



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 The Dilbertization of the Workplace  
(*Vocation*, pp. 69-76)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

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### Christian Reflection

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# The Dilbertization of Work

Many of us can identify with Dilbert's world, where work is meaningless and the corporate structure engenders laziness, frustration, and despair. Deeply unsatisfied with work, we hang on because we need the paycheck. How should we think about work when we're unhappy with our jobs?

### Prayer

O God, we are not all the same with regard to our work. Some of us have work that is demeaning or ill-suited to our gifts.

**Help us to endure while we must and to see every opportunity to serve others as an opportunity to serve you. Lead us to new possibilities.**

Some of us have work that we take for granted.

**Forgive our idleness and teach us discipline. Make us stewards of our opportunities and challenge us to invest ourselves more fully. Lead us to become productive members of our communities and witnesses to your own excellence.**

Some of us have fulfilling or rewarding work.

**Teach us gratitude, reminding us that to whom much is given, much is required. Lead us to opportunities for ministry within our work and inspire us to provide opportunities for others. Amen.**

Scripture Reading: Ecclesiastes 5:10-20

### Reflection

What do we want out of a job? Information-technology workers, part of the "creative class" studied by Richard Florida, named challenge, flexibility, and stability as the most significant of thirty-eight marks of job satisfaction. Money ranked fourth. "This suggests that today's workers don't see their job as 'just a job' or paycheck," Hsu observes. "Whether they realize it or not, people are looking for a job fit that matches an intrinsic, God-given sense of calling or vocation in which they experience challenge, significance, and the satisfaction of meaningful work."

When workers "find enjoyment in their toil," the Teacher in Ecclesiastes concludes, "this is a gift of God. For they will scarcely brood over the days of their lives, because God keeps them occupied with the joy of their hearts" (5:19b-20).

What should we do if we are trapped in a Dilbert-like job—performing tasks that aren't meaningful, among unmotivated coworkers, with an employer that doesn't care—where frustration replaces the joy of God's gift of good employment?

► *Discover who we are.* Some jobs fit us while others don't. What are we interested in, what motivates us, how do we work best, and what do we want to do? "Self-knowledge leads to discernment and optimal work fit," Hsu writes. "People with the same spiritual gifts might have very different vocations because of different passions, personalities, or experiences."

► *Look past success to significance.* Hsu has held five different jobs in



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the last decade, but with the same employer. "Rather than changing companies in search of more lucrative opportunities, it was more important that I work for a company that I believe in," he says. "It does not matter so much what I do as who I work for." Others may retire early and begin a new type of work. Businesspeople may enter full-time Christian ministry. On the other hand, Paul Stevens quit a pastorate that isolated him from realities of the marketplace and became a carpenter. He enjoys the physical work and interaction with non-church members.

- *Follow our calling with courage.* If we hate our jobs, God may counsel forbearance and perseverance; perhaps we are in this job for a reason. But if we suffer "chronic Dilbert-feelings," God may be calling us to change ourselves (our attitudes or skills) to fit the job, find a new employer, or change our job or career. None of these are easy and all require courage.

### Study Questions

1. Are you a *Dilbert* fan? Do you recall a favorite *Dilbert* strip?
2. "All of us need to discern where we feel God's pleasure," Hsu suggests, or the job that makes us say "This is what God put me on the planet for. This is what I'm wired to do!" Have you been blessed with this experience?
3. How can your congregation help its members find the joy of God's gift of good employment?
4. Comment on Douglas Meeks' observation: "Released from work as frenetic self-assertion, the justified person can enter into Work as free service of God's grace" (quoted in "Other Voices," *Vocation*, p. 59).

### Departing Hymn: "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty" (verses 1, 4, 6, and 7)

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation!  
O my soul, praise him, for he is your health and salvation!  
Come all who hear, now to his temple draw near;  
praise him in glad adoration.

Praise to the Lord, who will prosper your work and defend  
you;  
surely his goodness and mercy shall daily attend you.  
Ponder anew what the Almighty can do,  
if with his love he befriends you.

Praise to the Lord, who, when darkness of sin is abounding,  
who, when the godless do triumph, all virtue confounding,  
then sheds his light, chases the horrors of night,  
saints with his mercy surrounding.

Praise to the Lord, O let all that is in me adore him!  
All that has life and breath, come now with praises before  
him.  
Let the Amen sound from his people again;  
gladly forever adore him.

*Joachim Neander (1680); tr. Catherine Winkworth (1863), alt.*  
*Suggested Tune: LOBE DEN HERREN*

# The Dilbertization of Work

## Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To consider how well *Dilbert* reflects the contemporary workplace in American culture.
2. To explore how we can hear and respond to God's call if we are trapped in disillusioning office work—doing a job that isn't meaningful, among unmotivated coworkers, and with an employer that doesn't care.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Vocation (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. Locate the tune, LOBE DEN HERREN, for "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty" in your church's hymnal or on the web at [www.cyberhymnal.org](http://www.cyberhymnal.org).

