

Matthew Kaemingk and Cory B. Willson

**Work and Worship: Reconnecting Our Labor and Liturgy**

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Numerous passages in the Bible depict God as a worker, maker, potter, shepherd, and vinedresser. Moreover, the week of creation at the beginning of Genesis is portrayed as the pattern for human labor. Many of Jesus' parables were also inspired by the laboring culture of first-century Israel. Perhaps God used that to show that our labor, work, and vocation are very important to him. Two American theologians, Matthew Kaemingk and Cory Willson, have written a book that sees work as a very important aspect of the priesthood of all believers, and as the reason why it is important to *reconnect our labor and worship*. In other words, if we truly believe in the priesthood of all believers and the mission of the laity in the world, we should perceive our Sunday worship as preparation of Christ's priesthood for the work of ministry in everyday professions. These professions are a means of realizing the cultural mandate to be royal priests and the evangelical mission to be the light, salt, and leaven of the world. The authors acknowledge that the book was written primarily with American readers in mind, however, they have purposely utilized examples of liturgies from various church traditions (Baptist, Pentecostal, Orthodox, and Catholic), periods (from the early church until today), and geographical regions (Africa, Asia, South America, and Europe). Both authors are reformed theologians and professors of Systematic Theology, who have learned their trade through research and serving in organizations that deal with faith and work in many American urban centers (p. 8). They have three types of readers in mind: workers, worship leaders, as well as scholars, and students (p. 9). They believe worship can and should have a "(trans)formative impact on work and workers," although they add that the primary purpose of worship is to glorify God. Since there exists a great divide between faith and work in modern western society, "a single hour of gathered worship on Sunday cannot possibly hold these disparate aspects of our lives together on its own." The book is divided into three parts. The first part lays a conceptual foundation (p. 10) and explores problems that modern churches have in this area. The second part explores the nature of interconnection between work and worship in the Old Testament and the early church. The third part is practical, and it gives principles and practices on how to reconcile faith and work through communal worship (p. 11).

In the *Introduction*, the authors point to a common problem in today's churches – Christians often feel that their experience of church worship is a million miles away from their work experience (p. 1). Authors portray them as "disassociated

personalities” (p. 2) that live fragmented lives (p. 3) and have to be reintegrated. This is impossible to accomplish through mere intellectual understanding that one’s work is an important part of Christian service and worship. Authors believe that it is necessary to liturgically discover and strengthen the connection between our work and worship (p. 4) “through the practices of communal worship” (p. 5).

The first part of the book, “Foundations,” is divided into three chapters. In the first chapter, “Worship That Forms Workers,” authors compare the Sunday worship to a heart that pumps blood inwards and outwards. Similarly, worship should draw people in God’s presence to then send them out to spread “the grace of Christ, the law of God, and the power of the Holy Spirit into the world” (p. 18). Gathered together on Sunday, worshippers should “communicate their weekly stories to God,” bringing *trumpets* (thanks and gratitude for what they have experienced during the week), *ashes* (confession and owning their weekly stories of rebellion and sin), *tears* (sharing with God the sadness, confusion and even anger from their workplace), *petitions* (representing as priests their workplace, coworkers, clients, etc.), and *fruits* (of their labor to God’s table as a holy offering of thanks). Therefore, worship must not be a monologue, but a dialogue between God and the worshipper. Such worship will [trans]form the church and sanctify it through consolation and assurance of God’s presence and blessing, as well as confront godless attitudes of greed and pride through “practices of kneeling, bowing, listening, submitting, and confessing” (p. 22–23). At worship, the worshippers learn to “mimic and practice God’s patterns of work in their own working lives,” to join God in his activity toward “beauty, justice, craftsmanship, abundance, and healing” (p. 24).

The second chapter, “Worship That Fails Workers,” lays out that bad worship disintegrates our lives through poorly crafted songs, prayers, and sermons. Authors point out seven kinds of worship that do exactly that: institutional, spiritualized, individualist, saccharine, passive, privatized worship, and fueling worship.

