

On the way to work

A Christian approach to
thinking **differently** about
success and fulfilment

Chris Gillies



'Truly transformative' **PAUL WOOLLEY, CEO, LICC**

PRAISE FOR ON THE WAY TO WORK

‘There’s new thinking here, hammered out on the anvil of a long, demanding, and successful career at the highest corporate levels through prayerful reflection, biblical engagement and careful analysis. Chris Gillies offers us a rich understanding of God’s purposes for humankind, framing his approach to work on the dynamic springboard of the life, character and work of Jesus, and on the ongoing empowering of the Holy Spirit for everyday work. This is a book that anyone at any level could profit from. Bravo. And thank you.’

Mark Greene, mission champion, The London Institute for Contemporary Christianity (LICC)

‘Christians just don’t think enough about work and the way work is changing. *On the Way to Work* is a treasure trove of deep insight from the scriptures and a mine of good advice from a seasoned practitioner. Chris Gillies’ insights are honed from many years’ experience and will be life-giving for all kinds of people in different roles and occupations.’

Steven Croft, bishop of Oxford

‘*On the Way to Work* paints a reframing vision of how we can approach our working lives as worship. Such a brilliant handbook for how to approach the world of work with a kingdom-first mindset. Equipping, affirming and inspiring. I can’t wait for Monday!’

Caragh Bennet, cofounder and CEO, ZENA

‘Chris Gillies combines values with brilliant business acumen. He is one of the few people I pause to think “what would Chris do” and, most importantly, how. I’ve been lucky enough for Chris to have been my professional mentor since working together at Zurich. This book offers the opportunity for everyone to experience his wisdom and guidance, helping you choose how to spend your energy and achieve your aspirations, with morals at the forefront of decisions and actions.’

Kathryn Axcell-Steele, head of brand and integrated marketing, Wesleyan Assurance Society

‘This important book is insightful and inspiring, and full of invaluable, real-life examples of leaders navigating the world of work. Anyone who is keen to discover how to best deploy their influence for the kingdom of God will find much here to guide them through their careers.’

Stephen Foster, rector, St Aldates, Oxford, and advisor, Alpha UK

‘A theology of work and a work of theology. Over many years of treasured friendship, Chris Gillies both demonstrated to me and challenged me to see that the call of God, the vocation of the Christian, is not limited to ordained ministers and foreign missionaries, but rests upon all who follow Jesus and all who are sent to serve the king and his kingdom in every sphere of life and work.’

Simon Ponsonby, pastor of theology, St Aldates, Oxford

‘This book will expand your vision of what a deeply fruitful and successful life looks like. A central premise of the book is that our work matters to God and God really does matter to our work. With that as a robust foundation, Chris Gillies tackles many layers of the implications of what that means for our frontline work, time, money, decision-making, relationships; in essence, our whole lives!’

Ness Wilson, leader, Pioneer UK

‘This is a remarkable book, and you should read it. In these pages, Chris Gillies illuminates a path to work that is not only distinctive but also the way of Jesus and of the kingdom of God. If you let this book do its work, it will change you – for good. Chris has crafted a work that is truly transformative – a powerful journey towards personal and spiritual growth.’

Paul Woolley, chief executive, The London Institute for Contemporary Christianity (LICC)

‘This is a timely book on the importance of work – what we do, how we do it and most importantly why work is part of God’s plan for what it means to be human. Chris Gillies brings together years of experience, a biblical framework and lots of helpful illustrations in a very readable and accessible style.’

Peter Lynas, UK director, Evangelical Alliance

‘Chris Gillies offers a rich and rare combination of biblical wisdom, practical insight and personal experience that will inspire Christians to think differently about their work and its significance. My hope and prayer is that Christians and other readers will learn from Chris and the compelling vision he sets forth in this book.’

Matt Lynch, associate professor of Old Testament, Regent College

‘This is quite simply the best book I have read about the interrelationship between Christian faith and our working lives for a very long time. Chris Gillies repeatedly illustrates wise practical advice with telling anecdotes from his own experience, covering many different topics, acknowledging the value of different perspectives and sharing maturely what God has taught him along the way.’

Richard Higginson, former director and chair, Faith in Business

‘Whether you’re a seasoned professional or just starting your career, this book has something invaluable to offer. It masterfully combines the wisdom of years of experience with practical advice, making it a valuable resource for anyone seeking God’s calling on their life and true success in their work.’

