Christian Spirituality in the Workplace

Colleagues,

Every now and then I'm asked to do a book review for MISSIOLOGY, the journal of the American Society of Missiology, where I've been a member for decades. This time the book offered me for review sounded like the ancient mantra of the Crossings Community, Inc. formulated by our ancestor Bob Bertram: "Crossing Daily Life with the Word of God." So I said yes. Here's what I'll be sending in to the book review editor.

Peace and Joy!
Ed Schroeder

Taking Your Soul to Work. Overcoming the Nine Deadly Sins of the Workplace
By R. Paul Stevens & Alvin Ung
Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2010. x.200 pp. paper. $15.00

Stevens (Canadian) and Ung (Malaysian), once teacher and student, respectively, at Regent College (Vancouver B.C.) team up to offer a handbook for being consciously Christian while engaged in daily work. Taking your soul to work, as they put it, "a spirituality of work."

Granting that spirituality means many things to many people, they opt for this notion: "a disciplined attempt to align ourselves and our environment with God and to be a concrete bodily expression of God's Spirit in the world through all the

effort (paid and unpaid) we exert to make the world a better place, a little closer to the way God would have things."

The format is a three-step process. First a brief chapter on each of the "nine deadly sins" that infect the workplace, better said, infect workers in the workplace and generate "soul-sapping struggles." Then Part Two, "cultivating" the nine "fruits of the Spirit," God's gifts for coping with those soul-sappers. And finally Part Three, "imagining the outcomes of a Spirit-led life" on the same turf where the soul-sappers still ply their trade.

Each of the nine chapters in each of the three sections begins with a dialog between the authors. In part one that dialog highlights the nitty-gritty of the workplace where a specific one of the sins surfaces. They call this a diagnostic dialog. In Part Two their dialog introduces the gift-of-the-spirit for coping with that particular sin. You might call this the God-given therapy for healing that sin's onslaught. And their final dialog relative to that particular sin "imagines" (their term) the outcome. Throughout all three steps, also in the "imagining," both authors are speaking from years of experience, Ung from a number of high-profile jobs in Asia—financial analyst, AP foreign correspondent, telecommunications manager, executive in a Malaysian investment firm—and Stevens from a life that includes pastor, carpenter, business person and marketplace theology professor at Regent College.

I wasn't very far into the book before my Lutheran sensibilities picked up the "evangelical" slant of the authors as they set about to propose this Christian "spirituality of the workplace," and noticed the differences between their heritage and my own. Wasn't that already present in their definition of spirituality? Namely, in the univocal understanding of God's word and work in the world which they proposed, in contrast to the Lutheran Aha!

about God's ambidextrous dealings, bi-vocal speaking, in the world—and the Biblical testimony thereunto.

I too am not a total novice in theology of the workplace. For 30 years I've been involved with the Crossings Community, whose mission is to link "The Word of God to Daily Work." During one early decade of that involvement some 4 to 5 thousand Christians joined us—in some 200 weekend workshops and dozens of semester-long courses at home and abroad—to work on linking the word of God to the daily work of all of us.

What we came up with after that decade has parallels, yet significant differences, I think, from what Stevens and Ung are proposing.

These observations from what I noticed in the book.

1. They say early on (p. 3) "We are followers of Jesus Christ." But then—on the very next pages, as they spell out their "spirituality of work," that name never appears. All the references are to "God." I counted. After that solitary reference to Jesus Christ, all references to the deity—over 40 times—are with the word "God" in the chapter's seven pages. Theism and christocentric theism are not the same thing. Ask any believing Jew, any devout Muslim.
2. The nine sins of the workplace – they added two (restlessness and boredom) to the ancient list of the seven deadly sins (pride, lust, greed, gluttony, anger, sloth, envy) – are behavioral sins. Bad things people do to others and to themselves. Once or twice in the book the deeper notion of sin surfaces, the "root" sin of not fearing and trusting God. But overcoming THAT root sin gets no explicit attention. It's always sins (plural), not THE root sin (singular) that bears the fruits, sins

(plural).. The nine sins under discussion are symptoms, the fruits, of the root sin. To focus on healing the bad fruit without attending to the bad root doesn't cure the malady. Symptom-therapy heals no one. Didn't Jesus make that point repeatedly with his critics throughout the gospels?

3. Jesus is not absent throughout the book, but it is almost always Jesus modeling the godly life. Though his saving work is constantly presupposed, the necessity of having the crucified and risen Messiah present—and active—with us at the workplace is never mentioned. Sensing God's presence there is what counts. Where Jesus comes in for daily work, he is ethical example, behavioral coach.

For example, when it comes to the Fruit of the Spirit "Gentleness," the antidote for the sin "Anger," here is what Jesus does. "The entire life of Jesus embodies gentleness. He is our role model for becoming gentle souls in the workplace." (p.95) That formula is repeated regularly when each of the fruits of the Spirit is called upon to cope with its corollary deadly workplace sin. Here is the full list: pride/joy, greed/goodness, lust/love, gluttony/self-control, anger/gentleness, sloth/faithfulness, envy/kindness, restlessness/patience, boredom/peace.

It's not that the authors are "soft" on Christ's redemptive work. It is that they make no use of it in the work-place spirituality they construct. Is it also significant (even strange for evangelicals?) that most of the Christian writers they cite as theological allies come from Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox venues. The theology of the Protestant reformers— Luther, Calvin, Wesley—is never called upon for support. How come?

One final note. In our years with the Crossings Community we

learned that the primal onslaught confronting Christians in the workplace was not losing their morals in the nitty-gritty of daily work, but losing their faith. The struggle for Christians in the workplace—from CEO to homemaker—was confronting over and over again the voices of the principalities and powers present in the workplace, teasing them to stop trusting Christ's mercy word for them, and instead hang their hearts on some other "gospel" – either one of euphoria or of despair.

If that is indeed the deepest "soul-sapping struggle in the workplace," then more is needed than "Jesus is our role model." We need the crucified and risen Messiah and his "lo, I am with you always" right there on location, where all nine of the workplace-soul-sappers confront us. In Melanchthon's prose at the time of Augsburg (1530), repeated over and over again, "Christus manet mediator." Not just that Christ once was our mediator, but "Christ [must] remain mediator." Everywhere and anywhere we are, workplace included.