

THE WORD ON THE STREET

The Word on the Street

PERFORMING THE SCRIPTURES
IN THE URBAN CONTEXT

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The Word on the Street
Performing the Scriptures in the Urban Context
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For

The Open Door Community

*whose daily performance of Scripture
brings life in the midst of death*

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Foreword

Antonio Gramsci, that daring and much-imprisoned Italian sociologist, devised the phrase "organic intellectual." He intends the phrase to refer to working academics who are intentionally connected to movements of social transformation and revolution, who permit their actual engagement in such movements to influence, shape, and provide categories for their academic research. Gramsci, moreover, intends the phrase as a contrast to and judgment upon intellectuals who carry on their work in a social vacuum, as though the categories, purposes, and judgments concerning their research were intrinsic to the process itself without any larger reference. Whereas the latter are fundamentally irrelevant to the real world, "organic intellectuals" matter decisively to social reality, because transforming and revolutionary developments in society depend upon hard, critical thinking as the biting edge to social engagement.

I find Gramsci's phrasing helpful in appreciating this present volume, precisely because Charles Campbell and Stanley Saunders are indeed "organic intellectuals" whose critical work in their respective academic disciplines is related to, informed by, and in the service of the social transformation to which they are committed. I suppose it is correct to say that all of us engaged in theological research who take the church seriously are more or less organically connected, but these two young colleagues are visibly, practically, and intentionally connected to the movement in ways that suggest a different model of work and self-understanding.

Foreword

The title of this book is more cunning than it appears at first glance, because it intends to speak of a very particular word on a very particular street. The particular word is the gospel word of the Bible, with its insistence that the God of the Bible, in Jesus of Nazareth, has changed everything and made all things new. The street, in turn, is a very particular street. It happens that the "Open Door," the venue for this "organic engagement," is on a street named Ponce de Leon, or as we say, "The Ponce." The particularity of the street is found, however, not in that ancient and romantic name, but in the particular lives that are lived there, lives that are compounded of deep need and deep hurt and indeed deep hope that refuses to give in. That street "where cross the crowded ways of life" is a street of the hungry homeless who are bodily present to the busy commerce, traffic, trade, investment, and enforcement that colludes in the production of need and hurt, but that pays no attention to the carriers of that need and hurt.

The question that is endlessly posed by this interface of *word* and *street* is whether connection can be made between the two. On the face of it, there is no place hungrier for this word than this street (though one might argue that the hunger for the word is equally poignant on other, better-looking streets that are peopled by malls, banks, and "working churches"). It is a wonderment whether the word will provide any news that could be "good" on this street where the powers of death, despair, and abandonment are so palpable. It is the insistence of this present "word-book" by these organic intellectuals that the word is indeed good news here, because it asserts that the palpable death and despair is not the final reality. But this book is not singularly a "word-book." It is, I think even more, a "street-book"; it makes the relentless claim that it takes this street of broken bodies and nearly crushed spirits to give access to the word that makes all things new. Quite clearly it is the exposure to and engagement with this street that permits Saunders and Campbell to attend to the word in the decisive way that they do.

The interface of *word* and *street* is nicely put together in their aphorism "Street Readings/Reading the Streets." That way of putting the interface reminds me of the parallel statement, most often attributed to Karl Barth, that we should proceed with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. The point of that statement, of course, is to insist that the Bible must be related to what is going on in the world. The

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transposition from "Bible/newspaper" to "Bible/street," however, is a huge and telling maneuver. For these authors would surely insist, and rightly, that reading the newspaper is no adequate substitute for reading the street, for the newspaper is already a purified, purged reading of the street that is cleaned up to serve the interests and sensibilities of those of us who know little of the street and who want, even less, to know about the street. The slogan "Bible and newspaper" may in fact represent the ideological self-deception of much of the theological enterprise and the awareness of the church as we have lived in it — an awareness that is something of a protected cocoon away from the human reality of the street. Indeed it does not matter much if one reads the local *Journal-Constitution* or *The New York Times* as a paper of record; establishment interests have already cleansed everything, renamed everything, and invented euphemisms to distance and protect us from the truth of the street. Against such an idealistic misrepresentation, the street, as this book shows, plunges people of the word into the harsh, resilient, bodily traffic of humanness, a bodily reality that is an inconvenience, but that is shown here to be commensurate with the bodily reality of incarnational faith.

