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Book Reviews

Craig Bowman
cbowman@rc.edu

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Book Reviews

ELEANOR DANIEL AND MARK LOVE, EDITORS

The Web of Preaching: New Options in Homiletic Method

By Richard Eslinger

Nashville: Abingdon, 2002. 310 pages

Richard Eslinger serves as professor of homiletics and worship at United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio. He has authored seven books in the field of homiletics, including *A New Hearing: Living Options in Homiletic Method* (1987); *Intersections: Post-critical Studies in Preaching* (1994); *Narrative and Imagination: Preaching the Worlds that Shape Us* (1995); and *Pitfalls in Preaching* (1996).

His latest work, *The Web of Preaching*, serves as a sequel to the volume, *A New Hearing*, written 15 years earlier, and interprets current trends in narrative preaching. *A New Hearing* included interpretations of the homiletics of Charles Rice, Henry Mitchell, Fred Craddock, Eugene Lowry, and David Buttrick. *The Web* continues the interpretive dialogue with Craddock, Lowry, Buttrick, and Paul Scott Wilson and adds a more thorough interpretation of African American preaching.

The interpretive principle that Eslinger works by in this volume is that a homiletic method must be understood in light of its relationship to other methods. Eslinger imagines what kind of conversation homileticians might have with one another, portraying this relationship to that of a web. A web conjures up a picture of a homiletic system that is connected but with its components in tension with one another.

The components of Eslinger's narrative web engage in dynamic interaction with one another. At the center of this web, is a narrative foundation modeled after the African American tradition. Moving from the narrative center, Eslinger examines other approaches. The inductive method of Craddock and the "loop" of Lowry are located in the intermediate

section between the narrative center and the discursive (or conceptual) edge. The moves and structures of Buttrick and the "four pages" of Wilson connect with the narrative center but also extend out—maintaining minimal connections with the discursive rim. Finally, the emerging "homiletics of imagery" connect with the narrative core.

Two of the book's six chapters explore the narrative center. One of these describes the postliberal stance, which includes Eslinger's own perspective. The other investigates the African American tradition of preaching. Three other chapters address the homiletics of Craddock and Lowry (one chapter), Buttrick, and Wilson. The final chapter contains reflections on what Eslinger calls the homiletics of imagery. Because our culture and world think in visual forms, preaching will learn how to "image" the gospel, the world, and God.

Eslinger treats the various narrative models with perceptive fairness, devoting an equal amount of time to each. With every model, he identifies particular strengths and limitations. For example, in his treatment of Craddock, Eslinger identifies contributions Craddock makes to preaching, which include his attention to the function of language, emphasis on the faith community, and the need for the sermon to incorporate movement. In terms of Craddock's liabilities, Eslinger comments, "the weak link in his approach remains the assumption that the interpretive payoff of every text is a proposition, which in turn becomes the homiletical payoff of every sermonic form" (p. 49). Craddock's sermons are organized around a single idea, which results in the development of a propositional statement. Eslinger concludes that both inductive and deductive forms are bound to a rationalistic hermeneutic.

When it comes to Buttrick, Eslinger defends criticisms leveled against Buttrick—including his lack of documenting resources in *Homiletic* (pp. 195-196). His one criticism against Buttrick lies with his mode of praxis, which evaluates a contemporary issue apart from scripture. This is problematic in an age without a developed “Christian consciousness,” steeped in a biblical narrative (p. 196). Yet, of all the models Eslinger interprets and evaluates, he seems to have the closest affinity with Buttrick. That is apparent not only in this volume but also in his previous work *Pitfalls in Preaching* (1996).

Eslinger discloses keen and penetrating insights into the various narrative models. His interpretation gives fresh perspectives on these cutting-edge theories. Especially as he compares the models to one another and shows the relationship between them, he gives readers a greater appreciation and better understanding of how they can restore vigor to the pulpit.

Whereas Eslinger’s purpose was to disclose new options in narrative preaching, he speaks in derogatory terms of discursive forms of preaching. His “web” marginalizes non-narrative preaching—with didactic preaching located on the “rim” of the web (14). To describe discursive preaching, he uses such phrases as the “old rationalistic homiletic” (p. 12), “the old homiletic orthodoxy,” “old deductive preaching” (p. 16), and the “shell” model (p. 152).

