

Plain Speaking

Colleagues,

Seven years ago the Crossings board commissioned a festschrift to help celebrate Ed Schroeder's 75th birthday. 17 contributors sent in an assortment of essays and one hymn. Editors Steven Kuhl, Sherman Lee, and Robin Morgan assembled them under the title "Gospel Blazes in the Dark: A Festival of Writing Sparked in Honor of Edward H. Schroeder," and got 100 copies printed. All were quickly snapped up at \$20 a pop. Teasers appear on the Crossings website (see under the Library tab), but not the essays themselves. Barring a sudden clamor for another few hundred print versions the only future for that work lies in getting it online-which, serendipitously, affords us a nice little launching pad for the post-Ed Thursday Theology adventure. Over the next several weeks and months we'll be plucking from the trove for useful reading even as we wait for responses to last week's invitation ("Send! Send!") for contributions from all of you. (Hot news: the first of you has broken cover with an offer of submissions on four superb topics. Stay tuned.)

Today we kick things off with a "Gospel Blazes" essay by Timothy Hoyer, D.Min., pastor at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Lakewood, New York, on the shores of gorgeous Lake Chautauqua (southwestern corner of the state near the border of Pennsylvania). Tim is Ed's nephew. Over the past decade he's written regularly for Sabbaththeology and now and then for Thursday Theology. Here he honors his uncle with a reflection on a motif that bubbles up fairly often in Ed's work, i.e. using "nickel words." For any of you unfamiliar with U.S. coinage, a nickel is the American five cent piece. Twenty nickels make a dollar. Two or three weeks ago I read a report that the metals

used in producing a nickel are worth eight cents. That's a good tip-off to Tim's basic point about the extra value one gets when one pitches Gospel-talk in the everyday words that ordinary people prefer to use.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editors

"My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God" (1 Cor 2.4-5).

Nickels are cheap. They are almost useless. That is why the jars on store counters, with a sign taped on them begging for help for a local kid with cancer, are filled with pennies and nickels. So, in this North American world where education is valued and big words make one sound important, nickel words are scorned. When Ed Schroeder says, "Or in nickel words," some think he is using cheap, useless words, and that he is insulting them.

But, in a world where one billion people live off of less than one dollar a day, a nickel is important. In a world where millions cannot read, where millions get no education, nickel words are the coin of the realm.

Nickel words are important for telling others what one means. When the doctor uses big words, such as polymyalgia rheumatica, the patient says, "In English, please, Doctor." Or the patient turns to his son and gives his son a look that asks for help. Only when the son uses familiar words, nickel words, does the father understand.

The death and life of a man named Jesus also make nickel words

important. Jesus came from a village that was looked down on as worthless as a wooden nickel, "What good can come out of Nazareth [the sticks, or the wrong side of the tracks]?" Jesus claimed he could forgive people their sin, that he could get them on God's good side. And people were attracted to Jesus' claim because they felt they were on God's bad side. They, try as they might, could not get themselves on God's good side. They knew that. They were told that.

Life itself tells everyone that they are not on God's good side. Everyone on earth knows that their lives are always being judged, measured, "weighed and found wanting." When people see a baby, they ask, "Is she a good baby?" A good baby sleeps through the night and eats well and does not cry a lot. Children in school are graded on their every action-character, punctuality, attendance, reading level, tests, quizzes, homework, participation, how well they get along with others, the clothes they wear, the friends they play with, and how well they perform in sports. Next, when people work, their value is in their productivity, the amount of their paycheck, the kind of job they have. Families have to measure up to "family values." And at last, people who are old will evaluate their own lives. Not all of them will be able to say, "I have lived a good, long life."

All that evaluating and measuring is God's word. Not that anyone recognizes that evaluation as God's word. To most people, God's word has to be grand, bigger than ordinary nickel events. God's word has to be like The Ten Commandments-carved out of rock by fire from a cloud. God's word has to deal with the big things, the important things, not the everyday nickel chores. However, the problem with making God big is that God is left out of the day-to-day life of people. Even worse, God is not trusted to be in those day-to-day events and measurements.

To describe that measuring and evaluating, the Augsburg

Confession in Article 1 uses about two hundred twenty-six words, including “divine essence” and “incorporeal.” In nickel words, Ed Schroeder says the same thing, “We live by the word of God, the Ultimate Judge.”

