

Book Review – John Weaver

On the Brink

By Michael E Cafferky

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The invitation to review this book came as a surprise – a novel rather than an academic text. Yet from the first page I found myself drawn into the story and the Christian pastoral and mission themes that are raised.

While these themes might have been addressed through an academic text, the use of the novel with its fictitious characters allows comments and explorations that would be limited in the discussion of an actual business situation.

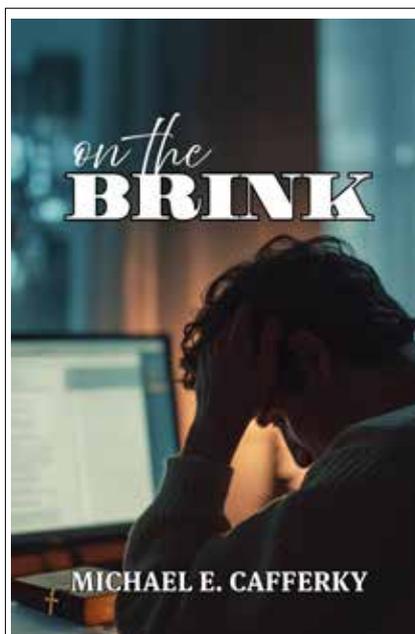
Michael E. Cafferky is the former Ruth McKee Chair for Entrepreneurship and Business Ethics at Southern Adventist University, where he taught courses in management, business strategy, entrepreneurship, organisational theory and business ethics. Following retirement he writes contemporary and historical fiction, exploring family relationships and Christians in society.

The story features a business executive, named Gabriel Oliver, who is involved in the management of a medical company, which is undergoing the familiar pressures of wealth creation and the corporate profit and loss 'bottom line', together with the accompanying tensions in staff interaction and decision making.

Gabriel is successful in his business career and financially secure; he has a loving wife and stable marriage. He has all he has wanted, but when the book opens we focus on Gabriel's health. He experiences increasing abdominal pains, concluding with his collapse in a company board meeting, and subsequent air ambulance flight to hospital. Through various operations his pancreatitis infection is cured.

While in hospital over a number of months Gabriel, a Christian, facing a life-threatening illness, has an encounter with God, which forces him to consider his spiritual life.

Gabriel recognises that he has been a Christian in name only, paying lip service but not living as a disciple of Christ.



Returning to work he commits himself to being an 'ambassador for God', sharing the Gospel in his work environment. This leads to hostility at work and a strain on his marriage. He considers the challenge of keeping quiet to protect his successful career, or standing up for his new understanding of Christian faith, which risks everything. The hostility he experiences is not so much focused on the Christian faith, as on the inappropriateness of talking about religion in the workplace. Some of his Christian colleagues tell him that his overt evangelism is making their

own work and lived faith difficult. We follow Gabriel's experience of trying to live out his faith in a largely secular world.

This novel led me to reflect on my own experience of an encounter with God, in which I felt called to some form of full-time Christian ministry, although this did not have the same results in my conversations with work colleagues. I was a senior lecturer in Structural Geology at what is now the University of Derby and when I was accepted to train for pastoral ministry I had to resign my lectureship and explain the change in career and life to my colleagues.

I had some trepidation in doing this, but I had always sought to be honest and act with integrity in my dealings with staff and students. I was surprised by the reactions. I learned about committed Christian connections in the families of my fellow lecturers: a grandfather who had been a Methodist minister; a father who was a church warden, and another grandfather-in-law who had been an elder in the Kirk. But the most surprising comment came from a colleague with no particular faith connection who said: 'I wish I had your guts to change direction and do what you really want to do!'

It appears, in the novel, that Gabriel's presentation of his beliefs in the workplace were in marked contrast to his life before his near-death experience in hospital. Bible on display; religious tracts left for colleagues to pick up, and overt silent prayer before meetings.

This eventually led to his removal from his position in the firm.



Christ and the Rich Young Ruler
Heinrich Hoffman, 1889
 Riverside Church, New York
 Photo: Wikipedia

Everything changed when, after being downgraded to a post in one of the firm’s clinics, he focused on addressing the vulnerability of colleagues and patients. He recognised that a key theme of the Gospel is God’s concern for the vulnerable of this world and he discovered that his life lived following this Gospel pattern would turn out to be a positive witness.

There are a number of twists and turns in the story with the revealing of fraudulent activity by one of Gabriel’s most critical colleagues, the continued support of close co-workers, and the

recognition of his abilities and integrity by the company boss.

Phil Jump, the Chair of the Industrial Christian Fellowship and I wrote a book of reflections and prayers to explore such a positive witness for those wishing to live out their faith in the workplace, *Love:Work, Reflections and Prayers for a World at Work*¹, which offers ten commandments to help us develop patterns for thinking and witnessing. We offered our thoughts under the headings of: Be diligent; Be alert; Be forgiving; Be caring; Be honest; Be healthy; Be prayerful; Be

generous; Be positive; Be reliable; and whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

Michael Cafferky’s novel is a useful place to start a non-confrontational discussion of ways in which we might approach our Christian discipleship in the workplace. As a novel it is easy to agree or disagree with the views expressed by the characters portrayed.

At the same time the themes and reflections explored by the author are challenging and helpful to the reader. This is definitely worth the read. 

1. Phil Jump & John Weaver, *Love:Work, Reflections and Prayers for a World at Work*, London: DLT, 2021..



After serving as a Structural Geology lecturer John Weaver was called to be a Baptist minister where he experienced factory activities in the shoe and printing trade. He then returned to academic life writing three major texts on Science and Faith focusing much of his work on Environmental Theology, and its implications for Corporate Social Responsibility of business and industry. John is an editor of this journal.