In the third chapter, “Workers in the Pews,” the authors invite worship leaders to think about the Christian workers they serve and ask some questions. For example, what are the workers’ vocations, and will the Sunday worship address their work victories and defeats? Also, did they perhaps tell workers that they should not bring their work to church worship? Do they provide workers a chance to grapple with God and their work (p. 40)? Do believers see the connection between work and Sunday worship? Does worship provide liturgies that will help the workers to stand up to counter liturgies that godless worldviews bombard them with? Besides having to find answers to these and similar questions, worship leaders should bear in mind that workers are already a part of God’s mission in the world through their workweek – a mission of “renewal and reformation of everything” (p. 48). Workers are essential for the mission of the local church precisely at their workplaces (p. 51). Workers are “members of the priesthood of

all believers” and that every work, “when done in faithful service to both God and neighbor, is a priestly act of worship” (p. 52), allows laborers to “permeate the world in its entirety” (p. 53) with God’s presence. Authors add that workers already have their parish, meaning that every local church has a multitude of parishes, and that worship leaders need to think about recognizing them, encouraging workers to pray for them and send them back “with a sense of priestly purpose” (p. 56). Therefore, Sunday is the time when workers stop serving so that worship leaders could serve them so that all would be “formed into the image of their high priest, Jesus Christ” (p. 57).

The second part of the book is called “Resources,” and is divided into six chapters (chapters 4-9). In the fourth chapter, we learn that the Old Testament skillfully integrated work and worship. It did not spend all the time teaching the Israelites about the theology of work and worship, but it gave them a pattern to follow and called them to a life of deep integrity. Through songs, sacrificial offerings, harvest holidays, feasts, and prayers, the Israelites have “practiced their way into integrated lives of holy worship and holy work” (p. 64).

The fifth chapter shows that the Pentateuch proclaims the liberation of former Egyptian slaves from Egyptian economic customs of greed and exploitation and teaches them new habits that “reflected the generosity, justice, and love of their new master – Yahweh,” precisely through the experience of worship (p. 69). Pentateuch also teaches that God not only has eyes to see, but a sense of smell to inhale the aroma of their offerings and enjoy the earthy jobs of his children (p. 74), who always bring him cultivated products, or, in other words, “creation developed, molded, transformed, glorified by human labor” (p. 80). Today’s separation between work and worship makes it difficult for workers to be blessed in their emotional assurance that God enjoys their work; in their ethical conviction that the purpose of work is “the flourishing of the whole community” and in their theological belief that God stands behind every material blessing (p. 84–86).

The sixth chapter shows that in the Psalms, God’s work gives “interpretative lenses” to our work (p. 91) thereby giving it meaning (p. 95). The Psalms show God as a worker, thus ascribing dignity to workers (p. 92–95). Songs in the sanctuary shape workers, conforming them to patterns of God’s work (p. 98) who then continue living according to those same patterns in their everyday lives (p. 99). Psalms and songs also serve as a picturesque abundance of words and images that help workers to express themselves and offer their jobs to God (p. 102). Since work is closely related to worship, an unethical worker or employer will stand in the way of worship. Therefore, it is necessary to adopt a vocabulary of repentance and to review one’s work before and during worship (p. 109). Worship transforms workers in the sense that it questions their work ethic when it “regularly and *physically* withdraw their bodies from the economy of the world” during worship, helping them to “examine the economy of the world in the light

of the deeper economy of God” (p. 110). In the seventh chapter, work and worship are seen through the eyes of Old Testament prophets who speak against idol worship, properly understood as “*an inordinate trust in the work of human hands*,” or something primarily related to economic prosperity and work. This enables us to sympathize with the ancient Israelites and recognize just how similar we are (p. 118–119). The chapter deals with three prophets. Amos points to the sin of workers who cheat in trade and bribe judges (p. 124) as the reason why God withholds his blessing and does not answer their prayers (p. 125). Hosea addresses the priests and worship leaders who use worship to manipulate with workers and “cover-up economic evil and pain” (p. 128). Isaiah returns the ball to the workers, specifically the elites, who imitate Pharaoh in their exploitation. In the well-known passage about fasting that is pleasing to God in the 58<sup>th</sup> chapter, Isaiah says that to treat workers fairly is a form of holy worship (p. 136).

