

Work: A Kingdom Perspective on Labor

Ben Witherington. 2011. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans. ISBN 978-0802865410, \$18.00 (pbk).

Taking Your Soul to Work: Overcoming the Nine Deadly Sins of the Workplace

R. Paul Stevens and Alvin Ung. 2010. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans. ISBN 978-0802865595, \$15.00 (pbk).

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Christian economists must wrestle with an apparent conundrum in our discipline. On the one hand, “work” is considered a “bad” that rational, self-interested individuals have to be given an incentive to undertake. The opposite of work is called “leisure,” the ultimate “good.” On the other hand, theologically, we are co-laborers with God and work is part of our calling and even part of what gives us meaning in life. So, how are Christian economists, and Christians overall, to think about “work”? What are some of the insights that theologians have already brought out? How might we advise a Christian educator or our pastor to speak on these concepts?

Two recent books offer answers to these and related questions. Witherington offers an accessible, Protestant, biblical treatment of labor that would be appropriate to recommend to pastors, Christian business leaders, and Christian economists who wish to engage the conversation on Christian life and work. In a very different type of treatment of the intersection of faith and work, Stevens and Ung offer a rich, concise doorway into letting the Spirit continue to work on one’s spirituality outside the four walls of the sanctuary. Because the purpose of each of the two books is different, this review treats them separately rather than comparing them. Witherington’s book is reviewed first; Stevens and Ung’s review follows.

As a Christian labor economist who has also been a pastor out in the field, I recommend Witherington’s fresh treatment of that four-letter word, *work*. He unpacks some “unbiblical myths” surrounding contemporary views towards work, then critiques and synthesizes various theologians to articulate a way forward. Witherington’s discussion of these themes makes a great resource for pastors and is relevant to Christian business leaders and economists.

Witherington motivates his discussions by using catchy, oft-used phrases about the nature of work as hooks into deeper, more nuanced and balanced conversation about work. He engages a wide variety of Protestant treatments of work: David Jensen’s rich and robust treatment of similar

themes, *Responsive Labor: A Theology of Work*; Miroslav Volf's extensive *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work*; as well as the practical, thorough guide by Gene Edward Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* and the moving, enlightening, and personal Barbara Brown Taylor's *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*.

It is difficult to describe succinctly how the book is organized. The chapter titles do not help a reader understand what is in them. The chapters themselves are an engaging read, but the writing sometimes wanders. It may be easiest to simply describe each of the chapters in turn.

Preface: Caution – Work in Progress. In the preface, named with an odd *double-entendre*, he critiques two theologian's definitions of work. He describes David Jensens' definition from *Responsive Labor* as "any activity undertaken with a sense of obligation to self, others, one's community, or one's God" (x). For Witherington, that is too broad and captures just about anything a believer does. He quotes and then engages at length Miroslav Volf's definition from *Work in the Spirit*: "honest, purposeful, and methodologically specified social activity whose primary goal is the creation of products or states of affairs that can satisfy the needs of working individuals or their co-creatures, or (if primarily an end in itself) activity that is necessary in order for acting individuals to satisfy their needs apart from the need for the activity itself" (x). For Witherington, this is too "a-theological" or focused on "meeting of human needs" (xi). He cites Volf's characterization of the history of theological thought on work and suggests there is a surprising void in the literature about work given "how much of our waking hours are consumed by work" (xi).

In this preface, he also notes that the topic of work is made even more difficult to talk about because of two particular "unbiblical myths" prevalent in America: (a) that we are all entitled to a retirement phase of life and (b) that work is a "bad" (attention economists!). He sets the stage for his argument that retirement, or a "non-working" phase of life, is not biblically consistent. His emphasis in the book is that "[w]ork was part of the original creation design, and it appears to be in the works for the new creation as well" (xii). He spends a good amount of time with passages from Isaiah and elsewhere to support his point that even in paradise there will be only a "war stoppage" not a "work stoppage" (xv).

The goal of chapter one, *An Opus That Is Magnum: On the Goodness of Work*, is to reclaim God's vision of the goodness of work in creation. Witherington describes his own distinctive contribution to the conversation as being an eschatological treatment of work. He intends to work backwards through the Bible rather than forward to explore the Kingdom perspective on work as we live in the between times.

