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Whole Life Worship: A Review of Work and Worship

Abstract

"Kaemingk and Willson's integration of liturgy and labor is well-researched and creates needed theological and liturgical bridges between work and worship."

Posting about the book *Work and Worship* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/whole-life-worship-a-review-of-work-and-worship/>

Keywords

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Comments

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in things

December 16, 2020

Whole Life Worship: A Review of *Work and Worship*

Jeremy Perigo

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

Author: Matthew Kaemingk & Cory B. Willson

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The growing field of worship studies receives its newest contribution in Matthew Kaemingk and Cory Willson's accessible but theologically rich book, *Work and Worship*. Blurring the lines of sacred and secular, these two Reformed systematic theologians endeavor to reunite labor and liturgy in a book for both academics and practitioners. Their unique contribution is critical as they expand and apply recent work in liturgical theology of scholars such as Nicholas Wolterstorff and James K. A. Smith to more fully incorporate whole-life worship and vocational formation.¹ Their pioneering work resounds alongside recent publications such as Sam and Sara Hargreaves' *Whole Life Worship*, exploring and reconciling faith and work within Sunday worship.² Rather than deconstructing current trends in corporate worship, Kaemingk and Willson construct a theology and practice of worship that is "vocationally conversant", where "both God and workers take turns speaking and listening" and "workers...begin to practice putting their faith in God and their work in the world into conversation."³ Their constructive approach provides key theological foundations through their examination of Scripture

and history. Simultaneously, their approach fuels creative liturgical practice for local churches in diverse contexts.

The twelve chapters of *Work and Worship* are split into three sections focused on foundations, resources, and practices. Much of the research features biblical studies and theological analysis aimed at integrating work and worship. Simultaneously, the book explores the embedded and operant theologies at the intersection of faith and vocation through vignettes featuring liturgical prayers of the global church and case studies of Christian workers such as nurses, businesswomen, dentists, farmers, and therapists.

In chapter one, the authors introduce and define worship, highlighting gathered worship as a key space for vocational formation. In vocationally-conversant worship, “our work is made open to God’s work.”⁴ Chapter two critiques worship that is overly institutional, private, and spiritual, aiming for shifts in worship that are more organic, public, and material. For Kaemingk and Willson, the context of worship should be a space for workers to worship where walls between private devotion and public vocation are torn down. Chapter three urges pastors and leaders of worship toward “vocational listening”, which enables the development of liturgies that critique destructive workplace practices and imagine all Christian workers contributing to the mission of God. Via the work of the Holy Spirit, worship becomes the place of the formation of our whole lives, including our working lives. Liturgy is then not only the work of the people, but also intentionally relates to work of the people. Therefore, liturgists need increased relationality that attunes not only to “spiritual” need of the people but also to the work of the people.

In chapters four to seven, Kaemingk and Willson elucidate the integration of worship and work as expressed in the Hebrew Bible, showing how Hebrew workers would bring their work into worship. In their work with the Pentateuch, the authors reveal a theological anthropology of workers who see God’s involvement with the minutia of daily work and bring hand-made offerings and sacrifices from their own farms into worship. The embedded and enacted worship rituals at harvest festivals force Israel to enjoy the fruit of their labor while remembering that God alone is the source of all fruitfulness. Celebrating with family, foreigners, and servants, they embody a new economy that encourages the flourishing of the entire community.

In chapter six, Kaemingk and Willson utilize God’s diverse “jobs” in the book of Psalms, such as seamstress (139:13), physician (146:8), and foster parent (146:9), as a framework for the work of our hands. They state, “The psalms...initiate a dynamic conversation, a vocational dialogue between the sanctuary and the streets.”⁵ Kaemingk and Willson do not ignore the harsh and challenging realities of the workplace. Using Psalm 104, they poignantly illustrate the relationship between God’s work and human work through a liturgical reading of Psalm 104 from the

perspective of an executive needing to cut costs, and a laid-off worker directly impacted by these decisions. The Psalms provide another opportunity to integrate worship and work under the sovereign work of God. The examination of the Prophets in chapter seven reveals idolatry often fueled unjust and unethical economic practices, and unjust business practices often led to corrupt worship practices. Worship and work are symbiotic, and the prophetic critique was both liturgical and vocational. Overall, this section on the Pentateuch, the Psalms, and the Prophets presents Israel's worship of God integrated with all of life, including work.

