

Stuart Briscoe: His Theology and his Outreach Techniques

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Just in case some of you are as unfamiliar with Pastor Stuart Briscoe as I was before being assigned this essay, perhaps it would be wise to first of all gain a little insight concerning the theological and historical background of Stuart Briscoe. Stuart grew up in England and came to America and to the Waukesha area only a few years ago. His present British accent still bears testimony of his ancestry. In his early years he worshiped with his family in a religious group which seems to have some similarities to various "Brethren" groups such as the Evangelical United Brethren. The group was a legalistic group and fostered many of the principles of Methodism. No smoking, no drinking etc. were the standards the people in this religious group were to adhere to. This group had lay preachers, so Stuart naturally became a lay preacher when he came of age. Thus he has not had what might be called a formal seminary training; although, he seems quite learned in various seminary disciplines.

However, life in the "Brethren" group, with its legalistic methodism, proved frustrating for Briscoe. Stuart recalls, "I had no concept of behaving like a Christian. I never even thought of Christianity as a way of life. To me it was little more than a way of death. That is why it was so dull to me." He later added, "After making a number of inquiries, I came to the conclusion that provided I went to church, didn't smoke, drink, curse or go to the movies God would be satisfied. Oh, and I must read my Bible, pray and leave the women alone. All this I adhered to with great tenacity. But church was dull." Briscoe then started preaching with his brother and two friends and formed a singing group. But something was still wrong. What bothered him was that God's standards seemed so superb and his requirements so great that they were completely beyond the reach of human attainment. Stuart calls it "the exciting time" when he realized that Christ was the answer to all of his problems and frustrations. "He (God) had told me to live the impossible because he had given me Christ to whom it was all possible."

Relieved of that burden he worked among youth and toured extensively, as called upon, throughout Europe, working with young people and youth programs. Then, about six years ago, he accepted a Call to Elmbrook Church on Barker Road in Waukesha.

The history of Elmbrook Church is also a rather interesting history. The church was at one time a Baptist Church. As time went on the church sided with the conservative Baptists. The voters and members finally became disgusted with their Baptist ties, and they decided to sever their ties with the Baptist Church. And so, today, the church at 777 S. Barker Rd, is listed as an interdenominational church. Even the pastors, and there are six of them, come from various, although generally reformed, background. Dick Faulkner, for instance, served as Director of Evangelism and Family Ministries at the First Presbyterian Church. Before that he was Director of Lay Renewal for various southern Presbyterian churches. However, whatever the pastoral make-up, under the leadership of Stuart Briscoe, the head Pastor, Elmbrook Church continues to have astounding growth, astounding attendance, an astounding budget and an astounding outreach. Why? That is the question that I believe you want answered in this essay. I will attempt to at least give you some insight into the questions and some of my own personal views. We will first of all review the doctrine and then the outreach techniques.

The Doctrine

We begin with the doctrine because I believe that the doctrinal stand of the church and Pastor Stuart Briscoe is an important factor in the kind of outreach that the church has. It is also necessary to mention that the

views of Elmbrook Church are not always necessarily the views of Stuart Briscoe. In a church such as this there is room for all kinds of beliefs and feelings and interpretations under one roof.

On the one hand the church is what it says it is, an interdenominational church. It has a pervasive ecumenical spirit. It is a gathering place for Lutherans, Reformed, and Catholics sitting side by side. Romans 16:17 says: "Mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which you have learned and avoid them." There seems to be little "marking" and not much "avoiding." Since a service has that type of mixed gathering there is also praying together and communing together. The Scriptural principles of fellowship are thus abused.

Stuart and the Elmbrook Church have a high regard for the Scriptures. In their Constitution, Article 19 "Statement of Faith," we read the following; "We believe, the Scriptures, both Old and New Testament to be the inspired Word of God, without error in the original writings, the complete revelation of his will for the salvation of men, and the Divine and final authority for all Christian faith and life." Passages such as 2 Ti 3:16, 17; 2 Pe 1: 20, 21, and Mt 5:18 are used to back up this stand taken in Article I of the Constitution. Briscoe believes that the miracles of Scripture such as Jonah and the fish, Jesus turning water into wine, and Jesus bringing the Youth of Nain back to life actually did take place as recorded. He pointed to the resurrection of Christ as the biggest and most fantastic miracle of them all. However, he has a bit of a problem when dealing with Genesis and the creation story. He is what we would term a "theistic evolutionist." He believes that the first three days of creation were fantastically long periods of time and that it was the turning on of the sun that put the rest of the creation process into a 24 hour day prospective. Of course, no big deal is made of your thoughts on evolution. You can be a member of the church no matter what your thinking on evolution.