He makes a fresh case for several non-controversial, but possibly under-emphasized theological claims about work: God is a worker,

at work now in the world, who calls us to work alongside God in the Kingdom, now and in the eschaton, by using the gifts God has bestowed upon us. He also identifies one of the unfortunate implications of the great technological improvements is that “America has largely uncoupled itself not merely from the land and old-fashioned manual labor but also from any theological sense of the purpose, nature, necessity, and goals of work” (20). His concern is that this contributes to viewing work as a burden and to forgetting that all belongs to God.

Chapter two, *A Theology of Work as Vocation*, engages two modern theological works on the concept of “agency” (ours and God’s) in our work. He first examines several of the constructs about work developed in Gene Veith’s work, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life*. He takes issue with Veith in that he believes Veith is too easy on modern Protestantism’s emphasis on individualism rather than standing in counter-point to that emphasis in modern culture. Witherington wants our vocations to be clearly housed within the community. He notes how surprised his students are when he tells them that in Phillipians 2:12, Paul is telling an entire community, not individuals, that they must work out their salvation in fear and trembling. “Salvation, in these terms, is a group project. And so is work,” says Witherington (24).

Witherington argues that our vocation is based on a calling by God to be co-laborers with God—and to be co-laborers alongside each other, in *koinonia*. The remainder of the chapter discusses in a helpful and rich way the notion of “calling” and being “led.” This is where the book may be most helpful for Christians looking for nourishing scriptural passages and discussion about vocational discernment and how God is at work in and through the work of our hands.

It is also near the end of this chapter that I found a delightful “hidden gem” of a discussion entitled “*Ars Longa, Vita Brevis: Work as Art, Art as Work*,” where he talks about God as “blues singer” and artisan. This is an extended discussion where he presents a “brief case for being an artist as a proper way to glorify God and edify others” (47). Educators of all stripes who read these brief pages might be unshackled from the pragmatism that relentlessly narrows the curriculum to math and sciences. Witherington nicely unpacks the *raison d’être* of the arts for Kingdom life, and modern cultures in general.

In chapter three, *Slackers and Sloths of the World, Unite!*, Witherington sternly counters the idea that many Christians have that “work” is toil, our punishment, and not what we were created for. He engages a plethora of biblical verses concerning laziness and work that appear in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes: that laziness is to be abhorred, and that all work (with no teleological vision) is in vain. In doing so, he presents a compelling way to re-capture the beauty of work as laboring side-by-side with Jesus in a way

that redeems both the goodness of work and the light-ness of even difficult work when it is done in response to God's call. Two telling quotes are, "What strikes me about the Bible's critique of laziness and slothfulness is that it does not merely assume that hard work is the norm. It assumes that hard work is a good thing...From this perspective, work is thus inherently forward-looking" (61). And "Work in light of Easter, should be life-giving, not death-dealing" (65).

The opening paragraph in chapter four, *Call Forwarding and Vocation's Variation*, is a provocative quote from Paul Minear in J. Nelson's 1954 edited volume, *Work and Vocation*: the Bible is "an album of casual photographs of laborers...A book by workers, about workers, for workers—that is the Bible" (67). As is Witherington's way, he uses this quote to pose the conundrum that will shape the chapter: that if Minear is correct, it is odd that there is such silence on the topic in the major biblical dictionaries. Then he analyzes several call stories, such as Moses', where the response to the call is, in essence, don't send me, send him, which is what Witherington means by "call forwarding" (68). He goes on to discuss the importance of not simply having been gifted, graced, and equipped, but to respond. He relates modern call stories, too, such as one from Barbara Brown Taylor.

He then discusses the importance of allowing for a variety of calls and responses to them, in any ministry—and in any work setting. He has a long meditation on Jesus' parable of the talents. He draws three conclusions concerning calling and vocation from the parable. First, God is in charge, not us; God "assigns the tasks." Second, God assigns tasks to us based on the abilities and gifts God designed in us, as well as based on the level of faith that the Christian is at, by which Witherington means, "degree of actual trust in God one has after conversion" (75). To this point, Witherington spends some time developing the argument that one of the tasks Christians should take seriously is "evaluating themselves with sound judgment" in areas such as gifts, grace, and yes, even level of faith. Christians must listen intently for God's "still, small voice" to guide us toward the tasks we should be doing (75). And third, we are "stewards of God's work, God's property" (76).

