

“This book is full of carefully crafted practical wisdom, born of long experience in the workplace and deep reflection on the riches of Christian theology and spirituality.”

**Revd Dr Graham Tomlin, Dean, St Mellitus College**

“In this book Will Morris has married astute and sympathetic observation of the workplace with a deep and lively Christian intelligence. The result is as clear and useful as a how-to manual, but fresher, sharper, and wiser. It’s really good.”

**Nigel Biggar, Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology, and  
Director of the McDonald Centre for Theology, Ethics, and Public  
Life, at the University of Oxford**

“A refreshingly honest illustration of workplace challenges. Morris fluently combines wit, positivity and lessons in which our business lives can coexist with our faith and morals.”

**John Cridland CBE, Director General of the CBI**

“This warm, measured, generous book not only offers a wealth of helpful biblical insight into the contemporary office world but above all reminds, inspires, encourages us to work for the God of surprises in the confident and expectant, but never triumphalistic, trust that there is no workplace, no situation, no challenge beyond His concern or kingdom touch.”

**Mark Greene, London Institute for Contemporary Christianity**

“Will Morris writes like he lives: with economy, understatement, humour, integrity, and a good deal of mischief. If his subject was straightforward, others would have dealt with it thoroughly and well, and it would be off the desk. They haven’t; and it isn’t: and that’s why we are immensely in Will Morris’ debt that he has given us an example to follow, a vocation to pursue, and a word to enjoy.”

**Dr Samuel Wells, Vicar of St Martin-in-the-Fields, London, and  
Visiting Professor of Christian Ethics at King’s College London**

“When I was a Treasury minister, Will Morris was an exceptionally thoughtful and helpful lobbyist. Now he is ordained, too. His exceptionally thoughtful and helpful book explains how paid work can be part of a life intended to honour Christ.”

**Rt Hon. Stephen Timms, Shadow Minister for Employment and  
Labour Party Faith Envoy**

“Christian reflection on the world of work and the challenges it poses has regularly suffered from one or other, and occasionally both, of two problems – it is often written by those who are fundamentally suspicious of business in its various forms, and not necessarily well informed about the realities of the workplace. Will Morris speaks and writes with the authority of someone who knows the life of the modern business office from the inside, and who approaches work as something in which Christians may find a vocation. As such, he offers invaluable wisdom and encouragement to those who are seeking to discern Christian meaning and responsibility in their life at work.”

**Dr Michael Banner, Dean and Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge**

“I do not always agree with Will Morris but on a fundamental issue we are in total agreement; you either take your faith to work with you or you’re not putting it to work. This book challenges on that issue in innovative ways and I recommend it.”

**Richard Murphy, Tax Justice Campaigner**

“Everyone who has prayed about their work will appreciate how Will Morris brings out God’s creation in every aspect of the workplace, and shows how we can participate in that creation through the daily challenges, dilemmas, frustrations, pains and joys.”

**Dave Hartnett, Blueprint for Better Business and former Permanent  
Secretary for Tax, HMRC**

Will Morris blogs at [whereisgodatwork.org](http://whereisgodatwork.org)

# WHERE IS GOD AT WORK?

William Morris

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*To Michelle,  
without whom nothing would happen, and with  
whom everything does. With all my love.*



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# Foreword

Will Morris is a missionary. Once a missionary had khaki shorts, dodgy sandals, a missing space where a sense of humour should be, and a tendency to talk about being on furlough and to complain about how much choice there is in the shops and how much water we waste. Then a missionary became someone who put extra syllables in the word Jesus, filled stadiums with crowds, spoke of how God filled the hole in your life, and invited people forward to collect literature.

Will Morris is a different kind of missionary. As the Father sent the Son to be with us, full of grace and truth, and as the Father and the Son sent the Spirit to empower us, with energy of wind and words of fire, so God has sent Will Morris to be with and empower people to live the gospel in work as well as in church, amid P45s as well as amid leather-bound Bibles, within health and safety regimes as well as within four spiritual laws.

Will Morris is also a priest. A priest speaks to the people on behalf of God and to God on behalf of the people. Will certainly does that – never more so than in this book. But as a priest-missionary Will addresses those at work on behalf of the church and addresses the church on behalf of those at work. That's what makes this book unique. Will speaks with equal authority when asking what on earth a person in the workplace is supposed to make of the ridiculous demands of this parable, as when asking what in heaven God's people are

to do when faced with the apparently acceptable conventions of an exploitative company.

It is this toing and froing that has constituted Will's life these last few years. And, rather than give us an account of his extraordinary life – and believe me, he's been on more planes and in more boardrooms and at more lunchtime communions than you could care to imagine – he much more humbly offers us the fruits of his reflections on Scripture, work, and what it means to put the two together and trust that from them will emerge holiness.

