BOOK REVIEWS

God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in all of Life

Reviewed by John E. Bauer

Spurred by his reading of Gustaf Wingren’s Luther on Vocation, Dr. Veith has provided a readable little book that aims to help people understand God’s providence in the world through their vocations. The central insight developed in this book is that one’s vocation is less about what we decide to do with our lives and more about what God is calling us to do and what He does through us in our vocations.

In Medieval times, vocation referred particularly to the offices of the Church and those heeding the call to vocation were priests and nuns – members of the holy orders. But one of the significant contributions of the Reformation was the discovery of the biblical truth that all Christians, by virtue of their call to faith, are members of the “royal priesthood” of all believers. As such, every Christian views his life as a means for service to God and man.

Additionally, Christians don’t just look at their occupations, their jobs, as their vocations, but realize that they have numerous vocations, all of which provide opportunities to love God and our neighbors. Veith provides many examples of how everyday tasks and occupations can be understood as “holy callings” through which God’s love and care for humans can be accomplished.

Critical to this understanding is the notion that God is “hidden” in the world, but accomplishes his will through earthly means. This is true in everything from the farmer’s toil to the sacraments and the incarnation. God’s power is invisible to the unbelieving world, but is at work in and through the lives of his people. Consequently, we can say that God brings peace to warring nations, God blesses the harvest, and God heals the sick, albeit through diplomats, farmers and doctors.

Veith summarizes the matter in these words:

“The doctrine of vocation is a theology of the Christian life, having to do with sanctification and good works. It is also a theology of ordinary life. Christians do not have to be called to the mission field or the ministry or the work of evangelism to serve God, though many are; nor does the Christian life necessarily involve some kind of constant mystical experience. Rather, the Christian life is to be lived in vocation, in the seemingly ordinary walks of life that take up nearly all of the hours of our day. The Christian life is to be lived out in our family, our work, our community, and our church. Such things seem mundane, but this is because of our blindness. Actually, God is present in them – and in us – in a mighty, though hidden way.”

This book is a highly recommended articulation of a Lutheran – yes, biblical – view of the world and what we do in it with our lives. Properly understanding the significance of our vocations provides a liberating and joyful basis for daily life.

How Christian Faith Can Sustain the Life of the Mind

Reviewed by John E. Bauer

This book comes at a turning point in the history of American church-related higher education. After several decades of books and articles lamenting the decline of Christian influence in the intellectual world, Hughes tries to provide a positive perspective on how the Christian faith can provide an academically rich foundation for teaching and scholarship.

In the course of this volume, Hughes raises and seeks answers to three fundamental questions: “Can Christian faith equip us to pursue the truth wherever that pursuit may lead? Can Christian faith empower the believing scholar to engage a wide range of conversation partners, even when those partners hold positions that may threaten our most cherished beliefs? And finally, does Christian faith empower the Christian scholar to think in paradoxical terms, to simultaneously hold conflicting positions, and to allow that conflict to generate imaginative creativity?” (p.5)

What Hughes does to answer these questions, however, is to lead the reader through several assumptions that may test the theological sensitivities of confessional Lutherans. One major premise is that Christian scholars must first “break through the particularities of their own religious traditions.” How might one do that and why is it necessary? Hughes argues that the object of the Christian faith is God, not the theological symbols and expressions we use to talk about God. By their very nature they are limited and finite – incapable of completely and totally defining God, the infinite one. Another premise is that the Bible is not to be understood literally, or as a “rule book, or a scientific
To Christians who believe in the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures and who believe that God has made himself known in understandable terms through his revealed Word, these requisites for Christian scholarship must be rejected. Hughes, in fact, gives voice to the very common mainstream liberal Protestant view of the Gospel as “unfathomable love in the abstract” as opposed to the real and tangible incarnate Word who lived among us, and died to save us.

To be sure, we confessional Lutherans should never permit the Confessions to become the norma normans, that is, the foundation or basis of our faith. But the net effect of Hughes’ premise is that the Bible itself is nothing more than the musings, stories, formulations, and poems of prophets and apostles about God. This is nothing more than garden variety post-modern constructivism in which the believer is allowed to use whatever means are necessary (e.g., the Bible, worship, creeds, prayer) to formulate metaphors of meaning so the transcendent and unknowable God can be subjectively grasped.

Hughes does a credible job of succinctly capturing the scholarly orientations and contributions of different Christian traditions. His assertion that Lutherans are particularly well suited for the life of the mind echoes recent work by scholars in Lutheran colleges and universities who, supported by a sizeable Lilly grant, are working to recapture and advance a distinctively Lutheran intellectual tradition. Our understanding of paradox in the Scriptures especially permits us Lutheran scholars to deal with the complexities of the Bible, the Christian faith, and the Christian in the world.

Sadly, Hughes does little to advance serious Christian scholarship. George Marsden’s The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship, reviewed in the first issue of CHARIS, at least elevated the means of Grace to a level higher than human expressions of existential angst. Hughes concluding account of his own near death experience, although valid as a personal reflection on his faith in Jesus and the confidence of his salvation, does nothing to illuminate how the Christian faith in fact informs the life of the mind. Because the mind

seeks truth – objective, universal truth, not subjective, personal, relative truth – this book fails to elevate the vocation of the Christian scholar above any other faith tradition from which scholarship might be derived.


Reviewed by John E. Bauer.

For almost two thousand years, higher education has been characterized by its foundation on the Christian intellectual tradition. It is only in the last century that this tradition has yielded to secularization and, as Burtchaell painstakingly documented in The Dying of the Light, even denominationally sponsored Christian colleges disconnected from their churches in their pursuit of academic freedom.

What Holmes does in this outstanding work is trace the history of the Christian intellectual tradition through seven distinct historical periods. He subjects the developments of those eras to an analysis based on four recurring emphases which, he argues, should be at the heart of the Christian academy: the care of the soul, the unity of truth, contemplative (or doxological) learning, and the usefulness of the liberal arts as preparation from service to both church and society.

Holmes’s Reformed background emerges clearly in his criticism of Luther's doctrine of two kingdoms and the modern Lutheran contention that human attempts to develop a unified theory of knowledge and truth are futile. Nevertheless, any professor teaching in a Christian college, as well as any Christian professor teaching at a secular university, should read this book for several reasons. First, it provides a succinct history of the Christian intellectual tradition. Holmes is at his best quoting philosophers and Church fathers in a way that the lay reader can understand. Second, this book provides another strong encouragement for Christian scholars to cultivate the theological foundations for learning. In fact, a scholarly life which operates from a Christian Weltanschauung in post-modern America is more accepted and recognized than ever. Finally, Holmes argues for the return to the liberal arts as the best means for Christian student development. “Liberal learning …facilitates understanding and effective communication across generations and cultures, while providing a common body of knowledge that remains open-ended” (p.109). Christian scholars in the Christian academy have a great responsibility and opportunity to serve God and society by perpetuating these aims. Holmes issues the clear challenge to us in this “must read” book.