

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Preaching from the Minor Prophets: Texts and Sermon Suggestions* by Elizabeth Achtemeier. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998. Pp. xii + 143. \$14.00.

This book is the natural follow-up to Achtemeier's earlier commentary works for Hendrickson Publishers (1996) and John Knox Press (1986). Achtemeier has written very readable commentary studies on each of the Minor Prophets. This latest book on preaching is a more focused examination of Old Testament preaching, making this book a welcome follow-up to her 1989 book *Preaching from the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press).

Achtemeier is recently retired adjunct professor of Bible and homiletics at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, a school that has served the Presbyterian Church in the United States (now merged with the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America) for many years. Achtemeier asserts that the church and its pulpits have long neglected the rich treasure that can be found in the Minor Prophets, despite the fact that "these twelve books are an important part of the church's canon, writings that make up a portion of our authority for all faith and practice. Through these books the voice of the living God continues to speak. And through these books the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is revealed, as he has worked in that span of salvation history that runs from Genesis through Revelation—that span in which you and I still stand and from which we find the basis for all our living" (p. 2).

The author realizes that since many church members (including many preachers) know so little about the Minor

Prophets, they will have to “wrestle” with the message of these prophetic books without the benefit of much past tradition. This book serves to *supplement* existing commentaries and give further direction as to how the Minor Prophets may be preached. Achtemeier notes where particular pericopes are used in the three-year cycle of Church lectionaries—if they are used. (See page 80, where Achtemeier notes that the church “has never included readings from Nahum in its lectionary.”)

The format of the book is quite accessible to the general reader. Achtemeier devotes a chapter to each of the twelve Minor Prophets. Several commentaries are listed at the beginning of each chapter, followed by a brief description of the historical situation of the prophet and the theological context of his message. The historical and theological descriptions, albeit brief, are very helpful, and this approach reflects classic exegetical (and thus homiletic) strategy. Appropriate environmental backgrounds provide context for Scriptural understanding and preaching, without which texts become pretexts.

Achtemeier proceeds by selecting several preaching passages from each Minor Prophet, attempting to choose passages that are representative of each prophet. Under each passage selected for reflection, there are two sections: “Features to Note in the Text” and “Sermon Possibilities” (or “Sermon Possibility,” if only one central preaching thought is pursued). The sections dealing with “Features” do not discuss at any length the questions that exegetical commentaries debate, except to note quickly what are the key ideas to consider in the exegesis. Achtemeier often provides an exegetical conclusion, but does not argue the point.

The section dealing with “Sermon Possibilities” is what the heart of this book is about. In this connection Achtemeier is usually right on target. What comes through time and again in this work is the theme of God’s covenant of grace as the backdrop for prophetic preaching. Sin cannot overcome God’s power, for his power is not a mere demonstration of strength but is also an exhibition of love, grace, and pity from a Creator who remembers our frame and knows that we are dust (cf. Ps. 103:14). In the covenant, however, God also acts to uphold justice and

righteousness. Israel's sins therefore cannot remain unpunished. Typical of Achtemeier's approach is the following comment: "The context of all the words that the Lord gave Amos to speak is God's covenant with his people Israel" (p. 37).

In addition, Achtemeier lays proper stress on the coming of the kingdom of God, already promised in the Old Testament. The prophets announce this kingdom as coming through the action of God alone. But it is a kingdom ruled by the Davidic ruler, a *messiah*. God holds this before his people through the agency of his prophets, and God "always keeps his promises," as Achtemeier repeatedly observes. This stress on God's kingdom is appreciated.

Having said that, there are nonetheless occasions where Achtemeier slips into an easy exemplarism. For example, that God commands Hosea to marry the adulterous woman Gomer does not provide any warrant for individual Christians to expect strange calls from God (pp. 11, 12). God's grace is indeed reflected in his command that the godly prophet love and buy back the sinful bride. That is a unique call, however, not to be emulated by "every Christian" in the sense of "Go, and do thou likewise."

In the chapter dealing with the prophet Jonah, Achtemeier is correct to assert that the heart of this narrative book is to show forth "the unbounded mercy of the Creator God, who is the Lord and Source of all life, natural and human" (p. 56), adding: "Jonah portrays the nature of God who is the Creator of all things...." This God wills to save "in overwhelming mercy" (p. 56), a depiction of mercy that culminates in the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ. Achtemeier proceeds, however, to treat the city of "Tarshish" as the place wherever Christians today may want to hide in their desire to escape God. Hence her words, perhaps "Tarshish is a good name for our present culture" because of its secular flight from the true God (p. 58). This isn't to say that Achtemeier doesn't offer helpful insights in this section, but at times the redemptive-historical context of Jonah is overshadowed by other homiletic concerns.

Achtemeier does not shy away from what many might perceive as the more difficult prophetic books to use in preaching. For example, Achtemeier says that Nahum is “a magnificent presentation of the nature of God and should be preached as such.... [T]here is nothing in the theology of Nahum that does not accord with the New Testament proclamation of the gospel” (p. 80). This is a helpful note to sound in a day and age when God’s jealous wrath against his enemies is largely muted.

Theologically, Achtemeier shows fine balance between accenting the gracious character of God and holding forth God’s justice and zeal for defeating his enemies and all evil (see pp. 81-85).

Occasionally, source critical comments intrude (for example, p. 23, regarding Hosea 11:10; pp. 64, 65, regarding Micah; p. 101, regarding Zephaniah 3:18-20; pp. 112, 113, regarding Zechariah), but they do not detract from the overall value of this book.

A number of errors in the book are here noted. The Biblical reference “(Matt. 20:28)” should read “(Matt. 28:20).” Also, the dates for the rule of good King Josiah are usually given as 640-609 B.C., not 627-609 B.C. (p. 87). On page 91 “Habakkuk 1:4” should read “Habakkuk 2:4.” Pontius “Pilot” should certainly be corrected to Pontius Pilate (p. 121). The Palm Sunday cry is found in Matt. 21:9, not Matt. 20:9 (p. 124). The reference to the judgment seat of Christ is found in 2 Cor. 5:10, not 2 Cor. 5:11 (p. 132).

This book is not intended as a shortcut. The preacher still needs to do his own hard work of textual exegesis, do his own reflecting on the Scriptural theology present in the text at hand, and do his own work to develop the sermonic theme and application. Although Achtemeier’s work is brief, in the various passages dealt with therein, it provides a number of stimulating thoughts and provocative ideas that show us that the Minor Prophets need not be left an unexplored region of the Biblical canon for preaching. These prophets can and do speak in a lively and relevant way for today. Achtemeier’s book is a welcome addition to the not-yet-very-large (but growing) collection of

works that wish to see the Minor Prophets put to appropriate homiletic use.

—Mark D. Vander Hart

*Power Preaching for Church Growth: The Role of Preaching in Growing Churches* by David Eby. Great Britain: Great Focus Publications, 1996. Pp. 192, includes appendices, references, and index. Price unknown.

Anyone familiar with the Church Growth Movement in North America or the burgeoning volume of church growth literature, knows that a great deal of attention is being given to the numerical growth of the local church and those methodologies or strategies most likely to yield growth. Much has been written and many strategies have been devised. However, missing from what has been written and what is being suggested is any consideration of the place and importance of preaching to the growth of Christ's church. This book by David Eby self-consciously aims to redress this absence of a consideration of preaching as a means of church growth. According to Eby, the omission of preaching from the agenda of the church growth movement is unbiblical and therefore inexcusable. A pastor himself of a Presbyterian Church in America congregation in the San Diego area, Eby hopes by means of this study to encourage fellow pastors "to regain their fervor and devotion to the ministry of the Word" (p. 8). As he puts it in his conclusion: "This book has been penned with a deep conviction that something radically unhealthy has been happening in Western Christianity this century: we have been gradually and increasingly losing our love and nerve for preaching. In recent years a shiny brass marching band has led an impressive military parade, known as the Church Growth Movement, down the evangelical mainstreet. This striking procession has displayed an imposing array of glistening modern weapons, all designed to accomplish growing churches and robust evangelism. But the trumpet of preaching has not been at the forefront of the band, nor has proclamation been the center of attraction in the parade" (p. 139).

Writing in a popular or non-academic style, Eby traces in eighteen chapters the biblical place of preaching in the gathering of Christ's people. The chapters are typically brief (4-6 pages) and conclude with a list of appropriate encouraging quotations from various authors. In the first several chapters, he illustrates the role of preaching from the account in the book of Acts regarding the founding and spread of the church. What marked the early church, as it is described in the book of Acts, is the apostolic preaching and teaching of the Word of God. The next group of chapters deals with the content and manner of power preaching for church growth. After these foundational chapters on the place, content, and manner of power preaching, Eby turns to the subjects of the preacher's piety and reliance upon the Holy Spirit, the temptations of the Church Growth Movement, and the cultivation and practice of power preaching for church growth in the local church. He then attaches to his study a series of helpful appendices on the Reformed confessions, the pastor's role in leading worship, and prayer for preaching and revival. A selected bibliography and index are also provided.

Though Eby's study does not intend to be an academic labor, it makes a significant contribution and offers a substantial corrective to much of the pragmatism and method-ism that plague the modern Church Growth Movement. The strength of Eby's study resides in the obvious interest that he has as a pastor in the growth (numerical and otherwise) of the local congregation of Jesus Christ. He does not advocate preaching as an *alternative to* or *escape from* the urgent evangelistic task that is given to the church of Jesus Christ. But he wants this task to be carried out in a God-glorifying and biblical manner, namely, through the lively preaching of the gospel by pastors whose desire to seek the lost is expressed through a faithful ministry of the Word. For pastors who are looking for biblical encouragement for preaching, this book should prove satisfying.