If you belonged to Stuart's congregation, you would hear a lot about Christ and the work of Christ. The "Statement of Faith" in the Constitution concerning Christ stateside: "We believe Jesus Christ is true God and true Man, having been conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He died on the cross a sacrifice for our sins according to the Scriptures. Further, he arose bodily from the dead and ascended into heaven, where at the right hand of the Majesty on High. He now is our High Priest and Advocate, and in the person of the Holy Spirit, he indwells the believer" (Isa 7:14; Mt 1:18-25; 1 Co 15; Heb 7; Jn 1:3-14; Ro 3:24, 25; 1 Pe 2:21-25; Ac 1:9, 10; 1 Jn 2:1, 2). Since they view Jesus Christ as High Priest and Advocate, they close many of their prayers with the words "In Jesus name." They preach Christ crucified and arisen, and Christ is a very important part of their preaching. As we mentioned earlier, a correct knowledge of Christ and his work was what turned the ministry of Stuart Briscoe from dull service to exciting service.

Concerning God, Article I of the Constitution reads, "We believe in one God, Creator of all things, infinitely perfect and externally existing in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost" (Dt 6:4; 2 Co 13:14; Rev 4:11; Heb 1:3; 1 Co 8:6). Concerning the Holy Spirit, Elmbrook Church and Stewart Briscoe stand for the following: "We believe the ministry of the Holy Spirit is to glorify the Lord Jesus Christ, and during this age to convict, regenerate, seal, indwell, guide, instruct, and empower for life and service" (Jn 16:8-13; 1 Co 12:12-14; Eph 1:13-14; Ro 8:9; Tit 3:5; Eph 5:18; 1 Jn 2:20-27). When it comes to gifts of the Spirit, such as speaking in tongues, faith healing, etc, Stuart is not real enthusiastic about them. He is not really convinced the Holy Spirit still today delivers such gifts. However, there are a few self proclaimed charismatics at Elmbrook who speak in tongues, but it is for them a private thing and they do not make it a public display.

I must admit that when I began working on this assignment I immediately expected a Billy Graham "make your commitment to Christ" kind of approach, in other words, that the individual has the power to believe As he has the power not to believe. However, although I thought I detected some of that in a sermon delivered by Pastor Marc Erickson, I must say that the idea of man's power to come to Christ was not in evidence.

Article I of the constitution says the following concerning man; "We believe man was created in the image of God but fell into sin and is therefore lost, and only through regeneration by the Holy Spirit can salvation and spiritual life be obtained" (Ge 1:26, 27; 2:17; 3:16; 1 Co 15:21, 22; Ro 3:9-23; Eph 2:1-3; Jn 3:36).

Concerning salvation, Stuart Briscoe and Elmbrook Church state: ‘We believe the shed blood of Jesus Christ and his resurrection provide the only ground for justification and salvation for all who believe and only such as receive Jesus Christ are born of the Holy Spirit and thus become children of God’ Eph 1:3-14; 2:4-10; Tit 3:4-7; Jn 1:2; 3:16-36; 5:24; Ro 5:9, 10; 8:1). At first I took a closer look at the phrase “only such as *receive* Jesus Christ are born of the Holy Spirit....” However, after reviewing the passages used to back up that article of faith and reviewing what was previously stated under the article on “mankind,” I have concluded that the receiving is not meant here as something which man has the power to accomplish, but that it likewise is accomplished by the Holy Ghost. In reading and interviewing I ran across no idea of double predestination. However, that would not mean that there is no one in that church body who believes in a double predestination.

As you might expect, when we get to the sacraments, we have problems. Here Stuart Briscoe and Elmbrook Church reveal their true “Reformed” colors. Briscoe admittedly states that he has trouble with “transubstantiation,” with “consubstantiation,” and also with Calvin. He thus agrees, more or less, with Zwingli. The Lord’s Supper thus becomes a memorial meal, and the word “represents” rears its ugly head. Anyone present at a service may come forward to the Lord’s Table. As far as Baptism is concerned the Baptist idea seems to prevail. According to Briscoe, babies are not baptized. You are baptized later on and may select baptism by immersion if your conscience so dictates; although, immersion is not demanded.

