through harsh speech at church. Shouldn’t we be just as careful at work not to “curse those who are made in the likeness of God?” (James 3:9, with reference to Genesis 1:26-27) Water cooler gossip, slander, harassment, disparagement of competitors — who has never been injured by harsh words in the workplace, and who has never injured others?

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## Selfish Ambition and Investing in Others (James 3:13-4:12)

James 3:14-4:12 also employs the paired principles of dependence on God and service to others in need. As usual, James puts them in reverse order, discussing service first and trust later. In this case, James



starts with an admonition against selfish ambition, followed by an exhortation to submit to God.

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## Selfish Ambition and Submission to God (James 3:13-4:12)

### SELFISH AMBITION IS THE IMPEDIMENT TO PEACEMAKING (JAMES 3:16-4:11)

Selfish ambition is the opposite of serving the needs of others. The passage is aptly summarized by James 3:16: “For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.” James highlights a particular practice that overcomes selfish ambition: peacemaking.<sup>[9]</sup> “A harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace” (James 3:18). In typical fashion, he alludes to a workplace — grain harvesting in this case — to make his point. He names several elements of peacemaking: grieving for the harm we do others (James 4:9), humbling ourselves (James 4:10), refraining from slander, accusation and judgment (James 4:11), and mercy and sincerity (James 3:17). All of these can and should be employed by Christians in the workplace.

### SELFISH AMBITION IS OVERCOME BY SUBMISSION TO GOD (JAMES 4:2-5)

Selfish ambition is causing quarrels and fights within the Christian community. James says the underlying cause is their failure to depend on God. “You covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures” (James 4:2-3). We fail to depend on God when we don’t even ask him for what we need. Interestingly, the reason we don’t depend on God is because we want to serve our own pleasures rather than serving others. This wraps the two principles into an integral unit. James states this metaphorically as an adulterous love affair with the world, by which he means the wealth and pleasure we are tempted to believe we can find in the world without God (James 4:4-5).<sup>[10]</sup>

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## Investing In Others (James 4:1-12)

Although James uses the metaphor of adultery, he is talking about selfish ambition in general. In the workplace one temptation is to use others as stepping stones to our own success. When we steal the credit for a subordinate’s or co-worker’s work, when we withhold information from a rival for promotion, when we shift the blame to someone not present to defend themselves, when we take advantage of someone in a difficult situation, we are guilty of selfish ambition. James is right that this is a chief source of quarrels. Ironically, selfish ambition may impede success rather than promote it. The higher your position in an organization, the more you depend on others for success. It can be as simple as delegating work to subordinates, or as complex as coordinating an international project team. But if you have a reputation for stepping on other people to get ahead, how can you expect others to trust and

follow your leadership?

The remedy lies in submitting to God, who created all people in his image (Genesis 1:27) and who sent his son to die for all (2 Corinthians 5:14). We submit to God whenever we put our ambition in the service of others ahead of ourselves. Do you want to rise to a position of authority and excellence? Good, begin by helping *other* workers increase their authority and excellence. Does success motivate you? Good, invest in the success of those around you. Ironically, investing in others' success may also turn out to be the best thing you can do for yourself. According to economists Elizabeth Dunn of the University of British Columbia and Michael Norton of Harvard Business School, investing in other people makes us happier than spending money on ourselves.<sup>[11]</sup>

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## Business Forecasting (James 4:13-17)

James moves to a new application in giving a warning specifically about business forecasting.<sup>[12]</sup> Somewhat unusually, he focuses first on the principle of trusting God. He opens with sobering words: "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money.' Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes." (James 4:13-14). It might seem that James is condemning even short-term business planning. However, planning ahead is not his concern. Imagining that you are in control of what happens is the problem.

The following verse helps us to see James's real point: "Instead, you ought to say, 'If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that'" (James 4:15). The problem is not planning; it is planning as if the future lies in our hands. We are responsible to use wisely the resources, abilities, connections, and time that God gives us. But we are not in control of the outcomes. Most businesses are well aware how unpredictable outcomes are, despite the best planning and execution that money can buy. The annual report of any publicly-traded corporation will feature a detailed section on risks the company faces, often running 10 or 20 pages. Statements such as, "Our stock price may fluctuate based on factors beyond our control," make it clear that secular corporations are highly attuned to the unpredictability James is talking about.

Why then does James have to remind believers of what ordinary businesses know so well? Perhaps believers sometimes delude themselves that following Christ will make them immune to the unpredictability of life and work. This is a mistake. Instead, James' words should make Christians more aware of the need to continually re-assess, adapt and adjust. Our plans should be flexible and our execution responsive to changing conditions. In one sense, this is simply good business practice. But in a deeper sense it is a spiritual matter, for we need to respond not only to market conditions, but to God's leading in our work. This brings us back to James' exhortation to listen with deep attention.

Christian leadership consists not in forcing others to comply with our plans and actions, but in adapting ourselves to God's word and God's unfolding guidance in our lives.

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## Business Oppression (James 5:1-6)

At this point James returns to the principle that work must serve the needs of others. His words in the beginning of chapter 5 are scathing. He warns "the rich" to "weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you" (James 5:1). While the gold in their vaults and the robes in their closets may look as shiny as ever, James is so certain of their coming judgment that he can speak as if their riches were already decomposing: "Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted" (James 5:2-3). Their self-indulgence has only succeeded in "fattening" them "for the day of slaughter" (James 5:5).[\[13\]](#)

These rich people are doomed both for how they acquired their wealth, and for what they did (or didn't do) with it once they had it. James echoes the Old Testament as he excoriates them for their unjust business practices: "Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts" (James 5:4; cf. Leviticus 19:13).[\[14\]](#) Money that should be in the hands of laborers sits instead in the treasuries of the landowners. And there it stays: they hoard their wealth and ignore the needy around them (James 5:3).

Business leaders must be especially diligent about paying their workers fairly. An analysis of what constitutes fair pay is beyond the scope of this article,[\[15\]](#) but James's words, "the wages you have kept back by fraud" (James 5:4) are an accusation of abuse of power on the part of these particular wealth landowners. The workers were owed wages, but the rich and powerful found a way out of paying them without incurring punishment by the legal system. The rich and powerful often have means to subvert the judiciary, and it's astonishingly easy to exercise unfair power without even recognizing it. Perhaps — as some claim — it is a sin to openly pay workers a wage that is too low to live on. But doubly sinful is the hidden abuse of power, say, to misclassify certain workers as independent contractors, or to inaccurately place them in a lower skill code in order to pay them less, or to pay women or minorities less for doing the same job as others. Misuse of power can never be excused just because it is a so-called standard practice.