—Cornelis P. Venema

*Old Wine in New Wineskins: Doctrinal Preaching in a Changing World* by Millard J. Erickson & James L. Heflin. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997. Pp. 269, includes Scripture & subject indexes. \$19.99.

Written as a product of a team-taught course in doctrinal preaching at Southwestern Baptist Seminary, this volume, as its title suggests, aims to address in a fresh way the issue of preaching and communicating the doctrinal content of Scripture. The authors are the well-known evangelical theologian, Millard J. Erickson, professor of theology at Truett Seminary of Baylor University, and James L. Heflin, formerly professor of homiletics at Southwestern and more recently general secretary for the European Baptist Convention.

The main divisions of this volume reflect its purpose to move from the foundational principles of homiletics to the application of those principles in the actual practice of doctrinal preaching. Part 1, “Understanding the Issues,” consists of an analysis of the difficulties confronting doctrinal preaching today and the place of preaching in the life of the church. Part 2, “Gathering the Doctrinal Content,” deals with the hermeneutical and exegetical challenges in the interpretation of doctrinal and narrative passages. Part 3, “Delivering the Doctrine in Sermonic Form,” considers four different kinds of sermonic forms that may be used in doctrinal preaching. Part 4, “Getting It Done,” concludes with a practical strategy for doctrinal preaching in a congregation.

In the opening part of this volume, Erickson and Heflin offer a kind of apology or defense of the importance, even necessity of doctrinal preaching for the church in the present day. After an opening chapter, written in the form of a dialogue between students and professors, in which the general suspicion and even hostility toward doctrine and doctrinal preaching are highlighted, the authors consider the “value and benefit of doctrine.” Doctrine, they insist, is an “inseparable component of the Christian religion,” and indispensable and constitutive feature of the historic Christian faith. Despite this evident role of doctrine to the life and well-being of the church, there are a raft of factors—cultural, religious, Christian, and clergy—that, when

taken cumulatively, constitute a formidable challenge to the continued emphasis upon doctrine in the contemporary age. These factors include the worldview of naturalism, relativism, pragmatism, deconstructionism, the primacy of image over word in communications, the increasing awareness of world religions, anti-intellectualism, and the selfism of much popular religion. The presence of these factors together comprises a hostile environment to the introduction of and healthy insistence upon the primacy of biblical doctrine.

But it is not only the general cultural environment today that constitutes a serious obstacle to doctrinal preaching. There is also the loss of confidence in and appreciation for the preaching of the gospel itself. Despite the biblical emphasis upon the central importance of preaching to the communication of the gospel, the church, especially in its North American evangelical expression, is losing confidence in preaching as an effective means of transmitting the faith. In their reflection upon this loss of confidence, Erickson and Heflin follow the pattern established in their reflection upon the loss of conviction about the importance of doctrine: they first emphasize the place of preaching in the life of the church, and then they consider the various obstacles that stand in the way of preaching today. According to the authors, there are a variety of reasons to insist that preaching remain a “major feature of worship” (p. 58). These reasons must be borne in mind, considering the many different obstacles to preaching today. Among these obstacles, some are inherent to preaching by its very nature, whereas others are “unique factors of culture” (p. 76). Some of the factors highlighted are an aversion to authority, orientation to the visual, the pressure upon ministers to succeed, and an emphasis upon the practical rather than the theoretical.

With this general analysis of the state of doctrinal preaching in the churches as a context, Erickson and Heflin turn in the second part of their study to the difficult question of “gathering the doctrinal content.” This part of their study consists of a broad-ranging discussion of the interpretive process necessary to glean doctrine from biblical passages. Assuming that the first labor of the preacher is the exegesis and interpretation of the



biblical text, their goal in this part of their study is to give preachers a method to use in distilling doctrinal content for their sermons. Two kinds of passages are of special significance in this interpretive process, “didactic” passages and “narrative” passages. Didactic passages are passages that “teach something, often doctrinal in nature” to an audience (p. 98). Narrative passages are passages that describe the “occurrence of historical events” (p. 98). Within these two broad categories of passages, there are a variety of sub-forms, each of which carries its own unique challenge to the interpreter. Doctrinal preaching of narrative passages confronts the would-be preacher with some special difficulties due to the specificity and uniqueness of the historical events recounted. How the preacher may move from the record or narrative of history to a doctrinal theme or point is an especially vexing issue exegetically and homiletically. However, according to Erickson and Heflin, the difficulties are not insurmountable and the sermonic payoff is well worth the trouble.

After setting out their analysis of the problem of doctrinal preaching today, and then treating the hermeneutical challenge facing the doctrinal preacher, Erickson and Heflin take up the subject of “delivering doctrine in sermonic form.” In the older language of homiletics, this would be termed the subject of *formal*, rather than *material*, homiletics. Here the question is not, how do I interpret this kind of sermonic passage? But, how do I cast the message of my passage into the form of a sermon, an actual exposition and application of the biblical text?

This part of Erickson and Heflin’s study is rather eclectic in nature. In a series of chapters, they argue for the legitimacy of various doctrinal sermon forms: the “expository doctrinal” sermon; the “topical doctrinal” sermon; the “narrative doctrinal” sermon; and the “dramatic doctrinal” sermon. The “expository doctrinal” sermon is one “that explains and clarifies a portion of Scripture (the sermon text), the truth of which has been discovered through careful study, with a view to making appropriate application of the truth to those who listen” (p. 170). The “topical doctrinal” sermon is one that speaks to some

doctrine or topic taught in the Scriptures, but not on the basis of an exposition of one particular biblical text or passage. The “text” for such a topical sermon may be “a specific passage, or it may [be] ... something broader, including a number of passages from different locations in the Bible” (p. 189). The “narrative doctrinal” sermon is one that follows the story of the biblical narrative, tracing the unfolding of events from beginning through the development of the plot line to the conclusion or completion of the story. Though Erickson and Heflin do not offer a formal definition of the “dramatic doctrinal” sermon, they seem to have in mind a presentation of the biblical teaching in a form that makes considerable use of a dramatic and visual re-enactment or representation of it. Among the various types of dramatic presentation, they include “dramatic monologue,” the “interview sermon,” the “dialogue sermon,” and the “media-augmented sermon.” The possibilities for a diversity of form and approach, therefore, are as great with respect to doctrinal sermons as they are with respect to other kinds of sermons.

In their concluding chapter, Erickson and Heflin provide a number of practical suggestions to preachers to help them implement the ideas presented in their study. In so doing, they seek to encourage the recovery of the practice of “doctrinal preaching in a changing world.”

The usefulness of this study lies largely in those sections that diagnose the problems and challenges facing the preacher of the gospel today, particularly the preacher whose sermons aim to reflect the rich doctrinal content of the Scriptures. Erickson and Heflin provide an excellent survey of the diversity of sources and kinds of obstacles that confront the preacher who seeks to fulfill his calling to expound and apply the biblical text to the people of God today. They properly score the tendency of many evangelical churches to disparage the preaching of the gospel and to substitute the latest pabulum of popular culture for the rich teaching of the Word of God. This book is a fine resource so far as its analysis of the obstacles in contemporary culture to doctrinal preaching is concerned. Its aim to encourage faithful

and effective preaching of biblical doctrine is likewise praiseworthy.

However, there are some rather serious methodological problems in the sections dealing with the interpretation of different biblical texts and the various forms in which a doctrinal sermon may be cast. Two of these problems are especially noteworthy.

First, the authors do not adequately guard the preacher against a misuse of the historical or narrative passages of Scripture. Because their concern is the distillation of doctrine(s) from the Scriptural passage, they encourage a kind of doctrinal preaching of historical narrative that could easily permit the preacher to treat the specifics and uniqueness of redemptive history as merely illustrative of more timeless and invariant truths. In the interest of sifting out the doctrinal content of such narrative passages, using a hermeneutical device they call “universalizing,” the preacher is encouraged to treat the history narrated as a kind of outer wrapping that may be discarded once the doctrinal content has been discovered. The hermeneutical and homiletical challenges here are much too complex to consider in a book review. But the kind of problem posed by Erickson and Heflin’s treatment of preaching doctrine from narrative passages has been rather thoroughly discussed in the debates regarding “historical-redemptive” and “moralistic” preaching. Though these debates have admittedly been most prominent among Continental Reformed theologians and some North American advocates of a historical-redemptive approach to preaching, the authors of this volume give every impression that they are largely unaware of these debates and of the dangers of misusing narrative passages in preaching.

Second, in their advocacy of several different doctrinal sermon forms—the expository, topical, narrative and dramatic—Erickson and Heflin exhibit a feature that characterizes this book as a whole, namely, a kind of homiletical eclecticism. Though they acknowledge various strengths and weaknesses that may attend these sermon forms, they readily embrace all of them as legitimate. However, in so doing, they stretch the limits of what is

meant by *biblical*, *textual* or *expository* preaching to include a wide-ranging practice on the part of the preacher. Doctrinal sermons need not be *expository* in the sense that they expound and apply the teaching of a sermon text. Nor do they need to derive their doctrinal content wholly from a particular biblical passage. Sermons based upon a miscellany of biblical passages or a topic(s) suggested by either biblical or non-biblical sources are judged appropriate. Furthermore, by their encouragement of narrative doctrinal sermons and dramatic doctrinal sermons, the authors confuse the presence of narrative and dramatic *elements* in preaching with *preaching as narration* or *as drama*. Story-telling and dramatic presentation may legitimately find their place as components in the preaching of biblical passages. However, they are not *as such* or *by themselves* legitimate alternatives to preaching that is *textual* and *thematic*, that is, preaching that seeks to set forth the main teaching of a sermon text.

