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The word on the street: performing the scriptures in the urban context

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reminds us that we are pilgrims on a journey, ever restless, ever scarred, ever seeking justice, ever holding hands with each other. The very last section of the book provides an extensive study guide for congregationally based action and reflection, a resource I recommend for all devoted to a gospel with feet in the public arena.

Doing Justice receives my highest commendation, and as tribute to that assessment I plan to use it as a study resource as our own congregation begins its plunge into community activism.

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

Stanley P. Saunders and Charles L. Campbell

Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000.

192 pages, \$24.95 Softcover

Performing the Word on the street in an urban context? That doesn't sound like anything I would ever do or even consider doing. Yet this book about preaching and biblical interpretation is a book I read over and over again. If your ministry leads you to come in regular contact with urban poverty and/or feel tempted to give up on energetic, prophetic preaching that relates to social and economic reality, this book is filled with encouragement for you.

The Word on the Street has its roots in the Open Door Community in Atlanta, Georgia, where Saunders and Campbell and their students at Columbia Theological Seminary leave the classroom and are transformed by the experience of reading Scripture in the midst of urban poverty. They assert that the place where the Bible is read changes the meaning we draw from its message. Thus their thesis: "We must learn to read the Bible in new places!" Going deeper, they say:

Reading the Scriptures on the streets has convinced us that the Bible can be powerfully and faithfully read and proclaimed in the places where our sight is filled with the distorting, idolatrous, corrosive images of

worldly power and wealth. Here the gospel most desperately needs to be heard. Here the reading of Scripture not only offers us the tools of resistance, but leads us toward faithful embodiment and performance, the culmination of genuine interpretation.

A flesh and blood example of actually daring to preach on the street sneaks up on the reader after Saunders and Campbell have spent the first half of the book laying the foundation. Then along comes Melanie Mitchell, a seminary student who is scheduled to preach on the street for the first time . . . “a required (and dreaded) assignment in the course, ‘Good News to the Poor.’” When Melanie finishes preaching, she says, “I did that?” She has been somehow freed by the context to “preach in a way she had never before imagined.” Melanie’s story left me wondering what I would say and how I would say it if I were to preach the Gospel on the sidewalk outside St. Mark’s among the homeless and poor people with whom I eat supper on Wednesday nights. How would that context inform and transform my preaching? Ever since reading this book I have felt unsettled about preaching from an elevated pulpit.

I still haven’t preached on the street yet, but my copy of *The Word on the Street* is dog-eared and precious to me. It provides hopeful support to preachers like myself who listen to the Gospel in circles of urban poverty and long for encouragement to keep proclaiming the Good News in the middle of abundance. Saunders and Campbell call preaching “the counterspeak of the Word of God” and “truth-telling in the midst of babel.” They offer help in resisting the powers Sunday after Sunday.

The Word on the Street includes a foreword by Walter Brueggemann, a comprehensive bibliography on poverty, urban ministry, and preaching as well as a brief, helpful index of Scripture references.

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