

ETHICS IN CONVERSATION

AUGUST 2021 | 25.4

BOOK REVIEW:

Work and Worship by Matthew Kaemingk and Cory B Wilson

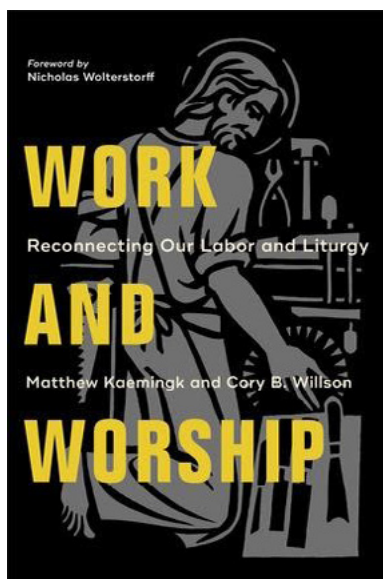
Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020

JON HYDE & DAVID MCILROY

Christians can struggle to integrate their work and their faith in practice. Christians may not feel able to bring their “work stuff” to church, and may come to believe that if church has little interest in their work then it has little interest in them as workers. This book is critical of a purely intellectual solution to this dilemma, rightly arguing that Christian workers need something more than a sound theory about how to think about their faith and their work. The authors properly acknowledge the importance of such theory, but press for a vital further step – that Christian workers should practise, embed and embody their theology of work in a community of worship. The rest of the book explores this central issue, with particular reference to the practices of Ancient Israel and the Early Church, before concluding with some practical suggestions for contemporary churches.

In doing so, the authors acknowledge the limitations on their project. They are clear about the view from which they write, in a modern and urban context in Northern America (partly offset by quoting the practices

of Christians in other parts of the world throughout the book), and from a particular Protestant angle. To that end, the book deliberately does not engage in detailed criticism of other thinking around the theology of work, but tries to construct the beginnings of a helpful resource in this area.



In Part 1 the authors explain their primary view of worship, as the heartbeat of the church. Like the systolic and diastolic functions of a healthy human heart, worship should pull God’s people in and scatter His people out again. In doing so, the intensive worship at church should enable Christians in extensive worship – loving and serving Christ in their lives outside of church. At church, Christians should be able to articulate their stories to God through praise, confession, struggle, petition and the fruits of their labour. To that end, worship needs to be “vocationally

conversant,” gathering Christian workers and their work before God for the workers to share their stories with God, and for God to share His great story with them. To this primary purpose of worship, the authors add the



Vincent van Gogh, *Congregation Leaving the Church in Nuenen*

secondary purpose of (trans)forming worshippers and their work by acclimatising them to God's economy when they spend so long in the economy of the world. In this way, Christians should be taught to inhabit

with their work, to help them to keep doing so through the rest of the week. All workers who are Christians are priests who are integral to God's mission, called to minister in the parishes of their workplaces.

Part 2 turns to consider how various practices of Ancient Israel and the Early Church may help Christians to integrate worship and work today. Chapter 4 argues that the ancient Israelites worshipped rather than thought their way into a life that integrated work and worship. Their liturgy, rather than their theology, showed them that they were called to a holy life in which their actions all week long needed to match the demands that God made of them.

Chapter 5 focuses on the Pentateuch and the ways in which God instructed the ancient Israelites to bring their work into worship. The Pentateuch contains a series of festivals, offerings, sacrifices and harvest celebrations, where the Israelites would commonly bring the product of their work itself into their worship, offering the best part of it to God. In this way, the Israelites could learn gratitude to God and to their neighbours for their possessions, celebrating with each other all the good things God had given them through their work. The authors note that

God's economy outside of church, being challenged as appropriate about their working conduct.

Chapter 2 focuses principally on the church, and critiques the ways in which worship presently fails Christian workers: it often highlights the work of the "institutional" church; it encourages a competition between material and spiritual life; it cultivates an individual and autonomous encounter between the believer and God; it fails to recognise the frustrations, boredom and injustice that workers experience every day; it encourages workers to consume worship passively; it provides Christian workers with refreshment from their weeks without connecting their activity in church with their activity outside of church; and it ignores the economic and political realities outside of church. In short, worshippers are not treated as workers.



Simon Bening, *Villagers on Their Way to Church*

our modern economy is far removed from that of Ancient Israel and the fruit of work far less tangible; but without celebrations that allow us to connect our success to God's providence we become proud and selfish.

In chapter 6, the authors show how rich the Psalms are for the Christian worker, with lyrics that arise directly from the lives and labours of God's people. Reflecting on God's numerous "jobs," we can see His faithful work alongside that of His people. It is for believers to sing about God's view of work so as to gradually start to shape their own view to be closer to His. More than that, the Psalms also give Christian workers a vocabulary to speak to God dynamically about their own praises, failings,

Accordingly, chapter 3 argues that church leaders need to recognise their congregants' work, and begin immersing themselves in the working lives of their members. Next, church leaders need to encourage members to bring their work into church and into worship, and to help their members see the liturgical connection between work and worship. Further, church leaders need to recognise that workplaces have their own rituals that will be shaping workers all week long. Therefore, church leaders need to help worshippers to practise, on Sunday, connecting God

hopes and fears at work, with assurance that God hears and reigns supreme. Christians in positions of authority at work might reflect on some of the Psalms seeking God's vengeance on the powerful, and the need for all believers to check their behaviour before they enter into worship.