Eight and ninth chapters are devoted to the early church, where worship was imbued “with a holy form of worldliness” (p. 144), since workers brought products of their work to worship, and then those products would be consecrated to God (p. 146–147). The early Christians deeply cared about work integrity, believing that a Christian must not live a double life. For example, they asked the baptismal candidates about their work (p. 150) and they refused to accept the fruit of sinful work (p. 151). The work was thus seen as something desirable and full of potentiality to serve one’s neighbor and participate in the mission and worship of God (p. 153). Therefore, the authors see the importance of discipleship which prepares the worshippers to use their vocations for these purposes (p. 154). One of the most important ways in which Christians in the past connected work with worship was the practice of “vocational offerings,” arising from the understanding that “Israel’s agricultural offerings and sacrifices were not abolished but rather *transformed* by the death and resurrection of Christ” (p. 164). The workers used to bring the fruit of their work and then help the poor, support ministers, and fellowship in the context of worship (p. 165). Such worship reminded workers that the purpose of work was not only personal gain but a blessing of “all of humanity and God as well” (p. 175). For the believers as priests to offer offerings of thankfulness, it was necessary that Christ as the High Priest first accomplishes his higher work of salvation, namely to offer himself as a sacrifice and transform the sinful workers into the holy priesthood (p. 185) through union with him (p. 187). Authors conclude the chapters about the early church by examining the modern form of giving through bank transfers, which makes even the symbolic placement of fruits of labor in the church basket obsolete, which is why they suggest different ways of financial giving inspired by these ancient Christian offerings (p. 190).

In the third part of the book, “Practices,” there are three chapters in which the authors guide readers in the application of mentioned principles. The tenth

chapter, “Work at the Lord’s Table,” describes how the Lord’s table can become an experience of transformation of the believer into a worker-worshipper. It recommends seven things for the worker/worshipper to do while partaking in the Lord’s supper: *to examine* his/her work week, *to approach* the table aware of one’s own Christian calling in life and work, *to thank* God through Christ, *to accept* grace from God, *to receive* the mighty work of God through Christ, *to share* the fellowship of bread and wine with other workers, *to hold* the bread and wine in their hand, and *to consume* “a gastronomical reminder that Christ is in them and they are in Christ” (p. 196).

The eleventh chapter, “Worship that Gathers Workers,” imagines a Sunday morning that addresses workers (p. 209). Authors talk about themes such as preparation of the worker/worshipper to come to worship, interior decoration of the church that encourages such view of worship, pastoral call to worship, and bringing of tears, trumpets, ashes, petitions, and fruits to worship (p. 211–239). These pages contain numerous examples that can be of considerable help to worship leaders.

The last chapter of the book, “Worship That Scatters Workers,” conveys the idea that “[g]athered worship in the sanctuary must become scattered worship in the streets” (p. 241). The workers need to be oriented toward their work and invited to think about how God works in and through their vocations. The church should pray while having workplaces in mind and it should send workers to their workplaces through different “commissioning rituals” that “root workers in God’s mission and reinforce their primary calling within God’s kingdom economy” (246). Authors suggest five such rituals, with a special emphasis on the last one, “Blessing and Charge,” in which workers are being blessed in their work and reminded of God’s presence and power at their workplaces, as well as called to be faithful to God’s mission in the world (249–250).

The *Epilogue* invites us to build upon the content of this book. Pastors should get acquainted with the “working lives of people in their communities” (p. 254) to be ready to help worshipers teaching them workweek liturgies that will strengthen their Sunday practices.

In many ways, this is a unique book that presents an important theological contribution that can be applied to different areas such as ecclesiology, pastorology, the teaching of worship, homiletics, and discipleship. It comes at an opportune time when many believers, either as an excuse or an honest fear of Coronavirus, do not come to church services anymore. Now most pastors and worship leaders, as well as believers, are more open to ponder whether there exist legitimate objections to church worship that need to be addressed. I believe that authors are correct in pointing out that worship should, among other things, be adapted to the needs of Christian workers, so that they become places where, as the authors say, they bring their vocations to worship so that they would learn to be their

worship to their vocations. Of course, this book deals with an important, but still limited area of work, so that church and worship leaders should think about ways of applying these principles to other spheres of the Christian life, such as family life, education, politics, entertainment, and others. This book teaches church leaders to delegate that most important part of the Christian service, namely, to be the salt, light, and yeast in this world – to proclaim the gospel using words and lives that reflect the deepest evangelical principles of faith in Christ, love for God and one’s neighbor, and hope in the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. This is also in harmony with Paul’s vision in Ephesians 4:12, where God gave church leaders “to equip his people for works of service,” and not to make them bearers of the whole service of God’s church.

*Work and Worship* will generate some objections among the church leaders. Some will find fault with its Kuyperian emphasis on Christian engagement outside the church that is not limited to witnessing of faith through evangelization. Others might resent its broadness and examples from Christian traditions that are too different from their own or the fact that the authors assume the reality of women serving as pastors in the church. I thought that the book could have been shorter by some fifty pages. However, regardless of many possible objections, this is a manual worth reading, studying, applying, recommending, and perhaps giving to coworkers in the church.

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