

WORK BY THE BOOK

Two books and two websites help Christians to think through how their work is a part of their calling

BY MARVIN OLASKY

A PLETHORA OF CHRISTIAN BOOKS and resources concerning issues of work, business, and calling is now available. I've found four particularly useful.

Those wanting a short book should get theologian Wayne Grudem's *Business for the Glory of God* (Crossway, 2003). In 96 pages he shows that business glorifies God when we use our talents to employ others in an environment that allows them to be productive and creative. He looks at issues such as ownership, productivity, employment, profit, competition, borrowing and lending, poverty and inequality.

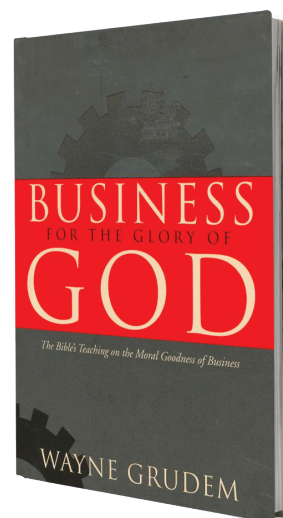
Grudem also concludes that "the only long-term solution to world poverty is business. That is because businesses produce goods, and businesses produce jobs. And businesses continue producing goods year after year, and continue providing jobs and paying wages year after year." He notes that business activities are essentially good but we can sin by making idols of them—

and when governments impede business development, they foster more poverty.

Darrow Miller's *LifeWork: A Biblical Theology for What You Do Every Day* (YWAM Publishing, 2009) is four times as long and broader in its analysis. Miller points out that many evangelicals have a dualistic worldview that leads them to divide life into sacred and secular realms. He notes that in the 62 years he has been a Christian, only twice has he heard a pastor preach on this dualistic problem.

Miller knows that Christians may feel a great dissonance between what our Christian faith says about the sacredness of our work and what we may experience as the drudgery of work.

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"We may know that God didn't institute work as a curse; we may know that God created us in his own image—made us to work as he does with great purpose and reward. But to our disappointment and unease, in our actual experience work is often more about survival than the fulfillment of our destinies."

Miller particularly criticizes a prime manifestation of this dualistic thinking among Christians, the idea that "it is best to leave the secular arena and go into the spiritual arena so we can be 'full-time Christian workers.' Only evangelists, church planters, pastors, missionaries, and theologians are doing full-time Christian work according to this view, because only these kinds of work are spiritual. The 'helping professions' (social workers, charity workers, counselors, etc.) rank a close second. . . . Accounting, carpentry, filmmaking, the arts, farming and homemaking are secular activities and thus lower."

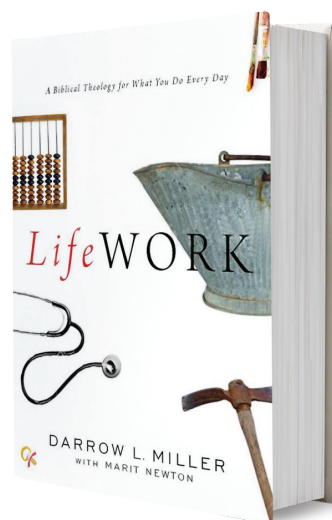
This split was most dramatic in medieval times, when the Catholic church taught of "two forms of life, the perfect life and the permitted life. The perfect life was higher, sacred, and contemplative. It was the life of religious workers like priests, nuns, monks, and theologians. . . . The permitted life was lower, secular, and active. This involved manual labor and was the lot of the common man, the farmer,

homemaker, cabinet-maker, merchant, and artisan."

The Protestant Reformation challenged such thinking: "Reformers like Luther and Calvin and also Ulrich Zwingli . . . recognized that there is no sacred-secular dichotomy but only a consecrated or unconsecrated life." Luther applied the German word *beruf*—"calling" or "vocation," in reference to professional ecclesiastical functions—to worldly duties as well: "If righteousness is by faith, Luther reasoned, then the contemplative life of the monks and priests is neither higher nor lower than the active life of the faithful farmer, cabinetmaker, or homemaker."

This belief changed ideas about work, and it should transform ours as well: "For Christians who understand that we are saved by grace through faith, the whole concept of work has been transformed to that of worship. Paul told Roman believers 'to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.'" Miller quotes 19th-century Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle's summary of this biblical ethic: "All true Work is sacred . . . even the poor day laborer, the weaver of your coat, the sewer of your shoes."