For these reasons, the present volume may be a good book to stimulate the preacher's reflection upon the challenge of doctrinal preaching today. It is not however a reliable guide to direct the way forward, not if we seek preaching that is textual-thematic in character.

—Cornelis P. Venema

*Culture Shift: Communicating God's Truth to Our Changing World* by David W. Henderson. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998. Pp. 255. \$18.99.

David Henderson, in his important new book *Culture Shift*, argues that the postmodern culture of the nineties would be scarcely recognizable to earlier generations. Not only is this "not your father's Oldsmobile," but this is also not your father's—or grandfather's—America. A number of the experts assure us that things have improved in our society, as evidenced by a booming economy and a declining crime rate. On the other hand, we have witnessed incidents of school violence unknown a decade ago and we have seen a sitting President impeached and labeled "contumacious" by a federal judge and the nation collectively

responds, “Who cares?” Surely, our nation has become, in some rather significant moral and spiritual ways, a different country than it was. To be sure, there has been improvement: legal racism has been successfully attacked and the financial status of much of our citizenry has been enhanced. Yet, Henderson argues, there has been a clear shift on these shores from a widespread embrace of (at least) cultural Christianity to an outright rejection of Christianity as inimical to the postmodern, pluralistic agenda. Such a culture shift means that the old ways of communicating God’s truth have been rendered passé and that we must discover and develop new ways of communicating God’s truth to our changing world.

What America used to be was hardly always desirable. Jim Crow laws, lynching, and prohibition are not missed. With all her problems, though, America was a place in which moral discourse could be carried on in the language of the Bible. Up until the early 1960’s, the Bible was taught in some form in public schools. A general biblical knowledge marked much of the adult population. Classrooms generally had the Ten Commandments posted and the Lord’s Prayer was offered daily in many schools. Certainly much of this “civil religion” was purely ethical, shorn of any redemptive content. Nonetheless, such biblical instruction as there was did provide a foundation and a framework for public conversation about good and evil.

There has been for some time, though, an erosion of belief in moral absolutes. Pragmatism, pluralism, and relativism have, in increasing measure, come to dominate the American cultural scene. And in their wake they have deconstructed the old absolutistic order and have built a new order whose chief ethic appears to be “Whatever.” Not only is it true that “anything goes”—as Old Blue Eyes sang—but there’s no reason why any and every thing should not go. If there is no God, no right and wrong, no standard for morality, no revelation from an omnipotent, merciful God, then no one can give a good reason why a person should not do whatever they feel like, including massacring classmates. John Lennon’s dream expressed in his

song “Imagine” (“Imagine there’s no religion”) is increasingly coming true and proving to be a frightful nightmare.

Henderson, however, sees “the diminishing of God and the concurrent inflating of man” (p. 222) not as limited to the past several decades but as having its roots in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment and extending throughout the past five hundred years. What we’ve witnessed in America in the last several decades is simply the flowering of that autonomy planted in the man-centered movements that we call the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Henderson writes that in the Renaissance “Europeans rediscovered the ancient humanist writings of the Greeks and Romans. For the centuries leading to the Renaissance, education in Europe centered around theology and belief in a personal God. Everything—the arts, political thought, philosophical reflection, medicine, the study of nature—was grounded in this biblical worldview. The arts and philosophy and political theory of the ancients, by contrast, had centered on the individual, with few reference points outside the self. This way of making sense of the world, once revived, began to wash away the God-centered view of life on which Christianity stood—and Western culture with it” (p. 98).

While it is certainly true that the Renaissance and Enlightenment fostered an individualism that developed into Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself” in the nineteenth century and Whitney Houston’s “Greatest Love” (a paean to self-love) in the twentieth century, it is not the case that everything in the medieval world was grounded in a biblical worldview. Much of the medieval worldview was a combination of neo-Platonism in the earlier part and then Aristotelianism in the later part. Yes, in the Middle Ages community was exalted—Henderson argues the debasement of community in the modern world—but often at the expense of the individual (if not to say the person). It is no mere happenstance that the medieval church had no doctrine of personal assurance of salvation and exalted the life of the regular clergy in the cloistered community as the high road to heaven: the person is not important, but the community—particularly the faith community—is important. The only notion of vocation that

one discovers in the medieval church is religious vocation, marriage is for those who cannot live the celibate life, and women are viewed, if not theoretically, at least practically, as ontologically inferior to men. I would contend that all of this stems from an inadequate development of the notion of the person, a development that awaited the Renaissance and the Reformation. Yes, we are a sickeningly self-centered culture. But that does not mean that every theological and philosophical development of selfhood and the concept of the person since the Middle Ages has resulted in a downgrade of the truth. Indeed, there has been necessary and proper biblical and theological development of our understanding of personhood since the medieval period.

Henderson's contention that things were fine until the Renaissance bears close examination. As noted above, in the medieval world the concept of the person in his integrity was sacrificed over against an exaltation of the community that swallowed up the individual. At the same time that the church downplayed man in his individual personhood, the church also gave man more "credit" than was his due, in light of man's fall into sin. Aquinas, the premier theologian of the Middle Ages, believed that the fall of man, while resulting in the loss of the *donum superadditum* and the sinful inclination involved in concupiscence, did not believe that the fall resulted in the corruption of the whole nature of man. Aquinas, in other words, did not believe in the noetic effects of sin. Henderson seems quite naïve concerning this feature of medieval epistemology. Since the mind of man is not radically altered by the fall, Aquinas believed that fallen, unregenerate man was quite capable of proper reasoning apart from grace. It is true that unregenerate man often borrows from a believing worldview and reasons rightly, in spite of himself. Indeed, such a man can reason at all only by borrowing the capital of a believing worldview. The Angelic Doctor did not teach, as did the Reformers, that grace renovates nature but rather that grace caps off or completes nature. Thus we might say that the church in the Middle Ages

had, at the same time, both too low a view and too high a view of man.

There were many elements of paganism in the Middle Ages and all the emphasis on the “individual” that grew out of the Renaissance and Enlightenment was not negative. In other words, there is more wrong with the Middle Ages than Henderson seems willing to admit and more right with subsequent historical developments than Henderson seems willing to admit. Henderson rightly criticizes our culture’s love affair with “self” but fails to go far enough. What he sees as post-modern self-fixation is simply the self-centeredness that has afflicted our race in different forms ever since Adam placed himself and his will at the center of the world. All this is to say that while late twentieth century America may be quite different in its moral and religious ethos from the America of a century ago (or even forty years ago), man in his nature has not changed since the Fall.

Some of the developments since medieval times that may be seen as the exaltation of the individual over against the community can also be seen, at least in part, as the continuing development of our notion of the person as part of the community. It was not until the early church that the concept of personhood clearly developed as a result of the church’s defining the distinct personhood of each of the members united within the Blessed Holy Trinity. Christianity teaches the one and the many without collapsing the one into the other. It is not correct, then, to decry all developments of “person” and “self” since the Renaissance as being inimical to community. In the pagan world, the person was lost in the community (e.g., Sparta, Plato’s *Republic*, etc.). It was Christian theology that gave proper definition to the persons of the Godhead as well as to humans created in God’s image. The Reformation played an important part in this—stressing the reality of a personal relationship with God through union with Christ—in a way not before realized. Henderson seems to write as if all theological and philosophical developments since the Renaissance have been downhill.

Why is it so important to gauge whether or not Henderson



has properly analyzed history? Because the purpose of his book is to instruct us how to communicate God's eternal truth to a world that has vastly changed. He would argue that since the world of the 1950's no longer exists, we cannot simply carry on as if it did. We must find new lingo and modes of expression to bring the gospel to this era. The same tired old Sunday morning rhetoric will not do in our hip, worldly-wise, postmodern era. To be sure, we are faced with enormous communication challenges, especially if we are to reach out effectively with the gospel and meaningfully impact the life of those whom we are seeking to evangelize. Can we not, though, overestimate the communication challenge? What I mean is this: Has not man ever since his fall into sin stopped his ears to the communication of the gospel? Was Jesus in his day unclear when his sayings were said to be "hard sayings?" Were they not styled as "hard," not because they failed to communicate but because they communicated all too clearly the hard truth that man was in a desperate condition and could do nothing to save himself? Man, apart from the work of the Spirit of the living God, cannot and will not hear, no matter how effective and winsome our communication. This does not exempt us from being clear and speaking in a way most calculated to gain a hearing. Nonetheless, we must understand that our failure to communicate the gospel is not simply borne by the speaker but also by the hearer.

