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Biblical Resources for Preaching



James Thompson, Editor

The prospect of having something to say and holding one's audience more than one hundred times each year is enough to fill most preachers with anxiety, if not outright terror. Reinhold Niebuhr experienced this anxiety in his first pastorate in Detroit. Early in his ministry, he wrote, "Now that I have preached about a dozen sermons I find that I am repeating myself. A different text simply means a different pretext for saying the same thing over again. The few ideas that I had worked into sermons at the seminary have all been used, and now what?" Niebuhr went on to say that he felt so empty of ideas that he dreaded the arrival of Sunday" (**Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic** [New York: Harper's, repr. 1980]).

The preacher who must prepare two sermons each week may indeed dread the approach of another Sunday if he has not learned to equip himself in a continuing process of growth. For some, "resources for preaching" may mean books of sermons, tapes, and sermon illustrations. Indeed, these resources have been highly popular for a long time. However, while the use of "canned" sermons and illustrations may reduce the anxiety of the coming Sunday, reliance on them demeans the preaching task. Preaching that is worthy of the name requires the personal engagement of the preacher, not the appropriation of the material of another.

The preacher will benefit enormously from resources other than the tapes and the books of ser-

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mons. Fortunately, the major publishers have produced a vast literature on preaching within the past decade. In this feature of **Leaven** I wish to focus on resources which treat the preaching task. Although they do not relieve the panic of the approaching Sunday, many of these resources will benefit the preacher by equipping him for the homiletic task. In this issue I shall focus on basic works in homiletics.

Textbooks on homiletics do not strike us as the most urgent on our reading list. Many preachers had the homiletics course years ago, and they did not find the homiletics textbooks very exciting or helpful. Preachers, like many other professionals, may simply go on with their task without reflecting on the theory which underlies their craft. I am convinced, however, that reflection on the theory of preaching is essential for those of us who take our craft seriously. In recent years, major publishers have filled the market with textbooks on homiletics. I will refer to some of the significant publications in the field.

The vast literature on homiletics reflects the significant differences among teachers of homiletics over what constitutes that field as a discipline. The first textbook on homiletics was Augustine's **On Christian Doctrine IV**, in which the former teacher of rhetoric emphasized such topics as style, delivery, and other aspects of the rhetorical tradition. Many books on homiletics have continued this tradition by treating the subject as a branch of rhetoric. John Broadus' **On The Preparation and Delivery of Sermons**, which has been the standard textbook for generations, has been justifiably criticized for its treatment of preaching as a rhetorical discipline. The book was first published in 1870 by Professor Broadus, who was homiletics professor in Louisville. It has since gone through revisions in 1897, 1926, 1943 and, most

recently, in 1979. The major themes in the field of homiletics are treated: the classification of sermons (by structure, by subject, by pattern), the formal elements of the sermon (arrangement, discussion, introduction, and conclusion), the functional elements in the sermon, and matters of style and delivery. Despite the thoroughness of the book, it suffers from an almost total absence of any treatment of exegesis or the theology of preaching. Broadus' book owes much to the rhetorical tradition, and it differs little from what one would expect in a beginning textbook in rhetoric.

John Killinger's **Fundamentals of Preaching** (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) treats the major themes of preaching also. Killinger's excellent knowledge of the preaching tradition is reflected in his chapter on "The Tradition of Preaching" and in his chapters on sermon structure (ch. 4), beginnings and endings (ch. 5), illustrations (ch. 6), and style and delivery (7). He also has a useful chapter on "What to Preach," in which he offers useful guidance on the planning of the year's preaching activity. The major weakness of Killinger's book, as with that of Broadus, is its inadequate treatment of matters of exegesis, hermeneutics, and the theology of preaching.

Haddon W. Robinson's **Biblical Preaching** (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), unlike other standard works on homiletics, gives primary focus to the development of expository sermons. After giving a careful definition of the expository sermon, Robinson traces the steps involved in moving from text to sermon. The final chapter treats the standard issues of oral communication (delivery, voice, dress). The book is a helpful treatment of the craft of biblical preaching. With its development of the stages from exegesis to the sermon, he presents his material in an organized way that can be helpful to the experienced preacher as well as to the beginner.

Clyde Fant's **Preaching for Today** is a very creative work in its treatment of various issues in preaching. Fant's opening sections on "Preaching as Authentically Christian" and "Preaching as Theologically Significant" reflect his excellent knowledge of the relationship between theology and preaching. The book also has a thoughtful section on issues in oral communication. In addition, Fant writes in a creative style that is a delight to read (on preachers who take a manuscript to the pulpit and try not to look at it: "If they are bold enough to go ahead and look anyway, they often give the impression of a kiwi bird going to water: now the head is up, now the head is down."). Fant's book is helpful, but it does not serve well as one's major resource in homiletics because of its inadequate treatment of exegetical and hermeneutical matters that are central to preaching.

The best current treatment of the preaching, especially for the general reader in homiletics, is Fred Craddock's **Preaching** (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985). The book serves well as an introduction to the field, as it is vastly different from homiletics books which are scarcely distinguishable from textbooks in oral communication. In part one, Craddock discusses the many

contexts of preaching (historical, pastoral, liturgical, and theological) and gives his own theology of preaching. In part two ("Having Something to Say"), he discusses both the exegetical and hermeneutical task of the preacher. In part three, he summarizes his work on the structure and formation of the sermon and gives a very useful description of the major qualities to be sought in a sermon. The book makes an excellent textbook for preaching at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

James Cox's **Preaching** (San Francisco: Harper's, 1985) is also designed as a basic textbook in homiletics. The major chapters ("The Importance of Preaching," "The Context of Preaching," "The Content of Sermons," "The Making of Sermons," and "The Delivery of Sermons") address the major aspects of homiletic thought. This text offers a good balance between the traditional homiletics text, with its interest primarily on rhetorical matters, and the theological discussion. Cox demonstrates a sound theology of preaching in chapter 1 and a good treatment of the stages between exegesis and preaching in chapter 2.

Thomas G. Long's **The Witness of Preaching** (Louisville: Westminster, John Knox, 1987) is also a very useful textbook on preaching. Before discussing some of the standard issues of oral communication, Long has excellent discussions of the theology of preaching and of biblical exegesis for preaching. Throughout the book, the discussion is shaped by an excellent dialogue between the disciplines of oral communication and the theological tradition.

David Buttrick's **Homiletic** (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) is the most technical of the recent textbooks on homiletics. Indeed, with its technical style it is useful primarily for graduate students in the field of homiletics. The book does not treat some of the standard items in homiletics (the delivery of sermons or the setting of the sermon in worship). Instead, as its subtitle ("Moves and Structures") suggests, it is concerned primarily with the making of sermons. The author's major concern is to describe "how sermons happen in consciousness," and he claims years of research to justify his conclusions. In his treatment of "moves and structures," he offers helpful insights on the internal components of sermons. However, the reader is likely to be frustrated by the absence of documentation for this research, by the overly complicated language, and by the weakness of the book in its treatment of the exegetical process in preaching. Despite its weaknesses, its treatment of the impact of language in forming consciousness and its excellent bibliography make this very useful reading.

The knowledge of the homiletic literature will not, by itself, produce good preaching, for good preaching cannot be divorced from the commitment to the word of God. Nevertheless, an acquaintance with this literature can assist those who are committed to preaching to reflect on the nature of their work and to equip themselves in the task of communicating the word of God to the people of God.