James also condemns those who "have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure" (James 5:5). The question of what constitutes living in luxury and in pleasure is also complex, but it confronts many Christians in one way or another. An American Christian, for instance, might well justify having a retirement account, since this is one of the mechanisms American society employs to ensure that workers can sustain themselves after their income-generating days are over. But how much is enough? At what point does saving become hoarding?

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## Waiting for the Harvest (James 5:7-20)

James concludes his letter with a variety of exhortations on patience, truthfulness, prayer, confession and healing. As always, these appeal either to the principle that faithful works must benefit others or that it must be done in dependence on God, or both. And as usual, James makes direct applications to the workplace.

### PATIENCE

James begins with a workplace example to illustrate the looming return of Christ: “Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near” (James 5:7-8). He then echoes these words as he draws to a close: “Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest” (James 5:17-18).

Patience at work is a form of dependence on God. But patience is hard in the workplace. Work is done to obtain a result — otherwise it wouldn't be work — and there is always the temptation to grasp for the result without actually doing the work. If I'm investing to make money, wouldn't I like to get rich quick, rather than slow? That mentality leads to insider trading, Ponzi schemes and gambling away the grocery money at the slot machines. If I'm working to get promoted, shouldn't I position myself better in my supervisor's eyes by any means available? That leads to backstabbing, stealing credit, gossip and team disintegration. If I'm working to meet a quota, couldn't I meet it faster by doing lower-quality work and passing off the problems to the next person in the production chain? And these are not only problems of personal morality. A production system that rewards poor quality is as bad or worse than the worker who takes advantage of it.

### TRUTHFULNESS

“Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your ‘Yes’ be yes and your ‘No’ be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation” (James 5:12). Imagine a workplace in which people always told the truth. Not simply avoiding lying, but always saying whatever would give the hearer the most accurate understanding of the way things really are. There would be no need for oaths and swearing, no retroactive clarifications, no need for contract provisions defining who gets what in the case of misstatements or fraud. Imagine if sellers always provided maximally informative data about their products, contracts were always clear to all parties, and bosses always gave accurate credit to their subordinates. Imagine if *you* always gave answers that communicated as accurate a picture as possible, rather than subtly concealing unflattering information about your work.

Could you succeed in your present job or career? Could you succeed if everyone became maximally truthful? Do you need to change your definition of success?[\[16\]](#)

#### PRAYER

James returns to the principle of dependence on God in his discussion of prayer. “Are any among you suffering? They should pray” (James 5:13). “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God” (James 1:5). James is inviting us to get very specific with God. “God, I don’t know how to handle this production failure, and I need your help before I go talk to my boss.” God is able to accomplish what we need, though he does not guarantee to answer every prayer exactly as we expect. Many Christians seem strangely reluctant to pray about the specific issues, situations, persons, needs, fears and questions we encounter every day at work. We forget James’ exhortation to ask for specific guidance and even particular outcomes. Have faith, says James. God will answer you in the real situations of life. “Ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you” (James 1:5).

#### CONFESSION AND HEALING

James exhorts us to confess our sins to one another, so that we may be healed (James 5:16). The most interesting words for the workplace are “to one another.” The assumption is that people sin against each other, not just against God, and at work that is certainly the case. We face daily pressure to produce and perform, and have limited time to act, so we often act without listening, marginalize those who disagree, compete unfairly, hog resources, leave a mess for the next person to clean up and take out our frustrations on co-workers. We wound and get wounded. The only way to be healed is to confess our sins *to one another*. If I just shot down your promotion by inaccurately criticizing your performance, I’ve got to confess it to you at work, not just to God in my prayer time. I may have to confess it to the rest of the department, too, if I’m really going to heal the damage.

What is our motivation for confession and healing? So that we may serve the needs of others. “Whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will *save the sinner's soul from death*” (James 5:20, emphasis added). Saving someone from death is serving a very deep need! And perhaps — since we are all sinners — someone else will save us from death by turning us from the error of our ways.

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## 1 Peter - Serving the World as Resident Alien Priests

Writing to a group of Christians who are being slandered, falsely accused, and perhaps even physically abused because of their allegiance to Jesus (1 Peter 2:12, 18-20; 3:13-17; 4:4, 14, 19), Peter explains how Christians are called to transform their suffering into service to the world. Christ has called us to follow him in a world that does not recognize him. We are resident aliens in this strange land, which is not yet our true home. Therefore, we are bound to experience “various trials” (1 Peter 1:6). Yet we are

not victims of the world, but servants to the world — “a holy priesthood” as Peter puts it (1 Peter 2:5) — bringing God’s blessings to the world. The job of the Christian, then, is to live in this alien land, blessing it until Christ returns and restores the territory to his kingdom.

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## Resident Aliens and Priests (1 Peter 1:1-2:12)

In the opening line of his letter, Peter addresses his readers as “exiles...who have been chosen” (1 Peter 1:1), a phrase which foreshadows Peter’s entire message. This phrase has two parts: “exiles” and “chosen.”

If you are a citizen of Christ’s kingdom, you are an exile because at present the world around you is not under Christ’s rule. You are living under foreign rule. While you await Christ’s return, your true citizenship in his kingdom is “kept in heaven for you” (1 Peter 1:4). Like exiles in any country, you do not necessarily enjoy the favor of the rulers of the land where you live. Christ came to this land himself, but was “rejected by mortals” (1 Peter 2:4); all citizens of his kingdom should expect the same treatment. Nonetheless, God has called us to stay here, to reside in this alien land while conducting the work of Christ (1 Peter 1:15-17).

Although couched in a political metaphor, Peter’s discussion rings with workplace terminology: “deeds” (1 Peter 1:17), “silver or gold” (1 Peter 1:18), “tested by fire” (1 Peter 1:7), “purified” (1 Peter 1:22), “built into a...house” (1 Peter 2:5). Peter’s workplace terms remind us that we live in a world of work, and we have to find a way of following Christ in the midst of the working world around us.

Having described what it means to be “exiles,” Peter takes up the other term from 1 Peter 1:1 — “chosen.” If you’re a Christian, you have been chosen by God. For what purpose? To be one of God’s priests in the foreign country you inhabit. “Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5). The title of priest is repeated in 1 Peter 2:9 (“royal priesthood”).

