

A Book Review on “Proclaiming the Scandal.”

Colleagues,

Today’s offering, on Thanksgiving Day (USA), expresses my thanks for the gift Jerome Burce has given us with the book reviewed below. As you’ll divine beginning with my opening line, I commend it to you with no reservations.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

PROCLAIMING THE SCANDAL. REFLECTIONS ON POSTMODERN MINISTRY

By Jerome E. Burce

Christian Mission and Modern Culture series (no number)

Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International

2000, x, 124 pp, paper, \$12.00

All readers of Thursday Theology will want to buy this book and read it. If for no other reason than that one of the “References Cited” in the bibliography at the back is, you guessed it, “Thursday Theology,” the stuff you’re reading right now. That’s a first as far as I know in published books.

Of course, there are even better reasons for commending Jerome (aka Jerry) Burce’s book, though some of them may sound a bit in-house. How so “in -house?” Answer: Seminex in-house. “Proclaiming the Scandal” is a pastoral theology—the only one I know of in print—built on the systematic theology taught at

Seminex. Jerry attended Seminex in the mid-70s, critically ingested the law/promise theology of the cross we all learned there, and was graduated one of our brightest and best.

His first call was back to Papua New Guinea where he grew up. [His parents were part of the first wave of LC-MS missionaries to PNG after WW II.] Before long Jerry was principal of a bush seminary in the highlands. Family medical needs compelled a return to the US, and Jerry has pastored 2 Lutheran congregations, one in Connecticut, one suburban Cleveland, since then. His book is solidly linked to those years of pastoral work, much of it openly autobiographical—"where I goofed, what I learned, what I had to learn all over again."

During the decade of Seminex's existence I once offered a seminar called: Using "Seminex" Theology for Ministry. A total of two students signed up, but we did it anyway. Jerry wasn't one of them, and neither of those original two are parish pastors any longer. But Jerry's book is a classic case of what that seminar proposed to do. Only he has done it better, much better, than I remember us doing.

"Seminex theology" is no shibboleth for some sacred cow. But the core of that theology, what we then called "the promising tradition" [accent on God's PROMISE], is what Jerry builds on—consciously, confessingly, convincingly—for articulating the "scandal" that the Gospel genuinely is. And then in retrospect on his own years of ministry, he crosses that scandal—paradoxically enough good news—into our crazy, mixed-up, so-called "postmodern" world today.

Proclaiming the Scandal is the 26th (and maybe last) in the Trinity Press International series "Christian Mission and Modern Culture." The authors who preceded him in the series represent the Who's Who of missiology today. The series aims to:

1. Examine modern/postmodern culture from a missional point of view;
2. Develop the theological agenda that the church in modern culture must address in order to recover its own integrity;
3. Test fresh conceptualizations of the nature and mission of the church as it engages modern culture. In other words, these volumes are intended to be a forum where conventional assumptions can be challenged and alternative formulations explored.

These three aims are (almost) the outline of Jerry's book—at least for the final three of his four chapters. His brilliant first chapter is a lead-in to that trio. Its title is "The Gospel as Scandal." Now you might at first expect this chapter to reflect on St. Paul's linking these two nouns in his epistles. Not really. It's Jerry's tale of his painful learning in the parish that the Gospel was a scandal—not to the outsiders, but to his own parishioners . He could never coax them to say it out loud in conversation, not even to him. They choked up instead of offering even the simplest statement of the Good News.

Even within the safe four walls of council meetings where pastor and lay leaders were arm-wrestling the congregation's future, the best they could say for why this or that proposal was commendable was: we want to attract new members to our church. When Jerry persisted and asked the Why? question again, no one was able to say anything that sounded even vaguely like THE Gospel. Slowly, painfully, he learned that today's "pastor faces a two-fold challenge: first, to arrive at a fuller understanding of how it is that cultural assumptions of his flock are impeding their Gospel confession; and second, to ascertain a way of surmounting these impediments."

He speaks to the first challenge in chapter 2: The Gospel as Proscribed Speech. Without walking us through the theological literature of postmodernism—though he patently knows it—Jerry walks us through his congregation to have us see how today’s culture “proscribes” Gospel talk, makes it a “no-no” to say out loud in any “proper” conversation out in public. That is true even for public conversation among believers, even when those believers are “in church” deliberating on the church’s business. Only in the Sunday liturgy is Gospel speech kosher, and there (thank God!) the pastor does the most of it.