Reuben Coulter, senior advisor, Faith Driven Investor and partner, Ignis Advisory

‘This is a book that has been over 40 years in the writing and its depth and insights reflect the journey of a man who has set his sights on bringing kingdom influence to the highest level of businesses.’

Nic Harding, director, Kairos Connexion and Together for the Harvest

‘Chris Gillies writes a wonderfully practical and thoughtful book that speaks powerfully about what it means to engage in the world of work in a distinctively Christian way. He constructs a brilliant, thorough and nuanced analysis that challenges the oft-prevailing and unhelpful narrative of the sacred–secular divide, and offers beautifully crafted autobiographical, theological and academic reflections to suggest an alternative mode of being for operating as a Christian in the workplace.’

Catherine Delve, CEO, Resurgam Asset Management Limited;
chair of trustees, Bridge the Gap Football



Ministries

15 The Chambers, Vineyard
Abingdon OX14 3FE
+44 (0)1865 319700 | brf.org.uk

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Dedicated to Arne Becker

Dear Arne,

Sorry this is late!

I hope that you will nonetheless find it useful.
My prayer is that many people of peace, like you,
may learn something new from reading this book.

May God bless the work of your hands,



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Introduction: **who this book is for and how to use it**

The greatest leaders we've studied throughout all our research cared as much about values as victory, as much about purpose as profit, as much about being useful as being successful. Their drive and standards are ultimately internal, rising from somewhere deep inside.

Jim Collins¹

Work at everything you do with all your heart. Work as if you were working for the Lord, not for human masters. Work because you know that you will finally receive as a reward what the Lord wants you to have. You are slaves of the Lord Christ.

COLOSSIANS 3:23–24 (NIRV)

On the way to work, do you look forward to your day? Whatever length your journey, whether a long commute or simply a few steps to the kitchen table, what comes to mind when you think about starting work? Does it give you a sense of purpose? How do you feel when work serves up difficulties and problems? How do we work well? Is there a God, and might God have something to say about the way we work?

Most of us work. Whether it's to earn a living, grow food, build a business, govern a country or work in public service; to care for a family, study for exams, volunteer by serving others or engage in research; to create art, make music or train to be an athlete – it involves work, usually hard work. If you work in one or more of these ways, or if you're working at finding the right job, this book is for you.

Christians believe that God has established some key principles which apply to all of life. These principles apply to our daily work, just as much as they do to more apparently spiritual matters. If you're a working Christian, this book is most definitely written with you in mind. But if you're not a Christian, don't lose interest just yet – there may be something valuable here for you, too.

Over the years, I've worked in many different organisations. Most of them didn't have a Christian ethos. Very few of my colleagues were Christians. But I frequently encountered people who sought greater meaning in their work, who wanted to learn how to work in a better way, who wanted to make a valuable contribution. Best practices that are shown to work consistently, identified through experience and academic research, are deployed every day by people of all faiths and none. What is not always appreciated is that many of these empirically proven best practices reflect biblical principles.

After years of academic research, distilled into four best-selling books, the management guru Jim Collins observed that the most successful businesses don't simply focus on beating the competition, making a profit and delivering attractive shareholder returns. Equally important for lasting success are the right values, a clear purpose and a commitment to helping others.² You don't have to be a Christian to apply this kind of insight. But in applying this insight to your own situation, you may find it helpful to discover more about the master practitioner who first defined these principles – and it wasn't Jim Collins.

This book will equip you with ideas and tools to help you unlock success and fulfilment at work. Success and fulfilment are not goals to strive for; they're natural by-products of working in the right way, for the right reasons, over a sustained period. And what we imagine to be success and fulfilment when we first embark on the journey may turn out to look quite different as we approach the destination.

So far, I've spent more than 40 years learning the hard way about the concepts contained in this book, and I've no doubt that I'll keep on

learning throughout the rest of my life. My hope is that by sharing my learning, I might help you to assimilate these ideas in far less time than the decades it took me, so that you can work more effectively and with greater purpose, and so that you can love being at work.

There's a natural progression to the chapters that follow. The early chapters cover basic, foundational material that some readers may find familiar. But if you're encountering these ideas for the first time, they could change your life. These fundamentals are blended with fresh insights and some questions for each reader to reflect on in a personal way. Building on these foundations, the middle section looks at the insights we gain from biblical role models, while the later chapters tackle specific challenges that many people encounter during their working lives.