Fallen, sinful man has, since Eden, always discovered different expressions of rebellion against God's Word, both in its original giving and in its continuing proclamation. Yet at root it is the same rebellion. If God commanded the prophets and apostles to speak through proclamation to the rebels and idolaters of their day, should we not continue to proclaim that same message to our day? Let me be clear: Henderson is no liberal who suggests jettisoning the message of sin and grace, the message of life in and through the finished work of Christ. He calls for us to communicate the old, old story in ways that will have a better opportunity for hearing in our culture. Henderson fleshes out this challenge for effective communication with a number of examples and illustrations. In arguing that we need to speak to

people in a language that they can understand, he illustrates this by recounting a conversation between Sue and Anne (p. 22). Sue asks Anne why Anne's life evidences "peace" while her own life seems "so hard" by comparison. Anne then proceeds to give her "testimony" to Sue, which testimony is full of typical "evangelicalese." Sue is, of course, somewhat mystified by it all. Henderson argues that Sue has failed to connect with Anne and make her experience intelligible to her in a way that would impact Anne's heart and life. Is the problem, though, that forty or fifty years ago—or during the Middle Ages—that Anne would have understood Sue but that now she doesn't? 1 Corinthians 2:14 tells us that the natural man—whether in 1450 or 1999—does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

Certainly one should never speak—in whatever era one lives—in a language to those not in the church that they have no context to understand. The 1 Peter 3:15 imperative has always been that we are to communicate the truth of our hope to the inquirer not in trite expressions of piety but in a realistic way that would impact their hearts. We need to teach this to our people, to be sure. The Book of Ecclesiastes is full of wonderful pointers about how we might communicate God's truth to those who operate from an "under the sun" perspective. Indeed, unthinking "God-talk" that evidences little concern to penetrate the defenses of the unbeliever is useless. But the challenge to speak clearly is not peculiar to our age but is the challenge that has always faced the church. Since natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, it has always been challenging to speak to him so that the ontological point-of-contact is realized. Fallen man, in his heart, knows the truth, the works of the law being written on his heart (Romans 2), but he suppresses that truth in unrighteousness (Romans 1). The apologetic challenge is to "bring up" that truth which he knows but deceives himself about, and to do so not with the language of evangelical witnessing but with fresh, vigorous, and relevant language.

Henderson gives a number of helpful suggestions for “relevant biblical communication” (pp. 34-5). He encourages us to “understand your world ..., enter your world ... [and] bring truth to bear from outside your world” (pp. 38ff.). Henderson wants us to speak to people in “understandable language” (p. 142). Indeed this is the need of the hour, but it has been the need of every hour in the life of the church. The problem underlying much of Henderson’s analysis, though, is this over-generalization: Things were better (more amiable) to the expression of Christian truth than they have now become; now a culture shift has occurred that makes the situation in our society worse (more hostile) to the expression of Christian truth. The problem with this analysis is that man, ever since the Fall, apart from the grace of God (both common and saving), has been hostile to the truth.

But there’s more to the problem than that. What we see in history is the development of man’s unbelief, the progressive unfolding of the unbelief that has been in man since the Fall, coming to increasingly clearer and fuller expression. At the same time, we see progress in regenerate man. We see in the history of the church a fuller understanding of the extent of our depravity, of what it means to push down the truth and live in self-deception. We’ve come to see clearly how radically man needs God, even in his epistemology. In other words, even as the City of man has more and more manifested its bankruptcy—not only morally but intellectually as well—the City of God has come to understand better how radical the claims of Christ are. The apologetic situation, to put it another way, is now less confused and more distinct than in earlier years in which a thin veneer of Christianity overlay much of our culture. What Henderson sees (and rightly so) is that the chasm between the City of Man and the City of God has grown apace. But here’s what we must ask: Does that bigger chasm *ipso facto* make communication more difficult, or does it eradicate subtleties that previously tended to blur the distinction between the two cities? Is not the folly of unbelief, as we have witnessed its development, more than ever manifest? Should we downplay the difference between the two cities in our communication, or should we not seek to highlight

the utter folly of unbelief and the truth that Christianity alone is the necessary and indispensable precondition for the intelligibility of all of life?

Perhaps the biggest danger in Henderson's book is the degree to which he would have us go to communicate with the unbeliever. Not only does he argue that personal witness must not be "preachy" (with which I agree) but he argues even against an attitude of proclamation in our preaching. If Henderson means (as he often seems to) that preachers should employ understandable language, I would agree. But he seems to go quite a bit beyond this, even to the leveling of preaching, so that there is little if any real difference between the preacher who in his official capacity proclaims God's Word and the congregant who witnesses to—or "shares" with—someone (p. 148). A view of preaching that would potentially put the pulpit on the same place as speaking to someone over the lunch table is decidedly unconfessional and at variance with the high view of preaching consistently set forth in the Reformed confessions.

Henderson urges discarding "you" language and then reveals what we might call not only a low view of preaching but a low view of the qualifications needed for the preacher. Henderson writes: "Sharing the pulpit or the lectern with men and women who are not 'professional Christians,' giving them the opportunities to talk about their struggles to integrate faith and life, also will lend credence to our words" (p. 209). Again, Henderson may well mean only that laymen lend shoe leather to the message of the pulpit and that the testimony of someone living out our preaching will add force to our words. Yet, nowhere in this volume does Henderson challenge a priority for preaching and set forth preaching as the primary means of grace blessed by the Spirit to the salvation of the elect. In other words, Henderson, by not distinguishing preaching from "sharing," departs from the historic Reformed and Presbyterian view of preaching as set forth, for example, in various articles in this journal.

But the book contains an even more serious error than Henderson's failure to set forth a high view of preaching (a really

unconscionable “oversight” in a book that speaks as often of the pulpit as it does). Perhaps the most egregious error in the book is Henderson’s encouragement to Christians to take a “here’s-my-experience” subjective approach to apologetics and evangelism: “Talk openly and honestly about your experience of Christ. Feet get fidgety when a tract gets pulled out or a Bible is flipped open. Religious dogma gets shot down in a moment. But nobody can deny your experience, not even the most ardent New Ager or most stubborn Scientologist. In a world where truth is nothing and experience is everything, our ‘testimony’—describing in fresh ways the difference Jesus has made in our lives—is one of the most important tools we have for reaching people” (pp. 212-13). Let us grant that many of the tracts that have been produced are so poorly done that we can sympathize with the fidgetiness and that many people handle the Scriptures with so little real discernment as to make us nervous, too. And let us grant that our carriage in personal discussions should not be that of the dogmatism of the pulpit. But what of the pulpit? If we are to preach “thus saith the Lord,” we are, of necessity, going to be dogmatic. One might argue that we do not know whether Henderson applies what he vies for here to preaching. As we’ve said above, nowhere does he carve out a special place for preaching, as one must do if he understands the divine activity that occurs in preaching.

The most serious part, though, of Henderson’s above quote is his abandonment of the proclamation of the objectively true gospel. To be sure, there’s an important place for the relating of our spiritual experience. But such a relation is to occur only in the context of the covenant community—lest we disobey our Master and throw pearls before swine (Matthew 7:6). Unbelievers need to be confronted with the claims of the risen, ascended Lord who claims the allegiance of the whole of his creation. They most decidedly do not need to have our Christian experience laid before them so that they may embrace or reject it as they see fit. Henderson claims that nobody can deny your experience. Conversely, then, we as believers cannot deny the experience of unbelievers. So the proclamation of the gospel is reduced to a

contest of “my experience is better than your experience.” But the Christian religion is the truth whether anyone experiences it or not. Yes, I have experienced it by the grace of God. And so will all who come to God in faith and repentance. But it is not my experience that validates the truth. Rather, the truth validates my experience.

I appreciate Henderson’s desire that we give shoe leather to our profession when we speak to others. But none of us should embrace this call to relativize the gospel. To engage in such an approach is to give away the store from the beginning. How can we argue that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life after we’ve gone down the path of acknowledging that “truth is nothing and experience is everything”? No, we must not capitulate to this rejection of truth, either explicitly or even tacitly (by letting the unbeliever set the agenda of what is valid argumentation). We ought rather to attack the notion that truth is nothing, reduce it to the irrational nonsense that it is and proceed to show that apart from the ontological Trinity and the self-attesting Christ of the Bible you cannot make sense of any experience. We need to be prepared to answer for our hope and the way that we do that is to be prepared to demonstrate that we believe the truth and that the truth alone frees us because the truth alone makes sense of the whole of our existence. A book like Greg Bahnsen’s *Always Ready* sets forth the proper approach to the unbeliever in this regard and helps us see how to speak winsomely, clearly, and convincingly to the unbeliever without putting the unbeliever in the place of judge, a place that belongs to God alone. To put my experience before the unbeliever is to ask him to be the judge. He rather needs to see that he stands under God’s judgment.

Henderson’s summary on page 222 amounts to this: “more than any other single factor, the history of the Western world in the past five hundred years has been shaped by this one dynamic: the diminishing of God and the concurrent inflating of man.” Given the truth contained in this statement, is not his suggested remedy of “go with your experience” like throwing gasoline on a fire? Should we not rather sound no uncertain note against the exaltation of personal experience divorced from truth—an

exaltation that is one of the primary manifestations of our man-centered society. Henderson argues that the self-exaltation that has afflicted us in the last 500 years has come to full blossom in the last few decades so as to make it virtually impossible to communicate the gospel unless we radically re-conceive our style of communication. But sin has always made the communication of the gospel difficult. The problem with Henderson's whole analysis is that, like Francis Schaeffer and his "below-the-line-of-despair" approach, it does not go far enough. We've been self-centered ever since the Fall; and it was to such a fallen, self-centered world that God gave the preaching of the gospel as the primary means of conveying his grace to the elect. The world has not "changed so much" that we must go about communicating in a way widely at variance from the past. Yes, we need to recognize that this is not our grandfather's world and that we must communicate in ways understandable to our age. Relativism, pragmatism, deconstructionism, post-structuralism, postmodernism, etc., do provide new challenges.