Will Morris writes like he lives: with economy, understatement, humour, integrity, and a good deal of mischief. If his subject was straightforward, others would have dealt with it thoroughly and well, and it would be off the desk. They haven't, and it isn't; and that's why we are immensely in Will Morris' debt that he has given us an example to follow, a vocation to pursue, and a word to enjoy.

Revd Dr Samuel Wells

*Vicar of St Martin-in-the-Fields, London, and Visiting Professor of Christian Ethics at King's College London*

# Introduction

I am a priest. I am a tax lawyer. As a priest, I celebrate the Eucharist, I preach, I lay on hands and anoint with oil, I listen, I wear a clerical shirt and “dog collar” (sometimes), and I go to parish coffee hours. I am part of the team at St Martin-in-the-Fields, the “church of the ever open door” and a pioneer in social care and outreach to the homeless. As a tax lawyer, I work on international tax policy, I travel globally, I meet with politicians and civil servants, and I chair business groups that interact with national, regional, and international organizations. I am part of the team at GE (General Electric), one of the largest companies in the world. My job is to ensure that GE in particular, and business in general, are not adversely affected by changes to tax law, and that taxes on business remain as low as possible.

To many people there’s something very strange about that pairing, perhaps even mutually exclusive. Some ask: How can you be a priest at the weekends and a tax lawyer during the week? Others ask: Does what you do at the weekends make you feel better about/absolve you from what you do during the week? The presumption that I can only live a compartmentalized life, doing good in one area and something (presumably) less good in another, is very strong. But it’s wrong. There is a missing conjunction. I am a priest **and** a tax lawyer, both of them, all the time – at work, away from work, during the week, on Sundays. I am both, and if I am to live the one life that I have “well” (an adverb that needs

more unpacking than I can do here), then I have to hold the two in tension, in balance, in my one life.

In other contexts this statement would not be regarded as remarkable. I am husband, father, son, and brother; lover of history; episodic Liverpool FC supporter; avid, if occasional, theatregoer – and on and on. No one would argue for strict compartmentalization between those areas. Of course, one may get more attention at any one moment, but they are all part of a single life. When it comes to God and work, however, there is a perceived disconnect, an assumption that somehow the two don't, can't, go together (except, perhaps, in the caring professions). There are exceptions to this view, especially in the Evangelical community, but it is generally pervasive. God = good; work for profit = less good/bad.

Yet, as I explore in the opening chapters, if we believe in God, then I think we have to believe in a Creator God. God didn't just happen along after the event; God worked, and that work was important to God. And however we understand the creation story, working – whether growing crops, raising livestock, building temples, manufacturing goods, or providing services – is an integral part of living as a human being. Although worship and prayer and contemplation are also fundamental to our lives as children of God, it is an “also”. God cares about work and is as present there as in church or anywhere else – and to say He doesn't care and isn't there does Him a disservice. It does us an even bigger disservice, however, because we miss the opportunity for a totally different level of fulfilment than if we simply “work to live” without any sense of where God might be in that work.

But there's even more to it than God merely being interested in work. God did not simply set the world going, and then install us as caretakers or janitors. Something happened to the world (“the fall”, imperfection, whatever), with the result

that if the first act of God was creation of the world, then the subsequent acts are the healing and redemption of that world (and its inhabitants). So our opportunity to work with God (the dynamic trio of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) is not just in making things for the sake of making things, but making things and providing services that can help the healing of creation – and of God’s people. In other words, all in all, work might be pretty important.

Now, I am the last person in the world to argue that every workplace is great, and that work is always fulfilling. But, because it is important to God, it has the potential to be fulfilling. It is that potential that interests me, because it opens up so many possibilities – for bettering our own lives, and not just ours, of course, but also those of others. What I try to explore in this book is how, because of the importance of work to God, if we exercise our imagination, if we leave ourselves open to possibilities, we may find God at work – even in the form of our boss, our annoying colleagues, or the arrival of a P45 (US: pink slip). God may also be present in the dilemmas that occur at work: if we’re asked to work harder and harder, asked to lie, tempted to do something bad. Finally, by looking at the workplace through the prism of a single parable, but from several different angles, we may also glimpse through Scripture where God may be at work.

There’s probably another book on maintaining the appropriate balance (creative tension, perhaps) between being a priest and a tax lawyer – although I begin to sketch out an answer based on Richard Rohr’s idea of “living on the edge of the inside” – but at its heart is the idea, belief, understanding, that work is important to God, and yet it also poses real challenges to us as humans. Being aware of the possibility of God in the workplace is both a significant challenge (you can’t hide...) and an enormous comfort (I can work with God here,

too). Living and working in an ambiguous place – including the moral grey zone of tax – may not be comfortable, nor seem that enticing. But it is where most of us are, and trying to see what the godly potential might be, rather than trying to shut it off from the “good” (= church) part of our lives, is our challenge as working Christians.