At the end of each chapter, there's a short summary of the key principles involved. The summary is intended to help consolidate your learning through a concise recapitulation and reflection on the key questions – it's not a substitute for reading the whole chapter. Readers who perceive themselves to be short of time may be tempted just to read the summaries, but that would be short-sighted. That feeling you experience of being time-poor may not adequately reflect the reality that time is a finite resource to be invested carefully. We all have the same amount of time each year. What matters is how we decide to prioritise that time. Most people work for 50 years or more. In that context, you may owe it to yourself to invest some quality time in learning more about the way to work, why your work matters profoundly and how to transform the way you think about your work.

I hope and pray that this book will encourage you to make that investment. The return on investment you achieve will most likely depend on the extent to which you're prepared to make changes to the way you approach your work. I believe the rewards will be worth it – for you personally, for your friends and family, for society and for God's kingdom.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Gillies met Noelle Saunderson in 1974. They were married in 1981. Without her, none of what follows would have been possible.

Chris has more than 40 years of business experience, training first as a chartered accountant with KPMG in London, then specialising in financial services with Allied Dunbar, British American Financial Services and Zurich Insurance. He was encouraged to volunteer for charity by the late Joel Joffe, who was Nelson Mandela's defence solicitor and subsequently moved to the UK where he became one of the founding directors of Allied Dunbar, eventually being appointed to the House of Lords. Joel's encouragement initiated a passion for charitable work in Chris, initially as a volunteer, and latterly as his main occupation alongside writing this book.

Chris made a first, faltering commitment to become a Christian while at school in Bedford, where he was confirmed into the Church of England, then later baptised by full immersion at Brickhill Baptist Church. His faith came alive in a new way through encountering the Holy Spirit in his final year at university in Bristol. Since then, Chris has tried to figure out what it means practically to be salt and light in the workplace, and how to steward power, wealth and time wisely. He has served as trustee for four different churches and as churchwarden of St Aldates, Oxford. He has also served as deputy chairman of WTC Theology.

Chris has worked in a variety of different financial services businesses, including as chief executive of a medium-sized bank, managing director of a life insurance company, managing director of an IFA distribution business, chairman of a corporate pensions and retail wealth business and director of several other regulated financial services businesses. He was chair of Zurich Community Trust UK for ten years, a board member of the global Z Zurich Foundation for eleven years and has served on the boards of seven UK charities, including currently as treasurer of LICC and chair of Stewardship.

In his last full-time, executive role for Zurich Insurance Group, he was the Global Life business's chief growth officer, a member of the Global Life Executive Committee, responsible for driving growth, facilitating top team alignment around global growth priorities and leading culture change. At that time, Global Life operated in 30 different countries, had 30 million customers and 10,000 employees and generated \$1.3 billion profit. Chris led Global Life's programme to integrate socially responsible practice into all business transactions before going on to chair the working party that formulated the Zurich Group's corporate responsibility policies worldwide.

Through mentoring, running courses, and facilitating groups, over the course of his working life Chris has helped many people think differently about their work.



9 How do I know if I'm in the right job?

It was my first managing director role. Following the merger of British American Financial Services and Zurich Insurance, I was appointed to lead one of the three locations, in Whitely in Hampshire, as managing director of Zurich Life. My remit was to grow the business and find ways for the combined sales teams to sell more of Zurich Life's products. It appeared to be a fantastic, career-enhancing opportunity, in a great location, with a very experienced team, and I was excited about the prospect. Exceeding that prophetic word I received from Marcus Ardern,¹ it brought with it a seat on the UK Life executive board that oversaw three companies. It really seemed as though God had a plan for my life, that this had been confirmed by Marcus' prophecy some years earlier and that in my 40th year everything had come to fruition.

However, during my first few months I encountered a lot of resistance and – as part of the merger rationalisation – we agreed that two of the senior team had to leave. Nevertheless, by the end of the first year we had grown substantially, and I was beginning to taste success. But the real challenge came during the second year. The Group CEO was visiting the UK and made some pointed comments about the expense of having three different locations. Having a second location was helpful for disaster recovery and risk management, but three locations increased costs for little additional benefit. It became clear that the Whitely location, where I was based, was simply too far away from Swindon, the main location. In those days, there was no video conferencing and no cloud-based computing, so travel and data-centre facilities weighed heavily in the equation.