### PRIESTS IN ANCIENT ISRAEL OFFER SACRIFICES AND BLESSINGS FOR ISRAEL

Before continuing, we must understand what it meant to be a priest in ancient Israel. Priests performed two chief functions: offering sacrifices in the Temple in Jerusalem and pronouncing the priestly blessing.<sup>[17]</sup> In order to perform their duty of offering sacrifices, priests had to be able to enter the inner portions of the Temple and — once a year, in the case of the high priest — to stand in the Holy of Holies before the divine presence. In order to say the priestly blessing, priests had to speak for God himself. Both of these duties required priests to enter God’s presence. This in turn required exceptional purity or holiness, since God’s presence cannot abide anything impure or polluted.<sup>[18]</sup> Yet priests served part-time according to a rotation system (Luke 1:8) and had ordinary jobs as their chief means

of livelihood. They could not sequester themselves from daily life, but had to maintain purity despite the dirt and corruption of the world. (Click [here](#) for more on priests in ancient Israel in *Numbers and Work*.)

#### CHRISTIANS AS PRIESTS OFFER SELF-SACRIFICE AND BLESSINGS FOR OTHERS IN NEED

##### **Don Flow, CEO Of Flow Automotive, On Priesthood At Work**

A priest bears the burdens of people by absorbing those burdens and bringing them before God and bringing God's blessing to the people. Paul made it clear that to fulfill the law of Christ meant to bear each other's burdens. Both John and Peter call us a "Kingdom of Priests." As Christian leaders, we must lean into the burdens of the people in our organizations. This means that we must genuinely know the people with whom we work. For Christian leaders, who a person is and what they do are fully integrated.

People cannot be reduced to instruments of production.

Christian leadership requires that prayer be fully integrated into the life of work. The whole world groans with the burden of the fall and it is our calling to participate in the healing of this world. In prayer, we can lift the burdens of others before God and we can bring God's refreshing touch to the world. I believe we are called to pray for the people with whom we interact every day, for His in-breaking into our day, that our organization would be a blessing, that it would do good, that it would be a positive force for shalom, and for God's blessing, which is the source of all abundance in this world. Prayer is central to the calling of leadership.

*Talk given at Seattle Pacific University, October 2008*

So for Peter to call Christians "a holy priesthood" (1 Peter 2:5) and "a royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9)

does *not* mean that all Christians should think of themselves as professional pastors. It does not mean that becoming an evangelist or missionary is the highest way of fulfilling God’s call to be chosen people. It means that Christians are to live lives of exceptional purity in the midst of whatever our livelihoods are. Only so can we offer sacrifices to God and blessings from God on behalf of the people around us. Peter states this directly: “Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge” (1 Peter 2:11-12). (Notice the concern to glorify God’s presence “when he comes to judge.”)

Of course, Christians do not perform the same sacrifice as Jewish priests. We do not slaughter animals. Instead, we perform the kind of sacrifice our Lord did: self-sacrifice for the benefit of others in need. “To this you have been called,” Peter says, “because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps” (1 Peter 2:21). This is not to be taken over-literally as death on a cross, but is to be understood as “spiritual sacrifices” (1 Peter 2:5) — meaning acts performed at the expense of self for the benefit of others in need (1 Peter 4:10). Our workplaces offer daily opportunities for self-sacrifices — small or large.

This brief survey of 1 Peter 1:3-2:10 fills out the picture Peter paints when he calls his readers “exiles...who have been chosen.” The term “exiles” means that we live out this vocation as resident aliens in a land that is yet to be our home — a place that is characterized by systemic injustice and corruption. The term “chosen” affirms that followers of Jesus — a “royal priesthood” — have the priest’s vocation to be a blessing to the world, especially through self-sacrifice.

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## Suffering Under the World’s Authorities (1 Peter 2:13-4:19)

### **David Hataj, CEO, Egerton Gear, Inc., on non-judgmental corporate culture change**

I returned home after 8 years to assume leadership of my father’s gear manufacturing company. To my eyes, the business was in trouble. Relationships on the shop floor were tense and deliveries to customers were often late or defective. The problems might have been related to the copious quantities of alcohol consumed by the employees, led by the CEO, my father. There was always a quarter barrel of beer in the break room, and a group accompanied my dad to the local bar every day at lunch to get a start on the day’s drinking.

As a believer, I objected to these behaviors, but I sensed God’s call to come back to the family business to be a blessing to my parents and the employees. It was an opportunity to be a witness for Christ’s love, forgiveness and redemption. I treated every employee with compassion and respect. I instituted more effective manufacturing processes and quality control. The business started turning around.

But I received harsh treatment by my father’s drinking buddies. I was ridiculed for not getting drunk. Rather than defending myself and retaliating, I strove to follow Jesus’ example as the suffering servant. When cursed, I tried to bless. When ridiculed, I quietly went about my job without condemning. Although I had major disagreements with my father, I always tried to show him honor and respect.

The experience turned into my own personal hell. But over the course of several years, the tide began to turn. Fewer people hung around after work for free beer. Some employees left the company, while others begin to embrace the new values. A sign of the mantle of leadership being passed to me came one day as my dad (not me) removed the beer barrel.

In this situation, my calling as a resident alien and priest could only be incarnated with a posture of humility and self-sacrifice.  
- Letter to the Theology of Work Project, Aug., 19, 2010



What might it look like for Christians to exercise our calling as resident aliens and priests in the work environment? Peter addresses this directly in instructions to his readers as foreigners and slaves. As foreigners, we are to honor and submit to the civil rule of whatever country we find ourselves in (1 Peter 2:13-14), even though our citizenship in God's kingdom entitles us to live as "free people" (1 Peter 2:16). As slaves — which apparently constituted a large segment of Peter's readers, since he does not address any other class of workers — we should submit ourselves to our masters, whether they treat us justly or unjustly (1 Peter 2:18-19). In fact, unjust treatment is to be expected (1 Peter 4:12) and it offers us an opportunity to follow in Christ's footsteps by suffering without retaliating (1 Peter 2:21). Notice that James is talking about suffering unjustly, not suffering from the consequences of your own incompetence, arrogance, ignorance, etc. Of course, you need to suffer obediently when receiving just punishment.

In practical terms, you are not free to disobey those in authority even in order to get what you think is rightfully yours. You will surely find yourself in situations where you don't get what you deserve — a promotion, a raise, an office with a window, a decent health care plan. You may even find your employer actively cheating you, forcing you to work off the clock, punishing you for your boss's errors. It might seem ethical to cheat your employer just enough to make up what you were cheated out of — calling in sick when you're not, charging personal items to the company, stealing office supplies or goofing off on company time. But no, "It is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil" (1 Peter 3:17). God does not give you the option to take back what was wrongfully taken from you. The fact that you lied to or cheated someone to make up for how they lied to or cheated you, does not make your action less evil. Your call is to do right, even in a hostile work environment (1 Peter 2:20). "Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult" (1 Peter 3:9). Instead, Christians should treat those in authority — even harsh and unjust masters — with respect and honor.

