

To Labor Not in Vain

BY GREGORY A. CLARK

If, as the Apostle Paul writes, “in the Lord your labor is not in vain,” then we need a way to understand our labor “in the Lord.” The books reviewed here make valuable contributions to thinking about work biblically and theologically. They help us to understand the conditions under which “all is vanity.”

Work is not one thing. Each of the books reviewed here reflect on human work as employment, a source of identity and community, as onerous but necessary activity, as site of oppression or alienation, as vocation, and as worship.

But the value of work on each of these scales is either problematic or ambiguous. Perhaps most fundamentally, some eat, drink, and make merry; others toil under the sun. And then we die—all of us. All is vanity.

The topic of work calls for theological engagement. The Apostle Paul seems to lead the way claiming: “in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15: 58). His claim is provocative, but it has failed to spur theologians to the task. The four books included in this review aim to begin correcting this neglect.

Each book develops a normative account of work by reading human work as a response to God’s good work in creation and in redemption. Their sources and their tools differ, and there are disagreements, but they also complement one another.

Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God’s Work (New York: Riverhead Books, 2014 [2012], 336 pp., \$16.00) is authored by Timothy Keller, the founding pastor of a megachurch, Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York, and by Katherine Leary Alsdorf, a former CEO who now leads Redeemer’s Center for Faith & Work. *Every Good Endeavor*

does the work of a teaching pastor by providing resources and models for thinking about one's work in light of Christian faith. The authors tell great stories that hold the reader's interest making the three-hundred page book accessible to most any audience.

At the center of the book's teaching is the claim, "Faithful work, then, is to operate out of a Christian 'worldview'" (p. 5) so that "we must think out the Christian worldview's implications in every field, and often those implications are subtle" (p. 169). This approach allows and requires the authors to teach not only on the nature of work but also on the Christian worldview. They fill in the framework and questions of a worldview with answers drawn from their exposition of Scripture.

Among the many strengths of *Every Good Endeavor* are these three: First, the authors acknowledge the limits of their approach. Because the language of worldviews harbors an intellectualist bias and because it emphasizes the differences from other worldviews, it can lead to elitism and sectarianism (p. 188), and this "can lead us to privilege white-collar work over blue-collar work" (p. 187). As a result, the authors distinguish the Christian worldview from "the Bible's view" (pp. 187-188). If we want to think about work as Christians, we would do well to learn from Keller and Alsdorf.

Second, Keller and Alsdorf illustrate their points with anecdotes and stories from a wide range of sources. These "illustrations" have a power to stand on their own and open up new avenues of thought. One of their explanations of how our labor is not in vain is to summarize J. R. R. Tolkien's short story, "Leaf by Niggle." Tolkien gets something profoundly right in this story, and the story brings it out better than any didactic account can.

Third, in their final chapter, they offer an account of the mission and programs of Redeemer's Center for Faith & Work. Here they lay out not just a set of ideas, but rather a description of people and programs that can serve as practice-altering exemplars for how the gospel is good news for our work worlds.



David H. Jensen's *Responsive Labor: A Theology of Work* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006, 121 pp., \$22.00) is the work of an associate professor of constructive theology at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. Jensen offers the most tightly argued and researched of the four books. He relies on the Cappadocian fathers, Reformed theology, and Catholic social teaching (especially Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*).

Because he sees God as appropriating *all* human labor, Jensen does not offer an exclusively Christian definition of work. He endorses the definition of human work as "any activity undertaken with a sense of obligation to oneself, others, one's community, and God" (p. 3).

The Christian will understand this work as the human response to the God who creates the world in love. Jensen sets out to relate work to

the doctrine of the Trinity, but that requires helping his readers understand the doctrine. Here Jensen shines. “The Trinity is a fundamentally practical doctrine,” he says, with practical significance for our experience of work (p. xii). The self-revealing triune God points to “the intrinsic value of difference, abundance, interdependence, sharing, and play in work.” By contrast, “our economy is often characterized by scarcity, a drive toward uniformity, hoarding, poverty, and overwork” (p. 51).

Jensen sees the liturgy generally and the Eucharist specifically as paradigmatic practices where human work displays the values of God’s work. He concludes with a consideration of reforms in practice and policy that would bring our economic realities more in line with the values we find in the doctrine of the Trinity.



Esther D. Reed’s *Good Work: Christian Ethics in the Workplace* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010, 132 pp., \$24.95) was originally developed as the Sarum Lectures at Sarum College in Salisbury, England. The book retains the feel of a lecture series. The material is not always systematically developed, but her content is rich and evocative, incorporating pithy quotations from other authors.