The bid of this book, in the wake of William Stringfellow, is to make a beginning on a new mode of "public theology." As the reader will know, the whole matter of "public theology" in current discussion is a hugely disputatious subject, given a secularism and pluralism that have "emptied" the "public square" of theological substance. As a consequence, most of what passes for public theology turns out to be exceedingly conservative, in the defense of the status quo, suggesting that anyone who departs from the old rational, capitalist consensus is a little flaky and is not to be taken seriously by those in the know who must act responsibly. Such a prism for public theology is, predictably, deeply establishment in its orientation.

The counter to such a sorry notion of public theology has been especially voiced by Stanley Hauerwas in his work, which is too readily caricatured and dismissed as "sectarian." Hauerwas's contribution, as I understand it, is to insist that the church, led by the word, must go full throttle in its own discernment and convictions, without accommodation to establishment interests. Whatever may finally be made of Hauerwas's own work, it is clear that his passion and freedom are important ingredients for this present work. It is clear, moreover,

that Saunders and Campbell have no interest in either accommodationist public theology or in a sectarian alternative that retreats before public scrutiny.

Rather, this public theology works in the categories given by the word, and proceeds to show that these categories of discernment, interpretation, and action are perfectly credible in making sense of public reality and in authorizing actions and policies that make sense and make human in a troubled urban society. This way of doing public theology is without apology, defensiveness, or embarrassment. It is also without much accommodation to conventional wisdom and conventional perception, because it dares to suggest that such conventions are likely to be distorting seductions. These authors understand well that these fresh categories for public theology are not easy or obvious, and are sure to be resisted and contested. But to be contested is exactly what advocates like Campbell and Saunders most want, to be contested so that gospel claims for the street are in dispute alongside market claims for the street that must also be brought into dispute.

That of course is why these authors are open to "street preaching." The enterprise of street preaching is neither wacko nuttiness nor exhibitionism; it is the joining of a contest in which the unexamined conventions of dominant society do not go uncontested and prevail by default.

I understand the importance of street preaching to be the urgency of contested reality. There will be many readers of this volume — many preachers among them — who have no intention of ever preaching on the street. If, however, street preaching means to engage in contested claims in the midst of the material, bodily reality of the street, then I wonder if preaching inside the church, here inside the church building, might more fully meet the demands of street preaching if the preacher (and the congregation) understood that street preaching, as distinct from conventional church preaching, entails a *willingness to contest and be contested amidst bodily reality*. My impression is that church preaching tends to be safe and consequently innocuous, not because it is in a church building, but because it tends not to be disputatious enough and not to be informed by the bodily reality of brokenness so evident on the street. Were church preaching to take on such qualities of street preaching, the church might more readily do public theology. I have no doubt that

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serious public theology finally must be done by preachers, not by scholars removed from the concrete daily life of the church. This public theology, moreover, has as a critical task the debunking of the plausibility structures of much of our society. It occurs to me that the relationship between conventional church preaching and street preaching is not unlike the "church theology" and "prophetic theology" distinguished in the *Kairos Document* of some years ago in the Reformed tradition of South Africa. That is, street preaching may more readily do what is the proper task of church preaching, just as "prophetic theology" is the proper work of "church theology." In both cases, what is required is the move from an idealistic enterprise that engages in denial, to the bodily world where the gifts and demands of the gospel are so powerfully operative.

The burden of this sort of public theology, however, is not primarily critical and disputatious, though such requirements are always present. This public theology, at its best, is rather declarative and affirmative in a kind of courageous *chutzpah* that asserts its own claims freely and without compromise. I am struck, repeatedly, by the ways in which this book appeals to gesture, hint, sign, and sacrament. The church, in its contestation, must always work in such a way, because the dominant and defining categories of reality, mistaken as they are, occupy a lot of space and administer a lot of hardware. In the face of such formidable force, the claims of this public theology are not easy or obvious or readily persuasive. These claims must always be made from the underside, in a way that seeks to enter the unguarded pores of dominant assumptions. Thus in an exposition of the narrative of the triumphal entry in Matthew, Stan and Chuck speak easily of "street theater," of acting out in public before an unpersuaded constituency a truth about Jesus that is counter to commonly assumed reality. The theater of truth on the street has a playful, teasing quality to it, but the tease has conviction and the play has authority. It lives at the edge of fiction, for the claims of the word, if genuinely heard, always sound like fiction to the powers of this age.