Why? Because our vocation as priests is to bless people, and we can't do that while defending ourselves, just as Christ could not die for the salvation of the world while defending himself (1 Peter 2:21-25). Christ, of course, was not afraid to exercise power and challenge authority in certain circumstances, and Peter is not claiming to recapitulate the entire Gospel here. Other parts of the Bible — especially the Prophets — emphasize God's call to resist oppressive and illegitimate authority. And submission doesn't always mean obedience. We can submit to authority by disobeying openly and accepting the consequences, as Jesus himself did. Here and throughout the epistle, Peter draws us almost exclusively to the self-sacrifice of Christ as a model.

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## Instructions for Leaders and Followers (1 Peter 5)

Peter now gives instructions for church leaders, termed "elders" ("presbyters" and "bishops" in the

Anglicized Greek derivations used in many churches today). The advice is good for workplace leaders, too. It focuses on serving others. “Tend the flock of God...willingly [and] eagerly” (1 Peter 5:2). Don’t be greedy for money (1 Peter 5:2). Don’t lord it over others, but be an example for others to emulate (1 Peter 5:3). Peter advises humility to the young — in fact, to everyone — when he quotes Proverbs 3:34, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (1 Peter 5:5). These are not unique to 1 Peter, and we will not expand on them here. It is enough to remember that the concept of servant leadership, circulating widely in today’s workplace, is well-known to Peter. How could it be otherwise, since Jesus is the servant leader par excellence (1 Peter 4:1-2, 6)?

For an application of this passage, see “Learn from Your Customers” at [Country Supply Study Guide](#) by clicking [here](#).

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## 2 Peter - Work and New Creation

Second Peter reinforces many of the themes we have seen in James and 1 Peter concerning the need for holy living and endurance in suffering. We will not repeat these, but instead discuss only chapter 3, which raises a profound challenge to a theology of work. If “the present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the godless” (2 Peter 3:7), what is the value of our work in the present day? To borrow the title of Darrell Cosden’s important book, what is the heavenly good of earthly work?[19]

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### The End of the World and the End of Work? (2 Peter 3:1-18)

Does our earthly work matter to God? Darrell Cosden has given a resounding “yes” to that question. Central to his argument is the bodily resurrection of Jesus, which (1) affirms the goodness of the material world, (2) demonstrates that there is continuity between the present world and new creation, [20] and (3) is a sign that new creation, while not fully realized, has been initiated. Our work is ultimately valuable because the fruits of our labor, having been redeemed and transformed, will have a home in heaven. But chapter 3 seems to call into question two integral aspects of Cosden’s theology of work: (1) the inherent goodness of created matter, and (2) the continuity between this present world and the world to come, the new creation.

Peter is responding here to lawless scoffers who claimed that God would not intervene in history to judge evil (2 Peter 3:3-4). He appears to describe a future that lacks all continuity with the present world; instead, it looks like the annihilation of the cosmos:

(1) “The present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the godless.” (2 Peter 3:7)

(2) “The heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.” (2 Peter 3:10)

(3) “All these things are to be dissolved.” (2 Peter 3:11)

(4) “The heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire.” (2 Peter 3:12)

But we should not be too quick to assume that annihilation is really in view here.<sup>[21]</sup> Peter is using the end-times imagery commonly found in Old Testament prophetic oracles to assure his readers of God’s impending judgment. The Old Testament prophets and Second Temple Jewish literature regularly employed fire imagery metaphorically to refer to both the purging of the righteous and the destruction of all evil.<sup>[22]</sup>

A truly apocalyptic<sup>[23]</sup> reading of 2 Peter 2:7, 10, and 2 Peter 3:12, then, would understand the fire and melting imagery as a metaphor for the process in which God separates good from evil.<sup>[24]</sup> This is how Peter uses fire imagery in his first letter, reminding his readers that, like gold, they too will be tested through fire; those who make it through the fire will be praised and honored by God (1 Pet 1:5-7). These passages stress not that the heavens and the earth will be literally annihilated, but rather that all evil will be utterly consumed. Likewise, Peter carefully describes the world in terms of transformation and testing: “dissolved,” “melt with fire,” “judgment,” “reserved for fire.” Douglas Moo points out that the word Peter uses for “dissolved” in 2 Peter 3:10-12, *luō*, does not connote annihilation, but instead speaks to radical transformation. He suggests that an alternate translation might be “undone.”<sup>[25]</sup>

Peter’s reference to the flood of Noah’s time (2 Peter 3:5-6) should caution us against reading “deluged” to mean total annihilation. The world did not cease to exist, but was purified of all humanity’s wickedness. Humanity’s goodness — limited to Noah, his family, their possessions and their work of tending the animals on board — was preserved, and life resumed on the physical earth.

Finally, Peter’s positive vision of the ultimate future describes a renewal of the material order: “But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home” (2 Peter 3:13). This is no thin, disembodied netherworld, but a new cosmos that contains both a “heaven” and an “earth.” In 2 Peter 3:10 we read that “The earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.” Disclosed, not destroyed. Thus even after the burning, “works” will remain.

This is not to say that 2 Peter is the chief source for the theology of the eternal value of present work, but only that 2 Peter is consistent with such a theology.<sup>[26]</sup> While we may not receive as much detail as we would want, clearly for Peter there is some sort of continuity between what we do on earth now and what we will experience in the future. All evil will be utterly consumed, but all that is righteous will find a permanent home in the new creation. Fire not only consumes, it purges. The dissolution does not

signal the end of work. Rather, work done for God finds its true end in the new heavens and new earth.

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## 1 John - Walking in the Light

Much like James, 1 John challenges the notion that faith can live without “works,” that is, acts of obedience towards God.<sup>[27]</sup> In Chapter two, John states that genuine knowledge of God is manifested by transformed character and behavior, epitomized in obedience to God:

Now by this we may be sure that we know him, if we obey his commandments. Whoever says, ‘I have come to know him,’ but does not obey his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist; but whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection. By this we may be sure that we are in him: whoever says, ‘I abide in him,’ ought to walk just as he walked. (1 John 2.3-6)

Again in keeping with James, 1 John regards caring for those in need as one expression of genuine knowledge of God. “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” (1 John 3:17) First John takes us one step further in understanding the relationship between faith and works, or, to use John’s terms, between knowledge of God and obedience.

