

## REDEEMING WORK





# REDEEMING WORK

A GUIDE TO  
DISCOVERING  
GOD'S CALLING  
FOR YOUR CAREER

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To my parents,  
Jack and Sandra Dik,  
a constant source of encouragement  
and models of living in  
new creation hope.







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## REDEEMING WORK







## Introduction: Yearning for Integration

**D**OES GOD have a calling for me?  
If so, how do I discern it?

What is God's will for my career path?

What are my gifts?

Where can I most effectively use them to serve in God's kingdom—and how do I make that happen?

These are a few questions (among many) that matter deeply to Christians who want their faith to matter more than just on Sunday, but throughout all aspects of life, including their careers. These questions matter deeply to me. They were front and center for me early on, when as a college student, I tried very hard, but not very successfully, to gain a sense of direction for my career.

It's not that no career paths interested me. Quite the opposite—I was interested in lots of things, and the thought of choosing one path to the exclusion of other appealing paths was almost paralyzing. I clearly remember my daily retreats to one of several prayer rooms on campus, each outfitted with a kneeling bench, a Bible, and not much else. I spent long stretches of time with my knees on those benches, pleading with God to reveal his will for my life and my career, open to just about anything. I just wanted an answer. Desperately.

I don't think I expected an audible voice or a Moses-in-the-desert, burning bush-type sign. I did, however, expect that God would reveal his will to me with palpable certainty. I assumed

that one day I would have an aha burst of insight, maybe during one of these prayer sessions. Or perhaps I would wake up one morning and simply *know*. When that inspired clarifying event didn't arrive, I prayed for it harder and waited longer. Unfortunately, the moment of spiritual awakening I sought never materialized, certainly not in the way I expected.

Eventually I did discern a calling. Ironically enough, I have since spent my entire career studying how people can discern and live their callings in life and work. How might people gain the kind of clarity and purpose I was seeking then? The answers are not always intuitive for Christians who have been socialized to adopt the pray-and-wait approach that defined my strategy at the time. But there are indeed answers. That's what this book is all about.

*Redeeming Work* offers practical answers to the tough questions that Christians ask about their career paths, questions like:

- How do I discern God's calling for me?
- How am I unique, and what difference does it make?
- How do I find a job that will enable me to live my calling?
- How does God's story impact what I do all day?

As Christians, we want to glorify God in our work. We want to feel confident that we are following God's will in our career decisions. But it is not easy. Today's work world is, in many ways, intimidating. Change is inevitable and constant, employer loyalty feels like a quaint relic of a bygone era, and robots are supposedly coming for all our jobs. The need for redemption in all areas of work is obvious. Forging a faith-driven career path is hard, and yet the need to do so has arguably never been greater.

## Faith, Work, and Vocational Psychology

The need to more fully integrate faith and work is nothing new. Christians have navigated this topic for the full duration of Christian history—from Adam and Eve’s earliest instruction in the Garden to the first Christians casting their fishing nets, from medieval monks scrubbing floors in drafty monasteries to business leaders meeting for prayer in a conference room somewhere near you. Christians haven’t always agreed on how faith and work ought to relate, of course, but the question has ancient roots.

In more recent history, the desire for answers to faith and work questions has intensified. In fact, an identifiable faith and work movement has been building for decades, starting around the mid-1980s<sup>1</sup> and picking up steam as Millennials and now Gen Z pour into the workforce with aspirations for their work to reflect their deepest values. Many helpful resources have emerged from this movement, and key initiatives—networking groups, think tanks, conferences, and so on—are now in place among Christians of all stripes, driven by a spirit of cooperation to explore how God’s story for the whole world ought to impact our work, no matter what that work entails. If you like books, many are available that explore this topic. In fact, a review of *hundreds* of books on faith and vocation was published *back in 2002*.<sup>2</sup> My shelves are full of such books, many of which I’ve found extremely helpful.

Yet as a believer in Christ and a vocational psychologist, one thing has always struck me as almost totally absent from the expanding collection of faith and work resources: science—more specifically, psychological science that has directly investigated career development, calling, and vocation. There are

decades of research within my field—vocational psychology—that address key questions, including:

- Which factors influence well-being in people’s careers?
- What career counseling activities lead to the best outcomes?
- How do people discern a sense of calling in their careers?
- What difference does it make when people approach their work as a calling?

Unfortunately, this research is almost universally overlooked in the books that Christians read on faith and work.

