

Rebuttal of Poetic Preaching – ThTh57&58

Ah, the joys of cyberspace – Ed can instantly critique me even when he's half a world away!

Enjoy,
Robin

I've read ThTh58, "Poetic Preaching – Part 2," several times and I wonder—

1. Can a recommendation for "poetic preaching . . . touching the whole person – head, heart, emotions, soul, and body" be grounded in a theology of the cross? Does such preaching even come with NT precedent? St. Paul admits that he was a poor preacher—"klotzy," he'd probably say today—vis-a-vis the rhetoric of the poetic preaching coming from his competition, those "super-apostles" who (almost) swept away the entire Corinthian congregation.
2. When Martin Rafanan, as you quote him, rags on "the more rational Lutheran setting" of proclamation, just whose preaching is he talking about? Shibboleths abound. Also from Lutherans; also about Lutherans. Especially about the alleged rationality of Lutherans. As the smart-aleck kid said to his Mom when she told him starving Chinese children would be glad to eat his spinach: "Name one."
3. What is there in Maurice Nutts own [RC, surely] working theology that grounds what he taught you? I have some hunches, but I wasn't there. One of those hunches is that his homiletics uses Thomistic Nature/Grace graph-paper when it prints out. Thus, since "grace does not abrogate

nature, but instead perfects it," the whole "natural" person needs to be "graced" by good preaching. The more component parts that get graced, the better the preaching is. In our common-sense notion of human persons that includes "head, heart, emotions, soul, and body," of course. Should there be additional items, as well as alternate parts-lists coming from other cultures, they too need to be graced by good preaching. Is that good preaching? If yes, could it be even better than that? Theology of the cross says yes.

4. You promised in ThTh57—a dangerous thing to do, as I've learned in doing cyberspace theologizing—that "next week I plan on talking about how one might go about synthesizing what could be construed as a "settled formula" (the six step Crossings method) and this poetic language I've just discussed." OK. Name one.
5. You allowed as how "I don't have it all figured out yet, [so] if any of you . . . have figured it out, wholly or partially, please send me your ideas and I'll put our collective inspiration together as Thursday Theology #58." Rule of thumb for theological method: "Group grope" can just as often (perhaps more often?) lead to collective desperation as inspiration. Jesus knew that: blind leading the blind, and nowadays in theology, the bland leading the bland.
6. If Martin Rafanans was the best response you got and Marva Dawns the best you found, then the promised synthesis still needs "figuring out." Even good guys like Marva and Martin may not have Crossings "figured out"—and that's not finger-pointing—so help for synthesis from them is unlikely. Rafanan knows something about our Crossings stuff, and my hunch is that our Crossings stuff probably has not yet dawned on Dawn. Perhaps it has. But neither of the citations we get from them delivers on what was

promised. You don't have to be Sherlock Holmes to detect that the "Crossings method" is significant by its absence in ThTh58.

7. And so also is cross-theology, I think. Its not patent in either Martins or Marvas contributions. Not that they are against it. They are just not using it for their critiques nor for what they commend.
8. Martins urgings—"caught up in the Spirit . . . experience . . . experience. . . 'touching people' and letting them know that you can be touched/loved/challenged... engaging people actively . . . getting into the space/face of the people"—arent necessarily antithetical to Crossings cross-theology, but they do work just as well with glory-theology, I think. And Id say that even if I hadnt bumped into "slain in the Spirit" piety here in Bali these days, about which more later. [Oops, theres a promise for ThTh futures.] "Preaching in the Spirit . . . getting caught up in the Spirit," language that ThTh 58 commends, needs Gospel-grounding.
9. Crossings is more than a method—and I know you know that—although it is also a method. Crossings is cross-theology, first of all a message, from which comes a method. Not the other way round. And according to John Douglas Hall it is "a thin tradition," a minority voice in the history of the church. See this coming Sundays Gospel, Matthew 13:31ff for corroboration that it was always so (small and hidden, though genuinely a treasure) from the very beginning.
10. In the Reformation era (as I sought to show in the June 1999 issue of Currents in Theology & Mission) the Reformers cross-theology, a minority voice at that time too, was a conscious alternative to the Thomistic nature/grace "glory-theology" regnant in the Latin church then. Whats bad about bad preaching today is bad theology,

the bad Gospel—aka no Gospel—that “gets into the space/face of people.”