In describing Craddock’s narrative style, Eslinger concludes that, “Deductive preaching’s use of Scripture, however, most often constitutes genuine misuse” (p. 16). Such a sweeping generalization is unjustified, but for Eslinger, narrative forms are the only true options for preachers.

Eslinger argues that for a preacher “to preach biblical narrative persistently through non-narrative homiletic methods would seem at some level to work against the intent of Scripture’s self-interest!” (pp. 71-72). However, as Charles Campbell has persuasively argued in a recent essay, this is precisely what is done by the preacher of Hebrews, who preaches the story of Jesus in non-narrative form (See “From Narrative Text to Discursive Sermon: The Challenge of Hebrews,” in *Preaching Hebrews*, David Fler and Dave Bland, eds., ACU Press, 2003).

In addition, rational forms of persuasion are not alien to sScripture. Paul’s letters include heavy doses of such rhetoric. An approach to preaching that includes both narrative and non-narrative methods is most healthy, allowing all the voices of scripture to be heard.

Despite the exclusion of non-narrative voices, Eslinger has given us an important interpretive volume on narrative preaching. He is most helpful in interpreting the various narrative models. His interpretive insights are perceptive; his understanding of the homiletical lay of the land is provocative. This volume enables homiliticians to gain a clearer perspective of the relationship between various narrative forms.

Eslinger’s method of understanding the various narrative voices as possessing a “mutually interactive quality” enables him to surface strengths and limitations that one would otherwise not see. He has immersed himself in the art, and readers reap the benefits of his comparative analysis. Even though this text may not be for introductory preaching classes, Eslinger interprets, describes, and summarizes these various models in a way that can be quite useful to those being exposed to them for the first time.

DAVE BLAND

Dr. Bland is a professor of homiletics at Harding University Graduate School of Religion in Memphis, Tennessee.

Speaking Jesus: Homiletic Theology and the Sermon on the Mount

By David Buttrick

Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2002. 230 pages.

David Buttrick’s books are always challenging, inspiring—and above all—thought-provoking. The title captures well the thrust of this work. Buttrick systematically works his way through the Sermon on the Mount (SOM) in Matthew 5 through 7 coupled with the Lucan material of the Sermon on the Plain—as well as the appropriate *Q* material and that

from the *Gospel of Thomas* that matches or nearly matches the sayings in the canonical pericopes.

His introduction to the SOM brings the reader up to date on the state of scholarship—a valuable aid, worth the price of the book. Each pericope is written out, then dealt with under two headings: “Redactions, Rhetoric, Meanings” and “Homiletic Theology.” This is nicely done. He also occasionally includes sample sermons, freely critiqued, that help demonstrate his classic form. His freshness and erudition is experienced on almost every page.

One of my first concerns about this interesting book is, although Buttrick’s consideration of “all the SOM material” is noble, it seems to invite adverse conclusions from inferior material. Yes, *Q* is the subject of serious study and inquiry today. In this regard, Buttrick rightly affirms that, “If recent *Q* scholarship is correct—although remember that we are speculating about a source known indirectly through Matthew and Luke—then we must revise our image of Jesus” (p. 14). My point, exactly. Should pure speculation have such conclusive power?

More troubling is Buttrick’s inclusion of near-similar sayings from the *Gospel of Thomas*. If *Q* throws in a monkey wrench, *Thomas* throws in the toolbox. Research on *Thomas* is still rather new and speculative, but many scholars believe it may be the *missing Q* or an edition of it. Yet its dissimilar sayings, almost always with a convoluted, torque the SOM material in unfriendly and unhelpful ways. Too much power again. The ideas/material Buttrick includes here depend seriously on the “Jesus Seminar” findings—highly slanted and tainted material.

A greater concern I have about this work is Buttrick’s rather liberal bent, both theologically and practically. Buttrick’s ideals do not discount his many contributions, but they do color them. Whether Buttrick is burying fundamentalism (p. 29), affirming political correctness (p. 143), offering interesting interpretations of words and ideas (pp. 89, 100), his stances show through as we expect they would. Recognize and take his orientation into account.

Finally, I think the beatitude material perhaps takes up too much space in the book—more than one-third of the pages.

Despite my criticisms, I think this book can be a helpful reference and resource for preachers with limited background in the history, interpretation, and theological import of the SOM. Even allowing for the above reservations, we are in debt to Buttrick.

DANIEL H. CAMERON

Dr. Cameron is a professor of theology and ministry at Great Lakes Christian College, Lansing, Michigan.