I hope that what follows may enable you to glimpse where God might be with you during the day at work, and how you may work with God. It can be a surprise, but if you keep eyes, ears, and mind open then, perhaps, like Jacob, you will also find yourself saying, “Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!” (Genesis 28:16 NRSV).



## **PART I**

# Where is God at Work?



# 1

## The Workplace

### Genesis 28:11–17 (NRSV)

*He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!" And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."*

If you were asked to spot the odd one out in the following pairs – salt and pepper, bread and butter, knife and fork, God and workplace – the answer is obviously “God and workplace”. The two are so far from being a complementary

pair that the dissonance is hardly even worth noting. It's so unremarkable that we accept it without thinking and move on. But perhaps we should pause a moment, consider it more, and dig down a little. Why are they so obviously incompatible? Why are "God" and "workplace" such clear opposites in our minds?

Of course, we can complain that it's the fault of secularism in the modern workplace that squeezes out all references to, and thoughts of, God. About businesses so fearful of favouring anyone – including in relation to religion – that they end up disadvantaging everyone. God has been banished from the public square, we can tell ourselves. But, in fact, I think that most of the problem lies not with secularism, but with us as Christians. Beliefs, issues, come at us from two directions, combining to form an impenetrable barrier – in our minds – between God and our workplace.

One set of issues arise from that significant part of the institutional church that, whatever it says, really only believes that God exists in church, on a Sunday morning, preferably with liturgy and hymns. On this view we can only meet God in a building with an altar, a cross, and pews, and at a certain time. For all the talk of café churches and weekday house groups, our Christian culture, our upbringing (and some of our church leaders) all make us consciously or unconsciously feel, believe, that God is only – or, at the very least, is especially – present in church, on the sabbath.

The other set of issues come from an equally deeply held belief by many Christians that God and religious activity are "good" and "pure", while office work or anything done for a salary (and especially for profit) is, at the very least, inferior, probably slightly grubby, or possibly even just plain dirty. And if that's the case, then how on earth can God be there in that?

Both of these ideas are deeply rooted in Western culture.

And yet countless millions of people in the UK and elsewhere spend eight or more hours in workplaces every day. What is the church saying to them? God doesn't love you? God doesn't care? You're wasting your time and skills doing this? That may not be what the church thinks it's saying, but that's sometimes very much what it sounds like. And then the church wonders why these people (now the significant majority) think Christians are weird; wonders why they don't want to come to church, and why they don't think that religion has anything to say to them or wants anything to do with them.

I spent the first year of my training to be a priest wondering what on earth I was doing. I was really there only because no one in the process of selection and training had said "no". There was a vague, nagging feeling that God was somehow driving (dragging?) me forward, but there had been no clear light shining on the road, no fixed plan. Then, one evening, someone came to teach a class on "faith and the workplace". Suddenly I realized what it was that I was doing, and why I was doing it.

I had always known that I was going to carry on with my secular ("day") job after ordination – but perhaps switch from the slightly grubbier, commercial world over time into something "better", more "worthwhile", perhaps something more "pleasing" to God. During the class that night my view changed suddenly and almost completely. I realized that I was getting ordained and staying in the secular workplace in order to make links between those two worlds. I was doing both in order to try to make clearer how the Worker, Creator God of Genesis 1 is also present in our workplace today, and how much He cares about those workplaces and cares about us in them.

Now you may accept logically what I'm saying, but do you really feel it? Many workplaces don't feel that great, don't feel like places of opportunity. There can be enormous tension.

Tyrannical bosses. Horrible colleagues. Stupid, pointless, meaningless rules. Long hours. Little sympathy or empathy. The threat of redundancy. A total lack of privacy. Or it can be even worse than that. There can be real discrimination. You might feel you are being asked to do unethical things, to cut corners. Or you may feel that the social utility of what you are doing is zero – or even negative. All of these things can make the workplace seem a bit of a nightmare. So, how on earth can God be there? Well, the simple answer is this: in the same way that He's present in the rest of our broken world. Life outside the workplace can be pretty awful sometimes, too – even in churches. Does every family get on at Christmas? Do families never viciously argue? Does every church welcome outsiders with open arms? What about clerical sexual abuse scandals? Nevertheless, despite this, do we feel that means that God cannot, therefore, be present in the midst of family, or in the midst of the church?

The point is not what's wrong; it's what could be right. And that may be unexpected – totally, completely, utterly unexpected. That is the story of Jacob's ladder. Here's Jacob. He's already tricked his stupid elder brother Esau out of his birthright, and now he impersonates him to his old, blind father Isaac, with the total support of his conniving mother Rebekah, in order to get Isaac's blessing. Esau, who's a big guy, not unreasonably is outraged when he finds out about this and, slightly less reasonably, decides to kill Jacob. Rebekah finds out and tells Jacob, and she and Isaac bundle him off out of the way to see relatives.