Using a variety of images, John explains that our obedience to God indicates, and is the result of, a prior reality variously described as passing from darkness to light (1 John 2:8-11), being loved by God (1 John 3:16; 4:7-10, 16, 19-20), being born of God or made children of God (1 John 2:29; 3:1-2; 8-9), or passing from death to life (1 John 3:14). According to John, right living is first and foremost a result and response to God’s love towards us:

Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 John 4.7-10)

John describes the result of this process as the ability to “walk in the light as he himself is in the light” (1 John 1:7). God’s love through Jesus atoning sacrifice brings us into a qualitatively different kind of existence whereby we are able to see and walk in keeping with God’s will for our lives. We don’t merely turn on the light once in a while. We walk in the light continually, as a new way of life.

This has immediate significance to workplace ethics. In recent years, there has been increasing attention to “virtue ethics” after a long history of neglect in Protestant thought and practice.<sup>[28]</sup> Virtue ethics focuses on the long-term formation of moral character, rather than on formulating rules and calculating consequences of immediate decisions. Not that rules or commands are irrelevant — “For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments” (1 John 5:3) — but that long-term moral formation underlies obedience to the rules. A full discussion is beyond the scope of this article,<sup>[29]</sup> but John’s concept of walking in the light as a way of life certainly commends the virtue approach. What we do (our “works”) springs inevitably from who we are becoming (our virtues). “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19) and we are becoming like him (1 John 3:2).

One specific application of the light metaphor is that we should be open and transparent in our workplace actions. We should welcome scrutiny of our actions, rather than trying to hide our actions from the light of day. We could never defraud investors, falsify quality records, gossip about co-workers, or extort bribes while walking in the light. In this sense, 1 John 1:7 echoes the Gospel of John 3:20-21, “All who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”<sup>[30]</sup>

For example, Rob Smith heads a business-in-mission organization in Africa that builds boats for use on Lake Victoria. He says he is frequently approached by local officials who want him to pay a bribe. The request is always made in secret. It is not a documented, open payment, as is a tip or an expediting fee for faster service. There are no receipts and the transaction is not recorded anywhere. He has used John 3:20-21 as an inspiration to draw these requests into the light. He will say to the official requesting the bribe, “I don’t know much about these kinds of payments. I would like to bring in the ambassador, or the management, to get this documented.” He has found this to be a helpful strategy to dealing with bribery. Although it is widely believed that bribery is an effective—albeit unethical—means of increasing market share and profit, research by George Serafeim at Harvard Business School indicates the paying bribes actually decreases a company’s financial performance in the long term.<sup>[31]</sup>

In a related manner, 1 John underscores that we don’t need full-time jobs in ministry to do meaningful work in God’s kingdom. While most Christians don’t have jobs where they get paid to do the so-called “spiritual” tasks of preaching and evangelism, all Christians can walk in the light by obeying God in their actions (1 John 3:18-19, 24). All such actions come from God’s prior love, and thus are deeply spiritual and meaningful. Thus, non-church work has value, not only because it is a place where you may get a chance to evangelize, or because the wages you earn can go towards funding missions, but because it is a place where you can embody fellowship with Christ by serving others around you. Work is an highly practical way of loving your neighbor because work is where you create products and services that meet the needs of people nearby and far away. Work is a spiritual calling.

In this sense, 1 John brings us full circle back to James. Both stress that acts of obedience are integral to the Christian life, and indicate how this factors into a theology of work. We are able to obey God, at work and elsewhere, because we are becoming like Christ, who laid down his life for the benefit of others in need.

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## 2 John and Work

The Second Letter of John fits into the overall framework of the General Epistles, while offering its own insights about life and work in Christ. It is short, but full of practical instruction.

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### Truthfulness (2 John 1-11)

#### TRUTH AND LOVE AT WORK (2 JOHN 1-6)

Each of John's letters is notable for bringing the concepts "truth" and "love" together into a single idea (1 John 3:18; 2 John 1, 3; 3 John 3). Here in 2 John, we find the most extended development of this idea.

Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, in truth and love. I was overjoyed to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we have been commanded by the Father. But now, dear lady, I ask you, not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but one we have had from the beginning, let us love one another. (2 John 3-5)

According to John, love plus truth equals an environment in which "grace, mercy and peace will be with us."

Regrettably, we often act as though grace, mercy, and peace depend on love *minus* truth. We may hide or shade uncomfortable truths in our communications with others at work in the misguided belief that telling the truth would not be loving. Or we may fear that telling the truth will lead to conflict or ill will, rather than grace or peace. Thinking we are being merciful, we fail to tell the truth.

But love must always begin with the truth. Love comes to us through Christ, and Christ is the perfect embodiment of the truth of God. That is to say, God knows the way things really are, and he wraps his knowledge in love and brings it to us through his Son. So if we are ever to love as God loves, we must begin with the truth, not with falsity, evasion, or fairy tales. It is true that telling the truth may lead to conflict or upset feelings—ours or others'. But genuine grace, mercy and peace come from facing

reality and working through difficulties to genuine resolutions.

Jack Welch, a former CEO of General Electric (USA), was a controversial figure due in part for his practice of giving truthful, candid performance reviews. He let employees know on a monthly basis how well they were meeting expectations. Once a year he told them whether they were top performers, middle performers who needed to improve in specific areas, or bottom performers who were in danger of losing their jobs.<sup>[32]</sup> Some may regard this as harsh, but Welch regarded it as loving:

I've come to learn that the worst kind of manager is the one who practices false kindness. I tell people, You think you're a *nice* manager, that you're a *kind* manager? Well, guess what? You won't be there someday. You'll be promoted. Or you'll retire. And a new manager will come in and look at the employee and say, "Hey, you're not that good." And all of a sudden, this employee is now fifty-three or fifty-five, with many fewer options in life. And *now* you're gonna tell him, "Go home"? How is that kind? You're the *cruelest* kind of manager.<sup>[33]</sup>

## THE COST OF TRUTHFULNESS (2 JOHN 7-11)

"Many deceivers have gone out into the world," John reminds us (2 John 7), and telling the truth can bring us into conflict with those who benefit from deception. Do we choose to tell the truth despite opposition, or do we participate in the deception? If we choose deception, we had better at least admit that we are no longer honest people. See "[You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor \(Deut 5:20; Ex 20:16\)](#)" for more on this topic.