Preaching, however, remains central to the communication of gospel truth and always shall, whatever changes or shifts culture undergoes. I get little sense of this from Henderson and of what it means that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Paul spoke to a pagan culture. If our society has reverted to such and become a neo-pagan culture, then perhaps we today are far closer to the position in which Paul found himself. Paul used pagan sources (Acts 17) and spoke in a way understandable to his age. Paul was always getting run out of town, by Jews and Gentiles alike, not because he was confusing but because he was altogether too clear. Paul spoke in the second person and confronted unbelief head-on. Henderson has helpful insights regarding clear communication and issues a real challenge to preachers and parishoners to "discern the times" and speak to people in language that they might understand. Indeed, we are to become all things to all men so that by all means we might win some. But Henderson fails in his volume to defend the primacy of preaching and to challenge a priority for the pulpit as the chief vehicle of the communication of the gospel. And that must be

done in our man-centered era, an era that hates preaching because it is so focused on itself. Henderson sees the self-centeredness of our era clearly but capitulates to it by giving fallen people more of what he thinks they want rather than what they really need: the plain, clear, and captivating proclamation of the unchanging Word of God to an era infatuated with change but longing in its deepest aspirations for the permanency of God's truth.

—Alan D. Strange

*Marketplace Preaching: How to Return the Sermon to Where It Belongs* by Calvin Miller. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995. Pp. 188. \$12.99.

This book comes as a follow up to Calvin Miller's earlier work *Spirit, Word, and Story: A Philosophy of Preaching*, later republished with a slightly different subtitle *A Philosophy of Marketplace Preaching*. The current work aims to bring the church's proclamation of the gospel—a public event—back to the public, or to use the author's preferred term, back to *the marketplace*. According to Miller, teacher of communication and homiletics at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, "the sermon" used to be a marketplace event—back before the church "made friends with Gothic architecture" and an introverted existence. Indeed, before Christianity was legalized, argues Miller, preaching was commonly "out-of-doors"! Out-of-doors preaching is a phrase Miller uses in an almost symbolic sense. It bespeaks preaching that is spontaneous, free, informal, unrehearsed, and Spirit-inspired, representing preaching that is directly relevant to (because it is in touch with) the marketplace. Miller posits out-of-doors preaching over against "indoor" preaching, which may be characterized as formal, restrained, and uttered in a stilted, stiff style. Such sermons are overly managed, overly plotted, and mostly irrelevant to the marketplace; they are indoor and out-of-touch.

In saying this, Miller is not urging the church to literally preach out-of-doors versus indoors, although he would not be adverse to that. His passion, his point, is for the church to preach



the gospel in an idiom that the world or marketplace understands. Thus the church must ask whether she is willing to bump her nose against the marketplace of ideas and sins. Miller is convinced that when the church remembers the marketplace-character of Christian preaching, she grows bold, living by faith, not by sight, and consequently ventures in faith, for she knows herself to be threatened on all sides by forces secular. The indoor church, conversely, is soft and self-satisfied; she is frightened out of her wits by the world—and dying! This comports with her taste for indoor sermons, which are expected to be refined, artful, respectable. Such sermons also prove to be cowardly, without scandal, and much criticized by the “congregation of reviewers.”

Miller relates the marketplace idea to relevance. Marketplace preaching speaks “shopping mall English” (p. 17). Many Baptist and Assembly of God churches have long understood this. Many megachurches have likewise come to understand that sermons must speak the language of “seekers.”

Miller contends that when the church addresses sermons to those outside the church, her “rhetoric stays so simple that it also appeals to those inside the church” (p. 17). Marketplace preaching is therefore quite different from what Miller calls “congregationally-specific” sermons, or simply “inside sermons.” When preaching is geared for one’s congregation instead of for the marketplace, the sermon’s content inevitably changes and the style of the delivery with it. The church is brought back to “art piece” sermons to be critiqued by its narrow clientele. This kind of preaching represents the church talking-to-herself; marketplace preaching on the other hand is a call to get outside the walls of the church and address those afar off with the gospel.

When our preaching enters the marketplace, before long it learns the language of the marketplace. The church gears herself for outsiders—and this produces “outside sermons.” “The outside sermon listens hard because life is hard. The outside sermon is Scripture-saturated, for it knows the Word of God is all that authenticates. Outside sermons teach—but only after they have reasoned and, above all, listened.” Says Miller: “Outside sermons dialogue; inside sermons tend to pontificate” (p. 20). This means

that outside sermons engage people where they are living—in sin, and coping with hurt. Congregationally-specific sermons on the other hand are self-occupied. Moreover, such “church-walled” sermons produce an “egoism of the redeemed,” and usually neither offer a vision for life nor issue a call to action.

Miller bids the church to recognize the paradigm shift that has taken place in contemporary culture. We must understand that the church has moved from the status of culture to a subculture. Therefore we must stop preaching in “the Vulgate”—that is, using language that doesn’t connect with the marketplace. Instead we must start speaking to the world in language it understands. In doing so we must not sanction our culture of narcissism and permissive morality; rather, we must challenge it.

In order to communicate with our secularized culture, Miller advocates what he calls the “audio-visual sermon.” The audio-visual sermon gives greater weight than has been done in the past to the image component in preaching. Much preaching remains too precept oriented for our story-soaked, video age. Audio-visual preaching aims to score the sermon’s points quickly, to speak in billboard graphics, and to reinforce the sermonic theme through the use of repetition, otherwise the theme is easily missed or forgotten.

While Miller examines some potential dangers to this kind of sermon, he remains committed to the call to new forms in preaching, for the old forms are plagued with their own hazards.

Miller’s book proceeds to flesh out these themes, and functions as a mini-manual of instruction for the sermon craft—that is to say, the book is in many respects a summary homiletic. The practical procedures and principles are presented creatively and demonstrate that Miller is a veteran preacher himself, knowledgeable of the preaching art.

Miller’s book also ventures into the arena of worship with a chapter entitled “Packaging Preaching: Worship in the Marketplace.” This chapter, wherein Miller pleads for the seeker-driven model for worship, is in this reviewer’s opinion the weakest in the book and certainly the most controversial.

Ironically, for all of Miller's rhetoric about "church-walled sermons" functioning as "art pieces" to be criticized by spoiled parishioners, he spends a great deal of time (almost half the book) instructing readers how to "craft" marketplace sermons. In other words, it turns out that marketplace sermons are also artful and shaped by homiletic technique. For example, with respect to Scripture, Miller discusses such topics as: What Version of the Bible to Use?, How to Read it?, Selecting the Wide Passage, The Text and the Topical Series, Enhancing the Text, Picking the Focal Passage, and Obtaining the Sermon Logo. Next comes the polish, which adds sparkle to the sermon so that worshipers "*enjoy* the sermon even as they listen to it" (p. 104). The topics here include: Crafting, Jokes or the Light Relief, The Art of Being Oneself, Synonym Sifting, Borrowing Interest and Style, Maximizing Your Habitat, First Line, Last Line, Logo, etc.

The reader will find most of what Miller has to say in this connection insightful, clever, and winsomely presented. Even where disagreement with Miller emerges, I enjoyed the contest. The reader will also find helpful Miller's Ten Indispensable Elements of Form and Style.

In pleading his case for the marketplace sermon, Miller argues for the one-point sermon. Once the single point of the sermon is fixed, the outline ought to grow along lines that support that singular focus. "The older three-point sermon style should be abandoned in this hard-hitting day of single-emphasis communication. This is not to say, however, that the sermon outline might not have several piers that support this single argument. It's just that these points of supporting logic should not be allowed to develop various separate themes. They should all contribute to building a single emphasis, which the sermon develops from the lone theme it champions" (p. 146).

Miller also offers the preacher a work-a-day strategy for building sermons (steps to follow), tips for pacing a sermon, and factors (four of them) of effective delivery. Again, most of the material presented in this regard is wise, if not novel, practical, and serves the reader well with reminders of old, forgotten homiletic lessons.

Miller bids all preachers to labor hard to be creative in their preaching, to break out of the mold of mediocrity. If we can't all preach well, we can all preach better. Although we might not be talented, we are all unique. We must accept our own individuality without accepting its shortcomings. "Criticisms are the physicians of our art. We should bless their diagnosis and proceed with the sermonic surgery they prescribe" (p. 173). Meanwhile, as preachers see-saw back and forth between feeling elated over their pulpit prowess and dejected over their pulpit puniness, we must be ourselves, spit in the eye of the demon called "peer-fear"—which squashes creativity and produces passionless sermons—and dare to communicate sensually (or emotively), not just cerebrally. Our sermons ought to snap, crackle, and pop with emotion. Miller even goes so far as to say that "the sensate must replace the rational" (p. 177). Our preaching must bleed with those who bleed. But, as Miller observes, if we have never been bloodied ourselves, we lack sensitivity and our sermons will never rise above "the little talk" of the inexperienced.

Miller offers some sane advice about illustrations and the "drama" they create. As for jokes, they are "best avoided." "They can serve our creative reputation, but even when they are done well, they lend a note of contradiction to the overall seriousness of what a sermon should be about" (p. 183). To be sure, humor will find its way into our sermons, for life has its lighter moments—fine, but pre-planned jokes, told for calculated effect, are another matter.

Miller's book is provocative, interesting, and serves preachers of all stripes with helpful homiletic reminders. Inevitably readers of Miller will work through this material with grins and frowns. The main thesis of the book we can appreciate: let's preach the gospel to the marketplace of unbelief in a vernacular and idiom that is understandable and uncompromising in its clarity. It seems however that Miller, being the creative fellow he is, over "techniques" the sermon and has his own way of making the sermon into a "work of art"—in this case a "marketplace" work of art—to be critiqued by parishioners of creative tastes.

—J. Mark Beach

*The Reading and the Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church: Volume 1—the Biblical Period* by Hughes Oliphant Old. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998. Pp. x + 383. \$35.00.

