

EXCERPT



Working for Better *A New Approach to Faith at Work*

August 26, 2025 | \$24.99, 216 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-1126-3

In a world where workplaces are becoming increasingly diverse, *Working for Better* by Elaine Howard Ecklund and Denise Daniels offers a timely guide for Christians navigating the modern faith-at-work landscape. Drawing from over twenty years of research and personal insights, *Working for Better* presents a groundbreaking exploration of how to express Christian faith in professional settings without compromising beliefs or alienating others.

A Calling for Common Work

Carmy Berzatto struggles with the transition from being a chef in high-end fine dining to running his family's sandwich shop in the show *The Bear*. In a moment of raw frustration and exhaustion, he says, "I feel like I'm trying to fix everything all the time, but nothing gets better. It just keeps getting worse." His passion for cooking, combined with the burden of managing a family business, feels like an endless cycle of trying and failing, leaving him feeling stuck despite his talent and effort.

Movies and literature are replete with examples of people who are doing work that lacks fulfillment in spite of their best efforts. This is not new; the Old Testament writer of Ecclesiastes complains about the lack of meaning he observes in all the "work that is done under the sun." One response to this experience of meaninglessness is to separate our work from the rest of our lives. If we can think of work as something that is not really part of what is most important for us, perhaps we can avoid this lack of meaning.

When we tell other academic social scientists that we have spent the past twenty years studying faith in workplaces (including, for Elaine, scientific workplaces, a context that most think ought to be the most secular), many ask, "Why would you do that? What place does religion have at work?" There are often good reasons for holding this view, since faith can be a divisive force. For many of us, it makes sense to see work as completely secular so that we can bracket it off from things that have more meaning and purpose. Some people may think of work as generally secular because it is not viewed as a place where the focus is primarily on God. Christians who hold this view of work as separate from faith may do so because they want to put most of their energy into pursuits outside work that are more obviously filled with intrinsic meaning for them. As one bivocational pastor who works as a truck driver during the week put it, "The purpose of the workplace is to make money. . . . The church is the place to worship and express your faith."

Faith-at-work expert Jeff Haanen says that secularity happens in two ways. First is what philosopher Charles Taylor calls "exclusive humanism," in which the world excludes any explanation of reality that is not built around humans or human action (*A Secular Age*). It is easy for Christians to reject this type of secularity, as it is obviously and directly opposed to a belief in God. A second way secularism occurs is more like polytheism, the belief that there are many gods. We think theologian Lesslie Newbigin has the right angle on the polytheistic approach to secularity (*The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*). He argues that while Christians may say that we worship only God, in practice we may be worshiping other gods as well—not necessarily other spiritual beings but workplace idols such as power, prestige, and money, or the desire for security and provision (or even inertia!), which become the primary reasons for our jobs. Thoughtful Christians know at an intellectual level that this polytheistic secularity is counter to God's purposes, but it may be more difficult than exclusive humanism to root out in practice.

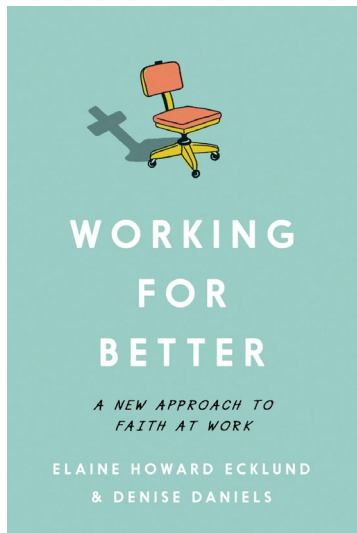
We believe that there is a third way in which secularity can gain traction in our lives, and it is this third way to which many Christians seem to default. This is the seemingly benign idea that to be secular is to be related to "worldly concerns," which are generally unimportant in the grand scheme of things, and that work is one of those worldly concerns. In this view work simply has less purchase or concern than those aspects of life that are more obviously spiritual. Yes, we need to work in order to live, but the kind of work we do and even how we do it is not as important as what we do outside the workplace. In some sense, this approach is the exact inverse of the exclusive-humanism approach, and yet its implications are equally problematic.



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There has been a significant effort over the past two decades to push back against this way of thinking and to encourage Christians to consider their work as a place where God wants to engage and use them. In the early 2000s, Redeemer Church in New York City started a Center for Faith at Work under the leadership of Katherine Leary Alsdorf, and soon a number of other faith-at-work institutes and centers had sprung up across the country and then around the world (Timothy Keller and Katherine L. Alsdorf, *Every Good Endeavor*). People began to write books on the topic, and a number of fellows programs were initiated, all in an effort to help Christians approach their work as a spiritual endeavor. Several faith-at-work summits were held, and forums and conferences were convened, bringing thousands of people together to explore what the Christian faith might have to say about their work. Denominations began to add workplace ministries in local churches. Yet, in spite of all the efforts of the faith-at-work movement, the most common opinion is still that faith belongs in sacred settings, such as church and Bible study groups, but has very little to do with the daily activities of work. Most Christians in the United States today continue to view their work and their faith as distinct domains, affected by a long history of thought going back to the ancient Greeks, who created a distinction between the material and the transcendent, with the transcendent being valued above the material. While this sacred-secular divide is not a biblical concept, it has shaped the belief of most Western Christians (Brenton Kalinowski, Denise Daniels, Rachel C. Schneider, and Elaine Howard Ecklund, “Called to Work: Developing a Framework for Understanding Spiritual Orientations Towards Work,” *Sociology of Religion*).

This sacred-secular divide also influences how Christians think about calling. For centuries, Christians have believed that the concept of calling is primarily for those who work in religious settings full-time. This idea dates back to the Middle Ages, when the term *calling* was reserved for those who were called by God to become priests, monks, or nuns. These people were special—called by God to do God’s work and set apart from the mundane activities of common people doing common work, who did not have such a calling.

We found that many of those we interviewed thought that the types of jobs with the highest potential to serve God included working directly for the church, as a pastor or worship leader, for example, or perhaps being involved directly in Christian ministry through a parachurch organization. One man who works as an engineer told us, “If it comes down to it, a priest or nun or something like that, [perhaps] a deacon, really does the spiritual work. As for me, I see no real connection [to spirituality] . . . as far as my company and my career and my job.” The belief this man expressed, that only those who work for the church have a calling, is unfortunate since there are only about 450,000 clergy in the United States, and clergy are disproportionately White and male. The idea that only those who work as clergy have a spiritual job or can experience God’s calling in their work is severely limiting, since most of those who attend church will never become clergy.

—taken from chapter two, “Secular Work”



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