"Street theater" abounds in this manuscript:

- Little Carson is baptized, a little theater of water and formula, and his father dares to term it "a death in the family," a death to all that is old and deathly and hopeless. The community watches

- the performance, shares in the theater, and as able, dies the death that is accomplished dramatically in and through the water.
- A dispute arose on the street about coffee, doughnuts, and ownership, who would eat, who would drink, who would control. What might have been an altercation, according to the assumptions of the market, turned out to be a genuine sharing. The community was watching and they saw, one more time, the drama of bread and wine and brokenness and healing and nourishment and all things new. One had to be watching to notice, or one might have missed the sacramental moment.
 - A most outrageous claim from the word is resurrection. These authors speak of "resurrection imagination" that "happens in the places where suffering and glory, humanity and divinity, spirit and flesh, presence and absence are embraced." It will make some of us nervous to link "resurrection" to "imagination," because then it may be less than "real" and "physical." But imagination is the capacity to see differently, to see that Easter is not just an ancient Sunday enterprise, but rather it is an endless, concrete surprise on the street.

For starters, that gives baptism, Eucharist, and resurrection as a prism for public theology. The bread is thin and the wine is poured out, and Easter is fragile news wherever it is told and trusted. None of it is compelling, unless one is on the street to see it, unless one is free to discern it, unless some are bold enough to sing it and say it. This act of evangelical reconstrual is daring and always uphill, but in no other way will the street be seen to be congruent with the word.

As a colleague who has watched these younger colleagues grow in freedom and courage, I am profoundly grateful for this book. As a colleague who is not very "organic" in the terms that Campbell and Saunders embody so well, I am moved by what they have seen and shared. I am chastened by it, but also energized. This book invites a re-think and a reconstrual of many dimensions of the church. Not least, of course, is its chastening, energizing word to seminaries and to those who engage in theological education. The summons for teachers and scholars is to be organically engaged. And that cannot happen effectively until we are present to the bodily truth and free enough for contestation. These strange gestures and signs that well up on the

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street, that seem like fiction, remind in powerful ways that the deep "fiction" which besets us is in fact our dominant categories of "truth."

The book offers a stunning, characteristically evangelical transposition so that what has been true is seen to be fiction and what seemed like fiction turns out to be defining truth. That odd exchange makes us much like Pilate in his wonderment about truth (John 18:38). It is instructive that the question is asked by the Roman governor just a chapter away from the "piercing" that happened on the street, in the public arena where the body of Jesus contested the claims of tradition and empire (John 19:34). Campbell and Saunders hold the question of truth close to the pain on the street, and invite us all to this odd place of newness.

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN
Columbia Theological Seminary
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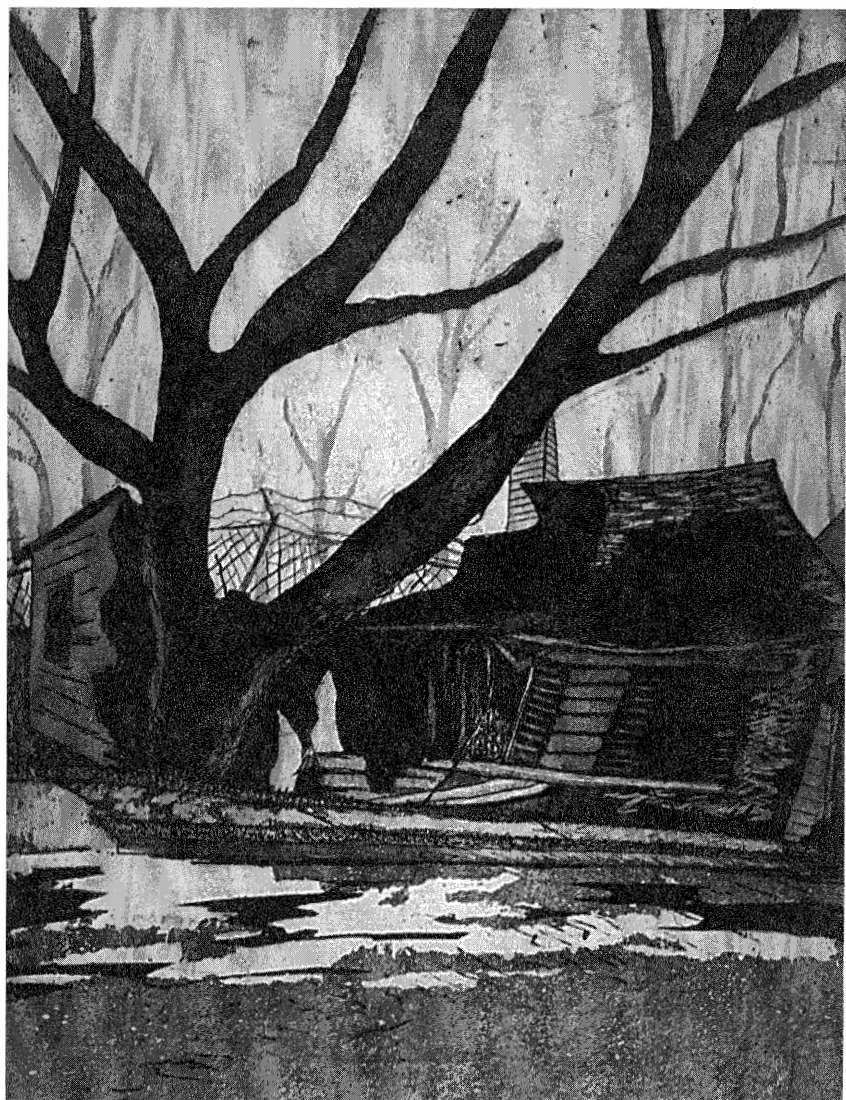
those who know Ed will recognize, he is in many ways a co-author of this book.