*The Reading and the Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church: Volume 2—the Patristic Age* by Hughes Oliphant Old. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998. Pp. viii + 481. \$42.00.

These volumes have been written by one who loves preaching for those who love preaching.

Hughes Oliphant Old is a pastor and member of the Center of Theological Inquiry, Princeton, New Jersey. This ambitious series provides a history of preaching whose quality and erudition match his previous accomplishment in, among other works, *Worship that is Reformed According to Scripture* (John Knox Press, 1984) and *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century* (Eerdmans, 1992).

Selecting details to include in a written history can be a most painful exercise. The author acknowledges his greatest challenge to have been the selection of preachers. His most important guide was the availability of sermons on which to base his narrative.

The focus of this multi-volume study is “to come to an understanding of how preaching is worship, the service of God’s glory” (p. 7). To explain the doxological function of preaching is to answer the question: How is preaching worship? Thus Old constructs a three-dimensional matrix of venerable preachers, their collection of sermons, and the categories that help us organize their sermons. These categories include several genres of preaching: expository, evangelistic, catechetical, festal, and prophetic.

The first volume begins by discussing the preaching we find in the Bible. Chapter one exposes the roots of Christian preaching in the Old Testament, especially in the worship of Israel. Then follows attention to the preaching of Christ and of the apostles. The third chapter provides an overview of the second and third centuries, especially the preaching of the *Didache*, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen.

Those tempted to breeze quickly through this first volume should strongly resist that impulse. The reward will be a very readable presentation of the Bible's (God's) own view of the nature and efficacy of preaching throughout the history of redemption. To characterize this as Old's own "theology of preaching" may not be an exaggeration. At any rate, he clearly sets in a row the building blocks for constructing a biblical understanding of the preaching activity.

Five distinct questions guide the treatment of second and third century preachers. First, how did the church move from missionary preaching to liturgical preaching? Second, how did the New Testament writings come to be recognized alongside the Law and the Prophets as authoritative for preaching? Third, how was the Old Testament related to the New Testament in exegesis and preaching? Fourth, how important to the church's life was preaching and teaching the gospel? And fifth, how were the reading and preaching of Scripture understood as worship?

The six chapters of the second volume take us to AD 604 (Gregory the Great). During these centuries of the Christian empire, from the end of the fourth century to the middle of the fifth century, two schools of exegesis and homiletics flourished within the Greek church. The School of Alexandria included such notables as Cyril of Jerusalem, the Cappadocian fathers, Cyril of Alexandria, and Hesychius of Jerusalem. The School of Antioch included the figures of John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Theodoret of Cyrus. But preaching flourished in other parts of the church as well. The Syriac church knew homiletical heroes of its own—like Ephrem of Nisibis, Narsai, Philoxenus of Mabbug—and produced its own lectionaries. The Roman or Latin fathers included Ambrose, Jerome, Maximus of Turin, and Augustine.

Interwoven throughout this history of preaching is considerable attention to the application of ancient rhetoric to, and the impact of ancient religious and philosophical thought on, the form of sermons. Moreover, because the content of sermons reflects the development of dogma, no student of the history of

preaching can afford to be ignorant of the famous trinitarian and christological debates of the church's early history.

Very important is Old's description of the innovative development of mystagogical preaching with Cyril of Jerusalem, and his claim that this kind of preaching would later affect Chrysostom and Augustine. As worship came to be understood in terms of the Greek mystery religions, the Christian approach to worship changed radically. By dramatizing a cosmic creative or redemptive act, one could reactualize it for the benefit of those participating in it. The penchant for allegorical exegesis led to allegorizing the sacraments as well. This particularly affected the rite of baptism where, for example, the removal of clothing before baptism represented removal of the old nature. Through anointing with the water of baptism, the new believer participates in the abundance of Christ. In the early church, both preaching and sacraments joined imitation with reenactment.

Guided by the author's principle of selection (available sermons) and focus of inquiry (how is preaching worship?), the reader is refreshed by occasional pauses to discuss a given preacher's exegetical technique, or his theology of worship and of preaching, or his pastoral acumen. One soon realizes that preaching is much more than writing sermons. To appreciate these models of patristic preaching is to study the history of exegesis and of dogma, and to examine their adaptation of classical rhetoric to their ecclesiastical liturgical context. Apart from any evaluation of the patristic lectionary developments, we might certainly profit from reflecting carefully on the place and power of the public reading of Scripture in worship.

Without doubt one of the greatest strengths of these volumes is their character as history in hortatory mode.

Listen to Old-the-preacher rhapsodizing theologically about Chrysostom-the-preacher. In a sermon on Genesis 15, Chrysostom declared: "Consider the dignity of this spiritual gathering and the fact that we are listening to God speaking to us through the tongue of the inspired authors." With echoes of the Second Helvetic Confession, Old observes: "It is not merely a matter of a printed book being the Word of God, but, even beyond that, it is

a matter of a preached message being the Word of God. To be sure, we need to affirm the authority of the written text before we can affirm the authority of the reading and preaching of that text. With John [Chrysostom], as with many a great preacher, the conviction that the Scriptures are indeed the Word of God is the essential driving force of his ministry. The preaching of the Word of God is authoritative and efficacious because it is God's Word, not the preacher's. Here is the foundation of the passion and the power of great preaching" (pp. 184-185).

Again later, admiring Chrysostom's prophetic courage in preaching against the sins of the Byzantine court, Old himself waxes prophetic: "That is the way it is with preaching the *lectio continua*. It has a way of getting the preacher engaged. The Word grabs the preacher and masters him so that he becomes its servant—which is how it should be if preachers are to be ministers of the Word" (pp. 214-215).

When he comes to Augustine, Old is ready to be quite explicit in teaching his reader lessons on effective preaching. For example, Old's observation about the printed form of Augustine's sermons says as much about modern seminary faculties as about the ancient preacher: "With a few exceptions, we do not get the impression that Augustine gave too much time to finishing up his sermons for publication. This very relaxed approach is not what wins the senior preaching prize, but it does meet the spiritual needs of the Church, and it was at this that Augustine aimed" (p. 345). A point well taken!

Worth the price of the volume is the author's discussion of six reasons for Augustine's effectiveness as a preacher, based on a thoughtful analysis of his sermons on First John.

Of particular interest is Old's analysis of catechetical preaching in the early church. For Cyril of Jerusalem, catechetical preaching was also evangelistic (an excellent idea!). For John Chrysostom, such preaching was principally moral, rather than doctrinal or liturgical, instruction. In his catechetical preaching Ambrose of Milan (*De sacramentis*) provides us with an approach to Christian worship that would eventually lead the church to emphasize sacraments over preaching.



Those interested in the history of liturgy will find Old's treatment of festal preaching very useful and informative. Preaching on the church's "special days" or holy days has been shaped by the church's understanding of redemptive history and of the power of preaching to commemorate that history. Church lectionaries and liturgical calendars embody a theology of worship and of preaching we must understand in order to evaluate.

Each volume contains an extensive bibliography of primary and secondary sources for each chapter, followed by a thorough index of names and subjects.

We wish the author continued strength and stamina as he completes the remaining volumes of this series. Both novice and experienced preachers will certainly enjoy accompanying Hughes Oliphant Old on this panoramic tour of preaching through the centuries. The tour features both refreshing pauses for doxological joy and challenging spurts for intellectual stretching. But most delightful of all is that these two are never far apart.

—Nelson D. Kloosterman

*Preacher and Cross: Person and Message in Theology and Rhetoric* by André Resner Jr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999. Pp. x + 205. \$18.00.

In this intriguing and informative book André Resner Jr., assistant professor of Bible and preaching in the College of Biblical Studies at Abilene Christian University, seeks to unravel the relationship between the preacher as a servant of the Word of God and as a servant of rhetoric. In other words, how should we conceive the person of the preacher from a theological perspective and from a rhetorical perspective? How does *ēthos* (speaker character) relate to the task of preaching the gospel? *Ēthos*, not to be confused with "ethos", has to do with the character or the *perceived* character of the speaker in rhetorical situations. "Ethos," on the other hand, refers to "customs," "belief," or "standards." This book is thus about "ministerial

character”—both the preacher’s holiness and Christian character, and also his holiness and character as perceived by the pew.

Resner sets out to define, clarify, and distinguish *ēthos* as it was used and understood in classical rhetoric, in the homiletical tradition, and in the apostle Paul, with specific attention given to the first four chapters of First Corinthians. These three groupings form the first three chapters of the book, with a fourth entitled “*Ēthos* for Contemporary Homiletical Theory.”

The first chapter carefully surveys the use and meaning of *ēthos* in the classical rhetorical tradition. The Sophists, for example, used the term *ēthos* to refer to the suasive powers of a speaker, especially as this relates to his character. The concern was with one’s reputation in order to gain the conviction of one’s hearers. The Sophists—for whom truth was relative—were well aware that actions speak louder than words. Thus they labored to put on a kind of “character mask” in order to win the confidence and favor of their hearers.

Plato, on the other hand, prized knowledge and truth. He had no patience for the manipulative rhetoric of the Sophists. Truth must be affirmed and defended even if it proves to be unpopular among one’s hearers. In fact, for Plato, truth possesses its own power to persuade. We need not resort to clever rhetorical tactics in order to gain a hearing or convince others of the truth.