Do we believe that? I suspect Miller is right when he notes that "the concept of work held today, in much of the Western world, has been framed by the materialistic or secular paradigm. In this worldview, there is no spiritual reality, only physical reality. From this perspective, what does work do? It gives us access to material things. . . . Man



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is an animal, a highly evolved animal, but he is basically a consumer. In this paradigm, man has no intrinsic worth. . . . Success in the workplace means moving higher up the career ladder, accumulating more money or power for the purpose of affording greater consumption.”

Some affluent people work hard in ways that provide no satisfaction. Some poor people work very hard, but others both domestically and internationally do all they can to avoid work. Miller writes, “Why are some nations poor? When you believe that work is a curse, you avoid work and don’t respect the work of others. Work and labor are demeaning.” He and I have been in “whole nations where the goal is to avoid work and where those with power corruptly live off the efforts of those who are less powerful.”

Miller also notes that “much of the blame for these stagnant economies can be laid at the feet of the greedy and corrupt behavior of the government officials and those mercantilists and tribal chiefs who control the economy. This behavior is institutionalized in laws and structures that are against freedom and either strip the poor of the fruits of their labor or rob them altogether of the opportunity to work. Autocratic leadership styles squash initiative, innovation, and creativity. Controlled economies and rampant corruption sap economic initiative. Lack of property rights and copyright protections prevent hardworking people and artisans from enjoying their rightful reward.”

Here in the United States autocracy is growing but is not yet dominant. Miller points out that we do have a problem with Gnosticism, the belief (among others) that the material world is evil and profane. Miller writes that “we are showing a Gnostic orientation whenever we demean things of the physical world . . . or see work in the fields that deal with them as a less-than-full Christian calling. . . . Like much of the animistic world, Gnostic Christians forget that when Christ returns there will be a new heaven and a new earth; instead they see this world as vanishing.”

Miller has a different eschatology: “When Christ returns, there will be a great shaking. All that is of the kingdom of God will be left standing; all else will be in a pile of rubble. Similarly there will be a refiner’s fire. All that has been built that relates to the kingdom of God will be left by the refiner’s fire. All else will be destroyed by the fire. The earth will not disappear when Christ returns! It will be a refined, purified earth, a ‘re-newed’ earth. The kingdom of God is both now and not yet!”

MILLER’S THINKING also underlies the first of the two web resources I recommend. *Lifework: Developing a Biblical Theology of Vocation* (mondaychurch.org/theology) is a free, downloadable 84-page resource that contains an overall explanation and a series of vocation-related Bible studies on subjects from agriculture and accounting to motherhood and relief work.

Its basic message is that “God has a general calling for all of the redeemed, first to salvation—justification, and then to the Christian life—to be godly men and women, to be servants, to seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness. He also has a particular calling for each follower of Christ, a place to work for His unfolding Kingdom. We shall call the former (general calling) life and the latter (particular calling) work. Together they are one’s lifework.”

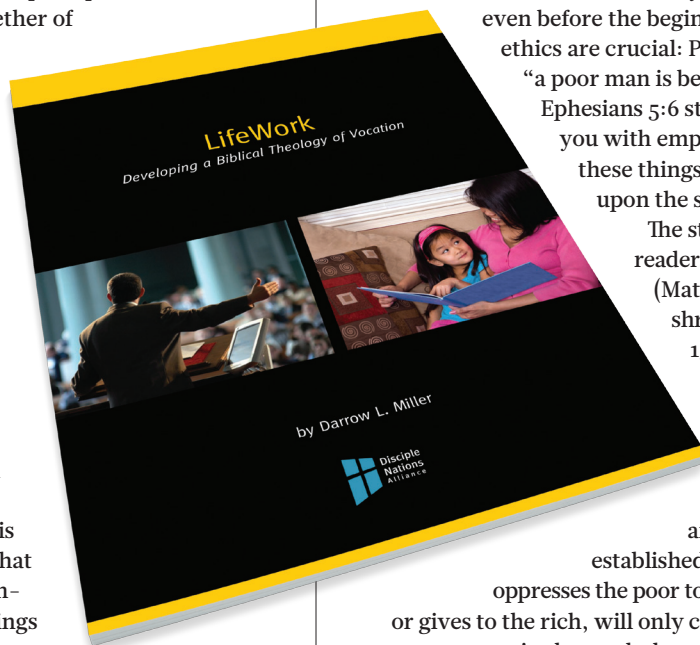
The specific studies are particularly interesting. The one on communication notes how the Gospel of John starts, “In the beginning was the Word,” and how Genesis 1:26, “Let us make man in our image,” reflects a conversation among members of the Trinity that was going on from even before the beginning. Verses regarding ethics are crucial: Proverbs 19:22 notes that “a poor man is better than a liar,” and Ephesians 5:6 states, “Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.”

