



Editorial for the first issue of Word & World, 1981

The Word for the World

JAMES BURTNES

It is not an accident that the first issue of *Word and World* focuses on evangelism. We do want to say that the Word is *for* the world, and that theology is *for* ministry. We intend to keep saying that in a great variety of ways throughout what we believe will be the long life of this journal. We read and benefit from, and work with and contribute to, other journals and other theological and churchly enterprises. We shall continue to do so. But this journal will have a special importance for us as a vehicle for exploring those particular congruities and disjunctions between Word and world which constitute the matrix of both serious theology and effective ministry.

We struggled for months over the selection of an appropriate name. *Simul* was a strong contender. Its primary historical reference is to the fact that the believer is justified and sinner *at the same time*. But there is in the Lutheran contribution to ecumenical discussion a more pervasive dialectic, a persistent emphasis on the simultaneity of Law *and* Gospel; Kingdom on the Right *and* Kingdom on the Left; God hidden *and* revealed; bread and wine *and* body and blood; Bible as Word of God *and* human words; Jesus Christ God *and* man. *Simul* would not have been a bad name for what we intend to do with this journal.

When this journal was founded in 1981 as a publication of the faculties of Luther-Northwestern Seminary, the founding team wrestled with the selection of a title for the new journal that would define its mission and purpose. Jim Burtress, the editor of the new publication, explained the thinking that went into the selection of the title (and its guiding philosophy) in the initial editorial, which is reprinted here as a means of calling the current and future issues of Word & World to the vision of its original founders.

Another strong contender was *Marturia*, the Greek word for witness. We wanted to stress that there is an intentionality to our lives, to our work, to our ministry, to our theology. The connection with the English word “martyr” was obviously a risk, yet it had a certain appeal. Christian witness can never be a casual avocation. It is a calling. We should like to think that we would go to the death for Christ were that to be required of us. We want to stand in the company of those who have believed that confessing the name of Jesus is not just an expression of self-understanding or a support for morality but a truth-claim, a claim made about God and ourselves but also about all of reality and the whole creation. We want to say that Christian faith is utterly serious, ultimately important. We are not just members of “the religious community,” certainly not of some “moral majority.” As theologians we are not interested in staking out a territory on which others must not trespass. We are confessors of the name of Jesus and we want to give our lives to bearing witness to him. When we looked for a name, *Marturia* seemed to some of us to do what we wanted our name to do.

When it came to decision time we settled on *Word and World*. It won out over *Simul* and *Marturia*, perhaps because it is unabashedly Anglo-saxon and monosyllabic. But the dialectic of *Simul* is there, and the intentionality of *Marturia* is there. We think that anyone picking up this journal will have some clear indication of what we are about. We believe that *Word and World* is direct and clear.

But it does also carry intriguing ambiguities. The *and* in the name is simply an insistence on some kind of connection. We placed on the envelope of our first invitation to subscribers a quotation from Dietrich Bonhoeffer: “I never experience the reality of God without the reality of the world or the reality of the world without the reality of God.” In the same context he writes: “The reality of God discloses itself only by setting me entirely in the reality of the world, and when I encounter the reality of the world it is always already sustained, accepted, and reconciled in the reality of God.” We are not unaware of the dangers of such an unqualified statement. But we do think it a good place to begin.

The relationships suggested in our *and* are, we believe, inexhaustible. The *and* means, to use some Lutheran terms, that the Word is always in, with, and under the world. It means that the Word comes to us through worldly *means*, to use another Lutheran term. It does not come to us directly, or unmediated. Nor can the Word ever be engaged by an escape from the world, but only through an immersion in it. The Word, whether as Bible, sacrament, preaching, Jesus Christ, must be addressed, understood, communicated, received, in worldly ways or not at all. And the world, society, government, technology, science, morality, everything that is worldly, must be investigated, attended to, managed, understood, with an ear for the Word which creates and sustains and redeems it.

This first issue takes one of those connections, Word for the world, evangelism. Evangelism has, in some circles at least, become an almost obsolete if not nasty word. Many American Christians are uneasy about any suggestion that they

“tell people what they ought to believe.” After the Holocaust, how can we do anything but listen silently to Jewish people? Many white American Christians, when implementing concerns for Blacks and Hispanics and Native Americans, regard social justice far more important than evangelism. We acknowledge our guilt about the rape of the land, the extravagant use of non-renewable resources, the exploitation of peoples and of nations, the arrogance of wealth and power, and we are convinced, rightly or wrongly, that Christian faith may be part of the problem as well as part of the solution. We are more aware of values in other religions, more appreciative of the seriousness with which people who are not Christians address needs and problems and issues. We need to, and want to, attend to all of that in this journal. And we shall.