The Ten Commandments: A Preaching Commentary

By John C. Holbert

Nashville: Abingdon, 2002. 143 pages.

John Holbert, the Lois Craddock Professor of Homiletics at the Perkins School of Theology, has produced a book that is informative, insightful, and inspiring for preachers who wish to lead their congregations in reflection on the Decalogue. Each commandment is examined in a helpful, fourfold fashion.

First, the commandment is considered in its original context within the Jewish tradition. Then, a history of the commandment looks through the lenses of the historical-theological context of the Christian church. Next—the heart of Holbert’s work—an exegetical section undertakes a word study of each commandment, setting the language within the larger context of scripture. Whether versed in Hebrew or not, most readers will delight in the discovery of new meanings for ancient commandments. Finally, sermonic suggestions are offered for ways to preach the commandment with homiletic creativity and contemporary relevance. To his credit, Holbert does not shy away from poignant applications.

At the outset, Holbert sets the stage by showing that Exod 20:2 and Deut 5:6 are not “commands” at all; rather,

they are announcements, basic convictions about the nature of YHWH, central claims about just who YHWH is for Israel. . . . At the very start of what has long been known as the ulti-

mate legislation of Israel, the traditionists who preserved the ancient code for us were careful to preface that code with the basic portrait of a God who loves and acts on their and our behalf. Any sermon on the Ten Commandments should announce loudly and clearly that the God who commands is first the God who loves and who acts for us. (pp. 13-15)

At the conclusion of his work, having exhorted every preacher to preach a series of sermons on the Decalogue, Holbert adds that before such a series begins, the preacher needs to introduce the Ten Commandments as a whole list, thereby helping

the congregation see that the Ten have a purposeful shape, beginning with the all-important first that urges single-minded commitment to the God who has claimed us, and ending with the certainty that the claim of God covers all of our thoughts and actions, both interior and exterior. (p. 138)

Any preacher who wishes to bridge the temporal chasm between the ancient and modern worlds and to bridge the theological chasm between law and grace will be richly rewarded in reading Holbert's book.

Our age needs the Ten Commandments again, but not as sterile laws, hung on school room doors and court room walls. We need the living and vital Ten Commandments, all Ten, to remind us of the God who gave them and to remind us of what that God wants us finally to become." (p. 138)

Amen!

ROYCE DICKINSON JR.

Mr. Dickinson is the preaching minister for the Plymouth Church of Christ in Plymouth, Michigan.

Preaching God's Compassion

By LeRoy H. Aden and Robert G. Hughes
Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2002. 176 pages.

Today, on the fourth anniversary of my nephew's sudden death, I e-mailed back and forth with my

brother about our journeys of loss (his son, age 15, in 1999 and my daughter, 10, in 1994). We tried to help each other see the truth of Paul's perspective: that God has comforted us so that we might help console others.

To those of us who seek to comfort sufferers from the pulpit, *Preaching God's Compassion* by LeRoy Aden, a professor of pastoral theology, and Robert Hughes, a homiletics professor, is a welcome resource.

The opening chapters force readers to grapple with the difficult questions of sufferers: "Oh God, why?" "God, what did I do to deserve this?" "Oh God, where are you?" They insist that ministers begin as agents of compassion with a theology of the cross: "The cross points to a suffering God in contrast to a theology of glory that lifts God above life's ills."

Aden and Hughes insightfully point to the basic pastoral stance: standing with the sufferer. One's oral proclamation is a complement to this pastoral stance, not a substitute for it.

The richest parts of the book come in the five chapters on specific aspects of suffering: loss, illness, violence, fear, and failure. In each chapter, the authors give general descriptions of what that type of suffering entails. But as they offer help on ministering, they zero in on specific instances. For example, in the chapter on loss, they tell the story of Nicolas Wolterstorff's pain as he dealt with the tragic death of his son (at age 25 in a mountain-climbing accident). After discussing the pastoral issues of loss that would be involved in ministering to Wolterstorff, they suggest ways that preaching could be helpful to him. Following this, the chapter goes into more general ideas of preaching to loss.

The book would have been stronger with more careful biblical reflection on suffering in the opening chapters. I resonate with their attempts to distance God from suffering. But to say categorically that "God is not the cause of [suffering]" is to fail to negotiate the full testimony of scripture. They might better have pointed out that God is not always the direct cause of suffering.

