

Rob Saler on the Publicly Engaged Church, Part 2 (Rich Fare for Holy Week)

Colleagues,

Here is the second half of the essay you started reading last week. I don't need to underscore its timeliness for people who are about to meditate on the Passion of Christ, and preach it too, perhaps. You'll see that for yourself. Savor the gift. As for Rob Saler, through whom the Spirit is delivering the goods, thanks be to God.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

The Spirit and the Publicly Engaged Church (*continued*)

Robert C. Saler

The Optics of the Market and of the Cross

When I was a parish pastor in Gary, Indiana, which like most impoverished urban areas is heavily churchd, I once received a phone call from a local newspaper asking me if our congregation wanted to place an ad in the paper's "Religion Classifieds" section (which already tells you something right there). Without my asking, he proceeded to tell me that many local churches found it helpful to get the word out about their service times, etc.

This is common practice, and I have no real problems with it.

But then he proceeded to say the following, “After all, it never hurts to get a leg up on the competition.”

Think of that imagery. Churches advertising so as to get a leg up on their “competition,” i.e. other Christian churches. Trinity Lutheran vs. Christ the King Lutheran, advertising their wares in a manner structurally indistinguishable from Wal-Mart vs. Target.

My point is not to knock church advertising. My point is that I suspect many of us American Christians have internalized, wittingly or not, the notion that the church operates in what sociologists [have called](#) a “spiritual marketplace” in which our functional role is to provide a “product” in order to meet a given “demand.” In my own work I’ve tended to argue that the main issue with missional theology in the mainline churches have to do with a “if we build it, they will come” mentality; thus, what we should notice here is how neatly that mentality corresponds with capitulation to consumerism.

That’s one problem. But it’s a problem that we are not going to get our heads around until we realize how thoroughly consumerism comes with its own theology, its own psychology, its own ideas around what truth, beauty, and meaning constitute.

The Christian author Donald Miller, speaking at an ELCA Youth Gathering in 2006, once pointed out that conservative estimates are that the average American views hundreds, if not thousands, of advertisements every day (between Internet, TV, t-shirts, magazines, etc.). He then went on to describe—in terms that I continue to find quite compelling— that the main goal of advertising is to poke a tiny hole in our lives, a hole that can then be filled by the product on sale. If you put these two facts together, then the psychological picture that emerges is one in which most of us are walking around having thousands of

tiny holes poked into our self-image, our sense of happiness, EVERY DAY.

And the effects of this are not benign. A stunning recent piece of art on the front of an avant-garde magazine focusing on women's issues puts it bluntly. [The image is of a young woman](#) in heavy makeup, shaded in such a way as to simultaneously imply overuse of cosmetics and perhaps even physical or mental abuse, looking down, and the caption simply reads: "Call Us Ugly to Sell Us Shit." The feeling of ugliness, the attack upon the peace that comes with one's worth coming from something other than work and consumption, translates into further consumption.

We know what the concrete effects of this are. Eating disorders rampant among women AND men. Personal household debt through the roof. And so on. But all of these material effects are tied up in the deeper material problem, and that is this: WE CANNOT BE SATISFIED. And what I mean by that is not that we personally are incapable of being satisfied, but rather that we are all caught in a matrix of forces that have a deep interest in ensuring that we WILL not be satisfied, because satisfaction is dangerous.

The word "satisfaction" comes from the Latin "satis facere," and it literally means to "make enough," that is, to be in a condition in which one feels that one has enough. What I am saying is that in the 21st century we North Americans, along with an increasing percentage of the rest of the planet, are caught amidst forces who would be deeply threatened were we all to collectively decide that we are "satisfied," that we have enough of a given product. If I'm satisfied with my blue jeans, I'm threatening the sale of Levi's. If I'm satisfied with my car, I'm of concern to Toyota. Indeed, the main indicator by which we measure the health of national economies in geopolitical terms is the "GDP," which measures GROWTH of economies as the primary indication that they are healthy.

