

# Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work

By Timothy Keller with Katherine Leary Alsdorf. Penguin Books, 2012. 300 pages.

Reviewed by Susan Payne

*Susan Payne, PhD, is an associate professor in the Christian Ministries Department at the University of Northwestern–St. Paul, St. Paul, MN. Before teaching at Northwestern, she served in church ministry, primarily in Minnesota, for 25 years. Dr. Payne teaches courses for undergraduate and graduate students called to serve in local churches, non-profit organizations, and intercultural careers. She has also been involved in two church plants in diverse neighborhoods of Minneapolis.*



Church planters working in creative-access contexts are often required to spend a significant portion of their time engaging in “secular” work to gain access to the communities they are called to serve. This raises questions and practical challenges for how their “day job” relates to their calling as church planters. While not directly addressing the context of frontier church planters, *Every Good Endeavor* explores the integration of faith and work, providing a rich theology of work and the challenges that arise in working as a Christian.

*Every Good Endeavor* combines the wisdom of a pastor-theologian with the practical insights of a business leader who started Redeemer’s Center for Faith and Work at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York

City. The late Timothy Keller founded the church and a group committed to outreach in the urban, multicultural, unchurched setting of Manhattan. The church was established in 1989, and by 1993, the founders saw a revival start as they reached out to an unchurched, urban population.

The authors focus on how a Christian can see their vocation as a work of the gospel. The book “captures some foundational ways of thinking about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit; who we are in relation to that Trinity; and how all this affects the work we were created to do” (xi). It is a compelling and engaging mix of theology accessible to all readers and practical theology for those who are looking for the meaning of their work in this world. In the introduction, the authors state, “Our goal is to feed your imagination and stir your action with the richness of what the Christian faith says (directly and indirectly) about this inexhaustible subject” (8). They achieve that goal in this practical book, directed toward any Christian, but deeply grounded in theology.

## Summary

The book is organized in three parts, seeking to answer three questions that Christians should ask about their work to ground them in the realization that “all human work is not merely a job, but a *calling*” (2). The three questions are:

1. Why do you want to work? (Why do you want to work in order to have a fulfilling life?)
2. Why is work so hard? (Why is it so often fruitless, pointless, and difficult?)
3. How can we overcome the difficulties and find satisfaction in our work through the gospel?

Each question is addressed in one of the three parts of the book. Part one, “God’s Plan for Work,” is making the case that people are created by God to work. Starting with Genesis, the authors explain God’s creative work and that God included work for his creation to do in the

garden paradise (chap. 1). Work is a mark of human dignity (chap. 2), and humankind was “built for work and the dignity it gives us as human beings, regardless of its status or pay” (41). The third chapter is particularly interesting to those who minister in multiple cultures as it discusses work as cultivation or culture making (often associated with theological discussions of the Cultural Mandate). The first three chapters lead to the fourth where the authors argue that the purpose of work is therefore service. Work is a calling to serve, not for the person, but for the gospel.

The second part of the book, “Our Problems with Work,” addresses the question, “Why is it so hard to work?” Chapter 5 points out that we all encounter thorns in our work life, but we can be assured that ultimately we can see how our aspirations to do fruitful work will be fulfilled in eternity. The feeling of work being pointless is addressed in chapter 6. It looks at how the author of Ecclesiastes has the same feelings and reminds the reader, “Nothing within this world is sufficient basis for a meaningful life here” (93). The authors discuss the common Western cultural issues of work becoming selfish (chap. 7) and idolatrous (chap. 8) as people may search for their identity in and through the work they do.

Part three is the solution that the authors have been moving toward in the first two parts. It is the Christian gospel that “decidedly furnishes us with the resources for more inspired, realistic, satisfying, and faithful work today” (147). Chapter 9 describes how the gospel is the “New Story” for our work. The new story provides an alternate narrative based on the worldview of a follower of Christ. The gospel speaks to what human life is all about and what can help people thrive in their work and world. The gospel also gives us a different conception of work (chap. 10). When our work is understood as partnering with God in the stewardship of this world, it can change how we view our daily work. The authors directly address the need for a moral compass in chapter 11. Clear ethical guidelines for work are crucial, and the gospel is wise counsel for our ethical practices. Finally, chapter 12 states that a focus on the gospel radically changes our view of our vocation. Gospel motives give us the new power that grounds our work in the gospel.