Within a few weeks, after a formal review of the three locations, my remit to grow the business was removed and I was announcing to 360 employees in Whitely the closure of their location and migration of the business to Swindon. With many employees having spouses working locally and children based in nearby schools, few were able to make the move to Swindon. In the end, about 330 of my team were made redundant. What began as the most exciting job of my life became a nightmare. Many staff thought I had betrayed them, that there had always been a secret plan to close the site and that I had been lying to them for the past 18 months. It felt to me as though God's plan for my life had been thrown out of the window.

Over the months that followed, we implemented the redundancy programme while colleagues in Swindon migrated all the business processes to their location. It was gruelling work, carried out with a bitter taste in the mouth and a huge amount of sadness. Was that really God's plan? What was I to make of the prophecy from Marcus Arden that my daydream would come true? Although it had indeed become reality, that prophecy now felt hollow.

Oft-quoted scriptures, frequently used in a platitudinous way, can lull us into a sense that everything's going to be all right. For example, Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV): "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future." Or Romans 8:28 (NIV): 'And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.' If God has a plan for our lives, if we're called, why do so many of us encounter problems along the way? How do we discern what that plan might be? And if we're working in line with his plan, according to his purpose, is it realistic to expect all the problems will melt away?

I've learned that God does have a purpose for each of us, and it's not his heart to deliberately conceal that purpose from us. However, we often fall into two traps when thinking about these things. First, we assume that God's plan is going to be detailed and personalised, so

we lose sight of the overarching purpose he has for all humans; and second, we fail to realise that God's plan is dynamically dependent on our own personal formation – adjusting to our mistakes and keeping pace with our development. If we're slow to grow, God's plan will be dynamically matched to our maturity rate, and problem-solving may be an important ingredient in helping us grow.

My grandmother created wool tapestries. Sometimes, when she was working on one of these, she would be working from the back of the tapestry and all I could see would be a jumble of colours, an ugly mess of loose ends, with no discernible picture. When she had worked on it for a while and then turned it over, the beautiful picture became clear. God weaves a pattern from the threads of our lives – including the mistakes and heartaches – to make something beautiful. While he is still weaving, we may not be able to see a discernible picture, but when we look back the design becomes clear.

Søren Kierkegaard said, 'Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.'² Sometimes we must fight our way forwards in the dark. Only when we reach eternity will God's purpose and plan become completely clear.

Most of us know the date and place of our birth. These position us at a specific point in history and geography. They also have a huge bearing on the kind of work that is available to us. In the 21st century, there are not a lot of career openings for lamplighters, log drivers or ice cutters, but there is a huge growth in social media influencers, web analysts and app developers. Those who are born in North America or western Europe will have very different job opportunities from the possibilities available to people born in sub-Saharan Africa or the Pacific Islands.

Most of us aspire to earn a decent living, commensurate with the point in history and geography in which we are positioned, and we also aspire to find enjoyment in doing so. We must recognise that in our world today, more than 700 million people live in poverty,³ so even these aspirations are presumptuous.

Parents frequently have a completely different perspective from their children on what that looks like. Many young people I talk to are eager to find out for themselves, and their emerging preference is frequently diametrically opposite to the preference of their parents. As young people start out in life, the first couple of full-time jobs can seem as though they will dictate their career for decades to come. This is not necessarily the case, of course, but that perception can create a pressure point.

People talk about a calling or vocation. The Oxford English Dictionary says the word 'vocation' is derived from the Latin *vocatio*, which means 'I call', demonstrating how closely the concept of calling and vocation are linked. The definition in extended use is: 'a profession, way of life, course of action, etc., which a person feels that it is his or her duty or destiny to follow, or for which he or she feels particularly suited.' Other definitions include the dimension of spiritual or religious calling. I've found that many young Christians are waiting for such a call, as if God is going to ring them up on their smartphone with a clear message to go and work in a certain place in a specific job. Their eagerness to have their calling confirmed can blind them to many other ways in which God might guide us.

Some have a romanticised view of the way that God speaks to us, often shaped by many amazingly uplifting stories from people who have heard God audibly, specifically and sometimes spectacularly. However, these are actually the exception rather than the rule. God speaks to us in many ways, often with such a quiet voice that we could miss it. Elijah was one of the greatest Old Testament prophets. We learn in 1 Kings 19 that when God spoke to Elijah, it was not in a great and strong wind, nor in an earthquake, nor in a fire, but after all these fearful phenomena had passed, God spoke 'in a low whisper' (1 Kings 19:11–13). Maybe another person would have missed that whisper.