11. The glory element in glory-theology doesn't have to be pyrotechnical. It doesn't have to be the razzle-dazzle ecstatic slayings which the Vineyard people of Portland, Oregon—44 of them (sic!) invited in by my bishop even—are sowing these last two weeks in the Protestant Christian Church of Bali, thus also among my members.
12. The glory of glory-theology is its alternate Gospel, a Gospel that glories in what people could do if they would just get their act together—at least a little bit—and then gives them the rubrics for getting to such glory. Its never that Jesus is denied, he's just linked to some additional “really important” items. Here in my church these days it's the Holy Spirit. Now who in their right mind and claiming to be Christian could deny such linkage! “All you've gotta (sic!) do is” (fill in the blank). From the Vineyard folks here these days the fill-in words are: “Follow these simple steps and then join me in praying for the gift of the Holy Spirit for you.” And their works do follow them.
13. Clearly Rafanan is not promoting glory-theology. That's not my point. My caveat is that what gets quoted from him doesn't get to the root of what's really wrong—and always has been wrong for the past two millennia—with bad preaching in the church (see Galatia, see Corinth), namely, a bad Gospel.
14. Marvas thoughts on “the postmodern spirit” are culturally insightful. But does her diagnosis go deep enough—even to the D-2 and especially to the D-3, as we say in Crossings lingo? I wonder how many people (outside of the egghead community) really “believed so firmly in the faulty Enlightenment notion of Progress.” Name one. Perhaps on the surface, but deeper down, Dawn, isn't it the

Enlightenment “do-it-yourself Gospel”—once called Pelagianism—as well as its post-modern versions, that we all even now really “believe so firmly in”? Can it be shown that in “postmodernist spirals of despair” Pelagianisms self-incurvature has disappeared? I think not. At best the evidence is ambiguous.

15. Cultures have a cultus. That's the root of culture—not only the word, but the reality it signals. According to cross-theology, we can expect the cultus of any culture after the fall to be a glory-theology. Always. When Marva concludes: “Consequently, the major characteristic of the postmodern condition is the repudiation of any Truth that claims to be absolute or truly true,” I ask her for evidence that the “truth” of Pelagianism has been repudiated. Despite her disclaimer it still shows up in my world as a “Truth that claims to be absolute [and] truly true.”
16. It seemed quite alive when we left postmodernist USA last month. Here in pre-pre-Enlightenment Balinese culture it appears to be what folks so firmly believe in. Granted we were here only three weeks, but you don't have to be a rocket scientist Those multiple “pres” are to signal the Hindu-Buddhist-animist culture that norms daily life hereabouts with good and evil spirits that demand constant attention.
17. And all of this in the face of the culture of tourism that swallows up this Delaware-sized island. Jets and bungee-jumpers and surfers and sex industry and shops and culture for sale and money, money, money. All that right alongside of public piety of festivals at the 22,000(sic!) temples here [remember Delaware] and the myriad of votive offerings that appear every morning all over the place amidst the choking city traffic that never abates.
18. An aside. ThTh 58 quotes Dawn: “To those who criticize

Christianity because it has been (and sometimes still is) violent and oppressive, we must acknowledge they are right" Seems to me that's a tad over-generalized, at best. Maybe bordering on shibboleth again. On this island Christians are the oppressed 1% minority in a Hindu population of 3 million. Elsewhere in Indonesia, with Islam the national majority, even in places where there are large Christian populations, the "violent and oppressive" stuff comes from the other side. Folks back from the field, (e.g., a 31 yr. missionary from Irian Jaya, Indonesias easternmost province, at last night's prayer meeting) say: "The media report only the tip of the iceberg of the persecution of Christians in Indonesia."

19. The last words of ThTh 58, also from Dawn conclude: "The Christian meta-narrative is the account of a Promising God who always keeps his promises – a Truth clearly seen in the First Testament history of Israel and most clearly seen in the history of Jesus of Nazareth, who died and rose again in fulfillment of God's promises."
20. Tell Marva that we're hearing personal narratives built on that very meta-narrative. What makes Christ's promise really "Good" and really "New(s)," people are telling us, is power. Christ's power does not eradicate the evil spirits, the powers that put curses on you, but thwarts their lethal onslaughts. That makes for freedom, they've told us. Freedom from fear (which local religion never eliminated, but even fosters), especially fear of death. It's even freedom in facing "true" God as forgiven people. That sounds like the Crossings matrix at all three levels. Even better, it sounds like an ancient Psalm about walking through the valley of the shadow of death and fearing no evil because, as we heard last night from Irian Jaya, "I am sitting next to Christ." Somebody's been preaching good Gospel around here.

Well keep you posted as we learn more.

Peace & Joy! Ed Schroeder.

22 July 1999. Bali, Indonesia