In chapters eight and nine, Kaemingk and Willson turn their investigation to the liturgical theology and practices of the early church with particular focus on the writings of the Church Fathers. They mention, for example, the possibility of modern churches mirroring the ancient practice of public processions of worship by a local church prayer, walking around the financial district, factories, or areas with great need. The authors present the early Christian practice of offering as a vocationally conversant practice evidenced in the liturgical instructions in early Christian documents, such as the *Didache* and *Didascalia*, and in early liturgical art. The rituals and art surrounding the offering acted as intentional liturgical catechesis where worship was the space to learn and practice economics Christianly.

Chapters 10 to 12 address specific practices of worship and worship planning principles, along with a number of acts of worship that fuse liturgy and labor. Kaemingk and Willson propose a Eucharistic theology infused with Christian vocation, where all human laboring and worship is dependent on God's work. Chapter 11 features numerous illustrations of vocationally-conversant worship to aid in gathering God's people, including preparation for worship, the use of liturgical space, interactive artwork, and responsive prayer. Similarly, chapter 12 is filled with ways to plan corporate worship, sending workers back to their places of influence. These practical chapters and related illustrations contain a liturgical breadth that spans denominations and cultures.

Work and Worship is a significant, original contribution to the field of worship studies. Kaemingk and Willson's integration of liturgy and labor is well-researched and creates needed theological and liturgical bridges between work and worship. Their concise, yet robust Old Testament theology of worship and work alone is more than worth the cost of the book. Additionally, this work is a strong advocate for the formative potential of worship that expands worship beyond personal expression. Kaemingk and Willson's work will resonate well with a Reformed Christian faith and Kuyperian worldview. Abraham Kuyper writes that worship "must be the one, grand, royal action of our whole life, in all our thoughts, words, and deeds we are always God's priests, called to serve his holy purposes."⁶ Kuyper's whole life worship is evident in the central argument of this book.

The book's central challenge to plan corporate worship that is vocationally converse may seem like another duty to add to the unending list of pastoral responsibilities; however, the invitation for pastors and liturgists to become conversant in the work of their congregation may lead to these ministers seeing the kingdom impact that they are praying and laboring for. Some readers may be left desiring a greater investigation of work and worship in the New Testament. The book has limited discussion on the first Christians and the words of Jesus. Though direct discussion on worship and work may be limited in the New Testament, topics such as Jesus' vocation as carpenter, Jesus' teaching on money, or an analysis of the vocational implications of Christ in all things, may have helped develop a more comprehensive study. Additionally, the study may have benefitted from an exploration of public witness and mission in the workplace, showing how the transformative work of God in corporate worship can spark transformation in workplace relationships. These critiques move beyond the authors' tasks but may encourage future scholarly inquiry.

Theologians, seminary students, worship leaders, and liturgists should engage with this seminal work. For worship educators, Kaemingk and Willson's research could aid in creating and leading services of worship that are vocationally conversant. While reading this text in my first semester serving here at Dordt, I began to imagine and discern how our student worship leaders could utilize parts of this text to plan gathered worship that is even more correlated with our educational task. Christian worship for workers, including faculty, staff, and students, is not an escape from the pain and pressures of the world, but in worship we truly meet with God, hear his Word, are formed by his Spirit's work, and sent as his kingdom agents in his world.

FOOTNOTES

1. See, for example, Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Acting Liturgically: Philosophical Reflections on Religious Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018) and James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).
2. See Sam and Sara Hargreaves, *Whole Life Worship: Empowering Disciples for the Frontline*, (London: IVP, 2017).
3. Matthew Kaemingk and Cory B. Willson, *Work and Worship: Reconnecting Our Labor and Liturgy* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 22.
4. Kaemingk and Willson, *Work and Worship*, 25.
5. Kaemingk and Willson, *Work and Worship*, 108.
6. Harry Boonstra, ed, *Our Worship: Abraham Kuyper*, trans. Harry Boonstra, Henry Baron, Gerrit Sheeres, and Leonard Sweetman (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008), 18.