

Bill Burrows on Spirit, Church, Gospel, and the Centrality of Christ

Colleagues,

Last week I sent you a batch of responses to assorted offerings of the past several months. I left one item out. To add it would have broken my evolving rule of thumb that 2000 words, give or take a few hundred, is enough for one week. It seemed in any case to be meaty enough for a post of its own. So here it is, a thing for all of us to chew on these next few days.

The author is William R. Burrows—Bill, as we’ve gotten to know him, whether by meeting him at Crossings conferences (two of them so far) or through snatches of his long, ongoing conversation with Ed Schroeder that Ed has thought to share over the years. Bill is a Roman Catholic theologian with pronounced sympathies for Martin Luther and company. He started his career in Papua New Guinea as a missionary priest with the [Society of the Divine Word](#). On leaving the priesthood, he landed at [Orbis Books](#), where he shepherded innumerable volumes into print, especially in the area of missiology, an Orbis specialty. He is currently on the faculty of New York Theological Seminary as Research Professor of Missiology in the Center for World Christianity. To know him at all is to find oneself thanking God for his erudition on the one hand, his graciousness on the other.

In the item below, Bill is using my remarks at the Crossings conference in January (ThTheol 888-890) as a springboard for his own reflections on matters of the Spirit in the church’s thinking today. On reading it through I reverberated at many

points, and continue to do that. You will too, I'm guessing. For any who don't know Paul Tillich, I added a link.

What I appreciate most about Bill are the connections he makes between my confessional Lutheran thought-world and the conversation of the broader church, especially in Roman Catholic circles. Here again I think you'll concur.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce

From William R. Burrows in personal correspondence, shared with permission—

What strikes me as dangerous in the current default language about the Holy Spirit is that it seems not to respect the Scriptural dynamic where, to use H. Richard Niebuhr's term, the entire structure of Christian existence is "Christomorphic." Add to that the Cruciform image that is at the core of Jesus becoming the Christ in the crucifixion and resurrection. That defining Christomorphic element seems missing among many, and Spirit-talk seems to me to be a way of baptizing whatever someone or a group has decided on other grounds we should be doing — for example, attending to the demands of the justice, peace, ecology triad. Then it gets extended to, again for example, things like transgender and other sexuality issues.

In an age where people seek deep inner confirmation that they're anchored in the transcendent, many borrow from Native American, Buddhist, or Wiccan traditions to construct their own personal religion. "Christian" Spirit-talk gets dragged in to validate their proclivities. In the deeper Christian tradition, though (take the famous Romans 5:5 text; St. Ignatius' rules for discernment; Luther's recovery of the meaning of the Gospel),

the role of the Spirit is one of confirming in the gut one's embrace of Jesus as the Christ and strengthening one to become "other" Christs. In other words, the Spirit is the Revealer who makes the words of Scripture into the living Word that enlightens us and strengthens us to become a new person in Christ (Eph 4:22-24 & passim). For those whose hearts are open, the Spirit makes the rituals of baptism, eucharist, marriage, confirmation, and so forth expressions of ratifying the big "Yes" of trusting God in Christ. And for those for whom such rituals are empty forms, the Spirit works to open the inner eye to the possibility of embracing God in Christ.

At this point, I think. I twig into your language and concerns in the January address on the Spirit-driven double life. If I may use different language, [Tillich's theonomy](#) is profoundly Pauline (and Lutheran), but as churches we seem to neglect the primacy of the conversion to Christ, who is the portal to theonomous living. We want people to act as if they were profoundly touched by Christ, where in fact, a large percentage in our congregations have really not undergone that radical conversion to Christ as ministered by the Spirit. And truth be told, one wonders about the quality of the inner life of many priests and ministers.