Their view of the Church is as follows: “We believe the true Church is composed of all such persons who are regenerated by the Holy Ghost through saving faith in Jesus Christ, are united together in the Body of Christ of which he is Lord and Head and are commissioned for the God given task of proclaiming the gospel to every person. Only those who are thus members of the true Church shall be eligible for membership in the local church. Every local church has the right under Christ to decide and govern its own affairs.” (Ac 2:41, 42; Ro 12:5; Eph 1:22, 23; 5:23, 24; 1 Co 12:12-14; 2 Co 11:2; Ac 14:27).

Concerning the Judgment, the following statement of faith stands: “We believe in the bodily resurrection of the dead; of the believer to everlasting blessedness and joy with the Lord, and of the unbeliever to judgment and eternal separation from God” (Mal 3:18; Mt 25:34-41; Jn 5:28, 29; Rev 20: 4-6, 11-15; 1 Th 4:16, 17; 2 Th 1:7-9). The article itself is somewhat silent concerning the millenium. However, such passages as Rev 20:4-6 and 1 Th 4:16, 17 indicate that there is room for a rapture and a millennium. Briscoe admitted that his church had people who believed strongly in the millennium (both premillenarians and postmillenarians) and also those who had never heard the term before and wouldn’t know what it meant if they did. Briscoe himself leans toward a millennium, but is at this time uncertain as to which camp he wants to be associated with.

And now, just a few more observations of Stuart’s doctrines and practices. All of the pastors are “called” by the congregation. The Church also, so Stuart says, respects the “calls” of other area pastors. He said that they encourage people, who come to the services but belong to congregations, to go back to their congregations and be as living examples of Christianity within their congregation. Those of you who have perhaps dealt with Elmbrook Church would be in a better position to judge that statement than I would. They presently have a Catholic family attending regularly but who still wish to remain members of the Catholic Church. Women are not granted positions in the church where they would have authority over the men of the congregation. The Constitution says, “The Board shall be composed of no less than 12 *male members* of the church.” Mrs. Briscoe herself is a much sought after speaker. She holds regular Bible classes and expounds on the Scriptures to women but only to women.

There are many things which are left unsaid, and so one would expect in an interdenominational church. In a sermon on “the flood” Pastor Briscoe stated, “I myself have some problems with the flood.” In other things as well, no clear and definite stand is taken, thus leaving room for a wide variety of views. Briscoe summed up their approach as a church in the following manner: “We try and be middle of the road, not going into the ditch on either side. We don’t want to be too strict so as to become stagnant and not so liberal so as to be come indifferent. Ours is a policy of flexibility as over against rigidity.” I think that statement speaks for itself.

Outreach Techniques

These middle of the road policies also have something to do with the outreach of the church. That there is an outreach is evident from the attendance records. The two Sunday morning services administer to about 2,000 people every week. The Sunday evening service (the one I observed) had about 800 people in attendance. Where do they come from and why do they come? The actual membership of the church is much smaller than attendance figures would indicate. Many of the people who attend are people who belong to other churches, Lutheran, Catholic, etc. But why do they come is the question we want to answer.

Stuart Briscoe says that his ministry and approach is summed up by three Greek words: *κοινωνία*, *διδασκαλία*, and *διακονία*. The church first of all teaches people, building and strengthening faith. In this each member is to realize that he or she is in a fellowship or partnership (*κοινωνία*) for the purpose of spreading God's Word. Then each member is expected to go out and teach (*διδασκαλία*) and serve (*διακονία*) the spiritually starving in the world. The big emphasis is getting Christianity to live in the individual's everyday life. Stuart Briscoe is accomplishing just that. They have no organized evangelism program as such, and yet the attendance figures and reports from people in the Milwaukee area indicate a lot of people bringing other people to the services. Using the people as witnesses is perhaps the best outreach technique that Stewart Briscoe has. The people are instilled to be living and walking examples of Christianity.

These objectives are spelled out in the membership requirements. Becoming actual members of Elmbrook Church means taking a three-month Bible course. Again, the Bible plays a very important part. The Bible is studied in all sorts of classes and settings. The following requirements have to be met for membership:

Any person professing faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, whose life gives evidence of the reality of his relationship to Christ and who is in agreement with the church in matters of faith and practice is eligible for membership in this church.

