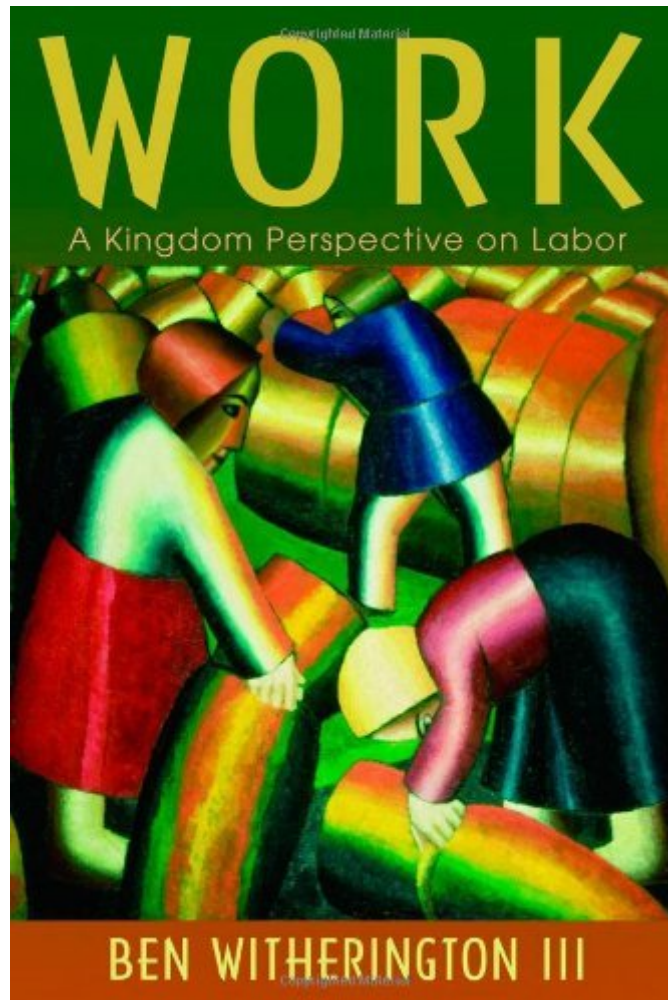




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# Work: A Kingdom Perspective On Labor



## Synopsis

Most Christians spend most of their waking hours working, yet many regard work as at best a necessary evil ? just one more unfortunate by-product of humanity?s fall from grace. Not so, says Ben Witherington III, and in *Work: A Kingdom Perspective on Labor*, he considers work as neither the curse nor the cure of human life but, rather, as something good that God has given us to do. In this brief primer on the biblical theology and ethics of work, Witherington carefully unpacks the concept of work, considering its relationship to rest, play, worship, the normal cycle of human life, and the coming Kingdom of God. Work as calling, work as ministry, work as a way to make a living, and the notably unbiblical notion of retirement ? Witherington?s *Work* engages these subjects and more, combining scholarly acumen with good humor, common sense, cultural awareness, and biblically based insights from Genesis to Revelation. ?Ben Witherington has given the whole people of God something desperately needed to make sense of Monday to Friday ? a theology of work that breaks down the heretical sacred-secular distinction. . . . Offers a work-view and life-view that, if embraced, would revitalize the mission of God?s people in the world. It?s that good.?? R. Paul Stevensauthor of *The Other Six Days* and *Taking Your Soul to Work*?Conducting a critical dialogue with the theological voices of our day, drawing upon the wisdom of the Christian tradition, and offering a sensitive reading of New Testament parables, Witherington delivers sound counsel on the Kingdom meaning of work and its implications for our lives today.?? Lee Hardyauthor of *The Fabric of This World*

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## Customer Reviews

Great read!

This book is short but packed with great theology concerning everyday work and how important it is to Christian Living. Far from being escapist, Witherington roots our work deep in the heart of Biblical living. Highly Recommended.

This book was a prescribed textbook in my doctoral studies. I enjoyed the biblical perspective on "work". It also gives great insight on leadership and followership.

This is one of several evangelicals' recent contributions to the theology of work from the christian perspective. Ben Witherington notes that until the last decade, there has been a dearth of theological reflections on this important aspect of the christian life. This is a glaring deficit, considering that we spend an enormous part of our life working, that the bible has a great deal to say about this subject and that work can and ought to be the main domain where the disciple of Christ is spiritually formed, fulfills his calling and brings glory to God. It is a strange omission in most works of christian theology. This is a welcome corrective to the long neglect. Throughout the book, the author interacts candidly with the major conversational partners on the christian understanding of work and does not hold back from critiquing the thoughts of eminent writers and theologians, past and present, such as Miroslav Volf, Jurgen Moltmann, Gene Veith, Martin Luther, Augustine, David Jensen and Andy Crouch and putting forth his own case. Those familiar with Witherington's background will not be surprised by his inclination that shapes the way he thinks about work. His Wesleyan, Arminian, Pacifist leanings are conspicuous, and his tone is one of unabashed confidence in the biblical veracity of his position. He begins with a theologically-oriented definition of work for the Christian and he puts it in the perspective of one who is lives in anticipation of the new creation. Work is for the Christian more than seeking self-fulfilment or meeting human needs or making money to survive/prosper but a participation in God's eschatological project of bringing in