It also could have been more helpful to ministers if Aden and Hughes had incorporated current homiletical writings that point to the primacy of the biblical

world with preaching that is more direct, seeking to draw the church (again) into Scripture's new way of reality and hope.

But as one who has sought both to face the waves of my own grief and to comfort fellow strugglers in my own church, I found this to be a great resource.

MIKE COPE

Mr. Cope is the preaching minister for the Highland Church of Christ in Abilene, Texas

Men and Women in the Church: Building Consensus on Christian Leadership

By Sarah Sumner

Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003. 332pages.

Sarah Sumner's recent work, *Men and Women in the Church*, deserves a hearing if for no reason other than its unconventional approach to a hotly contested issue among many conservative and evangelical churches, including those in the Stone-Campbell tradition. Rather than staking a claim with those who argue for women doing anything or with those who perceive that biblical hierarchical structures exist that restrict women's roles, Sumner takes a path that engages both sides.

I find that approach particularly refreshing in a time where both sides—egalitarianism and complementarianism—are becoming increasingly polarized and predictable around certain points of tension. For example, recent literature on this topic usually finds it necessary to make some decisive conclusion on what *head* means. When Paul says "head," does he mean "source" or "authority?" Sources are cited and authorities are consulted; exegetes weigh in from all sides. What you find is that nearly everyone comes down on one side or another—everyone except Sarah Sumner.

Sumner reviews some of the literature as well, but then moves on to suggest in a cogent way that perhaps Paul simply meant what he said—every "body" has a "head" and every "head" has a "body." What if the whole head and body thing is a metaphor and pairing off into debate about the precise meaning of

the term "head" causes to lose the essence of what Paul was really saying? For me, she is on to something here.

So it goes throughout the book. Sumner takes a good look at most of the usual texts that get raised on discussions about women and men. Though some would ask for a little more depth in exegetical matters and Sumner clearly is relying on the work of others in much of her textual analysis, most readers will find her explanations comprehensible. In clear and readable prose she walks her readers through the texts, hitting the significant textual issues but always coming out in some fresh, new place.

Sumner's greatest contribution to the ongoing conversation about men and women in congregational life, however, is not exegesis. Rather, her genius lies in taking her readers to a fundamentally new place to understand the contemporary dilemma. Instead of claiming some new understanding of manhood or womanhood, Sumner points her readers to become like Christ. In other words, much of the literature on this subject falls into the trap of attempting to address the issue from a point of view of culture, feminism, or tradition. In so doing, the emphasis on being like Christ or living in community slips away in the smoke.

So Sumner begins her journey into this ongoing debate from a different place. She is neither a feminist nor the daughter of one. Rather, by the telling of her own story and pilgrimage, she seeks to point a way of understanding that is rooted in discipleship and faith. "Though many people might still argue that women are entitled to the political right to lead in the realm of church government, I do not concur. Within the kingdom of God, people have only one right [--the right] to become children of God" (35).

So in a confessional way, Sumner calls us to repentance. What are we to repent of? Well, Sumner says we need to repent of thinking that women are somehow something less than men. And before you guffaw, Sumner leads the way by saying that is the very thing that she herself realized. "Many Christians, such as myself, have sinned by being prejudiced against women and partial to men" (34). When a woman says that she needs to repent of thinking less of women, I find myself wondering.

So I asked two women who are respected as leaders within the church and in society to read Sumner's book. Then I asked them about this prejudicial attitude, and they confirmed it. According to Sumner, not only do many men hold a prejudicial point of view on women, so do many women.

If the beginning place is repentance and a commitment to following Christ, then the path to take is one that recaptures a biblical view of personhood that honors the real differences in men and women while affirming the worth and calling of every man and woman. Sumner makes no bones about the differences that do exist. For example, the woman is the weaker (read "vulnerable") of the two as 1 Peter suggests. From a feminist point of view, Sumner wins no points on such matters. Yet her point is not about feminism but rather is made in an attempt to be faithful to the witness of Scripture.

Her faithfulness to Scripture and to the realities of a culture where men and women live and work together in ways that an ancient world did not know prompts Sumner to say some needful things about sexuality. To both men and women she firmly challenges conduct. Men must learn not to objectify women, reducing a woman to an "it." Likewise, women must address their own use of sexuality in inappropriate ways. "It's nice for the female ego to attract little glances from men, but it doesn't build security when a wife finds out her husband enjoys a lot of 'little glances' of other Christian women who dress the same way that she does" (302).

