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The Web of Preaching: New Options in Homiletic Method, Richard Eslinger

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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.

FREDERICK AQUINO

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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 Scripture. 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

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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.

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), affirm-

ing 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

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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 ultimate legislation of Israel, the traditionalists 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!

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