

SAMPLE

THE INTERSECTION

FAITH, WORK, AND LIFE

*An Introduction
to God's Design
for Integrated Living*

DR. ROBERT C. VARNEY & HUGH W. BRANDT

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Author's Note

Have you ever felt like your work has no meaning? Or like faith and daily life fall into separate days of the week? Or like the only valid contribution you have toward God's kingdom is tithing or working in ministry?

Ministry receives so much emphasis, especially evangelism, because it is so important; yet the word "ministry" has come to mean service only within a religious context, even though that was not originally the case. Evangelism and all religious ministry remain crucial to God's plan. Those of us in the workplace have many ways to serve God right where we are.

Many believers feel a significant divide between their "faith life" and their "work life," while the truth is that God never intended the two to be separate. Work was created as a God-human partnership toward building flourishing cultures of redemption—toward building God's kingdom on earth. No matter what your area of work or influence is, whether it's in science, economics, the arts, education, or family, etc., God sees your daily life as a vital part of his story.

We have seen faithful men and women become viscerally inspired as they embrace our magnificent God with both mind and heart. When they are equipped to live an integrated life, they find themselves led by the Holy Spirit in ways they had not previously imagined. These leaders then want to dive into action

to help those around them flourish in the ways God designed for His kingdom. Flourishing starts with knowing Jesus and it grows to abundance from there.

At Cities Project Global, we believe that God wants us to come together collectively to act redemptively to reflect God's nature, character and ways in everything we do. Our mission is to awaken people to a new perspective, equip them to live an integrated life as God intended, and unleash them collectively to live out their callings in a meaningful and influential way within their communities. In order to build a world of flourishing cities with kingdom cultures, we need leaders who are followers of Christ in every sphere of society to be engaging their work in union with their faith.

Our graduates continually comment that when their perspective changed about the kingdom of God, sharing their faith became more natural. They have become excited to tell others about the hope that is within themselves.

Cities Project Global has been preparing workplace leaders through programs and publications since late 2014. This collection of short writings reflects the foundation of why we exist and is a brief introduction to the core concepts which are threaded through all of our programs. We hope that as you engage with these ideas, you will begin to see your purpose in a new light, as God's co-creator in his story of redeeming the world.

Should these articles stimulate your mind and heart, there are two different actions: (1) find something around you that breaks God's heart; if it also breaks your heart, determine what you can do and do it; (2) if you want help on your journey, please contact us at info@CitiesProjectGlobal.com.

How to Use this Book

Our hope is that this book will offer you a heart-level transformation that will reveal a new and revitalized way of living into God's plan for you. As transformation is not passive but active, we have included questions for you to reflect on at the end of each chapter. We encourage you to meditate and journal on the questions, to invite the Holy Spirit to reveal His truths to you, and to begin to see God working in everything you do.

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PART 1: THE SACREDNESS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

These chapters explore the way God designed our work and purpose, and you will uncover a new way to look at your individual place in the world. You'll begin to see how your whole life—wherever you are and whatever you do—is a deeply meaningful part of God's plan and eternal kingdom.





2 The Work You Do has Eternal Significance

If you were to stop someone on the street to ask how they like their job, chances are nine times out of ten, they'd tell you it's "not bad" or that it "helps pay the bills." Most people are pretty ambivalent toward work, simply viewing it as a means to buy more free time and do something they're actually interested in.

Work Was Designed to Be Good

God never intended for us to feel detached from our work, but many Christians feel just as disenchanted as non-Christians when it comes to their jobs. A 2013 study by the Barna Group reveals that only a third of Christians surveyed reported that they felt called to the work they do.

In addition, many of us consider ministry and missions to be the only legitimate work that truly "serves God," and we view getting involved at church as the best way to live out our faith. In addition, we often think of Kingdom-building as the effort to share the gospel with our local and global neighbors, and that is important—but it's not the only thing.

We have to remember that the call to work predates sin; this is emphasized in Genesis 2:15 (NIV), which reads, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and

take care of it.” Work was designed as good—as an original and essential part of God’s plan, before the fall and before there was even a need for evangelism. When pastors and church workers came along much later, what was their main purpose? To help others live out their faith in all spheres of life—including work, which represents a significant portion of our waking hours.

You May Only Paint a Leaf in Your Lifetime; But That Leaf is Attached to a Beautiful Tree

J. R. R. Tolkien, now considered one of the greatest writers of all time, was afraid that he wouldn’t be able to complete the Lord of the Rings and that it would all come to nothing. But it was through his writers group, The Inklings, that contemporaries such as CS Lewis provided encouragement and convinced him otherwise. He illustrates this in the autobiographical short story, *Leaf by Niggle*.