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Somebody Lives Here

Etching with aquatint; 16" × 12"; © 1996 Christina Bray

Sin, Grace, and the Basement Door

At 6:20 A.M. nine of us stood in a circle at the Open Door Community and heard the words of the prophet Micah: "What does Yahweh require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8). Then, following a prayer, we boarded the van and drove to Butler Street C.M.E. Church, where we planned to share breakfast with the homeless people waiting for us there.

On this particular morning, however, the line of men and women gathered for breakfast was disorderly. As I unlocked the basement door, the rest of our group was trying to bring some order to the line. When these efforts failed, the decision was made to return to the Open Door without serving the meal. I relocked the door, and everyone except Ed Loring and I climbed back into the van and left. Ed and I remained behind and listened to the anger and frustration of the hungry people who would receive no breakfast that morning. "I've been here waiting since 5:00!" "I'm hungry, man, and I've got to go to work!" "And you call yourselves Christians!" "It's not fair. I wasn't causing any trouble. Why can't I get something to eat?" All Ed and I could reply was, "No, it's not fair, but we have to have some order to serve the breakfast. We know we're sinners. We'll be back in the morning."

Although this was my first time to go to the Butler Street Breakfast on one of those rare occasions when the meal is not served, I have had similar experiences on a smaller scale while "working the door" at the breakfast. The person at the door checks for tickets, determines the

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number of seats available at a given moment, and decides how many people come inside to eat and how many remain outside waiting. In many ways the basement door is a joyful place — a place of handshakes and conversation and fellowship. However, the door also brings with it times of conflict and, almost always, a sense of failure and a glimpse of the cross.

The person working the door is the one who has to say, "No." "No, you can't come in yet. . . . I know it's 35 degrees and pouring down rain, but there's no room at the tables right now." "No, you can't use the bathroom right now. We're too busy." And, worst of all, "No, we're not serving breakfast anymore; you're too late." The scale is smaller than it was on the morning we did not serve breakfast at all, but the anger, frustration, and conflict are just as real. And the feelings of failure are much the same.

In Revelation 3:20 Jesus says, "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me." The person working the door at Butler Street is the one who often has to say "no" to that knock — "no" to the Jesus who comes to the door hungry or thirsty or naked. And, as Ron Jackson, a former member of the Open Door Community, commented, "It just breaks your heart."

For every "no," however, the person at the door gets to say "yes" dozens of times. Indeed, this "yes" is the larger context of every "no": "We're back. The grits and eggs, oranges and coffee are ready. Welcome!" This "yes," however, also has its cost. Even the "yes" is, in a profound sense, unfair, for it is spoken in the context of an unjust system that forces some people to live on the streets and wait in grit lines. Even the "yes" poignantly reminds me, in particular, that I am serving as yet another white, male "gatekeeper" for many poor African-Americans. Even the "yes" can break your heart, for it must be spoken face-to-face with poor, oppressed people. Each "yes" brings an encounter with the crucified Jesus, who comes to the door hungry and rejected.

Within this context, I heard the words of Micah: "What does Yahweh require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" The order of these three demands, I realized, is important: justice, kindness, humility. In the process of seeking to do justice and love kindness, we are led to humility before God.