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Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

ELEANOR DANIEL AND MARK LOVE, EDITORS

The Sermon Maker: Tales of a Transformed Preacher

By Calvin Miller

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2002. 156 pages.

Calvin Miller's *The Sermon Maker* is a delightful combination of story and commentary, the story appearing on the right-hand page with technical notes on the facing page. Miller might well have written a book with only the commentary, in the mode of a traditional homiletics textbook, but it's the story, with lots of delightful/painful humor, that highlights and illustrates the mystery and difficulty of preaching.

The preacher is Sam, his nemesis, Emma Johnson, "a relic left over from the cold war, a Balkan weight lifter who carried a Bible big enough to frighten a Texas evangelist."

Sam, it seems, has lost the fire and is reduced to overheats (a frequent target of Miller's critique), tight logic and "remote alliteration," a condition known as "sermonic sclerosis" or in its Latin name, "homileticus horribilis."

One evening in the church, by himself, Sam considers "the pulpit . . . Fort Wilderness with a cross on it." In the quiet darkness of his frustration and fear, Sam senses a presence and soon becomes acquainted with Sermoniel, the Angel of Homiletics—"I go around helping powerless preachers get it back."

Sermoniel begins the arduous task of helping Sam shift his focus from the sermon to the congregation, from cleverness of phrase and heavy teaching to "telling his own story" through the gospel and helping others find the gospel in their own story and their own story in the gospel. Thus, Miller's book is not about the writing of sermons but about how people hear them.

Does everyone live happily ever after? No.

Does Sam recover the heart of preaching? Yes!

Sam finds out, as do all preachers, that there is no formula to great preaching. It's a lot of work, buttressed by huge amounts of prayer—and even then some sermons will misfire. Others, by the grace of God, will hit their target with an uncanny wonder. However it's approached, the sermon can never be the center of our attention. Our focus, instead, is the glory and love of God and the congregation, in all of its glorious and mundane specificity.

I read each story-chapter first and then the notes. However one may read it, the partnership of story and commentary, like a good conversation, offers a treasury of insight and challenge.

Having heard Miller in person, this book is a solid representation of his passion—to speak the Word of God in such a way that our words speak from the heart of God, via our heart, to the hearts of the people.

Preaching is hard work. But a prayerful heart and the desire to preach find a gracious hearing in the councils of heaven. In this respect, good preaching is always a miracle.

THOMAS P. EGGBEEN

The Rev. Eggebeen is the pastor for St. Paul's Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Livonia, Michigan.

God Sense: Reading the Bible for Preaching

By Paul Scott Wilson

Nashville: Abingdon, 2001. 192 pages.

Behold, a master carpenter went forth to build a house. But alas, as soon as he picked up a tool, his foreman confiscated it. The nail gun, the fore-

man explained, violated noise regulations. Liability concerns prohibited the use of chisels, saws, and power tools. Sledgehammers and crowbars were deemed unfit because of their destructive potential. Environmental regulations mandated the forfeiture of most of the rest. Finally, with only a tack hammer remaining, the carpenter was permitted to go about his task.

In *God Sense*, Paul Scott Wilson suggests that the carpenter is today's preacher, his previously chock-full toolbox now stripped to a bare minimum by generations of well-meaning scholars. To Wilson, professor of homiletics at Emmanuel College in the University of Toronto, the tools are the various senses in which scripture has been understood historically. The early church recognized four such senses: the literal, the moral, the allegorical, and the prophetic.

Early on, allegorical interpretation fell into disrepute. With the Reformation came the canon that biblical texts have a single meaning: the literal sense. Even then, Wilson asserts, the reformers understood "literal" in a dual sense: the grammatical meaning of the words as well as the theological claim made by the text. But the Enlightenment did away with this dual-literal sense, leaving the literal sense as determined by the historical-critical method as the preacher's sole remaining tool. Wilson finds little comfort in the multiplicity of readings offered up by postmodern literary criticism, suggesting that such methods devalue the authority of scripture.

As a result, the Bible was no longer a book through which God spoke to his people, but an ancient artifact to be examined scientifically. This left preachers ill-equipped for their task. Thus, Wilson claims, "it is not surprising that many sermons across denominational lines focus on what humans should do and omit consideration of God" (p. 35). This is especially tragic when one considers those who sit in the pew week after week hoping to hear a word from God.

Wilson's stated task is to restore the ancient senses of scripture to the preacher's toolbox while guarding against the abuse that led to their removal. He defends the value of the historical-critical method, but only as one tool among many. He suggests that preachers regard as primary the "God sense" of

Scripture, the sense that answers the question, "What is God doing in (or behind) this text?" To this end, Wilson includes chapters on the moral, allegorical, and prophetic senses, each aimed at rehabilitating that sense for contemporary homiletical use.