Ed Moy, later to become the head of the U.S. Mint, tells the story of his first job out of college. When he started the job, he had to fill out an expense report for his use of the company car, identifying his personal use of the car and separating this from his company use. The practice in the office had been had been to list personal use only for the travel from home to work, claiming the rest as company use even if the purpose of the trip was personal. When Ed honestly broke out his personal use, his boss almost fired him, explaining, "We are underpaid, and this is our way to gain more income. Your report will make the rest of us look bad." Ed respectfully said, "You can fire me if that is what you need to do. But would you really want someone working for you who would lie over such a small thing? How could you trust that person when the stakes were higher?" Ed kept his job, though the transition was a bit difficult!<sup>[34]</sup>

What are we to do about relationships with deceitful people and false teachers? Ed's example suggests that breaking off contact is not necessarily the best solution. We may be able to do more for the cause of truth and love by remaining engaged and telling the truth in the midst of deception than by leaving

the scene. Besides, if we broke contact with everyone who ever practiced deception, would anyone be left, even ourselves?

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## The value of in-person communications (2 John 12-13)

John ends the letter by saying that he wants to continue the conversation in person. “Although I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink; instead I hope to come to you and talk with you face to face” (2 John 12). Perhaps he realizes that whatever else he has to communicate could be misunderstood if presented in the impersonal medium of writing a letter. This gives us a valuable insight about sensitive communications—some things are better said in person, even if distance makes it difficult to see one another face-to-face.

In 21<sup>st</sup> century workplaces we find even more complex challenges to personal communication. Remote communications choices today include video conferencing, telephone, texting, letter, email, social media, and many other variations. But effective communications still requires matching the medium to the nature of the message. Email might be the most effective medium for placing an order, for example, but probably not for communicating a performance review. The more complicated or emotionally challenging the message, the more immediate and personal the medium needs to be.

Pat Gelsinger, former senior vice president at Intel Corporation says,

I have a personal rule. If I go back and forth with somebody in email more than four or five times on the same topic, I stop. No more. We get on the phone, or we get together face to face. I have learned that if you don't resolve something quickly, by the time you get together one of you is mad at the other person. You think they are incompetent since they could not understand the most straightforward thing that you were describing. But it is because of the medium, and it is important to account for this. [35]

The wrong medium for a particular communication can easily lead to misunderstanding, which is failure to transmit the truth. And the wrong medium can also get in the way of showing love. So choosing the right medium for communication is an essential aspect of communicating truth and showing love to people we work with. We need to communicate with respect and compassion, even in difficult conversations, and especially when we communicate with people we don't like very much. Sometimes this means meeting face-to-face, even if it is inconvenient or uncomfortable.

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## 3 John and Work



Like 2 John, 3 John is so short that is not divided into chapters. Nonetheless, it contains two passages applicable to work.

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## Gossip (3 John 1-12)

John addresses the letter to a “co-worker” (2 John 8) named Gaius. John demonstrates a personal touch when he says, “I pray that all may go well with you, and that you may be in good health, just as it is well with your soul” (3 John 2). He pays attention to his co-worker’s body (health) and soul. By itself, this is an important lesson for the workplace, not to see colleagues merely as workers but as whole people.

John then offers himself as an example of someone who is not being treated well in his work. A member of the congregation named Diotrophes has been trying to undermine our authority, John says, by “spreading false charges against us” (3 John 10). In all three of his letters, John’s primary concern has been bringing together truth and love (3 John 1). Diotrophes is doing the complete opposite, speaking falsely in hate. You can almost feel John’s pain as he says—to use the more dramatic translation of the New International Version—“I will call attention to what he is doing, gossiping maliciously about us” (3 John 10, NIV).

It is doubly painful that Diotrophes is a believer. This reminds us that being a Christian does not by itself make us perfect. No doubt Diotrophes thinks of himself in the right. What we recognize as false gossip, he may well consider simply warning others so they can protect themselves.

When we give our opinion of others in our places of work, do we ever make unfavorable impressions about ourselves or others? One simple test would help us see ourselves as others see us. Would we talk about someone the same way if he or she were in the room? If not, we are very likely giving a false impression of the person we’re speaking about, as well as giving a bad impression about ourselves. John, while he has a complaint about Diotrophes, is not gossiping. He knows that his letter will be read aloud in the church, so his complaint will be in the open for Diotrophes to hear and respond to.

Giving his opponent an opportunity to respond to his complaint is an essential element of John’s combining of truth and love. He believes that his complaint against Diotrophes is true, yet he recognizes that his opponent deserves an opportunity to explain or defend himself. How different from the kind of trial-by-press campaigns conducted by many public figures today, in which insinuations are spread through the mass media, where there is no opportunity to respond on the same scale.

This principle applies not only to how we speak of individuals, but also groups. To collectively denigrate others is as bad as, if not worse than, gossiping or slandering an individual. Virtually every kind of unjust treatment of people at work begins by casting them as members of an inferior or dangerous

group. If the accusation against someone in our sphere of work is that he or she is one of “them,” this signals our opportunity to speak up for getting to the truth of the matter, rather than settling for prejudice and guilt-by-association.

John’s commendation of Demetrius, the brother carrying the letter, is also interesting. John uses his influence as a leader in the church to raise up Demetrius to Gaius and his church. John commends Demetrius for both his life of truth and the respect given him by fellow believers. Leaders in the workplace can use their power and influence effectively toward the end of truth, justice, love, and mercy, even when the gospel is not outwardly acknowledged.

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### Greet People by Name (3 John 13-15)

The letter ends with the same thought that concludes 2 John. John has things to communicate that would be better said face to face than in pen and ink (3 John 13-14). But there is a twist in 3 John that offers another insight for our daily work. At the very end, John adds, “Greet the friends there, each by name.” Speaking a person’s name adds further to the personal touch that John recognizes is needed in communications.

Many of us come face to face with hundreds of people in the course of our work. To some degree, we need to communicate with each of them, even if only to avoid knocking into each other in the hallway. How many of them do we know well enough to greet by name? Do you know your boss’s boss’s boss’s name? Probably. Do you know the name of the person who empties the trash in your workplace? Do you greet people by name when you are in conflict with them? Do you learn the names of newcomers to the organization who may need your help at some point? The names you bother to learn and those you don’t can reveal a lot about your level of respect and compassion for people. John cares enough to greet “each” person by name.

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### Jude

The brief letter of Jude paints a startling picture of one very dysfunctional workplace: a church blighted by ungodly leaders. Some of the problems are unique to churches, such as denying Jesus Christ (Jude 4) and heresy (“Korah’s rebellion,” Jude 8). Others could occur in a secular workplace: rejection of authority, slander (Jude 8), violence (“the way of Cain”) and greed (“Balaam’s error,” Jude 8).<sup>[36]</sup> The worst abuses are perpetrated by leaders who gorge themselves at the expense of their flocks. “They feast with you without fear. They are shepherds who care only for themselves” (Jude 12, NRSV alt. reading). Jude’s words apply equally to greedy church leaders misappropriating a church fund for their own pleasures, or greedy executives plundering a corporate pension fund to prop up reported profits (and thus, their bonuses), or office workers surfing the web on company time.