The study on business points readers to parables of the talents (Matthew 25:14–30) and the shrewd manager (Luke 16:1–15). It spotlights proverbs that business managers should take to heart, such as Proverbs 16:3, “Commit your work to the LORD, and your plans will be

established,” and 22:16, “Whoever oppresses the poor to increase his own wealth, or gives to the rich, will only come to poverty.” As women move up in the workplace the work (both intellectual and physical) of the most celebrated woman in Proverbs is worth recalling: “She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard” (31:16).

Wayne Grudem’s short book is to Darrow Miller’s long one as the Lifework website is to the other top website resource I’ve found, that of the **Theology of Work Project** (theologyofwork.org). It has teams of scholars and workplace practitioners researching each book of the Bible along with 20 key topics about work, such as calling, compensation, globalization, business ethics, and conflict. The goal is to produce and disseminate papers and other materials that will help people to see God’s purpose in work and workplaces.

I looked at two of the studies now available online. The study of Colossians notes, concerning chapter 3’s admonition



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to exchange our old, lying selves for new ones, that "it is proper and necessary for a business to make a profit, or for a nonprofit organization to create added value. But if the desire for profit becomes boundless, compulsive, excessive, and narrowed to the quest for personal gain, then sin has taken hold."

This study at times exhibits an arch sense of humor: "Lying can result from promoting the company's prospects or the product's benefits inaccurately. . . . Christian workers who refuse to employ deception (whether by rejecting misleading advertising copy or balking at glorified Ponzi schemes) may find themselves making some enemies as the price of their honesty. But it also is possible that some co-workers will develop a new openness to Jesus' way when the Securities and Exchange Commission knocks on the office door."

Pointed questions minimize a potential Sunday school flavor: "It is likely that every workplace has people whose on- and off-hours actions make for juicy stories. It is not lying, is it, to repeat the stories? It is likely that every workplace has unfair policies, bad bosses, non-functional processes, and poor channels of communication. It is not slander, is it, to complain about those grievances?"

Well, "Paul's exhortation is to live differently even in fallen workplaces. Putting to death the earthly nature and putting on Christ means directly confronting people who have wronged us instead of gossiping about them behind

their back (Matthew 18:15-17). It means working to correct inequities in the workplace and forgiving those that do occur."

The study also critiques a "shallow way" of doing everything in the name of Jesus (3:17). "The shallow way is to incorporate some Christian signs and gestures into our workplace, like a Bible verse posted on our cubicle or a Christian bumper sticker on our truck. Gestures like this can be meaningful, but in and of themselves, they do not constitute a Christ-centered work-life. A deeper way to understand Paul's challenge is to pray specifically for the work we are in the midst of doing: 'God, please show me how to respect both the plaintiff and the defendant in the language I use in this brief.'"

Another completed Theology of Work study takes on the book that even John Calvin did not preach about: Revelation. The commentary on chapter 4 notes that "God is praised precisely as creator of all things. The visible world is not an afterthought, or a mere prelude to heaven, but an expression of God's glory, and the basis upon which his creatures may praise him. This again is foundational for a proper understanding of work. If the world is simply an illusion separating us from the real life of heaven, work in the world will necessarily be seen as more or less a complete waste of time. If, by contrast, the world is the good creation of God, the prospects for meaningful work become more hopeful."

The study accurately shows how positives taken too far become idols: "If the world system were a self-evident cesspool, the temptation for Christians to fall to its allures would be small. It is precisely the genuine benefits of technological advance and extensive trading networks that constitute the danger. Babylon promises all the glories of Eden, without the intrusive presence of God. It slowly but inexorably twists the good gifts of God—economic interchange, agricultural abundance, diligent craftsmanship—into the service of false gods."

The commentary opposes "a vision of 'heaven' consisting of nothing more than clouds, harps, and white robes." The new earth to come has some relation to the old: "God created humans to exercise dominion over the earth, which entails creativity. Would it be sensible for such a God to then turn and regard work done in faith as useless, and cast it aside? On balance, it seems far more likely that he would raise it up and perfect all that is done for his glory." ♦

