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## Preaching in Believing: The Sermon as Theological Reflection, Ronald J. Allen

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## Book Reviews

ELEANOR DANIEL AND MARK LOVE, EDITORS

### **Preaching Is Believing: The Sermon as Theological Reflection**

By Ronald J. Allen

Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002. 162 pages.

What is the relationship between systematic theology and preaching? What pastoral value does the former have for the latter? How does systematic theology shape the formation and delivery of a sermon? In *Preaching is Believing*, Ronald Allen claims that preaching grounded in the work of systematic theology helps the preacher, along with the church, embody more fully the elements of Christian faith.

The book is primarily a work in theological prolegomena. In other words, Allen does not prescribe, at least in principle, “the material content of theology” but lays out the formal dimension of systematic theology, defining its task, its criteria, its relation to preaching, and its place in the life of the church. This move stems from his desire to include multiple theological perspectives in the conversation.

For Allen, systematic theology entails “a logical, coherent, comprehensive interpretation of what a Christian community believes (or can believe) about essential elements of Christian life and faith” (p. 8). This task never ends, since evaluating the church’s claims is both an ongoing process and a multidimensional endeavor. For example, various ways of knowing (e.g., deduction, induction, and intuition) shape the church’s theological interpretation of its thought and practices. This is as an astute point on Allen’s part.

Also, Allen follows the work of Clark Williamson and proposes three criteria (appropriateness, intelligibility, and moral plausibility) for evaluating theological beliefs. The process of forming and sustaining Christian beliefs does not call merely for a face-value reading of a text or a doctrine but for continued “evaluation” of the church’s “understanding of its tradition, claims, life, and witness” (p. 12).

Allen contends that the preacher, along with the church, should connect systematic theology and preaching for several reasons. The connection explicitly links preaching and the formation of character. Beliefs have formative consequences both in the life of the church and in the broader culture. Probing this dimension enables the church to discern whether it embodies the beliefs it proclaims. Systematic theology also helps the church connect doctrines with concrete experiences, thereby allowing for diverse interpretations while searching for holistic renderings of the faith.

Honoring the otherness of a text, with its varied expressions, creates a conversational model for theological reflection. The text (or the classical expression of theological beliefs) and the contemporary situation do not trump one another, but enter into a dynamic relationship.

Overall, Allen’s book is an accessible read, especially for those who have not thought explicitly about the connection between systematic theology and preaching. It should challenge theological perspectives that privilege either the world of scripture or the world of the reader. However, the book needs a greater balance of analytical precision and constructive suggestions. In other words, a combination of theological prolegomena (questions about norms, resources, and dimensions of systematic theology) and theology proper (the actual content of theological beliefs) would aid the reader.

Obviously, such a move would unpack Allen’s revisionary perspective and change the conversation. Nevertheless, the book should provoke discussion about the relationship between systematic theology and preaching across theological perspectives.

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