In Psalm 139, we read about how intimately God knew David, even before he was born:

For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

PSALMS 139:13-14

This provides an important reminder that each one of us is born with certain gifts already inherent in our being. Some of these God has predetermined through the DNA of our parents, but sometimes there are fresh abilities that no one could anticipate. My son has better than 20-20 eyesight and excellent hand-eye coordination, which equipped him to become a national shooting champion and a county cricket wicket-keeper. My wife and I know of no one in the history of either of our families going back several generations that might have been the source of these skills.

Some are scientifically inclined, others are more artistic; some are better with numbers, others with words; some are naturally talented at sport or music; some are outgoing and extrovert, others are reflective and introvert. These things are innate within us, as we were 'knitted together in our mother's womb'. Yet we frequently ignore these characteristics when thinking about God's plan for our lives. The natural skills and preferences that we are born with provide important indicators of the work that God intends us to do.

Sometimes the circumstances and inequalities of life mean that not everyone gets an opportunity to discover these innate gifts while growing up. The journey of discovery may be delayed. But it is always a good starting point to take stock of what we know about ourselves, to become conscious of the skills, gifts, abilities and preferences that are part of who God has made us to be.

These skills, gifts and abilities contribute enormously to our enjoyment of life, but sometimes they are insufficient to sustain a career. My son's cricketing ability, for example, was not at a level that would enable him to contemplate making a living as a professional cricketer. However, he did try to make a career in the shooting industry, training

and qualifying as one of the youngest shooting instructors in the country, working in holiday jobs for some of the best-known sporting agencies and eventually securing a job offer from a well-known gunsmith and retailer. In the end, he decided that the progression opportunities were limited. So he closed the door on that dream, too, but not before it had given him an unexpected new skill that opened the door on something altogether different. Those years of teaching people how to shoot equipped him to be at ease with people from all walks of life – from gamekeepers to billionaires who flew in from the United States for a grouse shoot. Game shooting is a pastime that attracts the very wealthy, as well as farmers and country folk. After a week's work experience with a wealth management business, he was invited to apply for a job in relationship management, and he was successful in securing it because he was comfortable speaking to wealthy clients in a way that few other applicants in their early 20s knew how to do. Over time he developed into an outstanding sales and business development professional. But it started with the gifts of good eyesight and hand-eye coordination.

Another dimension that people often misunderstand is the nature of God's call on their lives. Society tends to define people by the job they do. The first substantial question that frequently crops up in conversation when people meet is, 'So what do you do for a living?' As we answer, the person asking the question is weighing up our value. This societal trend leads us to overlook God's primary call to every human. There are many Bible verses that speak of this, but here are three that may be helpful in explaining the true nature of this call:

Who has done this and carried it through, calling forth the generations from the beginning? I, the Lord – with the first of them and with the last – I am he.

ISAIAH 41:4 (NIV)

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

JOHN 3:16 (NIV)

Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest.

HEBREWS 3:1 (NIV)

God's primary call to every human being is to a relationship, not to a job. That relationship is founded upon and made possible by the person of Jesus. That relationship comes first, and therein we find our identity. The vocation coming out of our response to that relationship is secondary. We should not let our job define us too much: that can lead to a disproportionate sense of loss should we have the misfortune to be made redundant or to be dismissed, but more importantly, we can miss our primary identity driver, which is relational.

God commissioned us to look after the planet and to build a flourishing society. His calling on the life of every human being involves work – maybe work that is creative, that brings order where there is chaos, that helps sustain the environment and the planet's natural resources or that provides what society needs to flourish. It is more important to consider how we should go about that work. In one of Peter's letters, he explains the personal qualities that are important:

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But whoever does not have them is short-sighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

2 PETER 1:5–11 (NIV)

The 'calling' word is right there in the final section. Peter suggests that the way to secure our calling is profoundly connected to the way we behave and the character that we develop. It's also fascinating to see that, at the heart of this piece of advice, is a recipe for effectiveness and productivity – something every manager looks for in their team. My experience over many years is that knowledge, perseverance and self-control are absolutely vital if you are to succeed in any walk of life; most organisations say that integrity is important, and this is just another word for goodness. What about kindness, love and godliness? Well, there is sound academic research about workplace effectiveness and employee engagement that demonstrates how kindness and love are transformational ingredients in boosting employee trust, teamwork and positivity in the workplace.⁴ Once again, empirically observed best practice has a common root with the biblical advice given in the New Testament.

