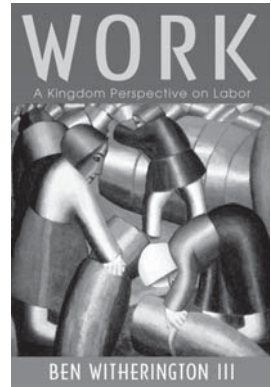


Work: A Kingdom perspective on Labor

Eerdmans, 2011, paperback, 184 pp, £11.99
ISBN-13: 978-0-8028-6541-0

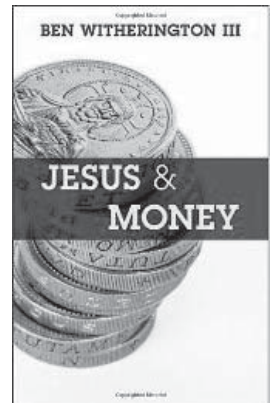
by Ben Witherington III



Jesus and Money: A guide for times of Financial Crisis

SPCK, 2010, paperback, 192 pp, £12.99
ISBN-13: 978-0281062546

by Ben Witherington III



■ reviewed by Christopher Bunce

The American New Testament theologian, Ben Witherington III, has written two books for Christians on work and money which are timely contributions to the debate concerning the current financial crisis. Moreover, both books complement each other well. In *Work*, Witherington attempts to locate work in the context of Christian vocation, as something that is Kingdom-oriented, what he describes as “culture-making”. He bemoans the attitude of many American Christians, whom he describes as tending ‘to evaluate their eternal worth on the basis of their net worth’. Anyone who has worked in the City of London, as I have, will be well aware of the culture of working long hours in the week in order to spend lavishly at the weekend. For Witherington, this Western materialism in which Christians are largely complicit makes

them partially culpable for the financial crisis, as it is an attitude towards wealth that he finds contrary to the New Testament. This theme is developed in *Jesus and Money*, where he states that ‘the self-justifying tendency of modern Christians to hoard wealth and live large have absolutely no basis whatsoever in the New Testament’. Witherington suggests that Christians have been too willing to lend and to borrow, adding to the spiralling levels of debt in the United States and elsewhere.

In *Work*, Witherington discusses a number of interesting ‘myths’ about work to which Christians have fallen prey. The idea that work is a result of the Fall, for example, is a misconception. For Witherington, work is not a curse as a result of sin, but rather the ‘toilsome’ nature of work is the result of the Fall. He therefore suggests that Christians should see their work as something that can be offered to God, like worship, rather than



▶▶ as a post-lapsarian necessity. This has the effect of freeing work to be a Kingdom-building eschatological pursuit. Witherington is also critical of the faith/work distinction prevalent in Protestantism. He sees the privatisation of work for many Americans as problematic: 'Work is not a secular activity; it is a sacred one originally ordained by God, and so it must be undertaken in holy ways'. Other myths that he uncovers include the American 'retirement' myth. He suggests that the theology of retirement has no biblical basis and is critical of the way that the elderly are put into retirement homes at the end of their working lives without the ability to contribute usefully to the Kingdom. He notes that the prophet Isaiah envisages an *eschaton* where there will be an end to *war* but nowhere does the prophet suggest an end to *work*. Witherington is also critical of the way that many see the modern obsession with work as a result of the Protestant work ethic. He believes rather that the obsession is attributable to a psychological preoccupation with self-realisation and authentication. There is therefore much food for thought in some of the Christian myths that Witherington challenges.

Jesus and Money is essentially a survey of the Bible's approach to wealth. From the Old Testament to the Book of Revelation, Witherington provides a provocative commentary on texts that address economic justice in an attempt to provide a New Testament theology of money, stewardship and giving. Witherington is especially critical of the American 'prosperity gospel' and how religious attitudes in America (especially televangelism) lean heavily toward material blessing in this world. No contemporary discussion about wealth and the New Testament seems to omit an analysis of the parable of the unjust steward in Luke's gospel, and Witherington provides a stimulating and lucid commentary. He concludes that 'what Jesus is not at all keen on is persons who are all about enhancing their own assets, portfolios, standards of living, or retirement accounts'. Witherington

also attempts to deal with some of the myths and hypocrisies surrounding these subjects. He asks why Christians are happy to tithe, in line with biblical encouragement, and yet are also happy to lend at interest, in contravention of the various injunctions against usury. Despite having a polemical tone against modern American capitalism, this book also has some practical tips for Christians grappling with these issues: The final chapter is entitled 'deprogramming ourselves from a lifestyle of conspicuous consumption and self-gratification'. It contains some sensible practical advice and amusing anecdotes. Appended to the text is John Wesley's famous sermon on the use of money. It is as relevant to contemporary society as it was then, encouraging Christians to gain, save and give as much as they can, so as to employ money for good works as stewards of the Kingdom.

These are both good contributions to the contemporary debate, but they are unashamedly American in their content. Some may find the excessive quotations from Barbara Brown Taylor and anecdotes beginning 'my Southern Baptist granny...' a little tiresome. *Jesus and Money* also appears to be a very middle-class book as it assumes that all Christians have things to give away, which is obviously not the case. Further, it assumes that wealth is a spiritual stumbling-block rather than a structural issue to be addressed in society. However, for Christians who do have a degree of financial comfort, this will inevitably be a stimulating read. *Work*, however, is likely to have less appeal in the UK. Much of its material can be found in other books on this subject which are more amenable to a British audience. *God at Work* (Continuum, 2007) by former investment banker and Christian Ken Costa, covers much of the same material and is particularly interesting for those trying to discern a vocation whilst working in a financial services context. Given Costa's new role 'reconnecting the financial with the ethical' in the light of the St Paul's fiasco, this may prove a more suitable read. ■

Christopher Bunce is an ordinand in the Church of England studying at Westcott House, Cambridge. A former banking lawyer at a US firm, he completed an MPhil last year in *Business Ethics* whilst training for the ministry. He will serve his title at St Peter's Church, Hammersmith.