This is not to say that Toyota, Diesel, the government, or anyone else is evil, though, because THEY TOO are caught up in the system of having to sell in order to survive, in order for people to feed their families. This is not “us” against “them.” This is us against ourselves. And that’s a spiritual problem.

One way we might conceptualize this is to think of the “optics” of the market. How does consumerism teach us to “see” the world?

Two theologians who have thought about these matters are Paul Griffiths (a Roman Catholic theologian who teaches at Duke University) and David Bentley Hart (an Eastern Orthodox theologian).

For Griffiths, the most corruptive aspect of the United States as such a “human city” is that it operates with a deficient notion of autonomy in which freedom is defined solely as the absence of dependence upon others. Moreover, perfect realization of this deficient autonomy finds actualization within a space whose logic feeds almost solely upon the construction of identity through unlimited consumption.

Ownership goes almost as deep [as commitment to autonomy]. Status is given principally by display of what is owned, and by capacity to increase what is owned and displayed. Among thoughts not thinkable is the idea that display can be excessive or that it is possible to own too much. The grammar of ownership has the syntax of consumption as a dominant element: the owner is someone who can buy; the act of buying, of purchasing, is the act by which owning is made real; and so the purchasing act is one that ought to be performed as frequently as possible. To limit it, ascetically to constrain it, is understood not only to be odd and peculiar and strange, but also antisocial, a virus within the body politic. Frequent purchase, the act of consumption, is what we are urged and

exhorted to; and so ownership is front-loaded into purchase, and purchase front-loaded into consumption. We become, ideally, owners who will not be deterred by the fact that we already own something from repurchasing it. We define ourselves, and are defined by others, principally in terms of what we would like to purchase. And when our autonomy is threatened by violence from without, by the decay of the body, or by betrayal, we comfort ourselves by going shopping...We can (we do) collude, as good shoppers, in our own tranquilization and the evisceration of compassion, sensibility, and love. We can (we do) deprive ourselves of the joy in the material world available only to those who refuse ownership of it.[\[i\]](#)

Griffith's point is that, to the extent that a community such as the church wishes to be the chief formative influence upon the sort of ends that believers choose, as well as the practices by which they reach these ends, it is (at least in the North American context, and increasingly the global one) in deadly competition with a force that has both the interest and the power to form both ends and practices within its domain. In other words, if the church has its own inherent logic, then so does the marketplace.

An equally vivid picture of the "marketplace" as a sort of overarching diagnosis of the Christian church's "other" is found in David Bentley Hart's *The Beauty of the Infinite*. According to Hart,

The market transcends ideologies; it is the post-Christian culture of communication, commerce, and values characteristic of modernity, the myth by which the economies, politics, and mores of the modern are shaped, the ideal space where desire is fashioned; it is the place that is every place, the distance of all things, no longer even the market square, which is a space of meetings, a communal space, but simply the

arid, empty distance that consumes every other distance.[\[ii\]](#)

Like Griffiths, Hart credits this market “empty distance” as having enormous power to shape desire (and thus, by extension, desired ends); unlike Griffiths, however, he envisions the market not as a rival public to the church but rather as the paradigmatic anti-public, a “no-space” which can thus insinuate itself into every space. Hart is clear that his naming of this force as the “market” is not a direct referent to free-market capitalism *per se*; rather, he sees the market as a kind of mentality which can, if necessary, inculcate itself into a variety of economic arrangements.