The key to finding your special God-given calling is to loosen your grip on the idea that God is calling you to do a specific job. Start thinking about your life's mission in broader terms. Stop reaching for confirmation that you're in the sweet spot of God's will, because God has a big, flexible sweet spot! Stop worrying about whether you're working at the right things. All humans have the same mandate – to love God, to love our neighbours, to care for the planet and to build a flourishing society.

When there are too many people chasing too few jobs, it's not always possible to obtain your dream job. In such situations, it's important to realise that we can be effective in all kinds of work if we seek to grow our knowledge, bring integrity with us to work every single day, develop self-control, learn perseverance and demonstrate love for our customers and co-workers. The way we work is more important than the work itself. This is exemplified in the advice given by Dr Martin Luther King to a group of American workers:

Whatever your life's work is, do it well. Even if it does not fall in the category of one of the so-called big professions, do it well. As one college president said, 'A man should do his job so well that

the living, the dead and the unborn could do it no better.' If it falls your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures, like Shakespeare wrote poetry, like Beethoven composed music; sweep streets so well that all the host of Heaven and earth will have to pause and say, 'Here lived a great street sweeper, who swept his job well.'⁵

There are, of course, moments when God will speak to us, or guide us, and we should pay close attention to those. But they are relatively few, even for those biblical heroes that we studied in chapter 5. Some of these words can provide general guidance, like that sense I've carried with me for many years that God wanted me to be a light in dark places. Some can be more specific, such as the prophetic word I received from Marcus Arden that my dream of becoming a director by the time I was 40 would come true.

With hindsight, I can see now that this was an important encouragement to me over a period of about ten years, motivating me to learn, to prepare and to invest in my work, so that, when the time came, I would be ready. However, it was never promised for the rest of my career, and my disappointment at having to close the Whitely location so soon after being positioned there was keenly felt at the time. The prophecy was about my first directorship, to encourage me to be ready to attain that level. The tough lessons from having to close that location were very valuable. Moreover, if anyone is to make 330 people redundant, it's probably best if it's someone who has learned how to act with integrity, self-control, perseverance and kindness. That prophecy sustained me through some periods of extremely hard work. Although the promise seemed to be whipped away after less than two years, if I take a longer view, I can see that it was a crucial piece of guidance for a specific period, and the more general promise of board-level work continued from the time I was 40 to the present day.

Our work matters deeply to God and God really does matter to our work, so we should get into the habit of praying for our work and expecting him to speak to us about it from time to time. Those moments may

not come as often as we might hope. Like Elijah, we must learn to hear the low whisper and not always be expecting a loud wind, earthquake or fire. Sometimes God will speak directly, during a prayer time or through a prophetic word or picture. When that happens, it's important to weigh what we hear or see carefully and check our feelings against other references, such as how he made us, what we read in scripture and the opinion of people we trust and respect. Talk it through, pray it through, keep a record of any prophetic words you have been given and be patient: a word given today is not necessarily about what will happen tomorrow. It can also be about something that may happen a long time into the future.

But what if we don't hear God speak? I had to make several career-defining decisions before I received my first piece of divine guidance, and many people find the same. Thankfully, God has also given us brains! We can use logic and the clues inherent within our abilities and preferences. Indeed, I find that God often challenges us to work out our own solutions as a way of stretching and developing us. In such cases, the following framework may be of some help. It can be used to consider your next job opportunity or your long-term career preference. It's also a useful tool if you're thinking about a change in direction. It will never trump God's voice, but it can be instructive nonetheless.

Imagine the whole universe of different jobs that fit your understanding of God's mandate for humans: work that is creative, that brings order where there is chaos, that helps sustain the environment and the planet's natural resources, or that provides the goods, services and relationships that society needs to flourish. Within that universe is a subset of jobs that use your specific gifts and talents (there are careers services and aptitude tests which can provide you with informed suggestions about this dimension, or you can work it out by researching and developing a list).

Also within that universe is a subset of jobs that you would really enjoy (once again, make a list). These two sets of jobs might overlap, but often our talents and our pleasures are not perfectly aligned – for good

reason, as it creates the opportunity for enjoyment through leisure as a way of resting from work.