Niggle agonized over his painting of a tree; it was to be his masterpiece. While he imagined beautiful leaves, sprawling branches, a gorgeous trunk, and a surrounding landscape, all he managed to paint in his life were a few leaves, and even those weren’t as spectacular as he imagined them. Before he managed to finish the piece, he caught a cold and died in disappointment.

But as Niggle passed through death and caught the train to some heavenly place, there was his tree:

Before him stood the Tree, his Tree, finished. If you could say that of a Tree that was alive, its leaves opening, its branches growing and bending in the wind that Niggle so often felt or guessed, and had so often failed to catch. . . . All the leaves he had ever laboured at were there, as he had imagined them rather than as he had made them; and there were others that had only budded in his mind, and many that might have budded, if only he had had time.¹

¹ Tolkien, J.R.R. (1964) *Tree and Leaf*. George Allen & Unwin.

In *Every Good Endeavor*, Timothy Keller shares this commentary on the story of Niggle:

Once or twice in your life you may feel like you have finally “gotten a leaf out.” Whatever your work, you need to know this: There really is a tree. Whatever you are seeking in your work—the city of justice and peace, the world of brilliance and beauty, the story, the order, the healing—it is there. There is a God, there is a future healed world that he will bring about, and your work is showing it (in part) to others. Your work will be only partially successful, on your best days, in bringing that world about. But inevitably the whole tree that you seek—the beauty, harmony, justice, comfort, joy, and community— will come to fruition. If you know all this, you won’t be despondent because you can get only a leaf or two out in this life. You will work with satisfaction and joy.²

Your Work Can Be a Window, Offering Others a Glimpse of the World as God Intended It When He Created it and How it Will Be in Eternity

Work is a partnership with God towards restoring the world to its original goodness. God not only wants to keep and use our good work and creations in eternity; he will redeem them into perfection beyond how we could have accomplished them.

As Keller puts it, there really is a tree. When we look at our work, we might just see it as a leaf and wonder if it really matters, but it is connected to a much greater purpose. It’s understandable to question whether work is really meaningful or accomplishes anything, but everything you do has an opportunity to be a window and an invitation to a redeemed world, offering others a view of things as God intended them to be.

² Keller, T., & Alsdorf, K. L. (2012). *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God’s Work*. (p. 15) New York: New York.

Reflect: How do you see your work?

- How does it feel to believe that your work is just as valuable in God's eyes as the work of a pastor or missionary? How does this challenge your pre-existing beliefs about work?
- How have you viewed your work as temporal in the past? Is it difficult to believe that your work and contributions to the world today are, in fact, in some way eternal?
- How does it change your perspective to think of work as a "window into eternity," granting others a glimpse into God's goodness and the world as he intended it?
- Think of your work in terms of practical detail. What do you do that impacts or serves others, and how might they have the opportunity to see the kingdom of God through it?



3

God Never Wanted You to Divide Your Life Between “Sacred” and “Secular”

How the Hebrew words “avodah” and “shalom” help us understand what an integrated life looks like

If you’ve been around churches or in small groups for a while, you might be familiar with the question, “How’s your spiritual life?”

The intentions are good—friends and family want to check in on how you’re actively building a life of faith. Sometimes if the answer is, “could be better,” the solution revolves around developing a more routine quiet time, getting more involved with Christian community, or trying a new Bible study. While these things are all good, they do also reveal something somewhat troubling: a divided, dualistic view of the sacred and secular that God never intended.

If we revisit the Hebrew roots of Christianity, we find the word *avodah*, which gives us a deeper understanding of how God envisioned our lives—lives that are meant to be integrated, not compartmentalized into work, family, church, hobbies, etc.

First of all, what does “dualism” mean?

Dualism is the misguided division of things into opposing dichotomies. Things like:

- Sacred vs secular
- Spiritual vs physical
- Clergy vs laity

While this dualistic outlook on things might seem native to Christianity—it's easy to assume that all Christians have distinguished between the sacred and secular for the past two thousand years—it actually comes from Greek philosophy. In fact, it stands in contrast to God's original desire for his goodness to permeate all of creation at all levels.

Now that we see that dualism emanates from Greek philosophy, let's explore how God intended things.

