

# *Make Work Matter: A Review*

O'Donnell, M. (2021). *Make work matter: Your guide to meaningful work in a changing world*. Baker Publishing Group.

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## INTRODUCTION

In *Make Work Matter*, author Michaela O'Donnell (2021) brings a fresh perspective to the familiar topic of vocation by showing how the principles that build successful entrepreneurs can be used to discern and pursue one's calling. O'Donnell is a successful entrepreneur who is also a practical theologian. She integrates these two passions to write this book for Christians looking to find meaning in their work. Whether they are just starting on their career path or are settled in their career but wanting to make things fresh again, readers will find this book full of practical, actionable advice based on a Christian faith perspective.

Practitioners will find this book useful as an encouragement that they are not alone in the challenges that they face in today's workplace. Readers will experience a sense of hope and direction in the action steps provided by O'Donnell. Professors will benefit from this book in the ways it provides a new perspective on vocation—a topic that is especially important to the students they work with daily. Students will benefit from learning about new ways to view vocation and the helpful guidance provided on discovering what their vocations are.

## THE FRAMEWORK

*Make Work Matter* starts by walking the reader through a process of naming where they are currently in their career and what their pain points are. O'Donnell states that we need to honestly reflect on where we are in our careers first before we can have hope for improving them. She then goes on to provide some context related to work and calling by discussing how work has changed over the years and then provides a historical theological perspective of calling. Similar historical perspectives can be found in other books on vocation, such as *Redeeming Work* (Dik, 2020) and *Every*

*Good Endeavor* (Keller, 2012), and all these books make the argument that our primary calling is to serve God in His purposes for the world. Where *Make Work Matter* differs is in its unique application of “the entrepreneurial way,” which can be used to discover and pursue the specifics of how that calling will be carried out for each individual.

The middle of the book discusses “the entrepreneurial way.” O'Donnell makes the argument that an entrepreneurial mindset can be used by anyone in the workforce in a way that can benefit their careers. The entrepreneurial mindset aligns well with what God has created us to do (i.e., seeing needs and finding creative ways to meet them). Specific characteristics of an entrepreneur that can be helpful to people in finding meaningful work are (1) being rooted in relationships, (2) trusting our creativity, and (3) building our resilience. She also discusses the importance of seizing opportunities, creating value, facing risk, and expecting our personal growth efforts to be a lifelong journey.

In the final section of the book, O'Donnell shares specific action steps that individuals can take to make their work more meaningful. The action steps are to (1) practice empathy by noticing the needs of people we interact with on a daily basis; (2) ask “what if” and imagine possible solutions to meet the needs that we observe; (3) say “let's try” and take the next doable risk, which is the next action we could try in the present or near term; and (4) take the time to stop and reflect on what has happened and what we can learn from our experiences.

O'Donnell's connections between the entrepreneurial way and calling align well with Beuchner's (1993) popular definition of vocation as being found at the intersection of what you love to do and what the world needs. Discovering what one's passion is and finding a way to use it to meet needs in the world is what every successful entrepreneur does. It makes sense that an entrepreneurial approach would be a useful tool for discovering one's vocation.

## ANALYSIS

If I had to list a weakness of *Make Work Matter*, it would be in its rigor. O'Donnell presents a lot of information based on research she did while completing her dissertation, but studies are not cited extensively. Supporting information is presented as anecdotes, and a lot of cases are provided. Some sections are more supported with outside research than others, such as the sections that discuss the historical theological perspective on calling and a section that discusses working toward redemption/shalom.

However, this book was a pleasure to read. I found it to be beautiful, interesting, and useful. What I found most beautiful about it was its honesty. O'Donnell has done a lot of research into work and shares insights about people and their experiences of work. A lot of the concerns we have about our work are shared experiences that others have as well, but we do not know it because people do not commonly share them. Because O'Donnell has talked to so many people about their views of work, she can let us know that we are not alone in our struggles. She normalizes the challenges of our current work situations.

I really appreciated O'Donnell's honesty and humbleness. She speaks from the role of a working mother, openly sharing about her areas of struggle and times when she failed. Her stories are relatable and encourage readers to feel safe enough to embark on a career exploration journey with her. She makes herself vulnerable so that we can relate to her.

The most interesting thing about this book to me was her connection between the entrepreneurial mindset and finding meaning in our work. O'Donnell weaves together a vision of entrepreneurship as a tool that helps us live into our calling as followers of Christ along with it also being a way for us to infuse meaning into our work.

There was a lot that I found particularly interesting. The companies that she provided as case study examples were interesting to hear about. Also, she gave several illustrations that stuck with me. For example, she talked about calling as being a set of nesting dolls. The innermost doll is our calling to be Christ followers. The next layer out is our call to work toward redemption. The next layer is our call to create. Finally, we have a call to the particulars of our work, such as what field we go into and the organization(s) for which we work. Personally, I connect to this idea because I see a lot of students focusing on the call to particulars, but really that is only the outer shell (the tip of the iceberg) when the real meaning can be found with the inner layers.

O'Donnell makes her ideas useful by not only laying out what to do, but, through actual examples, she illustrates

practical ways for us to succeed in doing what she recommends. She shows the action steps. Her recommendations are actionable and scripturally grounded.

I recommend this book for all Christians who feel they have grown stale in their careers and are disappointed with their work experiences or are experiencing a time of career transition. It is a great tool for naming where you are and planning a path forward. This book would also benefit faculty members who can use its ideas to provide more informed guidance to students. The book would also benefit students. I could see it being successfully used in an introductory business class, as it would introduce students to entrepreneurial skills and how they can be applied to one's vocational calling. It would also work well in an internship class to help students process the experiences they are having at work. Excerpts from the book, especially those that provide a historical theological perspective on calling, could be used in any business class that addresses the topic of vocation and calling.

## REFERENCES

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