Then there is a third dimension to consider, which is about your preferred environment. Do you prefer working indoors or outdoors? Do you like to be based in one place or to travel? Do you prefer working in a team or on your own, or a bit of both? Do you like office work or something more action-oriented? Imagine the sort of workplaces that might help you give your best performance and write down your preferences.

Finally, consider your material needs: a single person will need to earn less money than someone who has children to support; a job in a large city will usually involve more expensive living accommodation than a job in a rural location, but the latter might mean you need to own a vehicle. Each person will have a different understanding of how much income is sufficient. Some might feel motivated to support themselves in an unpaid role. Try to work out whether you have a minimum requirement that rules out certain jobs or makes other roles more desirable. In so doing, remember to guard your heart against selfish ambition, materialism and societal pressure – if we seek God’s way first, then he will help us earn what we need (Matthew 6:19–34), whereas if we aim for the money first, we’ll find ourselves worshipping at the wrong altar.

Once you’ve done that thinking, consider the four different dimensions in terms of the Venn diagram opposite:

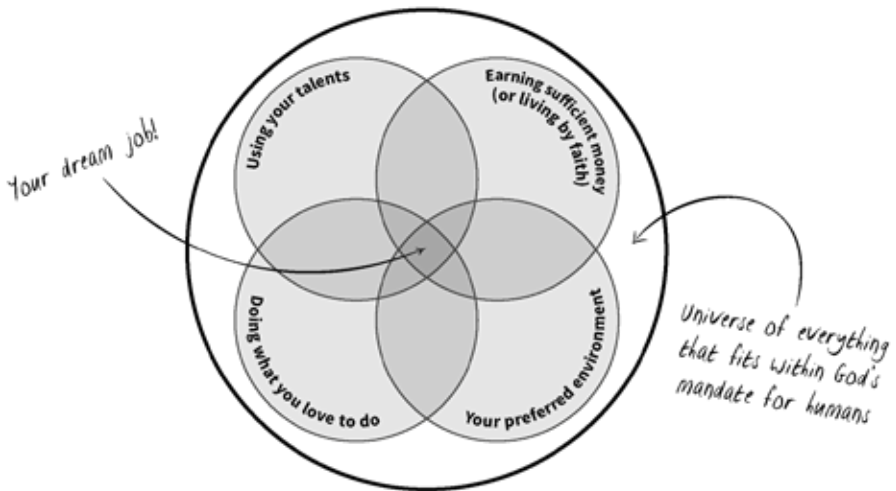


Diagram 2: Your dream job within the universe of God's mandate for humans

The overlapping areas provide a good indication of where your talents and preferences might combine to identify the most suitable kinds of jobs for you. Not everyone is able to operate in that central sweet spot – often trade-offs are required. Knowing that you are making those trade-offs consciously and understanding why you are making them can help give you a clearer perspective on why you are pursuing a particular line of work.

It's important to remember that how God made each person already provides a clear message. Our natural skills and abilities are a crucial indication of what God intends us to do. When we get to heaven, God isn't going to ask us why we weren't more like Mother Teresa, or Bono, or Billy Graham. He's likely to ask whether we were authentically true to ourselves, living up to our unique potential.

Thomas Merton once said: 'A tree gives glory to God by being a tree. For in being what God means it to be it is obeying him... the more a

tree is like itself, the more it is like him.⁶ The more we are true to our talents, the more we give glory to God. God also provides spiritual gifts to take our natural skills even further, as in the Old Testament account of Bezalel (Exodus 31:2–5; 35:30–35).

Maybe you're in a particular job out of circumstance or because it was the only thing available at the time. That can still be worthwhile work and service to God, but might not make best use of your skills and passions. In such situations, don't be afraid to make some changes. People can be reluctant to re-train or change career direction. That 'sideways move', perhaps involving a pay cut or offering no prospect of immediate progression, seems just too much to swallow or too risky. Society has conditioned us into thinking about success in certain ways – promotion, pay increases, more responsibilities; these vertical dimensions are usually the ones that are emphasised the most. However, the horizontal dimensions can be broadening, stretching and educational, with the potential to provide longer-term return.