So, sent away, and in trouble both with his brother and also, one might hope, with his conscience, Jacob travels until it's dark and then just lies down in the countryside to go to sleep. Then the totally unexpected happens. To this dodgy character, on the run, and in the middle of nowhere – miles from the

nearest shrine, and a long way from 10 a.m. on Sunday morning – God appears. And doesn't just appear, but heaven touches earth and earth touches heaven. All of a sudden everything is changed, transformed. What looked like an ordinary place is, in fact, the place where God is present, and where heaven and earth meet. In this nowhere place, God announces to Jacob that He will be with him and his successors and that they will be blessed forever.

God is not constrained by buildings, or by days of the week, or by circumstances, or by where we feel we are, or by what others think of us. God is not made in our image; it's the other way around – and, therefore, we should expect to be surprised from time to time. Jacob exclaims, "Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it! ... How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." That strikes me as a pretty good way of viewing even the worst workplace. People may think it's dodgy; they may think it's nowhere – the place that you have to go to in order to earn the money that you can then spend in order to be able to forget it – but, looked at in the right way, it may just be the gate of heaven. We must be prepared to be surprised because one thing can be almost guaranteed. If the heavens open and a ladder descends it will not – it will not – be in a church by the altar. It will almost certainly be nowhere in the building. It will surprise us – and it could very well be in your workplace.

So in these first ten chapters, we will explore where the ladder might be in your workplace, and perhaps how to find it. We'll certainly look at the bad things that can happen in any workplace, but the essential point to remember is that what we humans make bad, God can (quite often through us) make good again. So what might the opportunities be once we recognize the ladder in the workplace? Well, there are some obvious ones. It can be a place where we exercise personal

responsibility and behave ethically – not fiddle our expenses, and always cut square corners (as my former boss was fond of saying). Where we can deliver an honest day's work for an honest day's pay.

*But it's not just that.* It can also be where we carry out the gospel imperative to care for those who are in need, for those who need help. Our fellow workers may not be literally hungry, or prisoners, or naked, as in the parable of the sheep and the goats, but there are plenty – far too many people – who in the workplace really do feel trapped. Who feel imprisoned by circumstances, imprisoned by the need to earn something, anything, to put bread on the table for their family. Imprisoned by an inability to imagine something better, or by blind ambition that drives them ever harder and, thus, also further away from friends and family. Those people are prisoners in a workplace rather than a jail.

There may be those who are starving for respect, or a little love or friendship, or just a little fulfilment – and those people are truly hungry. Or our fellow workers may feel incompetent and out of their depth, or ugly, or unbearably different. Under the spotlight in the workplace these people are in a very real sense naked. It is our job, our duty, our obligation, but also our opportunity, our privilege, to help those people in those situations wherever they may be – including in the workplace.

*But it's not just that.* The workplace can also be the place where we exercise our talents, our God-given talents, to reach true fulfilment. A place where we exercise our skills to create things and services that other people want and need. Where we can be the stewards that God calls us to be from the very beginning of creation. A place where, if we get it right, we can create employment that gives our fellow humans jobs that give them dignity – that allows them to look after their families. And a place where we can work imaginatively in teams giving



living expression to Paul's analogy in 1 Corinthians 12 of the different parts of the body bringing their own functions and gifts to make up something which is more than the sum of its parts. That doesn't just work for the church – it can work for a secular workplace, too.

*But it's not just that.* It's a place where we can be co-workers in the act of healing God's creation. Where we can work for justice and for ethics. Where we can try to ensure that what our business, or government department, or school – or whatever it is – does, contributes in some way to the common good. Where, be it ever so slowly, we can try to make sure that the next decision that is taken is slightly better in some way than the previous one. A place where we can fight for what we believe – gently, respectfully, but persistently – and make a real, tangible difference to those around us, and to those whom we seek to serve.

*But it's not just that.* It can be a place of mission. A place where we try to bring what we know about our God, about Jesus Christ who lived and died and rose for us, to those who don't know. Now to be clear, I'm not for a moment suggesting handing out tracts or standing on a soapbox in the corridor with a megaphone. What I am suggesting, however, is that we can be who we are, that we witness to being Christians by being the people we are and by the way we act. We are much closer to many more people in the workplace than in any other area of our lives. In those close settings, day in day out, there are very few secrets. If we're Christians, they'll know it. If we act in certain ways, they'll see that. If it seems to help us in bad times and good, they'll note it. And sometimes they'll want to talk – and then we can tell them about the gift that has been given to us.

*But it's not just that.* There's so much more – but perhaps that's enough for now. Even when you read that partial list,