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And yet we are not about to give up on proclamation and confession of the name of Jesus. The churches with which we have been associated have been declining in membership and there seems to be a rather odd inclination to congratulate ourselves on that fact. We tend to see it as evidence that we are true to a “theology of the cross” instead of a “theology of glory.” Or we tell ourselves that we are called to be not successful, but faithful, implying that if we were successful we would thereby be unfaithful. Or we tell ourselves that because people are desirous to hear the Law rather than the Gospel, they turn away from the Gospel which we preach so clearly to the Law which others preach so seductively. We do not want to disregard those reactions to the situation of declining memberships, but we do not want to simply embrace them either. We want to investigate how to make known the Word to the world in ways that are neither apologetic nor arrogant, neither simplistic nor obscurantist, that are faithful to the text of the Scriptures but also to the contexts of the then and the there, and the here and the now.

So we offer an issue on evangelism. We begin with James Scherer because we want always to do our work in a global context, to take into consideration the whole world. 1980 was the year of two large Christian gatherings concerned with the propagation of the Gospel. The World Council of Churches Conference on World Mission and Evangelism met at Melbourne, Australia, May 12–24, and the Consultation on World Evangelization met at Pattaya, Thailand, June 16–27. Professor Scherer, who participated in both of them, and who has spent his life in the mission enterprise of the church, carefully analyzes and describes historical mission movements and suggests patterns for future reflection and action. We want to do our work in the context of parish ministry. Glenn Borreson, a pastor in Decorah, Iowa, investigates the very delicate and subtle relationship of baptismal

grace and discipleship as it was struggled with by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and presents us with a proposal for more serious reflection on the sacrament of entrance and the disciplined life which it engenders. We want always to be in touch with preaching. Roy Harrisville takes texts from Romans, and not only talks about the Gospel but proclaims the Gospel. We think these sermons are worldly preaching of the Word. We can hear Paul proclaiming Christ through Harrisville. We want to attend to the Scriptures. David Tiede takes Luke-Acts, the primal mission-evangelism document in the New Testament, and examines that Word in the midst of that world in which it first appeared. He gives us some surprising and important clues about how we might faithfully deal with that text here and now. It is a proposal for the interpretation of Luke-Acts, but it is also a proposal for evangelism. We want to be aware of the American context. Paul Sonnack looks at our history and warns us about techniques for manipulating people, about methods which can be used to bring about results but which violate people in the process. The question is raised whether we can or ought to use such methods for bringing the Word to the world.

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We want the reading of this issue to be a beginning. We print the theme of the issue on the spine because we want to make this a resource to which readers will return every time they want to do serious work on this theme. We want each issue to be a kind of paperback book. We think these articles are of lasting importance. We do not want them to get lost or buried. And so we also include a section entitled *Resources*. James Bergquist does a bibliographical article on evangelism, introducing the reader to literature in this field. We think it is a valuable piece, leading the reader into the many and diverse dimensions of mission and evangelism, and introducing themes and categories which will help to organize this complex area. And Paul Martinson offers us “An Islamic Reader.” Islam has burst upon our world in dramatic and traumatic ways. We make no apology for the fact that it is oil which has brought Islam to our attention, and the revolution in Iran, and the American hostages, and the Iran-Iraq war. If we were ever oblivious to Islam, we can no longer be. It is a very large, and very significant, part of the world which provides a setting for the Word.

Reviews will concentrate, as much as possible, on books on the theme. But we shall select books for review that we consider important, whether they relate to the theme or not. We shall encourage reviewers to state the importance of books in the context of Christian ministry, but never in a way that avoids serious theological evaluation.

The section in which this piece appears, *Perspectives*, is a category in which we hope to take a look at things from a particular point of view. Probably there will be some introduction to the issue in this section, the editor's word about why the theme was chosen, and how the articles fit into the theme. But there will be room for other things. And this time we offer a short piece by a working bishop, Harold Jansen, who knows something about the difficulties of evangelism in his district, which includes New York City and Brooklyn and South Bronx, places where the Lutheran Church does not have an easy time of it. It is a clear and direct suggestion about one way to actually do evangelism.

We are not guaranteeing, not even hoping, to please everyone. We are not so naive as that. We are not going to argue endlessly defending the importance of either the Word or the world, of either theology or Christian ministry. There will be those who think we are too theological, who will not see the importance of theological investigation unless it is immediately usable. And there will be those who think that we are too tied to ministry, too practical, too superficial. There will be those who think we are too tied to the Word, and those who think we are too immersed in the world. We know that. But we also know that there are those who struggle very hard to work at the congruities and the disjunctions of Word and world, and we look forward to a long and lively conversation with those readers. We shall keep at it. And we are confident that we shall get better at it, that the journal will improve as we learn to know our readers and our subject matter better. We want to thank our first readers for joining us. We are pleased to anticipate continued support and continued conversation. 

JAMES BURTNESS (1928–2006) was professor of systematic theology and ethics at Luther Seminary, and was the first editor of Word & World.