Chapter five, *Work as Ministry, Ministry as Work*, is a short chapter, at the level of a thoughtful sermon, which dispels the notion that work is secular and ministry is sacred. (He even starts it with a poem—one that he wrote on work as ministry. The poem is actually a nice, succinct version of his theology of work.) He relates a story that summarizes one of the main points of his argument. Upon visiting the Billy Graham library, he came across the gravestone of his wife, Ruth. The inscription read: "Construction Completed. Thanks for Your Patience." "When I saw that inscription it dawned on me that there is a whole different way of evaluating work,

ministry, and time. What if you evaluate life's work as something God has been doing in and to you?..." (83). He presses in on this and related questions well throughout the rest of the chapter.

In chapter six, *Seeing the World from the Crouch Position: Work as Culture Making*, He engages the ideas in Andy Crouch's book, *Culture Making: Recovering our Creative Calling* for the entire chapter. Witherington pushes against both the insular nature of Christian community reflected in the home-schooling and Christian schooling movements as well as the post-modern notion that religion is a personal and private matter. "Culture creating is inevitable for human beings; the only question is whether Christians will meaningfully and self-consciously engage in such activities as part of the 'work' and realize that in so doing they are creating a new world" (104).

Chapter seven, *New Balance: The relationship of Work to Faith, Rest, and Play*, is particularly pertinent to Christian business leaders, and to pastors ministering to Christian business leaders. He argues for a full vision of persons, their work, and their lives. For example, workers are valued as *imago dei*, and to be paid accordingly. He concludes this chapter with a discussion of the various forms of and importance of play. He draws heavily on Moltmann's *Theology of Play* (1972). His argument that God's inner life is one of *joie de vivre*, and we are invited into it, is fresh and interesting. These pages are a must-read for Christian workers and others seeking more delight in their relationship with Creator. This chapter provides an important counter point to the silence on the relationship of work, rest, and play in the book up to this point.

His epilogue, entitled cryptically, *Overtime: Take This Job and...*, provides the bookend to the preface in which he raised the two un-biblical myths: (1) that work is a "bad," and that (2) we are all entitled to a retirement, non-working, phase of life. The question he poses is: "How, then, do we discern the proper boundaries for our work, so that we do not seek to find our identity in work, nor lose ourselves in our work, nor become workaholics?" (158). He refers to Volf (2001), and points back to several of his arguments throughout the book to answer the question. In this chapter he provides a summary of his main arguments. It is actually a good place to start in order to get a somewhat organized road map of the book's over-arching arguments.

As rich as the text is, it is uneven in both writing style and depth. Some chapters would be strengthened by stronger exegesis. At times, he seems to use a well-chosen quote from another's treatment of a theological concept as an easy foil to introduce his own counter-point, but he does not engage the whole of the other's argument and demonstrate how his own argument adds to the discussion. He includes a discussion on the theology of Luther that is not well developed, and moderately tangential to the rest

of his argument. He also uses Luther as a foil, and the argument is unnuanced. In chapter six the reader may be discouraged, or at least annoyed, by the many long quotes from Crouch rather than having a more distilled, coherent argument to engage.

The attempt at catchy chapter titles can make it difficult to grasp what the chapters are about or to help a reader to easily find a passage they want to re-read. A major part of the book's value is in identifying a nicely representative reading list of (mostly Evangelical) Protestant Christian thinking about work. Unfortunately, a serious omission is that the book lacks bibliography and indices.

In sum, this is an accessible, Protestant, biblical treatment of labor that would be appropriate to recommend to pastors, Christian business leaders, and Christian economists who wish to engage the conversation on Christian life and work. This book would also provide an accessible text for college students and adult Bible studies to use as part of a journey of vocational discernment.