***Avodah*: the integrated life God wants you to live**

The Hebrew word for work is *avodah*. We see it first in Genesis 2:15 (NIV): "The Lord God took the man and placed him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it."

But that's not all. In English translations of *avodah* throughout scripture, it is rendered into many different words: work, craftsmanship, ministry/service, worship.

All of these things are encapsulated in *avodah*, but have you ever thought of work and worship as one? And how do you conceptualize ministry? Most people think of church work when they think of ministry, maybe working their way down the hierarchy of "sacred" vocations—pastor, worship leader, youth group leader, theology lecturer, Christian media workers. The list goes on, but only for a little because in most people's minds, there aren't many jobs that count as ministry. People think other material work (jobs that keep the cogs and wheels of society moving) are necessary but not ministry.

But what if anything at all counts as ministry, if it’s done for God? Any opportunity we have to work, act in service, or love others? Don’t all of these reflect God?

The truth is that our work can always be a gift for others. Whether serving food in a cafe, acting as an accountant and keeping people’s finances in order, or creating community art in public spaces, there is always the opportunity to enrich the lives of others.

And living in that integrated way, where work, worship, and service are one, is *avodah*—our original calling.

***Shalom* is more than just peace—it’s wholeness**

You may be familiar with the Hebrew word *shalom*. It means peace, and amongst Hebrew speakers it’s commonly used as a greeting. We typically understand peace as the absence of conflict, but *shalom* means so much more.

As Tim Mackie, who started The Bible Project, describes it, *shalom* is about wholeness. It can refer to a stone with no cracks or a wall without gaps or bricks missing. *Shalom* is something complex, with lots of intricate pieces, that is in a state of completeness. Job described his tents as being “in *shalom*” because he counted his flock and no sheep were missing.

Life is complex, full of moving pieces and relationships and situations, and “when any of these is out of alignment or missing, your *shalom* breaks down.”³

You can also enact *shalom*—it’s just as much a verb as it is a noun. To bring *shalom* means to “make complete.” Solomon *brings shalom* to the unfinished temple when he completes it. And

³ The Bible Project. “Shalom/Peace” N.D., <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/shalom-peace/>

Proverbs describes reconciling a broken relationship as *bringing shalom*. In the Old Testament, when rival kingdoms stopped fighting, they *made shalom* by not only declaring a ceasefire but starting to work together for each others' benefit.

Jesus is called the Prince of Peace (*shalom*) not only because he will bring an end to conflict in the world, but because he will bring wholeness to it and its people again.

Bringing *shalom* to our cities

Common grace is the description of how God makes good things available to everyone—no matter their beliefs—and it is distinct from his saving grace. As Christians, we are meant to be agents of his common grace, working for the common good of all people.

When we build a culture of *shalom* in our community, we bring restoration and redemption to the world, cultivating God's kingdom.

In an article in Christianity Today,⁴ Skye Jethani describes how shalom is reflected in the Garden of Eden:

- There is order—God intentionally planted it and tended to it
- There is beauty—God designed living things with more than pure utility in mind
- There is abundance—God provided more than enough raw resources

Jethani goes on to illustrate an example of a friend bringing *shalom* to his city through these principles, realizing that his vocation as a real estate developer was a ministry.

⁴ Jethani, S. (n.d.). Planting Gardens in Prison: Why We Labor for Shalom Now. Christianity Today: This is Our City. Retrieved November 15, 2022, from <https://www.christianitytoday.com/thisisourcity/7thcity/skyes-essay.html>

Walter Crutchfield, in Phoenix, AZ, looked beyond economic opportunities to develop real estate, searching for ways to bring transformation to depressed neighborhoods. He came upon run-down properties in an underserved part of Phoenix and worked to restore them. By doing so, he brought order to a chaotic, struggling neighborhood. By taking extra care, planting trees and adding color, he cultivated a beautiful space. By inviting businesses into the restored building, he brought abundance, creating jobs and economic opportunities where there previously had been none.

These decisions were made in pursuit of the common good, and they brought *shalom* to a city community.

How are you cultivating *avodah* in your life? How can you bring *shalom* to your community?

Instead of contemplating the question, "how is your faith life?" and perpetuating a dualistic faith-work, sacred-secular mindset, it would be better to consider the question, "how are you building *avodah* in your life?"

When you recognize the significance of your work, and how it is a fully integrated part of how God has called you to share your faith with others every day, you can look for ways to bring *shalom* to those around you.

Reflect: How is your work a ministry?