To act theonomously, though, a fundamental breakthrough conversion has to have occurred. This is the basic insight of the Pentecostal renewal movement. And, of course, even if we've made that fundamental Christian conversion, the "old man" still lurks within each of us. My favorite philosopher-theologian, Bernard Lonergan, remarks somewhere that the saints realize the depth of their sinfulness, a depth that the unconverted person has no inkling of. Unconverted Christians see Law as an external command and, when they look at their lives and compare them with the lives of criminals, the dissolute, and so forth, they think of themselves as, well, maybe not perfect but pretty darned

good. Again in Lonergan's terms, the old man is a complex underlying manifold of unintegrated emotions, habits, self-interested striving and self-deceptive rationalization. Tillich's theonomously living person, on the other hand, is someone profoundly grateful for the blessing of the work of Christ and simultaneously struggling to live the depth of the Christ-life at home, at work, and in the larger world. And in that process, unintegrated emotions have to be integrated into a total person whose habits promote good deeds and overcome egotistical self-interest while illuminating areas of self-deception. There is no rulebook one can follow to fulfill the obligation s/he feels to be creatively loving, "another Christ" in daily life. The written law is the floor beneath which s/he knows she must not fall, but the inner demand that you're articulating in your talk is one of feeling obliged to put creativity in action. Lonergan speaks of making good things happen that would not happen if that person were not set free to be creative.

One last thought: I think that those who urge us to be involved in politics, striving to solve the ecological crisis, tear down racial prejudice, end inequality, and so forth, are urging us to do good things. It gets murkier when they urge us to be "modern" in accepting every new insight into sexuality and gender identity, but I think we need to be open to the reality that we live in an unfinished universe and maybe such changes reflect ways in which changing circumstances do amount to "changes" in what is "natural." But I digress. To return to my train of thought, when they want to make the church into an interest group that pushes this or that agenda, they're missing the fact that human beings are spread out on a huge continuum. For some, the horizon of their activities and the demands of the double life will be confined to being honest, loving, and creative within the confines of home and work. But so much of our moral

language today seems to envisage all Christians having to be active on much broader stages and the churches propelling those movements. It helps me to have a wife who works as a school psychologist. When my friends use soaring language about things like ending world poverty or reversing climate change, she reminds us that a very large percentage of the families at George Fischer Middle School have a hard time getting through the day and that dozens of her kids are emotionally impaired.

I often quote my good friend, Samuel Escobar, a Latin American Evangelical. Sam was all in favor of grand schemes to save the world from its follies. He was equally firm in the conviction that the primary obligation of the church is to preach the Gospel and become a community that nurtures people in the Christ-life. I think that if we do that, our congregation's members will respond to the promptings of the Spirit in whatever sphere of life they are in.

Addendum, in a follow-up note—

What I find very interesting today is the way in which conservatives jump on one set of ethical concerns and liberals jump on another. That Christ may have been about something truly universal that cuts through either set of cultural preoccupations seems a silly question to most moderns. Getting one with God (at-one-ment) and sharing the deeper ministry of Christ in bringing persons to live "with the grain of the universe" seems fanciful. To quote Lonergan:

"The crisis, then, that I have been attempting to depict is a crisis not of faith but of culture. There has been no new revelation from on high to replace the revelation given through Christ Jesus. There has been written no new Bible, and there has been founded no new church to link us with him. But Catholic

philosophy and Catholic theology are matters, not merely of revelation and faith, but also of culture. Both have been fully and deeply involved in classical culture. The breakdown of classical culture and, at last in our day, the manifest comprehensiveness and exclusiveness of modern culture confront Catholic philosophy and Catholic theology with the gravest problems, impose upon them mountainous tasks, invite them to Herculean labors....

“There is bound to be formed a solid right that is determined to live in a world that no longer exists. There is bound to be formed a scattered left, captivated by now this, now that new development, exploring now this and now that new possibility. But what will count is a perhaps not numerous center, big enough to be at home in both the old and the new, painstaking enough to work on the transitions to be made, strong enough to refuse half-measures and insist on complete solutions even though it has to wait.” [*Collection: Papers by Bernard Lonergan*](#), S. J. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), p. 266-7).