In Aristotle’s work, the classical tradition reached a pinnacle. He refined the rhetorician’s art, focusing on *ēthos* (the perceived moral character of the speaker) as bearing the greatest power of persuasion. He steered a course between the Sophists and Plato. Since the rhetorical situation is one in which the speaker projects a certain *ēthos* and the hearers ‘read’ that *ēthos* projection in certain ways, “Aristotle urged the rhetor who would seek to be persuasive to study well one’s target audience in order to wear the *ēthos* mask that would most appropriately play to their predispositions and prejudices” (p. 34).

Resner also discusses the labors of two Latin writers, Cicero and Quintilian, demonstrating how Cicero followed in the line of Aristotle and Quintilian in the line of Plato. Quintilian disdained rhetoric as persuasion, viewing it as a kind of ruse. The rhetor, he

said, is to be truly good and really eloquent; this carries with it the power of inevitable persuasion. The entire rhetorical engagement between speaker and audience is made more complicated because “access to the ‘real’ person of the speaker and his or her ‘real’ character is always mediated by the perception of the hearers” (p. 36).

Next Resner surveys *ēthos* in the homiletical tradition of the Church. Here we move from the person who is rhetor to the person who is preacher. Preacher, notes Resner, is a theological category, and asks: Are rhetorical and theological categories suitable bed-fellows? Resner observes that homiletical theory that begins with *ēthos* is usually hearer-driven, while homiletical theory that begins with the preacher and theology is usually message-driven. Early Christian writers—pre-Augustinian—could not conceive of a way to reconcile the conflict between rhetoric and theology. Augustine, however, whose *De Doctrina Christiana* represents the Church’s first homiletic, argued for the proper use of rhetoric in order to preach the gospel in a more persuasive manner. The Church has swung back and forth on this pendulum ever since, with Karl Barth representing the anti-Augustinian swing of the pendulum today. In fact, Barth sought to slay rhetoric altogether. In terms of the contemporary American scene, Resner demonstrates how homileticians like Daniel J. Baumann, Clyde Fant, and Robin R. Meyers each, to varying degrees, operates according to the hearer-driven model. Rhetoric is viewed as a valuable tool not to be shunned. Resner, however, believes that these authors overestimate the role rhetoric may legitimately play in the preaching task. Again, to varying degrees, each writer allows concern for persuasion to slide into human manipulation.

Resner believes that a fresh perspective is opened up for us by examining how the apostle Paul used rhetoric—and how he didn’t use it! Paul, according to Resner, shows us how to properly apply rhetoric and theology to the labor of gospel proclamation. This involves the application of both rhetorical and theological frames of reference to the preaching situation. What is foremost here is the way in which the primacy of the gospel reorients

homiletical theory, “without rejecting the role which rhetoric and *ēthos* always play” (p. 82).

It is Resner’s thesis that Paul was acutely aware of classical rhetoric; he both used it and critiqued it. Contrary to Augustine, however, Paul did not consider rhetoric “ideologically neutral.” Rhetoric, especially rhetorical *ēthos*, occupies a legitimate role—a required role—in the ministry of the gospel and the Christian community it forms. This becomes clear when we examine the *ēthos* argument the apostle employs in his Corinthian correspondence. This correspondence is both distinctive in its irony and commonplace in its deliberative convention. “Paul’s chief problem in Corinth ... had to do with the differing standards which he and the Corinthians used for determining speaker credibility.” The apostle did “not measure up to the Corinthians’ credibility standards, standards which they had borrowed unreflectively from their rhetorically-enmeshed environment. Paul’s task in face of this was to reorient the Corinthian Christians to a different expectation for and perception of preacher-*ēthos*” (p. 129).

What this means is that true preacher-*ēthos* is not to be derived from a particular cultural setting; rather, it is to be derived from the divine call, commissioning, and empowerment that the gospel itself demands. According to the gospel, a kind of reverse-*ēthos* plays a legitimate role, since certain deficiencies actually authenticate biblical faith and the gospel of the cross. God’s people need to apply the right standards, consistent with the gospel, to their orator evaluation. Resner’s burden, then, is to demonstrate how the apostle Paul made thorough use of rhetoric—with *ēthos* appeals—but tempered it by the *logos* of the cross, for the *logos* of the cross runs counter to the culturally derived standards of speaker credibility.

This leads Resner to the last chapter of his book, which addresses *ēthos* for contemporary homiletical theory.

Rather than continue to ride the seesaw of rhetoric versus theology, Resner proposes a way for homiletical theory to travel a new, more steady, course. This comes by recognizing that the gospel takes priority in defining the rhetorical situation. At the

same time it is important to recognize that whether one examines the task of preaching from the perspective of rhetoric or from the perspective of theology, each perspective employs concepts indigenous to its own basic logic that must not be imported to the other. For example, theology understands that God alone gives the increase, that the efficacy of the gospel depends on God's power and mercy, not on the preacher's rhetorical powers. Similarly, rhetoric understands the dynamics of persuasion, and the gospel preacher ought to be concerned about how his hearers perceive him as a person. We make *ēthos* appeals whether we wish to do so or not. Thus it is appropriate to ask: "What do the people see and perceive me to be? How does this perception relate to my responsibilities to serve Christ and be a steward of God's mysteries?"

Since the message of the gospel sets the agenda, not the hearer, and that message is the theology of the cross, we must stand against a triumphalistic theology of glory and the numbers-driven, success-enamored churches that would make preaching "effective" at almost any cost. The gospel is compromised in this approach, and rhetoric destroys theology. At the same time, we must also resist those who say that how we are perceived is irrelevant. To the contrary, preachers must be concerned about how hearers perceive them. Indeed, hearers inevitably form opinions regarding the preacher's *ēthos*. Preachers must therefore aim for a *ēthos* that is genuine and conforms to the gospel. They must also understand that two kinds of pulpit autobiography, polemical and apologetic, can function in preaching. "Polemical *ēthos* appeals are used for self-defense against antagonists. They attempt to remove the wrong stumbling block for hearers, in this case the preacher's person. Apologetic *ēthos* appeals are the preacher's personal testimony to God's redemptive activity in the world as the preacher has been privileged to see it or experience it. As acts of Christian witness ... they concretize for the hearers instances of God's ongoing 'gospel activity' in the world in which the hearers themselves live" (p. 184).

In any case, preachers in many respects personify the gospel and its benefits—or fail to! The world watches and draws its own

conclusions, employing its own, mixed (up) criteria for judgment. The church meanwhile may not ignore how she is perceived by her observers. It is critical that preachers ponder by what criteria they will be judged credible, effective, and faithful. This begins with the gospel and must shape a community of faith that employs the standards of the gospel for preacher evaluation. When the church does that she, for the sake of Christ and the gospel, will hold preachers to that standard. We can only imagine the blessings that will ensue when that path is followed.

Every reviewer has his quibbles, and I have mine with this book. It seems to me that although Resner's point is well taken regarding reverse-*ēthos* as evidenced in Paul's Corinthian correspondence, several more examples from Paul's epistles would help to illustrate the apostle's use of rhetoric as a whole and more effectively demonstrate how the church might utilize rhetoric in the task of preaching today. While appreciating Resner's focus on *ēthos* as a rhetorical issue, he raises broader rhetorical issues in relationship to preaching that beg for analysis. I am left wanting to hear Resner's analysis, if only in a general way, how rhetoric more broadly conceived may be properly used in this wider context. These however are only quibbles, not quarrels. I'm more than ready to ignore what this book does not do and commend it heartily for what it does do.

—J. Mark Beach

*The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching: Connecting the Bible to People (In Honor of Haddon W. Robinson)* edited by Keith Willhite and Scott M. Gibson. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998. Pp. 181. \$15.99 (cloth).

This book is a *Festschrift* of sorts in honor of Haddon W. Robinson. Robinson, a graduate of Bob Jones University and a 1955 graduate of Dallas Theological Seminary, has served as a professor of homiletics, among other things, for forty years in three seminaries. Robinson returned to Dallas Seminary in 1958 and taught preaching there for nineteen years. During this time

he earned degrees in sociology and speech as well as a Ph.D. in communications from the University of Illinois. In 1979, Robinson became president of Denver Conservative Baptist Seminary and also taught homiletics. In 1980, Robinson published a book that many institutions have used as a primary preaching textbook, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*. In 1991, Robinson was installed in the Harold John Ockenga Distinguished Professor of Preaching chair at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

The contributors to this volume of essays honoring Robinson are all students, colleagues, and/or beneficiaries of Robinson and his teaching. Robinson's primary contribution to homiletics is his thesis that every sermon preached should exposit "the big idea" of the text. Robinson believes that in his exegetical work on any given passage, the preacher should come to grips with what the primary teaching of a passage is in its original context. It is this primary teaching that he call the text's "big idea." Once the preacher grasps the big idea of the passage, he must then apply it to the context of his auditors. In other words, the preacher should ascertain the big idea that the text communicates to its first audience and then show the relevance of that big idea to the lives of the congregation that sits before him.

Robinson asserted in *Biblical Preaching* that "a sermon should be a bullet and not buckshot. Ideally each sermon is the explanation, interpretation, or application of a single dominant idea supported by other ideas, all drawn from one passage or several passages of Scripture" (p. 33). Robinson cited a number of scholars to support his big idea thesis, including not only homileticians Donald Miller, Alan M. Stibbs, Grady Davis and J.H. Jowett but also classical rhetoricians. Robinson also sees the sermon method employed in the Old and New Testaments as one in which the prophet or apostle delivered a "burden" that was essentially one idea teased out into its various sub-points. We might well ask whether Robinson's concept of the big idea is a valid one. While it makes rhetorical sense in a speech to develop a single idea, it does not necessarily follow that there is a one-to-one correspondence between speech-making and sermonizing.