I understand why this is the case. The vast majority of faith and work resources have been written by pastors, theologians, and business leaders—authors guided by Scripture, experience, and wisdom from which I’ve benefited enormously. Yet these same authors do not generally read and seldom even have access to social science research. I’ve long been concerned about the ivory-tower phenomenon in which scholars expend tremendous effort conducting rigorous research that is only ever read by other scholars, and that fails to have any meaningful impact on people’s everyday lives. Reflecting on this problem, and frustrated by the near-total absence of psychological research in the faith and work conversation, I found myself thinking, *Someone really should write a book that shares what we’ve learned in vocational psychology with Christians interested in integrating their faith with their work.* Then came, *Huh . . . maybe I should do this.* And finally, *Who is going to do it, if I don’t?* My sincere hope is that *Redeeming Work* becomes a key resource to offer Christians evidence-based assistance to help them flourish in their work, a resource informed by Scripture, theology, experience, and cutting-edge psychological research.

## Who Should Read This Book?

If questions related to discerning a calling and living out your faith at work strike a chord with you, or if you're simply curious about what a faith-informed career path might look like, this book is for you. Many of the concerns Christians have about discerning and living their callings become pressing for the first time during young adulthood. That's when, for many of us, the real world hits us in the face like a two-by-four, and we feel the pressure of making major life decisions in a way we had never before experienced. For this reason, many of this book's examples speak directly to young adults. Yet discerning and living a calling are not onetime events but rather represent an ongoing process. It is a lifelong journey, and at every stage, Christians want their faith intimately tied to what they do. *Redeeming Work* does not address retirement—a rich topic that deserves its own set of resources. But for adults of any age who are navigating career transitions and decision points, the biblical and scientifically informed advice in these pages is relevant now.

## Where We Are Headed

The purpose of *Redeeming Work* is to give practical, actionable advice to Christians seeking to discern their callings and live out their faith within their careers. The book draws from wisdom derived from Scripture and vocational psychology, two of God's great gifts for people who want their faith to matter in their work. Part 1—"Foundations"—lays out the book's basic approach. The first chapter summarizes Scripture's Four-Act Story, noting how framing your personal story within the context of God's larger story offers the most promising pathway possible for experiencing joy, meaning, and purpose in your work.

The second chapter digs into several common, well-intentioned half-truths that Christians too often hold when they make decisions about their careers, often with disappointing results.

Part 2 walks through a process for “Discerning Your Calling.” Chapter 3 suggests a strategy for staying spiritually grounded during a time of discernment, then explores what vocational psychologists know about what works in career decision-making. Results from that research translate into practical steps you can follow in your discernment process. Wise career decisions ordinarily start with an accurate understanding of one’s gifts. In chapter 4, I invite you to take inventory of your interests, work values, and personality. As a reader, you can create a profile with PathwayU, an evidence-based online assessment system, and complete scientifically supported measures of these gifts. Access to PathwayU (powered by jobZology, a career assessment company I had the privilege of cofounding) is a unique feature of this book, and one of the ways it leverages psychological science to provide meaningful guidance. Once you identify the core features of your gifts, you can use this information in chapter 5 to evaluate the fit of diverse career paths. As you sift through your options, you will notice themes emerging in the paths that fit you well, and that align with your emerging sense of calling. Chapter 6 closes this part by describing an evidence-based approach to securing a job that aligns with your gifts and supports your goals for living your calling.

Finally, part 3—“Living Your Calling”—explores how to express a calling in today’s economy. Chapter 7 tackles a key question of enormous relevance to Christians: “How can my faith help me succeed in the changing world of work?” Massive changes are under way in today’s workplace, stemming from a new type of relationship between employers and workers, ubiquitous computing, and rapidly increasing automation. How is

work transforming, and how should Christians navigate this? What is in many ways a challenge is also an opportunity for believers in Christ, a key point we explore in this chapter. Chapter 8 digs deeply into the Christian vision of redemption and renewal—which build on a high view of, and profound respect for, the goodness of creation. A major role assigned to humans in the Bible is that of partnering with Christ as “ministers of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18) throughout the whole creation, including every area of work. Christians who embrace this role often struggle with the details of what “working redemptively” means exactly, in the context of their jobs. This chapter explores this question, with an eye toward embracing how our work today contributes to God’s work of making all things new.

Our careers are not the most important aspect of our lives, nor do they define our identity. That is found in Christ himself. Yet in his wisdom, God created people with common needs and the ability to meet them through mutual service. Whether we are employed, volunteer, or engage in caregiving (or all of these), most adults spend more of their waking hours working than doing anything else. Work is a core life role and a primary path through which we can express our gifts in the world, for God’s glory. Perhaps you’re reading this book because you are struggling to discern and live out your calling right now, maybe for the first time, or maybe after many seasons of discernment and re-engagement. Perhaps you’re simply interested in learning more about what integrating faith and work might look like for Christians. Whatever the details of your personal story, you are part of God’s larger story. That’s where *Redeeming Work* begins.