All people relate to God as a judge. One hundred sixteen words of the Augsburg Confession describe that relationship with God in Article 2, Original Sin. Ed Schroeder writes, “God’s word at first is bad news: There are no good guys.”

That is very bad news. But it gets worse. If God’s word is only that no one is good, the remedy would be everyone trying to be better, even with a little help from Jesus. The worst part is that God is against bad guys. God is so against the bad guys that God is the major sponsor of all funeral homes worldwide, in fact, the only sponsor.

The number of words in the next two articles of the Augsburg Confession could also be counted, but it is the nickel words of Ed Schroeder that make those articles not just part of a debate before a German prince but good news given to people who hear them. And hearing the words, understanding the words, is essential: For “faith comes from hearing, and what is heard is the preaching of Christ.” The Augsburg Confession uses the words “propitiate” and “reconcile.” Ed writes, “Christ is for the bad guys.” Those words catch people’s attention. Not only because they are nickel words, but because those words are so surprisingly good. Everyone thinks the hero who saves the day is against the bad guys. But here is Christ, the Son of God, saving not just the day but saving people by being for the bad guys. And if someone is a bad guy in God’s eyes, there is immense relief to hear that Christ is for you.

When Jesus was on the cross, everyone thought he was worth even less than a nickel, less than a penny. He was worthless. And

like all worthless things, Jesus was thrown away, as all people are thrown away. He was thrown away into a grave, into the dirt.

“But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. God is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (Cor 1.27-30). God raised Jesus from the dead! God has made that worthless nickel the most foolish value there is for us.

Because God raised Jesus from the dead, there is more, even better, surprising good news. Ed Schroeder proclaims, “Christ-trusting bad guys are now good guys. So says the Judge. Key word: faith.” Those nickel words are clear, useful, hearable words that are valued because of whom they name. They name Christ, crucified and risen for all!

Another use of nickel words is Ed Schroeder’s translation of the story of the woman caught in adultery who is brought to Jesus to measure and evaluate. Everyone else has done their evaluation and said that she deserved death. After Jesus got rid of all the evaluators by having them evaluate themselves, Jesus turned to the woman and said that he did not evaluate her. Instead he was on her side. (Jesus is for the bad guys.) She was free to “Go and live as a non-sinner,” as Ed Schroeder puts it. She was regarded and reckoned as righteous to God.

Not many people have agreed with Ed Schroeder’s translation of that verse. Most think that Jesus told the woman to go and behave from then on and not do anything wrong again. But one’s hermeneutics is determined by one’s soteriology. Or, in Ed’s nickel words, “How you read the Bible depends on what you think

you need to be saved from.” Ed’s nickel translation proclaims that all people need to be saved from what God thinks of them. The other translators are too small in their faith in Christ and so only say that people need to be saved from doing the wrong things.

All Christ-trusters are free to go and live in that freedom of being a non-sinner. For, as Ed Schroeder says, using nickel words, “If Christ makes you free, you are free all the way!” Where people were disconnected from God before because of measurement and evaluation, and God was left out of their day-to-day lives, now people who are Christ-trusters have free access to God. With free access to God, Christ-trusters are free from the law, free from the law telling them what to do, and are free to be led and guided by the Spirit of Christ.

Ed Schroeder has been free as a Christ-truster to tell others that Christ is for them, using words that they can afford-nickel words. If some think that nickel words are weak, foolish, worth nothing, remember that God has chosen the weak, the foolish, the things worth nothing-including a dead Jesus. Nickel words that proclaim Christ’s promise of forgiveness as a result of his death on a cross may seem like foolishness to those who are perishing. But for those who do believe, they are God’s powerful words of salvation (1 Cor 1.18). And for one who has heard Ed Schroeder’s nickel words and clings to them, clutches them, holds them, and trusts their promise because they are Christ’s promise, it is not enough to say thanks. The best that can be said is, “I believe.”

In the Thursday Theology pipeline-

Next week: Preview of the Jan. 2012 Fourth International Crossings Conference (ya’ll come now!)

December 8: Best Christmas Sermon, selected by lay readers from submissions by an assortment of Law/Gospel preachers

December 15 & 22: Father Joest Mnemba, "Images of Christ in Africa," a reflection well suited for days of recalling how the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.