

Our Work Loves Our Neighbor: Did Jesus Waste Most of His Life?

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Book review by Anne Cregger

We long for our work to matter to God; indeed, many days we long for it to matter at all. And we wonder...

In *Our Work Loves Our Neighbor*, Hotaling, Gilman and Baugh have put new feet and muscle to what my colleague and mentor, Steve Garber, has taught for so many years in so many venues. We are encouraged always to hear of the same message being signaled out from the other side of the country! This is a small volume, really. It only took a couple of hours to read it through. The message is that doing our work in the 'secular' workplace is sacred duty, as much so as if we were doing what the world more often defines as full time Christian work. And it's not only sacred for the value of being a good witness to the Kingdom, though that is, of course, part of it. It's also sacred as it's one of the primary vehicles that God has designed and strategically placed in our world to be used by Him to love His people, those that know Him and those who do not yet. "We believe that in his Garden Commission, God did say: 'go into the world and make good shoes.'... Part of the whole gospel of God's love for the world is meeting people's need for good shoes and good food." And if we're in the work of shoe manufacture or sale or food production or service, it is our sacred privilege to convey those goods in the best way we can. We need to fully understand the value of that work in God's eyes; indeed we are impoverished if we do not.

So, here's the thing: this trio has brought into focus a new way we can look at our work, as through God's own eyes to see what He's doing. Think of a job, any job, and see if you can find a way to connect it with human flourishing --- flourishing of almost any kind.

Some examples:

A young friend, Josh, works in the field of finance for a consulting firm. It's good work. He's done it for some time but is only lately coming to understand the value of his part of the work of bringing into order the accounts of good businesses, so that they can meet their regulatory requirements, so that they can carry on their business of providing whatever goods or services they provide for the betterment of their customers. The client organization is served by his work, and they flourish. In turn, the *customers* (end users) of the client organization are served by his work. They are helped. And so it helps them to flourish, too. But he never had considered that this work was as valuable to God as an overseas missions trip.

I have a friend, Kathy, who works at a nearby university. Her work is to place nursing students into local hospitals for practicums during their courses of study. We live in an area where there are plenty of health facilities to choose from, so Kathy's work can seem routine sometimes. One nursing student asked to be placed into the jail clinic at the county retention center. It took a significant amount of arranging, but Kathy was able finally to place the student there. Now a young and eager (and by the way, Christian) student is present to minister to the inmates who need health care. She learns better how to serve in that environment and the inmates get the care of someone who truly desires to be there. The Kingdom benefits in the short and in the long term. Kathy has probably not thought of that as 'sacred' work. But it is.

Last one: another friend, Rosemary is a gifted designer of interior spaces. For many years she's worked for different organizations, creating interior color and physical arrangement schemes that clients accept or reject according to their tastes and wallets. It's hard work, and the clientele is challenging, but she keeps on. As an earnest follower of Jesus, Rosemary sees that she may have an impact for the kingdom in her workplace, may be able to raise someone's awareness of God's goodness and love for them, maybe even advance the kingdom into the life of a coworker by coming alongside them with regular lunchtime Scripture reading group. She's a prominent leader in her church community, and her walk with God has blossomed in the 22 years in the neighborhood. When we talk about how she feels about the idea of her work supporting the Kingdom, it makes me sad to hear her say, "You know, I am really glad to do this work--- and I'm good at it---but I do it so that I can support my missionary friends that I know through the church." Yes, she believes that her work matters to God, but not much beyond the possible witness to unbelievers in the workplace and the donations she can make to the 'real' Kingdom work done by people who go to Africa or Haiti or even serve the Kingdom through the work of organizations like The Navigators or Campus Crusade for Christ or Young Life. In churches we pray regularly for missionaries and for church programs all around us, bringing the gospel message to the underserved of the world. And we should. But we should not neglect prayer for our people doing the work that God has created for them (and designed them *for*) right here. Right now. Every day.

Think for a moment about our fellow Kingdom citizens who spend their time juggling test tubes in a lab, bending over excel spreadsheets in an accounting firm, collecting garbage at the curbs of our cities, spooning cereal into a baby's mouth in the kitchen, serving in government offices or defending our country far away—what about them? And what about the work itself? Does the church generally see the value in it? If you're a doctor or teacher, maybe, but otherwise, not as much. And how does *God* view those activities that we do every day? The authors of this small, quick read posit that, in fact, it's vitally important to God that we rightly see Him in our workplaces, that the products and services we produce help fulfill God's commandment to love our neighbors.

Over the years our churches have unwittingly advanced split thinking about vocation: 'real' Christian work is directly associated with church and missionaries and is close to the center of God's will, and everything else comes in second at best. The implication is that this secondary work may be useful for supporting the 'real' Kingdom work and for bringing the occasional few into a saving knowledge of Jesus, but beyond that, it's deemed a necessary evil and 'of the world.' This is just not so. As the authors say so well: "We believe our work matters to God. Even though we may appear insignificant in the role we play, our work and our lives become significant because we are part of God's delivery system of love. Careers and avocations--- where most of us spend the majority of our days--- are a primary means of loving our neighbors. Businesses, government, education, non-profits and avocations help people meet each other's needs and gain dignity by contributing to the good of society. Our work is really God's love made visible."

In this little volume, *Our Work Loves Our Neighbor*, the authors take the time to explore what our heavenly Father is doing on earth in different fields of endeavor: fields like telecommunications, accounting, consulting, carpentry and counseling. We learn how these works that seem so secular are, in fact, sacred. So, what about Rosemary's work of design? She helps create environments in which people live, learn and thrive. Indeed, they can flourish. Amen.