In chapter 7, the authors show how the Old Testament prophets critique the negative consequences of separating work and worship. Unfaithful worship undermines the integrity of work, whilst unfaithful work leads to perverted worship; there is no hard and fast distinction in the prophets' minds. Starting with a helpful discussion of idolatry as placing inordinate trust in the work of human hands, the chapter makes the prophets' critiques of idols pertinent to work today. This chapter discusses many of the pitfalls that Christian workers face today in maintaining the integrity of their faith both in worship and work. Given the importance of this, the chapter could have been strengthened with some specific contemporary examples, which are helpfully given on other issues elsewhere in the book.

With chapter 8, the authors turn to the Early Church. This jump straight from the Old Testament to the Early Church, skipping the New Testament, is notable and passes largely without explanation. This absence highlights the authors' keen interest in the practices of God's people in their worshipping communities. The Early Church blended the earthiness of Christians' physical labour with their worship. The authors imagine a contemporary church service with practices and liturgy centred on the work of the believers in the pews.

Chapter 9 focuses on how early Christians, like the Israelites before them, brought their work into worship as an offering. The Early Church adopted the worship practices of the Old Testament to an urban and commercial context, bringing as offerings the physical products of their work, which were then used to help the poor, support the ministries of the church or in corporate worship. The Early Church continued the Old Testament focus on worshippers bringing the first fruits of their work as an offering, and remembering through worship that God is with them in their work, and has blessed their work, through which others can be blessed too.

The Early Church navigated the tension between the need for Christians to bring their work as an offering to God and their reliance on God's grace for all that they had; how it was important for them to offer their work to God, but to

do so in the context of receiving a far greater work (of their salvation) from Christ.

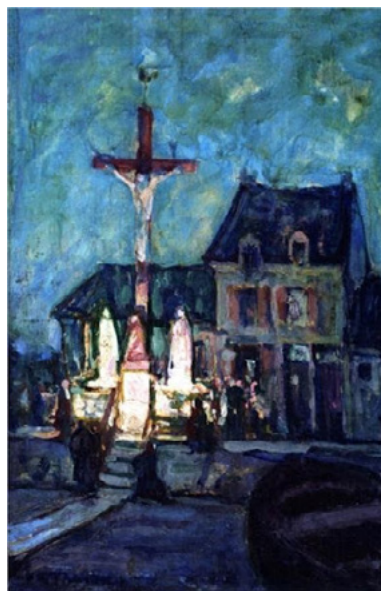
The final section of the book, Part 3, turns to practices today that may help Christian workers to integrate their worship and their work liturgically.

Chapter 10 explores how the liturgy of the Eucharist can help the workers to directly engage both their work and their worship: by examining, approaching, thanking, receiving, sharing, holding and consuming. In these ways, the workers can check their behaviour at work; bring their whole life before God; acknowledge and thank God for all that they have, and that through Christ their imperfect work can be part of God's economy; acknowledge their ultimate reliance and dependence on God, in work as well as salvation; share the precious body and blood of Christ with other believers from all stations of life and work; hold the physical bread and wine and so reflect on both the sin within their workplace and God's ultimate redemption; and be reminded by consuming the bread and wine that Christ is in them as they leave church and go to work.

The final two chapters set out some practical examples and guiding principles aimed at developing worship that engages workers, first for church and then for work beyond church. These are intentionally practical chapters, reflecting on how workers might prepare for worship; the physical space in which worship occurs; and how church leaders might welcome workers, with their concerns, praises, sins, requests and the fruits of their labour. There is also consideration about how Sunday worship can best orient, pray, commission and send workers out to their vocations in the world. The authors suggest including rituals that highlight worshippers' work rather like many churches highlight the work of their mission partners, thereby also making the point that worshippers' work is as important a calling as traditional missionary work. They also suggest specific opportunities in the service for workers to pray about their work, and be commissioned by the church for it.

Overall, this book makes a welcome and important contribution to the field of theology and work, despite not addressing the theology of work directly at all. Its reflections

on the vital importance of embedding and embodying Christians' work within their worship at church are insightful and vital, posing an important challenge to churches everywhere to creatively and imaginatively



Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Fishermen's Devotions, Étapes*

embrace the work that their members do the rest of the week. The authors' argument is not that liturgy itself will be effective to ensure that churches give proper place to work, and workers give proper place to Christ, but that theology which is not embedded and embodied will fail to penetrate to the hearts of workers.

In closing, the authors highlight a number of issues that require further work, such as how churches can keep encouraging their members aside from Sunday morning services. Perhaps church small groups or parachurch organisations supporting particular workplaces (such as the Lawyers' Christian Fellowship for Christians in the law)

might be helpful here, but it is good for such questions to be posed for further investigation. We wonder if such investigation might helpfully engage further with Christian thinking around work in other cultures and parts of the world, given this book's (admitted) focus on North America; for example, the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity in England has long spoken about the importance of Christians gathering and being scattered back into their workplaces. There is also much work to be done on how contemporary Christian workers can effectively offer the first fruits of their work to God. We hope, with the authors of this book, that the discussion is only just beginning.



Photograph by Jim Rusthoven, *Cathedral at Bayonne*