This book includes an epilogue telling more of the story of the development of Redeemer's Center for Faith and Work. This practical chapter discusses how a gospel approach to work can be taught and discussed. It includes what the authors learned about how to help people change their mindset, ethics, and practices in the workplace. The story of the founding and development of the center could be valuable for developing a similar model or adapting their model to different cultural settings.

## Evaluation

This collaboration between a prominent pastor-theologian (Keller) and the executive director of the Center for Faith and Work (Alsdorf) provides an insightful and powerful combination of theology and practice in a very readable book. The structure of the book around three questions that Christians may have about their work makes the argument easy to grasp. Those who have studied the theology of work previously will find the content of the first part familiar, as the discussion of the Creation Mandate, the intrinsic goodness of work, vocation, and calling are common topics. However, Keller's writing shows the heart of a pastor who is deeply perceptive but is able to make theology accessible to everyone.

The reader knows the authors are speaking from experience, having worked with many (notably younger adults) at their center. The illustrations not only have credibility but also may ring true to our own experiences if we have been a part of a similar American church.

The third chapter is a profound theological discussion on the command of God to be fruitful and multiply (often called the Cultural Mandate) and the building of cultures and civilization. The discussion is helpful for those who have not studied this before, though it may also be familiar to the reader from other sources. The theology of work lays solid groundwork for the application to any situation. A strength of the book

is that it is written from each author's experiences in business and in a church in New York City. The descriptions and illustrations about kinds of work, beliefs about work, and ethics in the workplace are rich because they are steeped in working with their multicultural, urban population.

The multicultural practitioner will need to evaluate the practical topics from the perspective of their specific community, allowing for application of the principles to their situation. I have been part of two church plants in the diverse neighborhoods of Minneapolis, and we repeatedly found that we had to work intentionally not to simply copy a success from one situation and expect the same results in another. This is a strength of the book as well, because it challenges those in other contexts to consider their own applications instead of simply adopting the solutions that were fruitful in Keller's situation. Questions provided for the individual to evaluate how they are viewing their work from a Christian worldview, on pages 182–183, could be adapted for discussion on work beliefs in one's own cultural situation.

*Every Good Endeavor* is also a helpful book for those who preach, and it is written from a pastor's point of view. At the same time, Keller has a way of making deep biblical and theological points accessible to all. I highly recommend this book for those who are starting to consider the integration of faith and work from a Christian worldview. It grounds the reader in a rich practical theology of how Christians view the work God has given them to do and then helps the readers unpack how to do that work in their community. The book would be a great resource to study in a group. Although the first three chapters may be the most useful "as is" for groups in cultures other than Western/American, the second and third parts would need to be discussed with the intention of adaptation to one's own culture or the target culture.

This book will also be valuable in the changing landscape of missions today. Those called to serve are more often finding themselves in positions where they are bivocational in order to support their ministry or for entry into countries where a job is necessary to receive a visa.

Cross-cultural church planters among the unreached are increasingly facing crucial questions like:

- How much time should I devote to my work versus other more direct ministry?
- How do I run a legitimate business in a closed country which also has some kind of natural spiritual connection?
- Am I doing a job that local people could do and therefore taking away opportunities from them?
- How can I work or run a successful business in an economic environment that is impoverished and not business-friendly?
- What is the relationship between meeting practical needs through my business and preaching the gospel?

While not directly addressing these questions, *Every Good Endeavor* lays a theological foundation which can resource and inform these questions and others like them. As cross-cultural church planters employ various avenues of work to gain access to unreached communities, this theological vision for the goodness of work—God’s design and call in our lives to work for his glory—can infuse practitioners’ everyday “secular” work with a deeper sense of meaning.

## Table of Contents

***Forward by Katherine Leary Alsdorf***

***Introduction***

***Part One: God’s Plan for Work***

1. The Design of Work
2. The Dignity of Work
3. Work as Cultivation
4. Work as Service

***Part Two: Our Problems with Work***

5. Work Becomes Fruitless

6. Work Becomes Pointless
7. Work Becomes Selfish
8. Work Reveals Our Idols

***Part Three: The Gospel and Work***

9. A New Story for Work
10. A New Conception of Work
11. A New Compass for Work
12. New Power for Work

***Epilogue: Leading People to Integrate Faith and Work***