

A Book Review GRACE AT THE TABLE. ENDING HUNGER IN GOD'S WORLD

Ed and Marie have island-hopped from Bali to central Java for this week, following up on invitations from the president of the Asian Christian Artists Association in Yogyakarta, Judo Poerwowidagdo, and from Nancy Johnson and Steven Haggmark, ELCA exchange professors at the Christian University in Salatiga. He sent me this before they left.

**A Book Review –
GRACE AT THE TABLE. ENDING HUNGER IN GOD'S WORLD.
By David Beckmann & Arthur Simon,
New York/Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press. 1999,
iv, 210 pp., paper. \$10.95.**

It's always an honor to review books written by friends – especially dear friends, as both authors are.

Art Simon, grounding father of Bread for the World [hereafter BFW] in 1974, was my St. Louis seminary classmate in the early fifties. He recruited me along with other seminarians way back then to go across the Mississippi into Illinois and campaign for his older brother Paul in his first (and successful) attempt to get elected to the Illinois legislature. And as far as Paul Simon goes, the rest is history. For Art, we could say that BFW is his history. During his years of inner-city pastoring on the Lower East Side of New York, the hunger and poverty in that parish context finally nudged him to gather Christians into an

ecumenical citizens' movement against hunger. Under his leadership BFW drew 44 thousand members into its cause.

David Beckmann is also a dear friend beginning back in his student days at Seminex in the seventies. Most recently he crashed with us for the Seminex 25th anniversary reunion earlier this summer. His parting gift was this copy of this book—just off the press—celebrating BFW's 25 years as a Christian political lobby and re-wording its message vis-a-vis world realities today. David took over the helm at BFW in 1991 after working for years with the World Bank on projects around the globe that mirror much of BFW's own reason for existence.

First a word about the winsome format of Art & Dave's production. It's an easy read—even though the data (and they know a lot and show us a lot) are sometimes grim, very grim. E.g., how few seconds have to tick away before another child dies of starvation in our world.

Art Simon and David Beckmann speak with authority. Are there any two people alive today more "in the know" about the hunger/poverty complex in the USA and in the world? I doubt it. Art and Dave are pros, experts, super experts. They've been on these ramparts for decades. They know the territory. And they have a way with words, nickel words, to bring us along into the territory. The layout is a catechetical (stolen from Luther?) question and answer format with stories that give the statistics a human face. All told there are 29 major questions grouped under 8 chapter headings. Those 8 are:

- *Hunger in God's World,*
- *Ending Hunger,*
- *The Overloaded Earth,*
- *A Jobs-Based*
- *Strategy,*

- *Gender and Race,*
- *The Economics of Hunger,*
- *The Politics of Hunger,*
- *Taking Action.*

I read the book here in Indonesia during my 3-month stint as English-language pastor for an international (five continents present on most Sundays) congregation on the island of Bali. Our world here is case-study material for everything the authors are saying—the global economy, democracy and human rights, tourism, too many people, women bearing the brunt, guns and bread, capitalism’s soft underbelly, racism, trade and international investment—to tick off just 10 of the book’s sub-sections. But you don’t need the thunderous echo we hear here to get the message. Dave and Art’s case for Ending Hunger in God’s World is perfectly clear and powerfully compelling. If we hadn’t already been BFW members, we’d have signed up long before we got to the book’s last page.

So stepping out of the reviewer’s role for a moment and donning the BFW member’s hat, I say: If you are not (yet) conscientized, and/or not one of the 44,000 BFW members, there still is time. The book’s title, *Grace at the Table*, is, of course, a pun. To say “grace” at table, as we Christians are wont to do, is to commit ourselves to getting the hungry to a place at the table, for God’s grace at the table.

Our family has been BFW members from its beginning. So we’re BFW junkies, fans of the movement, fans of David and Art. And yet, and yet . . . the book’s theology could be better. Do the realities of a Christian ecumenical movement mandate generic theological foundations that your constituency—all 44,000 of them—will salute? Is that really true? I think not, and thus my disappointment that the authors didn’t harvest more of their own evangelical catholic—aka Lutheran—heritage for the BFW cause.

