

Work: A Kingdom Perspective on Labor
By Ben Witherington III

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Ben Witherington is Professor of New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary and on the doctoral faculty at St. Andrews University in Scotland. He is a graduate of UNC, Chapel Hill (BA), Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary (MDiv), and the University of Durham (PhD). *Work: A Kingdom Perspective on Labor* is something like his fortieth book. It would seem that he is probably not much of an expert on “rest.”

Work is a thoughtful, biblically insightful, stimulating introduction to the topic. With seven chapters and 166 pages it would serve well as a small group or adult education text at a chapter a week. Witherington opens with a Christian definition of work as “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). This is, as a moment’s reflection will tell us, less a definition of the reality of human work than a summary of an ideal for good work. Still, the author is on the right track. His discussion of the rich biblical teaching on the essential goodness of work and how sin can distort and wound that goodness is very well done.

Witherington then discusses our choices of what work to pursue (a luxury for the few in our world, it must be acknowledged) in terms of calling and vocation (strangely and unjustifiably separated by Witherington). What does God want us to do? What has he gifted and equipped us to do? He downplays a little too much the role of the Body of Christ in the process in favor of a more individualistic approach. Witherington is provocative in challenging whether Christians should be running casinos, fighting in wars, and making cigars. Whether we agree with him on all these things or not, his discussions are thoughtful and provocative for individual and group study.

Witherington addresses the problems of laziness (the slothful, the sluggard) and workaholism with insight and wisdom. He discusses the parable of the talents in terms of how we steward the gifts and abilities with which God has variously endowed people. An interesting chapter is given to the relationship, similarities and distinctives of what we call Christian ministry and “work” seen as a form of ministry. We might ask whether an MBA could be as much a preparation for a life of “ministry” as an MDiv. I think Witherington would probably agree with me that it could be seen that way.

Probably the least satisfying chapter in Witherington’s book is his long, approving discussion of Andy Crouch’s book on culture-making. The relevance for this in terms of our work lives is not particularly well-developed --- nor does this approach to culture relate much to the way corporate culture is discussed in the business and organization milieu (e.g., by MIT’s Edgar Schein in his classic, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (1985)). Missed opportunity. Witherington closes with a breezy discussion of work and its relationship to faith (faith vs. work? No), consumption (enough!), rest, and play. Good discussion starters.

Bottom line: give the man a solid B grade for this book. Lots of A level insights, occasional flashes of genius and originality, raises most of the important introductory topics for a Christian approach to work, intermittently provocative and challenging opinions, occasional drift into less relevant academic territory, and just slightly random in its overall structure. But, hey, I liked it overall and recommend it as a good book to adopt as a text for a course on the subject.