## Begin with an Observation

"*Dilbert*, which appears in more newspapers than any other comic, symbolizes a paradigm shift in our approach to work. Older comics had a certain work ethos, displayed in characters like Dagwood Bumstead of *Blondie*. Dagwood might symbolize the workers of the World War II generation: a lifelong company man whose years of loyalty had earned him his own office. Mr. Dithers may have yelled at Dagwood when he fell asleep on the job, but Dagwood never worried about job security or corporate downsizing.

"Contrast this with *Dilbert*, the quintessential worker of the postmodern era. Despite *Dilbert*'s education and specialized training as an engineer, his work is meaningless and unsatisfactory. Instead of an office, he has a cubicle. And his coworkers drive him crazy....

"Some of us are deeply unsatisfied with our work, but we hang on because we need the paycheck. How do we think about work when we are unhappy with our jobs?" (*Vocation*, pp. 69-70).

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read responsively together the prayer in the study guide. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Ecclesiastes 5:10-20 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

Are members familiar with *Dilbert*? Ask them to share their favorite strips. You might collect a few examples from your newspaper. (Both recent episodes and a number of classic strips are available at the *Dilbert* website, [www.Dilbert.com](http://www.Dilbert.com).) Using these examples, highlight some of the themes that run through this comic strip.

In Richard Florida's study, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, workers named challenge, flexibility, and stability as the most significant of thirty-eight marks of job satisfaction. Money ranked fourth. Ask members if they agree with this ranking. Would they put something else near the top of the list? Call attention to the similarity between this list and the recommendation of the Teacher in Ecclesiastes 5:10-20.

Following the article by Al Hsu (pronounced "shee"), the study offers three suggestions to those who are frustrated in a *Dilbert*-like job: discover who you are, look past success to significance, and discern and follow

God's calling with courage. Sometimes we become trapped in meaningless work because we did not know enough about our vocation (including our interests and abilities) to find a good fit, we valued money or prestige above doing work that is significant within God's kingdom, or we lack the courage to make the required changes in ourselves, workplaces, or careers.

### **Study Questions**

1. You can find the most recent strips and some classic strips at [www.Dilbert.com](http://www.Dilbert.com). Encourage *Dilbert* fans to reflect on why they enjoy reading *Dilbert*. Have they known coworkers like the characters in the strip, or workplace problems like those in the strip?

Some members may not like the comic strip. Hsu admits that its unrelenting cynicism is off-putting: "The cynicism that suffuses [*Dilbert* creator, Scott Adams'] cartoons, though amusing to a point, does not reflect the gospel hope offered by the One to whom he is called." On the other hand, Hsu recommends the strip's critique of workaholism.

2. Hsu compares "feeling God's pleasure" to "what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls 'optimal experience' or 'flow,' those times when we are completely immersed and satisfied with our work or activity. In contemporary terms, we might say that these are times that we feel like we're 'in the zone.'" When do members experience this? Does it depend on working conditions, compatibility with coworkers, having a challenging assignment, being well compensated, or other factors?

Experiencing "flow" may be a good indicator that our work fits our calling, but some Christians are called to difficult positions of service. Is it possible that they "feel God's pleasure" even though their work is no picnic? Consider Michael Novak's observation: "Enjoying what we do is not always a feeling of enjoyment; it is sometimes the gritty resolution a man or a woman shows in doing what must be done—perhaps with inner dread and yet without whimpering self-pity" (quoted in "Other Voices," *Vocation*, p. 59).

3. We should pray regularly for individuals who cannot find work, or whose jobs are unfulfilling. When we are trapped in a meaningless job, God may be calling us to change (1) ourselves (our attitudes or skills) to fit the job, (2) find a new employer, or (3) change our job or career. In the first instance, we can help individuals see the significance of their work, or to develop their language, writing, or computing skills in order to be more successful. In the second, we might recommend new employers; we might invite them to work with us. In the third, we might help them explore more meaningful careers, even supporting them in a "trial run" of a new occupation.

Sometimes we should encourage individuals to persevere in their current job. When might we do this, and how can we support them in enduring a frustrating situation?

4. The Teacher in Ecclesiastes warns against the love of money (5:10-12), which is one version of "frenetic self-assertion." Other ways involve the disordered desire for notoriety, promotion, or power in the workplace. We often identify ourselves by our place of employment or career. How can our work become a form of competition with others? Do members know someone who took a job, moved to another employer, or accepted a promotion primarily as a way of self-assertion?

### **Departing Hymn**

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a closing prayer.