The responsibilities of church membership are summarized in the Church Covenant as follows:

We confess our faith in Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord and our sincere desire to serve him faithfully in the fellowship of his Church.

By the power of the Holy Spirit, we will order our lives according to the Scriptures and we will endeavor to *set a Christian example* at all times and to *witness to others* that they may believe.

We Promise to make diligent use of all the means and opportunities for spiritual growth.

We promise to promote the Lord's work at this church by our gifts, prayers and service, to preserve the unity of the Spirit, to encourage one another to love and good works, and in all things to give our Lord Jesus Christ the pre-eminence.

I believe that the informal service is also a drawing card. There is no set format, but each service may be different. One service, for example, was dedicated to the Lord's Supper and people giving public testimony of their faith. The service lasted for well over two hours and Briscoe finally had to call a halt to the service. The service I attended on a Sunday evening, as an observer, went something like this:

- a. A few hymns were sung from *Hymns For the Living Church* (Hope Publishing House-Chicago). It only contained hymns and had no liturgical format.
- b. People were asked to turn around and greet each other.
- c. People from the congregation were given a chance to arise and pray about something on their mind.
- d. Choir—announcements.
- e. General prayer by associate pastor (*ex corde*).
- f. Collection and choir number.

- g. Interview with a nurse who is presently working in Nigeria (her testimony of faith).
- h. Erickson's sermon based on Daniel 5.
- i. The people were dismissed.

Other observations:

- a. No clerical gowns were worn.
- b. The sermon contained a few light moments bringing a few chuckles from the people.
- c. A lot of people had their Bibles with them, they used them, and they took notes.
- d. People were warm and friendly.
- e. The service lasted for one hour and 45 minutes.
- f. A fellowship hour followed the services.
- g. Nursery care is provided for the services.

The interdenominational focus and the ecumenical doctrines, as I mentioned before, serve as drawing cards, Star of Bethlehem also would have gained several more families during the past year if I would have closed my eyes to scouting, the Masonic Lodge etc. When your requirements for membership ask for only a few Christian basics and you are left to do as you wish concerning other Biblical teachings (flood, evolution, etc.), then you are going to be able to receive people into your membership who would not be accepted into, say, a WELS congregation. "I can't understand why there are such divisions between Christian Church bodies, and why they can't get together" is a phrase I am sure you have all heard. Elmbrook Church is a place where they can satisfy that interdenominational desire.

Another drawing card is Stuart Briscoe himself. He is a very dynamic preacher who preaches the Word of God and not just "social gospel." He has his sermons well outlined, the complete outline appearing in the bulletin, and he knows what he is aiming at in the sermons. He has a theme and parts. And he is a very gifted speaker, one who draws crowds wherever he goes. I am also convinced that his distinguished British accent serves as a unique drawing card, setting him apart from others. Besides that, his sermons are practical and they are crammed with applications. When the people leave they know that the text applied to them and not just to the person next to them in the pew.

Elmbrook Church and Stuart Briscoe have reached far beyond 777 So Barker Road. On Wednesday evenings Briscoe has a program on Channel 18 TV entitled "In Reality." Briscoe is on WISN radio at 10:30 p.m. every Sunday evening with a program called "Telling the Truth." He told me that his radio broadcasts are heard in some way or another around the world. And so the media of television and radio are used for outreach.

There is an outreach to the youth. In the fall of 1974, Elmbrook Church, in conjunction with Intervarsity Christian Fellowship and Christians from other churches, embarked on a dynamic program to bring the truth of Jesus Christ to UWM. Just 1 ½ years later, over 200 young people from the campus community are now attending "The Friday Night Thing" as it is called, hearing the Word of God in music, drama, and the spoken Word. These meetings are held in the Lutheran Chapel across from the student unions. The group has a stated three-pronged purpose: "Our primary interest is to help our young men and women mature in the areas of Bible study and discipleship. Next we're training our people in evangelism, and thirdly we provide Christian fellowship." So many young people are coming to "The Friday Night Thing" that they are running out of room and Bible study leaders.