Hart’s account also proposes a link between the autonomous modern self who misconstrues freedom as pure autonomy to follow desire and the interested amenability of the marketplace to precisely such a formed personality. The hinge between the two is commodification, not simply of material products, but of those features of a person’s identity (particularly those formed in communities outside the marketplace, e.g. religious faith) that are not immediately possessed of an exchange-value within the market:

The market, after all, which is the ground of the real in modernity, the ungrounded foundation where social reality occurs, makes room only for values that can be transvalued, that can be translated into the abstract valuations of univocal exchange. And in the market all desires must needs be conformed to commodifiable options. The freedom the market acknowledges and indeed imposes is a contentless freedom, a “spontaneous” energy of arbitrary choice; and insofar as this is the freedom that is necessary for the mechanisms of the market to function, every aspect of the person that would suppress or subvert this purely positive, purely “open” and voluntaristic freedom must be divided from the public identity

of the individual, discriminated into a private sphere of closed interiority and peculiar devotion... persons (arising as they do from the often irreducible stresses of particular traditions, particular communities of speech and practice, even particular landscapes and vistas) must be reduced to economic selves, by way of a careful and even tender denudation and impoverishment; thereafter the “enrichment” of the person can only occur under the form of subjective choices made from a field of morally indifferent options, in a space bounded by a metaphysical or transcendental surveillance that views the person as utterly distinct from his or her aboriginal narratives, allowing these narratives the status perhaps of quant fictions but preventing them from entering into the realm of the real on other terms (as, say, persuasions, forces of contention that cannot be reinscribed as part of the playful agon of the market).[\[iiii\]](#)

This is heady language, but the point is relatively clear: when the marketplace shapes our identity, when all of the holes that advertising pokes into our identities come home to roost, then the effects are devastating both for our own identities and our communities. Think again of that image of the woman: commodification is abuse, but it is also the same sort of erasure, of eff-face-ment, that comes with both overuse of cosmetics and the facelessness conferred by abuse.

And I would suggest that, if we are to think about how mission interacts with the world’s questions around truth, beauty, and meaning, we should take this aspect seriously. My point in all of this has been to suggest that we live in a culture where powerful forces (beyond any given individuals; think of the Bible’s talk of “principalities and powers”) are at work keeping people DEEPLY (one might even say “spiritually”) dissatisfied so that the systems that profit from such dissatisfaction may flourish.

We may think eventually to try and change those systems; however, from a missional perspective, I would argue that all politics depend first upon worldview. So, theologically speaking, what is an alternate worldview to the one shaped solely by the marketplace?

In this setting I'll assume that you're all up on the Heidelberg Disputation, but let's just get the text fresh in our minds.

Theses 19-21 are, of course, the famous ones. Of particular interest here is Thesis 20 and its explanation:

20. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.

The manifest and visible things of God are placed in opposition to the invisible, namely, his human nature, weakness, foolishness. The Apostle in 1 Cor. 1:25 calls them the weakness and folly of God. Because men misused the knowledge of God through works, God wished again to be recognized in suffering, and to condemn wisdom concerning invisible things by means of »wisdom concerning visible things, so that those who did not honor God as manifested in his works should honor him as he is hidden in his suffering (*absconditum in passionibus*). As the Apostle says in 1 Cor. 1:21, For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. Now it is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross. Thus God destroys the wisdom of the wise, as Isa. 45:15 says, Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself.

And then Thesis 21 goes on to state, famously:

21. A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.

This is clear: He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering. Therefore he prefers ,works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil.

Consider this last thesis in connection with what we have been discussing: a theologian of the cross calls a thing what it is. Why? For Luther, it is for this reason: WHEN GOD WAS MADE MOST MANIFEST IN THE LIFE, DEATH, AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST, THIS TOOK THE FORM OF THAT WHICH THE WORLD CALLED UGLY. Jesus was a peasant carpenter and itinerant teacher from a backwater town who briefly engaged large crowds for a month or so, eventually fell out of their favor, and was crucified as a criminal by the Roman empire (one of the most shameful deaths for a Jew). God's truth in Christ took the form of what the world found ugly and pathetic.