He then links this parish experience of “a tongue-tied church” and the “spiritual agnosticism” underlying it to the still deeper “roots of repression in current North American culture.” This chapter concludes:

“[My congregation] members are crippled by the pessimistic epistemology of their natal culture. This renders it horrendously difficult, if not impossible, for the congregation to reflect and practice its identity as Church and, in so practicing, to act openly in accordance with its churchly vocation. The words on which that vocation depends are ‘off limits.’ Weirdly, Christians themselves become the enforcers of rules which work against the very Word in whom their life and purpose is found.”

“The Gospel as Required Speech” is the next chapter. It’s Jerry’s constructive proposal for the next question. “How shall pastors proceed in leading them beyond this impasse?” So it’s specific pastor-to-pastors talk. I shall not chronicle in detail—get the book and read it for yourself. It’s only twelve bucks, ten cents a page, a steal!

This much to whet the appetite. There are criteria (“game rules”) for what is, and what is not, Gospel. Our culture is

awash with good news proposals that are not the Gospel—and Jerry shows why they are not. Within the church’s proclamation—across the denominational spectrum—other gospels are being offered that are also not the Gospel—and Jerry shows why they too are not. His four pages (69-73) on the specs of the “required Gospel” are worth the price of the book.

Jerry concludes these 4 pages with this encouragement:

“Finally, the Gospel, at once utterly scandalous and riotously splendid in its newsy goodness, is God’s ongoing response to the present dilemma of tongue-tied ministers and reluctant confessors. The Church’s pastors therefore have nothing except the Gospel to say as they seek to respond to this same dilemma. Let them say it with joy and confidence, for ‘with God all things are possible.’ The rich can be saved, including those whose wealth consists in an overabundance of religious options. This means that postmodern camels can also be drawn through the needle’s eye of the Church’s confession; or so implies the Church’s Lord (Matt 19:24-26).”

The final chapter, “The Gospel as Promising [sic!] Proclamation” does a reprise on the tongue-tied parishioners and finds signs of hope even among these “agnostically stricken doubters who face us from the pews Sunday after Sunday.” The grounds for that hopefulness is the promising Gospel itself. “The doubting faithful are not keeping the promise to themselves but are getting it out and making it known. Someway, somehow. If not by shouting it, then by leaking it.”

Christ’s own original inner circle were a dozen like this, “doubting faithful, faithful agnostics, who manage in spite of themselves to keep on confessing that Jesus is Lord.” When their Lord promises that they will “receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you,” this is “patently not a command. It is wildly a

promise. Exactly how wild is seen when the Holy Spirit, blowing where the Holy Spirit wills, turns the craven denier into the rock-solid confessor and makes polyglot linguists out of Galilean yahoos.”

This chapter’s “coda” cements pastor and parishioners under the same diagnostics. “We pastors not only preach to the postmodern, we are the postmodern. Our ability to recognize the anxieties of those we minister to stems in huge part from the fact that we find them in ourselves.” And Promising Proclamation is “Gospel for us Let Christ be dinned into our ears by those we trust to tell of him faithfully and well, whether we find them in the books they write or among the colleagues with whom we gather in the mutual conversation and consolation of the faithful. Let the bread be placed in our mouths and the cup lifted to our lips by hands other than our own, the accompanying words uttered by someone else who, believing them, thereby invites us, again, into the circle of faith, faith that clings against all reason to astounding, unthinkable words, ‘The body of Christ, given FOR YOU. The blood of Christ shed FOR YOU. . . .’ We will not shout the Gospel from our pulpits until it has been shouted into our hearts.”

From the longer citations presented above you detect that Jerry is a word-crafter, maybe even a rhetorician. Already in Seminary days his written work was literary, publishable stuff. Even in conversation he’s like that. His prose is not prosaic. I remember reading somewhere that Goethe had a similar affliction; even when talking about the weather, it came out in iambic pentameter. Jerry would countermand the comparison, I know. But he is a marvelous word-smith. If you read the book for yourself—as I am fiercely recommending with this rave review—here are the first words you’ll encounter at the top of page 1:

“Ever so slowly the dam softens, and words, seeping fitfully through crevices of synapse and neuron, wire and pixel, begin their altogether wondrous appearance on the computer screen before me.”