There is a variety of other Bible classes for all ages, everything from "God Squad" (Jr. High Group) to "Couples' Fellowship," and these are weekly. There are numerous Bible groups meeting in homes throughout the Milwaukee area and the surrounding areas. Various colleges have started Bible groups. These Bible discussions are led by leaders who have been trained at Elmbrook Church. The church's outreach and the number of people reached every week is simply phenomenal. They have a complete bookstore at the church,

and they provide an extensive tape service, providing taped sermons to those who want them. Briscoe made the following statement: “People who are going hungry in other churches are coming here to be fed.”

A WELS family (former???) made the following observations concerning Elmbrook church:

- a. They were led to the church by another member of the church.
- b. The liturgy is done away with—they felt that much of our Lutheran Liturgy has lost its meaning for the people.
- c. Elmbrook is too large and you get lost in the crowd unless you really get involved in everything.
- d. Briscoe has a popular manner—a good speaker.
- e. Great to see so many young people in the church and involved in the church.
- f. Many opportunities to study the Bible—more opportunities than at a WELS church.
- g. They went through the membership class and felt that some things were not explained as thoroughly as they would have liked.
- h. Briscoe, with his British accent, stands as a symbol in the congregation.

There is still one other important consideration when talking about the outreach of that church. They have six pastors. Each pastor can focus all of his time and his efforts and his ingenuity into a few specific areas, while the other pastors take care of the other areas. It is a type of specialized ministry, and I think it has a great effect.

Lessons

Is there anything we can learn from a church that has such a fantastic outreach? I think there is. Of course there are several things, which might be crowd drawers and crowd pleasers that we cannot, and scripturally dare not, go along with. We cannot go along with the principle of ecumenism and false fellowship that fosters “union” but not “unity.” We also cannot go along with some of the doctrines, such as those concerning the sacraments.

However, there are also lessons we can learn. One is to make sure that we are truly feeding our people with our sermons. I will never speak like an angel. I will never preach like Paul, and I probably will never be a dynamic preacher like Stewart Briscoe, not even being able to master a British accent. But we can make sure that we, with the Lord’s guidance, prepare well for our sermons. *Christianity Today* recently had an article (“Preaching Takes Work”) which had some worthwhile comments. “If the message is to have ‘far-reaching effects,’ then the preacher must make that message relevant to the needs of the hearers.” We must make sure that we apply the Word of God to the people in their everyday situations or else they are going to go home thinking that the message only applied to the Children of Israel or to someone else in the pew on Sunday morning. That article also states: “Without discipline the preacher will not accomplish anything worthwhile. Without study his mind will be empty, and an empty head and heart make empty pews. What is needed is a message direct from God, supported by Scripture and delivered as banner-headline news for this confused age.” Thomas Shepherd puts it like this: “God will surely curse that minister who lumbers up and down the world all week, and then thinks to prepare for his pulpit by a hurried hour or two on Saturday night.”

G.B. Williamson says:

In equal condemnation is the man who allows his time for preparation to preach to be lost in idleness, pursuit of pleasure, or preoccupation with secondary considerations. He comes to the pulpit empty in mind and soul, prepared to do nothing better than thresh old straw—to feed the hungry sheep nothing but chaff and to substitute a little perspiration for inspiration, expecting much heat to make up for a lack of light. (*Overseers of the Flock*, p. 50)

A sermon that lives, moves, and compels, a sermon with up-to-date illustrations and with two or three potent practical points that draw attention to the text will draw people, the Lord will see to that.

Perhaps we can look at our services and see if we are using a variety to hold the people's interest. Our hymnal has a wealth of material that often goes unused. Through the means God has given us, we have to instill in our people such an appreciation of God's grace and a desire to hear the Word, so that they, too, will bring others to hear. That was true of the main outreach objectives of Stuart Briscoe. It is time to start giving some special attention to developing enthusiastic youth through enthusiastic youth programs. These people are tomorrow's church leaders. I personally find this as one of the most difficult tasks in the ministry. Perhaps the time has also come for larger congregations, if it is at all financially possible, to start thinking in the terms of a specialized ministry, a servant "called" to administer in specialized areas, so that one servant is not spread too thin over too wide of an area.

We have to realize that there are going to be people leaving our congregations, some drawn away by reason, some by false doctrine, the Bible warns of just that kind of problem. However, when people do leave our fellowship, God grant that we, as pastors, are not the cause of their leaving because we have failed to feed the spiritually hungry.