Preachers with a high view of scripture will find much to like in this book. Admirable is Wilson's balance between scholarly analysis and practical guidance. Especially helpful are three extensive lists of questions to help preachers focus on a text's theological claim—the God sense of the text.

This book's shortcomings are relatively minor, but some need to be mentioned. Most annoying is Wilson's confusing categorization of the various senses. At times, he refers to the moral, allegorical, and prophetic senses as subcategories of a theological sense; at other times he combines the three into the category of homiletical criticism, which along with theological and historical criticism form "the trinity" of biblical criticism.

Wilson's treatment of allegory takes up more space than it should. He rightly defends allegory as an effective communication strategy. He distinguishes good allegory from bad by redefining the former to encompass little more than metaphor and analogy—figures of speech that preachers commonly use in the homiletic task. Having so narrowed the scope of the term, he then spends far too much time defending its legitimacy.

Nevertheless, preachers who are concerned about communicating an authentic message from God will find this book both engaging and helpful.

MARK FROST

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Preaching Hebrews: Rochester College Lectures on Preaching, Volume 4

Edited by David Fleer and Dave Bland
Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2003. 154 pages.

Preaching Hebrews, as the title indicates, is the fourth volume of lectures on preaching at Rochester College. Eleven chapters are divided into two parts:

four essays on preaching Hebrews and seven sermons that illustrate features of the essays in Part 1. Tom Long writes a forward, and David Fleer follows with an introduction to the volume.

Part 1 talks about message, practice, and preaching—making use of Hebrews as a laboratory model. It is composed of four essays by Luke Timothy Johnson, Charles L. Campbell, Richard L. Eslinger, and Greg Stevenson. Johnson explores the meaning of Christology and discipleship in Hebrews from the perspective of the Christian who asks, “what the world of Hebrews has to do with Christians today” (p. 12). Johnson believes contemporary Christians can be challenged by Hebrews “because its understanding of Jesus Christ and of discipleship is at odds with that held by many who consider themselves Christian” (p. 25).

Campbell works with the notion that “the text should shape the form of the sermon” and applies it to Hebrews as an example of discursive (nonliterary) preaching based on a narrative text—the story of Jesus (p. 30). The author of Hebrews, Campbell believes, utilizes a discursive form to open up “new insights into the story” of Jesus (p. 32), a “narrative logic” that is “poetic and tensive” (p. 43).

Eslinger attempts to identify the community of the phrase “To the Hebrews” as a means of understanding the church’s spirituality, principally through the themes of covenant, journey, and rest. Stevenson’s essay illustrates the need for “true dialogue between the church and culture” (p. 67). Convinced that a major challenge of preaching is to communicate indirectly, Stevenson turns to the rock group U2 (pp. 71-74) as an effective illustration of how the use of scripture can have bearing on our culture.

Part 2 contains sermons that are rich with imagery, timely and meaningful applications, contemporary parallels to the audience of old, and probing questions. Dean Smith connects our story to that of the first hearers of this sermon we call Hebrews and allows us to hear the call of Jesus as an alternative voice in our own culture, which is hostile to the journey of faithful perseverance.

John York allows us to observe God in Christ as he breaks through the heavenly hierarchy to make himself lower than the angels. We come to see that

in Christ’s humanness lies the protection no angel can provide—the conquering of death itself. Ron Cox invites us to dare to listen to the God who is a consuming fire and before whom “all are naked and laid bare to his eyes.” The surprise is that standing before God in the full light of day with no pretenses and no need to hide is a place of healing, and we are able to look full in his face with confidence.

Rubel Shelly explores the ancient preacher’s Christology of the exalted savior who is our superior, merciful, and eternal high priest. He asks “If he is so high and holy, can he pay attention to our needs?” The answer lies in the magnitude of the suffering of Jesus that affirms, “He has been where we are.”

The fifth sermon is a dialogue between Shelly and York that ponders the preacher’s possible critique of today’s gospel of health and wealth and the American dream. Shelly and York allow us to hear a conversation with Jennifer Smith that reminds us that life is not easy and helps us recover the place of lament in the church.

James Thompson takes us back to ancient scenes of worship in which things happened: thunder, fire, and seraphs singing. He calls us, out of our “affluent and entertainment-saturated world” where things only really happen in football stadiums, to discern anew the fellowship of the firstborn, the city of the living God, the great cloud of witnesses, the blood of Jesus that speaks to us, and to discover in the simplest of worship settings that something always happens.

Finally, Ross Thompson helps us to dream a dream and to see a vision of the kingdom of God and to hear a calling to go into the world to make disciples.

This is a valuable book on preaching. It bridges theory and practice. It provides readers and preachers of our heritage an opportunity to learn from leaders not of our own tradition. It connects quite successfully homiletical reflection with actual sermons. Your editors commend the work of Fleer and the Rochester lectures on preaching.

MARK LOVE

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