- How have you applied a dualistic view to your life? Where is there an opportunity for union?
- How does the Hebrew word *avodah*, meaning “ministry,” “work,” and “worship” all simultaneously, change your perspective on how God views your work and life? What about how he wants you to view it?
- *Shalom* means not only peace but wholeness, and Jesus is the Prince of *Shalom*, bringing wholeness to the world. We are meant to model our lives after him; what does it mean to bring wholeness to the world (or city) around you?
- How does it change the way you view yourself if you consider yourself an “agent of common grace?” What are the practical implications for your work and relationships?
- What are your opportunities to bring order, beauty, and abundance to your community? What is in need of restoration?
- How are you uniquely experienced and gifted to respond to that need, bringing wholeness to those around you?

About the Author



Dr. Robert C. Varney

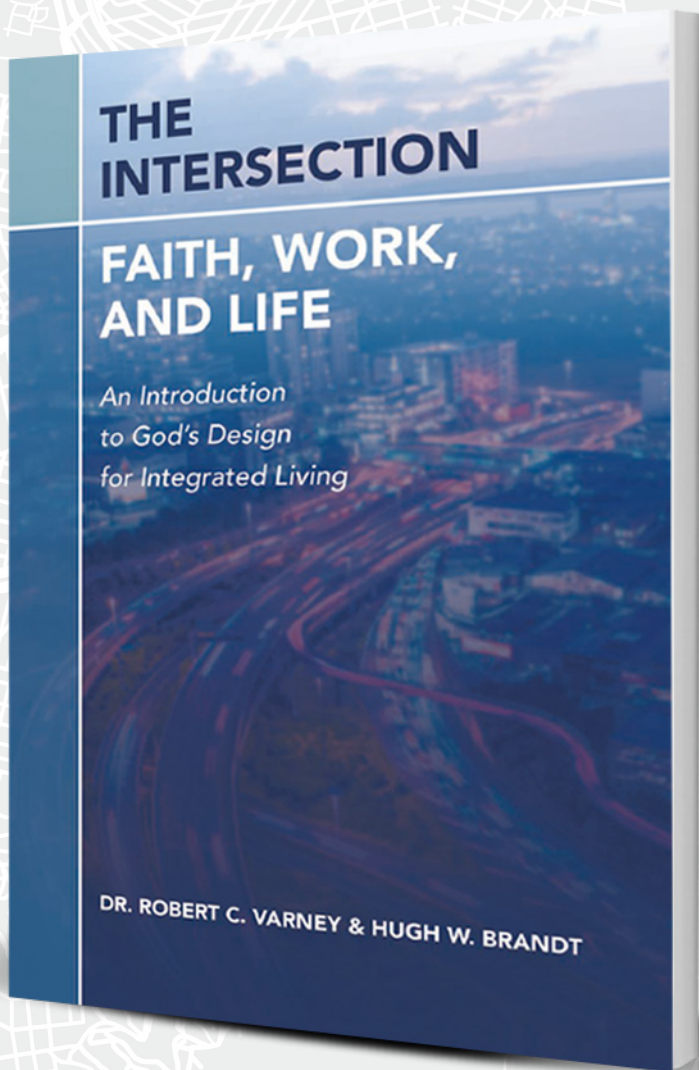
Bob is the President and founder of Cities Project Global (CPG). He currently lives in Virginia with his wife of 57 years, Sandy. They have 2 children and 6 grandchildren. Bob received his Ph.D. in computer science from Penn State. As a 25 year serial entrepreneur, Bob's expertise in the TECH industry led him to testify on Capitol Hill, appear on ABC's 'The Wall Street Journal Report', and chair the Washington Chapter of the Council of Growing Companies. Post retirement, Bob offered his services to global Christian organizations such as Cru, YWAM, and IMB. Bob launched CPG in 2019 with the vision of mobilizing Christians around the world to live out their God-given purpose.



Hugh W. Brandt

Hugh is the Chief Cultural Officer and a founding member of Cities Project Global (CPG). He lives in Colorado with his wife, Lynn, two sons and two grandchildren. As a Global City Consultant, Hugh enhanced CPG's 'Flourishing Cities' curriculum and facilitated this flagship product in over 40 cities around the world. Hugh has witnessed city leaders around the world (e.g. London, Abidjan, Ivory Coast, Denver, etc.) successfully collaborate to repair brokenness in their cities. He firmly believes in the words of Isaiah, "You'll be known as those who can fix anything, restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate, make the community livable again." (Isaiah 58:12).

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