Reed, an associate professor of theology at the University of Exeter, does not offer a comprehensive definition of work, opting instead to pursue the topic through the variety of aspects it presents in different contexts. Still, her central claims are that

to understand the meaning of work, one must first understand the meaning of rest; the predominant framework for describing a Christian ethic of work...is the resurrection of Christ Jesus from the dead...; [and] reflection on the resurrection can orient (or reorient) the working lives of Christians in important ways.” (p. 2)

These are substantive claims that may indeed help us understand what it means to say “in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”

Reed fills out her claims by “thinking with the resurrection.” This means four things. First, it is a form of “Christian realism.” Idealists (here she has in mind “Freegans” who are “dedicated to revealing human over-consumption and waste” by “dropping out of the paid employment economy”) posit an alternative society, but they underestimate the complexity of social ills and the nature of sin (p. 23). Political realism, however, offers more cynicism than hope. By contrast, “Christian realists derive truth not only from the observation of things around us but from the event of the resurrection and the hope of God’s kingdom to come” (p. 24).

Second, she finds that Catholic social teaching has already done good work in showing us how to think with the resurrection. Here she draws on Pope John Paul II’s *Laborem Exercens* (1981) as a model for thinking with the

resurrection. Perhaps thinking of Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* which tried to articulate a middle way between capitalism and communism, she insists that theological realism is not a middle way. It is rather "rooted in the Triune God...who transcends the realities of the created order and raised Christ Jesus from the dead" (p. 28).

Third, she offers readings of two icons, one depicting Christ and the harrowing of Hell (p. 27) and another of St. Nicholas (p. 98). Both readings offer unique insights in what it means to think with the resurrection.

Finally, Reed takes the reader through the liturgy to show how the liturgy trains its participants to see the world. To labor not in vain is to have one's work and oneself and ultimately one's people taken up and transfigured in Christ's resurrection.



Ben Witherington III, a prolific and highly respected New Testament scholar, has written *Work: A Kingdom Perspective on Labor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011, 192 pp., \$18.00). His insights into the nature of work depend not primarily on research conducted for this book but from a life's work of reflecting on biblical texts for the Church. One of his central goals for the book is to teach the reader "what the Bible actually says about work" (p. vii).

This book packs many punches into its small size and casual tone. To illustrate, I will follow only its first line of thought.

Witherington constructs a definition of work in which eschatology has a central place. After sifting through definitions of work proposed by others, including Jensen, he then constructs his own. A good definition should provide a clear standard by which to determine what falls inside and outside of its domain. So, a Christian definition of work should enable us to determine what work Christians can, must, and must not do. A definition that includes everything does not make such distinctions and so is a failed definition.

Witherington defines 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).

We should note how Witherington's definition brings "new creation" or a "kingdom perspective" into the definition of work. "Our eschatology must shape our vision of our tasks" (p. xv). It is our eschatology that will determine what kinds of work are and are not in vain.

This pushes the question back to "What does the eschaton, heaven on earth, look like?" Witherington emphasizes two sources: Jesus' teachings about the kingdom, and Isaiah's declaration of the completion of all things:

they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;

nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

Isaiah 2:4

Isaiah's view of the eschaton distinguishes swords and plowshares, war and work. It forces the question of whether it is possible to have Isaiah's view of the eschaton and consider war "good work." Is war possible work for a Christian who follows Jesus' teachings? Witherington responds with a clear "no." War contradicts the realities of the new creation.

Work, on the other hand, will continue in paradise which "involves a war stoppage, not a work stoppage, so that crops can be sown and their fruit enjoyed in peace. Work apparently *isn't* the human dilemma; war and other sorts of fallen human behavior are" (pp. xiv-xv). Witherington is quick to point out the implication here. Heaven on earth is not a retirement home. This means that our dream of working in order to achieve retirement is based in unbiblical myth.

This first line of thought that I have traced in *Work: A Kingdom Perspective on Labor* aptly demonstrates how little we have reflected on what the Bible says about work and how helpful Witherington is for that purpose.



Keller and Alsdorf, Jensen, Reed, and Witherington each make valuable contributions to thinking about work biblically and theologically. They help us understand the conditions under which "all is vanity." If we are to believe Paul when he writes, "in the Lord your labor is not in vain," then we need a way to understand our labor "in the Lord." The categories of "Christian worldview," "the Triune God," "the resurrection," and "new creation" are abstractly complimentary. They do not, however, amount to the same thing. They differ in their power to tell the story of God's work, to articulate the goodness along with the toil and vanity of human work, and to spur us to imagine heaven on earth. They differ in the clarity with which they can condemn actions that work against God and can praise actions which cooperate, even co-create, with God. With each of them we can affirm that nothing good is lost.



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