Those who follow the ongoing debate between egalitarians and complementarians will find her chapter on Thomists and Scotists an insightful analysis on the failure to hear well the distinctions between the two points of view. Though she takes a few apt pokes at egalitarians, her main focus is on what she perceives as a major disconnect that occurs within the complementarian point of view. She states that complementarians begin with the traditional viewpoint upheld through much of church history: (1) women are inferior and (2) therefore they should not take leadership roles within the church. Then the complementarians state that Point One—women are inferior to men—is not biblical and should be discarded. However, Sumner states that Point Two—no

leadership roles—continues to be upheld by complementarians. This creates a logical quagmire. If the reason that women have not held leadership roles no longer holds true, then why would churches refuse to explore the gifts and calling of women?

Whether or not all of her readers agree with Sumner's logic remains to be seen; however, when taken with the vast activity of women within the New Testament documents, her conclusions carry much weight. Most important is that Sumner shows more concern about the authority of Scripture, the call for every member (man and woman) to practice their gifts, and formation of Christ in our churches than on whether we get it right about Adam and Eve in 1 Timothy 2. Her persistent call for humility and community is a needed voice in a large number of congregations.

There is much to recommend *Men and Women in the Church*. Those within the Stone-Campbell movement will affirm her attempt to honor the witness of Scripture. Women who have wrestled with understanding their place in the kingdom will find Sumner's personal story woven into her writing to be an encouraging word. Readers looking for resources to take the discussion beyond the polarization occurring between those arguing for women's equality and those seeking to preserve hierarchical frameworks in church and home life will find some engaging trajectories. Preachers will benefit from her discussion of Ephesians 5.21ff in their next sermon on marriage. Marriage counselors will marvel at her chapter on Matthew 18. Church leaders will be blessed by the story of one church's pilgrimage toward embracing God's gifts to men and women.

And I believe that every reader will find hope in Sarah Sumner's call to repentance and a summons to a Christ-centered focus for our calling as the people of God.

CARSON E. REED
Indianapolis, Indiana

Just Preaching: Prophetic Voices for Economic Justice

Edited by André Resner Jr.

St. Louis: Chalice (for Family Promise), 2003. 234 pages.

This timely collection of 32 essays and sermons is thoughtfully organized in eight sections: (1) "Economics and the Just Word," (2) "Motivations for Just Preaching," (3) "God's Stake in Just Preaching," (4) "Is It Just America? Poverty and Homelessness in the Homeland," (5) "Children, Poverty, and the Just Word," (6) "The Voice of the Poor," (7) "'Affluenza': Preaching the Just Word in Privileged Contexts," and (8) "Just Preaching Is Not Church as Usual."

Among the more recognized contributors are Walter Brueggemann, Patrick Miller Jr., William Sloane Coffin, James Forbes Sr., and Barbara Brown Taylor. André Resner and Will Willimon are to be thanked for recruiting this diversity of contributors and crafting their work into a coherent whole. Resner writes the introduction to the entire book with brief introductory pieces for each section, capturing the focus and flow of the essays and sermons that follow.

Several of Resner's short prologues function as meditative focal points to prepare the reader for some of the radical statements, stunning statistics, and penetrating insights made consistently throughout this collection. His own provocative essay in the first section, "Justice as the Purpose of Preaching," proposes a new paradigm for preaching, in which justice becomes the starting point for preaching biblical texts, thus forcing the preacher to rethink entirely the task of preaching. In other words, the preacher must discern the problem of injustice in our particular present when coming to every biblical text in order to be faithful to both the text and the present encounter of injustice.

One cannot read this book without being convicted and compelled to make a commitment to preaching justice in our time and to call the church from cultural complacency to compassion and change in every American context, whether urban or suburban, intercity or rural, prosperous or poor. The two appendices at the end of *Just Preaching* state the

goals of Family Promise, and in particular, the programs it sponsors:

Family Promise created *Just Preaching* because we know that clergy can be powerful voices for justice. Preaching can provide the inspiration, but congregations also have a need for information—opportunities for study and education that can lead to action.

Just Preaching urges readers to preach justly and lead congregations to more actively "do justice, love loyalty, and walk humbly with God" as faithful neighbors determined to alleviate injustice and extend the blessed shalom of God in its place.

CRAIG BOWMAN

Dr. Bowman is a professor of Old Testament at Rochester College, Rochester Hills, Michigan.