the new creation. Work from the Christian perspective cannot be understood apart from the cosmic renewing work of the Spirit of God. Then he takes us through some key biblical passages on work and basically cautions us against either demonizing or divinizing work. The biblical warnings against workaholism and a promethean approach to work are as clear as they are against sloth. It is important to see work as part of but not the be-all and end-all of what it means to be human. It is to be balanced with play, worship and rest. He seeks to correct, in his view, certain distortions of the biblical understanding of work in some forms of Christian thoughts such as the clergy-laity divide, the sacred-secular dichotomy, the meticulous supervision of human affairs by an all-controlling God, an aversion to works due to a faulty understanding of works-righteousness, and the theology of separate spheres and realms of duties that allow Christians to violate biblical teachings in his 'official line of duty'. In all, he argues for a more coherent, holistic view of work that allows all Christians to live out the kingdom vocation through good, honest, edifying labour. He reminds us that Christians are 'God's workmanship created in Christ for good works' (Eph 2:10). The nature of good work, as such, is discussed. Honesty, diligence, creativity and excellence are important ingredients of what constitutes good work. But the basic commitment of the Christian is not only towards a high quality of our work but the highest kind of work that has been entrusted to us by God. That is the work of fulfilling the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. It is with this basic eternal, redemptive framework that he discusses the concepts of 'calling' and 'vocation'. Under this rubric, the place of marriage and celibacy, 'church work' and 'non-church' vocations as well as the issue of remuneration are discussed. Within 166 pages, he covers a lot of grounds and we may complain that he could have gone deeper in some of the more controversial points he touches on and that his definitions of what constitutes 'work' or 'calling' are a little difficult to follow but as a primer, it is quite a treat. It is not a book that will satisfy you with clear-cut answers and unassailable arguments but the sort of book that will 'tease your brain into active thought', as Witherington loves to say and do. Written in a witty and stimulating way, this latest installment by a very learned and articulate writer entertains as much as it educates.

This book should be a part of the library of anyone who is interested in the theology of work, work as worship, or business as missions movements. Witherington wrote this book out of his perceived dearth of material on the theology of work, and that is one weakness of the book-- he examines a few sources in depth but somehow has missed so many others. If you read Hugh Wenatchel's *How Now Shall We Work* or Tim Keller's *Every Good Endeavor* you can find a host of sources over the centuries on this topic that Witherington somehow missed. Andy Crouch, Mirslav Volf, H. Richard

Niebuhr are three he extensively cites that are also cited by the aforementioned works. As such, there is much agreement between all of these books. But Witherington offers his insights which are different than the Reformed writers above. He offers this critique of other attempts to look at a theology of work: "they work forward through the Bible, rather than backward, and...never get to an eschatological or Kingdom perspective on work, that is, work in light of the in-breaking Kingdom," which is Witherington's contribution (p. xvi.) Witherington offers his own definition of work: "any necessary and meaningful task that God calls and gifts a person to do and which can be undertaken to the glory of God and for the edification and aid of human beings, being inspired by the Spirit and foreshadowing the realities of the new creation" (p. xii). Human beings were intended to work, and not just to do any kind of work, but to do good works, and do them in accord with the way we have been fashioned, the abilities we have been given, and therefore the vocations for which we are best suited (p. 7). Expanding on his definition of work, Witherington writes "Before we engage in any sort of work, we have to ask whether it will glorify God and edify other persons, whether it can be an expression of love of God and love of neighbor...Work is not a secular activity; it is a sacred one originally ordained by God, and so it must be undertaken in holy ways...Whatever we do, we are to strive for excellence...'Good enough' is not good enough when the standard of excellence is the example of Christ the worker" (p. 15). Christians can inhabit many spheres of vocation, but activities like prostitution do not fit the definition of "work." Witherington likewise contends that Christians cannot be soldiers, since Jesus commands us to love our enemies and to bless them, not kill them. All work can be God-glorifying, even if it is not our specific vocation: "The truth is that even when work seems like drudgery, if it is done to God's glory it is good in character, and if it is done for the edification of others it is at the very least divine drudgery, not mere toil, not mere activity. It has meaning, purpose, direction. It is Kingdom-bringing." (p. 21) Witherington looks at Veith's *God at Work*, which I am not familiar with, particularly to analyze Martin Luther's views on work. Luther held the problematic sacred vs. secular view of work, which Witherington (like Keller et al) rightly critiques: "But the Bible says nothing about God having two kingdoms, one spiritual and one physical, one sacred and one secular. The only Kingdom in the Bible that has the name God appended to it is the one Jesus claimed to be bringing in through his preaching, teaching, healing, dying, and rising" (p. 28). Witherington later approvingly quotes Andy Crouch that "If the ships of Tarshish and the camels of Midian can find a place in the New Jerusalem, our work, no matter how 'secular,' can too." (p. 123). "the sacred-versus-secular dichotomy doesn't work when it comes to defining Christian work. Any work that is good and godly, any work worth doing, can be done to the glory of God and for the help of humankind. And while we are at it, any such work is full-time