As Lutheran theologian Vitor Westhelle has argued, this heritage from Luther—training us to see the presence of God in that which the world despises, calls ugly, regards as worthless—may be one of the most stunningly relevant aspects of our tradition in a world in which what Luther might call a “theology of glory” (that is, assuming that truth is most present in that which is beautiful, powerful, well-praised, etc.) dominates the logic of the marketplace. If the marketplace gives us a kind of optics, a “way of seeing” that sees ugliness in order to keep us purchasing, then the “optics” of the cross trains us instead to see the world as God's good creation in which it is precisely the outcasts, the marginalized, and the “ugly” in which we might expect to see God's Spirit most at work (note that this applies to people, but perhaps increasingly also to creation itself as it suffers the effects of our constant need to consume

unsustainably).

What does this have to say to the publicly engaged church? I think it's this: if God hides in suffering, in that which the world calls weak, then perhaps one of the most significant contributions that Lutheran Christianity might bring to our context's ongoing conversations about "truth, beauty, meaning, and justice" might be to think with others—Christian or not—as to how our minds have been trained to see beauty in those places advantageous to the marketplace, and to ask then how a different kind of optics, a different kind of "eyes" for the world, might disclose the presence of truth in that which cannot be easily commodified and sold within what Hart calls the "agon" of the market. To the extent that we as a culture can gradually emerge from our addiction to the consumerism that is killing us, it will not only have material effects but also spiritual effects. And one of those spiritual effects is that the good news, the gospel of a God who hides in weakness and suffering in order to find us and the world that God loves precisely amidst that suffering, might become a story that resonates with the pathos of the world to an even greater extent. This is what I mean when I say that an incarnational logic of the cross, born from formation by the gospel and its gifts, results in a situation in which the properly formed theologian, the properly formed Christian, loves the world more than the world loves itself.

The church cannot call the world ugly to sell it shit, or even to sell it gospel. The church must call the world blessed to preach gospel to it.

Implications

But let me conclude by making a few suggestions for what the things I've been able to sketch only briefly.

I've suggested that Luther's *Freedom of a Christian* teaches us

that the gospel frees God's people to engage the horizon of the neighbor's need apart from the economies of self-justification. But I've also argued that this is not a one-off insight but requires ongoing and deep formation in the spiritual gifts and disciplines of the church. In incarnational fashion, the deeper we go into the things of Christ, the more "secular" (worldly) we become in that we engage more deeply the world qua world as the site of God's love and of God's redemption (this is what Bonhoeffer was getting at at the end of this life, I'm convinced—his saying that the Christian life needs to become more fully worldly is not a departure from the quasi-monastic vision of Life Together, but the further extension and radicalizing of it. I can say more about that in the Q & A if you like).

And I've suggested that part of what is at stake (and in keeping with the optical themes of Fr. De Chergé's letter) is a kind of optics of the cross that resists the optics of the marketplace. But here again formation and spiritual discipline is key. It is not optional as to whether or not we are formed—whatever formation is not done by the church, the market will do for us. But rather than thinking of church formation as a bunkering down in a kind of alternative society, the fundamentally Lutheran theological insight is that going deeper into the particulars of the church and the thickness of Christian life is not a retreat from the world, but a deeper dive into it. As the church becomes more itself, it becomes more secular, because *thesaeculum* belongs to God by creation and to Christ by redemption.

As far as I can tell, Crossings does distinction between law and gospel pretty well. But my parting challenge: how can this group continue to think about the ways in which Lutheranism in its current manifestations empowers our people with the thickness of the Christian life, the material and spiritual disciplines that

create a Fr. de Cherge (even if a Lutheran one), and—most of all—the realization that to go deeper into the love of Christ is to love the world as God loves it, which means more than it loves itself? I have been arguing that theology must give rise to formation, and a shadow supposition is that—as much as we theologians would love to think otherwise—such formation is not automatic from even the best theological formulations. It needs Spirit-led work. Are we up to the gift of that challenge?

[i] Ibid. 227-8. Cf. Griffiths, “Reading as a Spiritual Discipline,” in *The Scope of Our Art: The Vocation of the Theological Teacher*, ed. L. Gregory Jones and Stephanie Paulsell (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), esp. 34ff. [Back](#)

[ii] David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 431. [Back](#)

[iii] Ibid., 432. [Back](#)