Well, what are the theological foundations for Grace at the Table? Chapter 2 "What God Intends" spells them out. They are fundamentally Biblical (no surprise from these two authors) and formulated thus:

"Two main themes run through the Bible concerning hunger. The first is God's providence. The second is our responsibility to take care of the earth and one another. Both themes reflect the will of God that everyone be adequately fed. . . . that all people find a place at the table." Biblical texts, largely from the OT prophets, supplemented with NT corollaries, are the building blocks. The pitch is to ethics, to sanctification: "God wants us to feed the hungry, care for the poor, alleviate the plight of the suffering. So get out and do so."

The logic for persuasion is clear: Since Christians of all persuasions are people committed to God's cause, who take the Bible seriously as God's word, who value the mind of Christ, therefore we must help the hungry find a place at the table.

Well, isn't that pretty good for specifying theological foundations when Christians address hunger? Not bad as far as it goes, I'd say, but not as good as it could be. The betterment I'd propose links to the fancy word "hermeneutics." The hermeneutical task says: It's not enough simply to make your case from the Bible. The point is HOW you use the Bible, in this case how David and Art use the Bible.

Since they know me, they'll expect me to draw on our common theological heritage. To wit, something Lutheran. And I can almost hear them asking:

"But would your proposed betterment, Ed—more patently [blatantly?] Lutheran, as we expect it to be—would that make our cause less ecumenical, less widespread in its appeal, and thus

less useful for promoting the BFW movement across the Christian spectrum?"

Granted, it may, and that is a risk. But you'll never really know until you've tried. And the original Lutheran reformers, as Dave and Art both acknowledge, weren't making a 'Lutheran' pitch at all in the Reformation era. Their claim was that the Biblical theology they were confessing was "core catholic" all the way back to the age of the apostles. They also had the chutzpah to say that their Biblical hermeneutics had a similar pedigree. But more on that below.

Suppose David and Art had been more explicit about their Reformation theology. Then their chapter WHAT GOD INTENDS might begin like this: "Two main themes run through the Bible concerning hunger. One is God's law, the other God's promise. Both words of God urge us to 'end hunger in God's world.'" Examined more closely they constitute God's double strategy for reaching that goal.

"But these two strategies [themes that run through the Bible] are different. One "makes sense" to all humankind, speaks winsomely to the whole human race, even to folks who have never heard of the Bible or what's in it, nor of Jesus either. That's God's law. In the Bible its building blocks are equity, fairness, common sense, even enlightened self-interest. Its appeal speaks to our whole human race. You can build coalitions across religious boundaries with its resources.

"The second theme, God's promise, is compelling for those who have bumped into the Christian story, the Christ story. Such people have a second impetus besides God's law for "ending hunger in God's world." God's second theme does not supplant the first, but supports it, heightens it, offers new resources for sticking to the original agenda. But it also expands that

agenda. When pursued to its end God's promise opens new vistas on new creations, new economics, new politics with, yes, new commandments for ending hunger in God's world. The New Testament is not called "new" for nothing. There's novelty aplenty. And the prospects are upbeat."

I'll stop here. Long time readers of these postings, many of you also hooked on law/promise hermeneutics, can yourselves add the paragraphs that might follow. If you need help—as one previewer of this review asked for—we could all try something collaborative for a future edition of ThTh. But would such "law and promise" thematizing be ecumenical—ecumenical enough? There's one way to find out. Here's one possible scenario: If Art and David's book gets to a second edition (I hope so) I'd also hope some law/promise thematics could get into chapter two. It is not alien to them, I know. Art & I learned it as sem students from Caemmerer, Pelikan and Piepkorn. In David's case we taught it to him at Seminex—and he aced the course. So I'm optimistic. The prospects are upbeat.

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