ministry" (p. 126). The Lutheran view focused on serving one's neighbor in his work, not God Himself. Witherington rightly points out that this does not conform with Paul's epistles and personal example. Witherington contends that when Jesus says "my yoke is easy and my burden is light," (Matthew 11) He means that Christ shares our yoke-- we are co-laborers with God (1 Cor. 3:9) in His work in the world. "(W)hen we are doing Christ's work he is sharing our yoke...this is what makes the burdens light...The Christian...(must) recognize that the whole yoke does not fall on our shoulders" (p. 64). This also plays into Witherington's thoughts on the importance of taking a Sabbath from all activities, which he develops in the latter parts of the book. He encourages Christians to take a day of rest, say, Saturday as separate from their day of worship (Sunday). We must consider how we should best Sabbath. Vocation is something that was defined pretty well in Hugh Whelchel's book-- and Witherington works to hash out a definition as well. Your vocation is basically what God has called and equipped you to do. Many Christians may work in a profession that is not their vocation, even though they are working in that profession in a Christian manner. The author then looks at the parable of talents from Matthew 25:14-30. God does not give everyone the same amount of faith (Romans 12:3-6), but we are called to step out and work with what we have. Our work ethic ("zeal") and quality matter to the Master who is going to return one day (see 1 Corinthians 3:5-15) (p.71-76). "Everything is to be done coram Deo, before the face of God, not merely bearing in mind that God is watching, but bearing in mind that God is now working, and also will one day do the quality control test on one's work" (p. 89). "(A)ll persons in Christ are called to both ministry and discipleship of various sorts. Labor is part of this calling...Work is part of what we offer to God on a daily basis as we respond to God's call to do various things that matter in life, even do things that change life for the better, or even save lives" (p.81) Witherington is clear, work doesn't save us or endear us to God, but it is an expression of our holiness and desire to do the will of God. He critiques David Jenson's statement that "Human work can never detract from or add to the work God has already accomplished," as being unbiblical and something that "undervalues our work" (p. 130). Witherington elaborates: "God could have chosen to redeem the world and bring in his Kingdom without us, but he has not chosen to do that. He has chosen to use us as his instruments to do His work. Our work, then, if it is good and godly, can never be seen as merely a response to the work of God, though it is often that as well. The work of God can be hindered or helped, added to or destroyed by what we do" (see Romans 14:20, 1 Cor. 3:9, and Ephesians 2:10) (p. 130). Witherington echoes Andy Crouch's call for Christians to "make culture." "Christians must work hard to produce the best art, the best movies, the best neighborhoods, the best restaurants, the best athletics possible, not merely by copying, but by coming up with something fresh, new,

interesting, life-changing" (p. 111). In all, I give this book 3.5 stars out of 5. Witherington is mainly critiquing a few other works and adding his own contributions. But it lacks supporting evidence and anecdotes from those who work in professions other than theology, like himself, and is therefore weaker than Keller or Crouch's work. It is a necessary read, and I would like to explore more Wesleyan/Methodist views on work as worship.

Ben Witherington has written a easily digestible book on the theology of work that is theologically rich. Witherington comes from a distinctly Arminian perspective and so I do take huge issue with some of his exegesis and theology. That being said, here is a book that will make you think hard about how the gospel impacts your work.

It is okay, but at the end...concerning This is a good book except for three glaring concerns including: 1. The author believes that one can lose their salvation; 2. The author gave an example where an abortion may be sanctioned, thus the woman and doctor would just have to pray, and everything will be alright - he sets up a strawman argument where he places the wife and mother's life against the life of a preborn child. 3. The author argues for us to limit our "carbon footprint" coming off point number two, this is foolish. God is not in control in Ben Witherington III book. As if God wants us to have reasonable abortions and hug the trees. Sorry, I liked the book until the last two chapters...

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