Taking Your Soul to Work by R. Paul Stevens and Alvin Ung is a highly practical and well-organized book that takes the themes developed in various theological treatments of work and weaves them together within a framework of spiritual disciplines. The book is not stiff or pedantic; they talk with the reader and with themselves in an engaging way, as if they are continuing a conversation they had been having with themselves and others. These spiritually-grounded and wise Christian businessmen walk alongside the reader in a way that draws the reader into the conversation too. The more I read in the book, the more I hungered to have these conversations about spirituality with my own colleagues at work.

The result is a rich "workbook," or possibly devotional text, to help Christians reclaim their own work as part of the Kingdom. It is purposefully arranged to be a rich resource for individual or group Bible study, with extensive notes, bibliography, index of authors, index of subjects, and index of scriptural references. Each chapter concludes with thoughtful exercises and prompts for reflection and discussion. Christian economists are often asked to lead Bible studies or adult education classes and this book would provide a provocative framework. Given the sheer percentage of time that people spend at "work," a book that encourages and contributes concretely to healthy spirituality in the workplace is a welcomed resource.

In the introduction to the book, Stevens and Ung suggest a definition of work-place spirituality that represents well their own views is Gregory Pierce's in *Spirituality at Work: 10 Ways to Balance Your Life on the Job*. Spirituality is "a disciplined attempt to align ourselves and our environment with God and to be a concrete bodily expression of God's Spirit in the world through all the effort (paid and unpaid) we exert to make the world a better place, a little closer to the way God would have things," they

quote (5). They consciously organize the book around three “movements” in a spiritual life they identify in Pierce’s description. The authors describe these movements as:

1. Identifying the struggles that prevent us from coming alive at work;
2. Cultivating the Spirit of God who equips us with life-giving resources;
3. Imagining the outcome of Spirit-led life that welcomes God at the center of work.

They identify nine “Deadly Work Sins” as the “struggles” in the first movement of a spiritual work life. The struggles are the traditional seven deadly sins, Pride, Greed, Lust, Gluttony, Anger, Sloth, Envy, with Restlessness and Boredom added to them. Each struggle is treated in a concise, grounded chapter that brings together reflections on what that “sin” means in a biblical context as well as specifically in the workplace. The second set of nine chapters match one “struggle” to a fruit of the Spirit that can be particularly cultivated to help combat it: Joy, Goodness, Love, Self-Control, Gentleness, Faithfulness, Kindness, Patience, and Peace. The third set of nine chapters develops “Outcomes of a Spirit-Led Life” that can result from combatting the struggle using the fruits of the Spirit.

They engage thinkers from across the Christian spectrum: Aquinas, Augustine, Bernard of Clairveaux, Buechner, Calvin, Wesley, Henri Nouwen, Evelyn Underhill, and others. Eugene Peterson provides an engaging forward that primes the reader to enter into the conversation.

One of the unique and rich features of the book is that the two authors have between them much business experience in a wide variety of cultural settings. They use a conversational vignette between the two of them at the beginning of the chapters that draws on their business experiences to provide a working frame for the ideas for the chapter. The conversations also model ways in which readers themselves could start a conversation about spirituality at work.

In sum, this is a rich, concise doorway into letting the Spirit continue to work on one’s spirituality outside the four walls of the sanctuary. The authors engage great Christian thinkers, philosophers, business leaders and scripture even-handedly. They remind the reader throughout the book that our spiritual strength comes from the work of the Holy Spirit, not from our own works. Their epilogue contains a final blessing for the reader: “In writing and editing this book together, we have seen God working in our lives. We wish you this same joy of discovering God at work in your life. In the same way we’ve been enriched by our conversations with one another, we hope you’ll find a friend with whom you can start a conversation on what it means to be growing spiritually in the workplace” (170).

This is a resource for Christian economists and others who do not want

to check their faith at the door to their office. It is an engaging read for those who are comfortable keeping faith and work separate, but are curious about how they might intersect. Its orientation toward spiritual disciplines, however, would make it difficult to use as a resource for deep, theological reflection on the issue of “work.” Instead, it is a highly practical guide to leading a virtuous work life grounded in scripture and classic, Christian thought.

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