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In the face of all this evil, Jude gives a command as surprising in the workplace as in the church: have mercy. “Have mercy on some who are wavering; save others by snatching them out of the fire; and have mercy on still others with fear, hating even the tunic defiled by their bodies” (Jude 22-23). Jude is not afraid to take strong action against evil. His mercy is not soft or weak, as his images of fire, fear, and defiled bodies indicate. Jude’s mercy is severe. But it is mercy nonetheless, for its hope is not merely to punish the offenders, but to save them.

This severe mercy may be what some workplace situations require. Someone who commits fraud, or harasses other workers, or lies to customers cannot be let off lightly. That only leads to greater evil. But neither can discipline turn into mere revenge. In Christ’s eyes, no person is beyond hope. The godly leader treats each person with respect, and tries to discern what kind of discipline might lead them back into the fold.

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## Conclusions from the General Epistles

The General Epistles begin with the twin principles that following Christ makes us able to trust God for our provision, and that trusting God for our provision leads us to work for the benefit of others in need. These principles underlie a variety of practical instructions for life at work (especially in James) and theological insights for understanding the place of work in the life of faith.

This raises two questions for us: 1.) Do we believe these principles, and 2.) Are we in fact applying them in our work lives?

### Do We Believe the Two Principles?

We see countless situations in our workplaces. Some cast doubt on whether God can be trusted for our provision. Others affirm it. We all know people who seemed to trust God but didn’t get what they needed. People lose jobs, houses, retirement savings, even life itself. On the other hand, we receive good things we could never have expected and never have caused to happen ourselves. A new opportunity arises, a small thing we did leads to a big success, an investment works out well, a stranger provides for our needs. Is it true that we can trust God to provide what we truly need? The General Epistles call us to wrestle with this deep question until we have a firm answer. This could mean wrestling with it for a lifetime. Yet that would be better than ignoring it.

The principle that we should work primarily for the benefit of others in need is likewise questionable. It is at odds with the basic assumption of economics: that all workers act primarily to increase their own wealth. It clashes with society’s prevailing attitude about work: “Look out for Number One.” We demand proof (if we have the power to do so) that we are being paid adequately. Do we equally demand proof that our work benefits others adequately?

## Are We Applying the Two Principles in Our Work?

We can assess our level of trust in God's provision by examining the things we do to provide for ourselves. Do we hoard knowledge to make ourselves indispensable? Do we require employment contracts or golden parachutes to feel secure in our future? Do we come to work in fear of being laid off? Do we obsess over work and neglect our families and communities? Do we hold on to an ill-fitting job, despite humiliation, anger, poor performance and even health problems, because we are afraid there may be nothing else for us? There are no rigid rules, and some or all of these actions may be wise and appropriate in certain situations (obsession excepted). But what does the pattern of what we do at work say about our degree of trust in God for our provision?

The most powerful measure of our trust in God, however, is not what we do for ourselves, but what we do for others. Do we help others around us to do well at work, even though they might get ahead of us? Do we risk our positions to stand up for our co-workers, customers, suppliers and others who are powerless or in need? Do we choose — within whatever scope of choice we may have — to work in ways that benefit others in need as much as ways that benefit ourselves.

We need to hold ourselves and others highly accountable for applying these principles to our work every day, as the letter of Jude reminds us. Obeying God's word is not a matter of religious sensibilities but of flesh-and-bone consequences for ourselves and those affected by our work. Yet accountability leads us not towards judgmentalism, but towards a merciful heart.

The General Epistles challenge us to re-conceptualize our notion of not only of work, but of who it is we're working for. If we trust God to provide for our needs, then we can work for him and not for ourselves. When we work for God, we serve others. When we serve others, we bring God's blessing into a world in which we live as members of society, yet citizens of another kingdom. God's blessings brought into the world through our work become God's next steps in transforming the world to become our true home. Therefore as we work "in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home" (2 Peter 3:13)

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## Key Verses and Themes in the General Epistles

<p><b>James 2:15-16</b> If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?</p> <p><b>James 2:26</b> For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.</p> <p><b>1 John 3:18-19</b> Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him.</p> <p><b>James 3:16</b> For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.</p>		Key principle of serving others instead of self.
<p><b>James 1:17</b> Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.</p>		Key principle of depending on God
<p><b>James 1:19</b> Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.</p> <p><b>James 1:26</b> If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.</p>		Listening and avoiding harsh speech
<p><b>James 2:9</b> But if you show partiality, you commit sin.</p>		Not showing favoritism
<p><b>James 4:13-14</b> Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money." Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring.</p>		Acknowledgment that we are not the source of our own success
<p><b>James 5:4</b> Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.</p>		Just labor and wage practices

<p><b>James 5:8</b> You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.</p>		Patience
<p><b>James 5:12</b> Let your "Yes" be yes and your "No" be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.</p>		Truthfulness
<p><b>James 5:13</b> Are any among you suffering? They should pray. <b>James 1:5</b> If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.</p>		Prayer for specific needs
<p><b>James 5:16</b> Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.</p>		Confessing to others and forgiving others
<p><b>1 Peter 2:13-14</b> For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right.</p>		Obedience to civil authorities
<p><b>1 Peter 2:18-19</b> Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh. For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly.</p>		Obedience to workplace authorities
<p><b>1 Peter 4:12</b> Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.</p>		Expecting adversity due to following Christ

<p><b>1 Peter 2:20</b> If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval.</p>		Enduring suffering
<p><b>1 Peter 3:9</b> Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called — that you might inherit a blessing.</p>		Eschewing retaliation
<p><b>1 Peter 5:2-3</b> Tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it — not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock.</p>		Servant leadership
<p><b>2 Peter 3:13</b> But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.</p>		Eternal life in a new earth, cleansed of evil
<p><b>1 John 1:7</b> But if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.  <b>1 John 3:2</b> When he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.</p>		Personal transformation as the foundation of ethics
<p><b>Jude 12</b> They feast with you without fear. They are shepherds who care only for themselves. (NRSV alt. reading).</p>		Accountability of leaders
<p><b>Jude 22-23</b> Have mercy on some who are wavering; save others by snatching them out of the fire; and have mercy on still others with fear, hating even the tunic defiled by their bodies.</p>		Mercy and accountability not mutually exclusive