After I'd been working in Allied Dunbar's finance division for about six years, I was asked to move into the sales division to support the newly appointed sales director. It was a fascinating opportunity, working with about 5,000 salespeople and 400 sales managers, using very little of my technical financial skills and experience, but testing me in management, motivating salespeople, remuneration, strategy and influencing. Had I stayed within the finance division, I could have expected my next promotion within a year or two, but because I had to win the trust and confidence of a very different kind of team within a sales environment, it took longer than I hoped to secure that promotion. In some ways, that was a hugely frustrating time, but I now look back and see that – without that move – I might have remained a finance professional for the rest of my career. Instead, the door opened to many new opportunities over the next 20 years for which I would never have been eligible without those two or three years of learning new skills. Those opportunities were more in tune with my natural abilities than a career as a finance director. I ended up leading and building businesses, rather than monitoring, reporting and tuning the

business' financial performance. I worked with customers, suppliers and distributors, with a growth focus that suited me far better than a pure finance role.

Eventually, 27 years after I gained my degree in French and German, having given up all hope of ever using those language skills for anything more than the occasional foreign holiday, I was offered a global role in Zurich Insurance's headquarters in Switzerland, where both French and German are widely spoken. Just like my grandmother's tapestry, the threads finally came together into a beautifully coherent picture. Coincidence or God-incidence? I would certainly never have envisaged or planned it that way. Certainly those many and different experiences over the years had equipped me uniquely for that role, which required finance, sales, marketing, leadership and language skills rolled into one, and where I was able to do God's work in a number of lasting, impactful ways.

SUMMARY

KEY POINTS

- God has a purpose for each of us. It's not his heart to conceal that purpose. However, many assume that God's purpose is so detailed and personalised that we forget about the overarching plan he has for all humans. We also tend to forget that God's plan is dynamically dependent on our own personal formation – adjusting to our mistakes and keeping pace with our own development.
- Society defines people by the job they do. This trend leads us to overlook God's primary call to every human – he wants us to know him. That relationship is founded upon, and made possible by, Jesus. As far as God is concerned, relationship comes first, and in relationship we find our identity. The vocation we feel coming out of our response to that relationship is secondary.
- The key to finding your special God-given calling is to loosen your grip on the idea that God is calling you to do a specific job. Start thinking about your life's mission in broader terms. All humans

have the same overarching mandate – to love God, love our neighbours, care for the planet and build a flourishing society. All kinds of work can become service to God if carried out with the right attitude.

- Our work matters deeply to God and God really does matter to our work, so we should get into the habit of praying for our work and expecting him to speak to us about it. Those moments may not come as often as we might hope. Thankfully, God has also given us brains! We can use the clues inherent within our abilities and preferences to work it out. How God made us already provides a clear message for us to read. Our natural skills and passions are an important indication of where we might find our best work.
- Maybe you're in a particular job out of circumstance or because it was the only thing available at the time. That can still be worthwhile work, but it might not make best use of your skills and passions. Don't be afraid to make some changes. That 'sideways move' might well prove to be a good long-term investment.
- God weaves a pattern from the threads of our lives – including the mistakes and heartaches – to make something beautiful. While he is still weaving, we may not be able to see a discernible picture, but when we look back the design becomes clearer. Only when we reach eternity will God's purpose and plan become completely clear.

POINTS FOR REFLECTION

- What do you feel about your current job? Is it a good fit with who you are?
- Has God ever spoken to you about your job? If so, what did he say? If not, are there other clues you can use to help you figure out if your current work is right for you?
- If your identity comes from relationship, and your vocation is more about *how* you work than *what* you do, might this have implications for the way you go about your work?



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On the way to work, do you look forward to your day? Whatever length your journey, whether a long commute or simply a few steps to the kitchen table, what comes to mind when you think about starting work? Does it give you a sense of purpose? How do you feel when work serves up difficulties and problems? How do we work well? Is there a God, and might God have something to say about the way we work?



Weaving together biblical perspectives with academic research and his own experiences of working in business and for various charities, **Chris Gillies** lays the theological foundation for work in a way that is accessible to both Christians and not-yet Christians alike. He then moves on to examine biblical role models from both Old and New Testaments and concludes by exploring common issues we wrestle with in our work, from money matters and leading others to knowing if we're in the right job or how to act ethically.

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With 30 years' experience of working at director level in financial services, **Chris Gillies** has also served on the boards of four different churches and seven charities. Through mentoring, running courses and facilitating small groups, he has helped many people think differently about their work. He is chair of council for Stewardship and treasurer for LICC.