## ENDNOTES

- [1] When James refers to work (Greek *ergon*), he generally uses the plural (Greek *erga*), typically translated as “works,” “deeds,” or “actions.” In this article we explore work and workplaces in general from what James says about specific works/deeds/actions. We recognize that James is not a how-to book about work or the workplace in the modern sense. But we believe that what he says about works/deeds/actions has specific implications for today’s work and workplaces.
- [2] This is especially likely if the author of the letter is James the brother of Jesus, which is the traditional ascription and remains widely accepted. Among the most recent noted scholars to argue this position are Richard Bauckham and Luke Timothy Johnson.
- [3] Interview by William Messenger on July 29, 2010 in Hong Kong. Name of source withheld by request.
- [4] See Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon entry Greek #2041 and Theological Dictionary of the New Testament Volume 6, page 635, entry 2240.
- [5] Luke Timothy Johnson, “The Letter of James” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. XII (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 177.
- [6] For a discussion of how this understanding of faith squares with that of Paul, see Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 37-43, 118-144.
- [7] This is likely an allusion to Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount/Plain (Matthew 5:3/Luke 6:20).
- [8] To give one example, the first result on the Harvard Business School Publications website [www.harvardbusiness.org](http://www.harvardbusiness.org) on Sept. 18, 2009, browsing under the topic, “Interpersonal Skills” is “Listening to People.”
- [9] Again echoing the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:9).
- [10] James borrows the metaphor of adultery from the Old Testament prophets, who frequently used it to depict the pursuit of wealth and pleasure as substitutes for God.
- [11] Elizabeth Dunn and Michael Norton, *Happy Money: The Science of Smarter Spending* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013).
- [12] These warnings seem to echo both Jesus’ teaching and the OT prophets. See, for example, Ezekiel



34:3; Amos 2:6-7; 5:12; Micah 2:2; 6:12-16; Matthew 6:19; Luke 6:24-25; 12:13-21; 32-34; 16:19-31; 18:18-30. Note also that James 1:1-18 focuses on understanding past and present success and failure, while this section focuses on forecasting the future.

- [13] The day of slaughter seems to be a reference to the day in which God judges those who were called to lead and care for His people (Zechariah 11:4, 7).
- [14] Leviticus 19 is one of James's favorite OT passages; see L.T. Johnson, *Brother of Jesus, Friend of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 123ff.
- [15] CONTENT NOT YET AVAILABLE: See, however, \*Pay at [www.theologyofwork.org](http://www.theologyofwork.org).
- [16] For more on this topic see Theology of Work, *Truth and Deception* available online at [www.theologyofwork.org](http://www.theologyofwork.org).
- [17] The priestly blessing was commanded by God to be offered by priests in Numbers 6:23-24 and consists of the words in Numbers 6:24-26, "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace."
- [18] For God's holiness and the consequent need for human holiness in His presence, see Leviticus 11:44-45. For the extensive cleansing and consecration process of the High Priest on the Day of Atonement, see Leviticus 16.
- [19] Darrell Cosden, *The Heavenly Good of Earthly Work* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006).
- [20] "Jesus' nail-scarred hands and feet are the prototype for the coming new creation. What we find true in his body, we also find true in this vision. What we have done — although it is ambivalent at best on its own — once redeemed and transformed, does find a home in the new creation." Cosden, *The Heavenly Good of Earthly Work*, 76.
- [21] See Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (Nashville: Word, 1983); and John Dennis, "Cosmology in the Petrine Literature and Jude," in *Cosmology and New Testament Theology*, eds. Jonathan Pennington and Sean McDonough (London: Continuum, 2008), 157-177, for thorough discussions of this complex passage.
- [22] See, for example, Isaiah 30:30; 66:15-16; Nahum 1:6; Zephaniah 1:18; 3:8; Zechariah 13:7-9; Malachi 3:2-3; 4:1-2; Sirach 2; Wisdom of Solomon 3. The New Testament uses fire imagery this way as well: 1 Corinthians 3:10-15; 1 Peter 1:5-7; 4:12-13, etc.

- [23] By “apocalyptic,” we mean in keeping with the literary conventions and intentions of apocalyptic imagery.
- [24] See also Douglas Moo, “Nature in the New Creation: New Testament Eschatology and the Environment,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 49:3 (2006), 468. See also Al Wolters, who argues that the fire imagery refers to the process of God refining the world. Al Wolters, “Worldview and Textual Criticism in 2 Peter 3:10,” *WTJ*, 49 (1987), 405-13.
- [25] Douglas Moo, “Nature and the New Creation,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 49:3 (2006), 468-9.
- [26] CONTENT NOT YET AVAILABLE: For a discussion of the relationship between work, workers and the products of work in the present world and in the New Heaven/New Earth, see Theology of Work Project articles, “Revelation and Work,” “\*Meaning of Work,” and “Products of Work” at [www.theologyofwork.org](http://www.theologyofwork.org).
- [27] While they share similar themes, the circumstances surrounding the writing of James and 1 John are quite distinct. For a succinct summary of the purpose for which 1 John was written, as well as a helpful proposal regarding the circumstances that likely stand behind and compel John’s letter, see Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 14-28.
- [28] See the introduction to the 2001 edition of *Character and the Christian Life* by Stanley Hauerwas (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press).
- [29] See “Ethics” at [www.theologyofwork.org](http://www.theologyofwork.org).
- [30] For a fuller discussion, see the Theology of Work Project article on the [Gospel of John](http://www.theologyofwork.org) at [www.theologyofwork.org](http://www.theologyofwork.org).
- [31] George Serafeim, “The Real Cost of Bribery,” *Harvard Business School Working Knowledge*, Nov. 4, 2013, accessed at <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/7325.html>.
- [32] “Should I Rank My Employees?” *Wall Street Journal*, April 7, 2009. Accessible at <http://guides.wsj.com/management/recruiting-hiring-and-firing/should-i-rank-my-employees/>.
- [33] Jack Welch, “What I’ve Learned: Jack Welch” in *Esquire* magazine, December 31, 2006. Accessible at <http://www.esquire.com/features/what-ive-learned/wil0104jackwelch#ixzz2nkRA41TP>.
- [34] Ed Moy, “Faith and Work: Spiritual Insights from a Career in Business & Public Service”, at Kiros,

Seattle, October 11, 2013. Audio recording available at <http://kiros.btexpo.ws/media/>.

- [35] Pat Gelsinger, "Faster Chips, More Opportunity?" interview in *Ethix* 57, Jan-Feb, 2008, accessible at <http://ethix.org/2008/02/01/faster-chips-more-opportunity>.
- [36] Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, vol. 50 of the *Word Biblical Commentary*, eds. Bruce M. Metzger, David A. Hubbard, and Glenn W. Barker (Dallas: Word Books, 1983), electronic edition.