To assert that the development of a big idea makes for successful communication is not to prove that this is the only way, or even a superior way, of structuring a sermon.

Rather than asking if the big idea approach to sermonizing is helpful, we should perhaps first ask whether every particular text, in fact, contains only one idea. And if a discrete text contains more than one main idea, does this fact mandate as many sermons on the text as there are ideas in the text? I raise these questions not so as to settle the big idea discussion but to point out that a number of prominent preachers in the history of the church have preached in a running expository style somewhat at variance with the big idea method. In the ancient church, for example, neither the greatest theologian—Augustine—nor the greatest preacher—Chrysostom—followed a big idea method, at least consistently. Some of their homilies are more like the kinds of sermons that we may hear or preach these days, while others, if not to say most, are more of a running exposition of the text. Perhaps the Fathers adopted the method that they did since their homilies were sometimes on successive days and were more teaching than preaching. The same can be said of Calvin. In his Deuteronomy sermons, for example, Calvin would simply break for the day when his time had expired and pick up there the following day. Again, the forum for the delivery of these sermons may have permitted a less stylized, more lecture-like form of sermon development. All this is to say that if one wishes to argue strenuously that there is but one proper way of sermonizing, one should do so with the awareness that in the history of the church we do not find a uniform style of sermon among the great theologians and preachers.

Perhaps, though, Robinson is right in his theory of the big idea inasmuch as the Bible as a whole does, we may say, contain a big idea. Insofar as the big idea approach means the elaboration of a unified theme into its proper sub-points, the Bible does have a unified theme that it develops in its pages. The big idea of the Bible, if you will, is God the Father bringing his chosen people to salvation through the person and work of his dear Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. This does not mean



that every passage of the Bible necessarily contains only one big idea—and the same idea at that. It does mean, though, that the story of redemption is the story of the Bible and that “salvation is of the Lord” is, in some sense, taught in every text. Every text throws some light from its own angle on the great salvation story.

Many who follow Robinson do not necessarily believe that the big idea approach applies to the Bible as a whole. This is not to say that they would regard the Bible as atomistic and lacking in unity. Rather, even some of Robinson’s followers do not necessarily treat the big idea of their text as part of the bigger idea of the whole Bible. This is because many evangelicals who would embrace Robinson underestimate the importance of biblical theology and systematic theology, disciplines necessary in integrating the big idea of the text with the big idea of the Bible as a whole. Biblical theology, grounded in systematic theology, enables one to keep the redemptive-historical work of God always in view. While the typical evangelical approach to texts often fails to preach Christ and is moralistic, a dogmatic approach that is not redemptive-historically nuanced tends to miss the glorious unfolding salvation story and the eschatological riches that we possess because of the finished work of Christ. Similarly, biblical theology that is not grounded in dogmatics tends to treat every text in the same way, so stressing the big idea that the purely redemptive historical preacher sounds as if he is preaching the same sermon from every text. We need neither of these reductionistic approaches but a full-orbed sort of preaching that appreciates the place of the text in its biblical theological development, always keeping in mind how this text comports with the Bible’s big idea, properly grounded in Reformed dogmatics, clearly explicated and applied to the hearts of our hearers.

The book is divided into three main parts, each one treating some aspect of big idea preaching: Part I deals with the why of big idea preaching, while Parts II and III deal with the how of big idea preaching. Most of the contributors currently serve in the academy and have had considerable preaching experience. Bruce Waltke’s article on “Old Testament Interpretation Issues for Big

Idea Preaching” is one of the more interesting and helpful contributions. Waltke begins his article by noting the problem that source criticism (literary criticism, form criticism, and tradition criticism) presents to Robinson’s big idea approach. At the hands of the source critic any given pericope may be so whittled into smaller parts that the search for unity (or the possibility of unity) in the larger passage may be abandoned as hopeless. Given the anti-supernaturalistic presuppositions that underlie such scholarship, we rightly reject the atomistic approach to the text of the source critic. We understand that there is always an ultimate unity, for every given biblical text has not only a human author but a human author inspired by the Spirit to produce the infallible and inerrant Word of God. Waltke does discover, however, in the contribution of “poetics” an approach to the text that yields good fruit and that comports with the big idea approach. Waltke sets forth more than a dozen techniques that scholars have asserted as composing the “grammar” of poetics among the biblical writers, particularly characterizing the wisdom literature. Waltke then proceeds to apply this poetical approach to Proverbs 26:1-12, showing how such an approach helps in discovering and developing the big idea, and then he actually exposit the text as one would in the process of developing a sermon based on the big idea of this text.

Other articles treat preaching big idea sermons from the New Testament, narrative passages, interacting with biblical theology and various cultures and subcultures. All in all the volume contains a number of helpful hints to preachers and does a good job of demonstrating the breadth of big idea preaching. While this collection of essays does not clearly elucidate and consistently maintain the high view of preaching contained in the Reformed and Presbyterian confessions, the preacher will find material here to help him in the organization of his sermon and in the more effective communication of his sermon.

—Alan D. Strange

*Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized* by William H. Willimon. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992. Pp. xi + 124. \$13.00.

*The Intrusive Word: Preaching to the Unbaptized* by William H. Willimon. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994. Pp. viii + 144. \$12.00.

I first came across William Willimon's books on preaching and baptism in a friend's library. Before long, I was flipping through the books and reading him quotations, and I have been quoting Willimon ever since. And these books are certainly quotable. William Willimon is a United Methodist minister, a professor at Duke Divinity School, and the Dean of Chapel at Duke University. He does not write from a Reformed perspective, as the reader will notice at various points, but passage after passage will strike a chord in the Reformed reader's heart.

Willimon's thesis is that baptism defines a person. Those who are baptized live in the world, but they belong to God: they are "odd" (*PS*, 7). The preaching of the Word in the worship service, therefore, ought to address those assembled in terms of this identity. "We preach either under the promise of baptism, 'Come forth, be washed, and you shall be odd,' or the mandate of baptism, 'You are washed, you are ordained, you are odd'" (*PS*, 3).

As God's people, therefore, we are to listen to his Word. The minister's calling is not to apologize for the Word or try to escape from it or translate it into the categories of this world; he must simply preach it. Instead, the modern church has tried to make biblical language more acceptable to the world: "The modern church has been willing to use everyone's language but its own....Unable to preach Christ and him crucified, we preach humanity and it improved" (*PS*, 9). Willimon rejects the approach which seeks to make Scripture conform to experience. In these approaches, "if my experience and therapeutic goals collide with those engendered by the Bible, too bad for the Bible. My experience becomes a judge of Scripture" (*PS*, 16-17).

Baptism not only identifies and defines us, it also summons us to repentance, to change. "Whatever signing on with Jesus means, it means that we will not do just as we are, that change is demanded, daily, sometimes painful turning and detoxification

that does not come naturally” (*PS*, 32). Today, many sermons suggest that what we need is not conversion, but simply more self-esteem (*PS*, 39-40). As a result, we reject any authoritative call to repentance, and we end up conforming to the thinking of this world. Thus people want “inductive sermons,” which allow them to draw their own conclusions (*PS*, 47ff.).

In contrast, biblical preaching, says Willimon, speaks authoritatively, demandingly; it re-forms us. “When preaching is a bit arrogant, pushy, assertive, incomprehensible, then our medium will more appropriately fit with the message, and the gospel will be more fairly proclaimed” (*PS*, 64).

In the final two chapters of *Peculiar Speech*, Willimon deals with our address to unbelievers—a theme he elaborates on in *The Intrusive Word*—and the political nature of preaching. The church, as the baptized community, is a new *polis*, a new people (*PS*, 100)—a people under the rule of Christ which proclaims to the world that it, too, must submit to Christ (*PS*, 97).

*Peculiar Speech* deals with preaching to the community of the baptized; *The Intrusive Word* deals with preaching to those who are outside that community, the unbaptized. Willimon stresses that people by nature are not able to hear and believe the gospel; it takes a miracle for them to hear. We fail to communicate sometimes for very good reasons: the gospel does not fit in with this world’s way of thinking. “We preachers so want to be heard that we are willing to make the gospel more accessible than it really is, to remove the scandal, the offense of the cross, to deceive people into thinking that it is possible to hear without conversion” (*IW*, 19). The gap we face in preaching is not between Jesus way back then and our hearers now or between the minister and the people; it is “between us and the gospel” (*IW*, 15). We need to preach boldly, relying on the power of the gospel, which is the power of the resurrected Lord: “Only because we worship a resurrected Lord can we risk preaching” (*IW*, 25). “We preach best with a reckless confidence in the power of the gospel to evoke the audience it deserves” (*IW*, 22).

Willimon goes on to deal with the nature of the gospel. It is not a set of interesting ideas which we as individuals can consider

(*IW*, 39), nor is it a message we are equipped by nature to understand (*IW*, 43). Instead, it is something radical, something which changes us and makes us disciples (*IW*, 39). We are not to begin with ourselves in preaching but with the Word.

Throughout the book, Willimon calls us to avoid reinterpreting the gospel to make it suit the “felt needs” and the thought patterns of our hearers. Instead, we must proclaim God’s gospel, through which He invades our lives, changes our whole way of looking at things, and produces a people for Himself, the church (*IW*, 129). “This book,” he says, “asserts to the baptized that preaching in the service of anything less than a living, intrusive God is not worth the effort” (*IW*, 4).

There is certainly much that a Reformed reader can enjoy and appreciate in Willimon’s books, but there are also several problems with them. While Willimon criticizes feminist readings of Scripture (e.g., *PS*, 16-17), he also draws on feminism for a critique of the idea of “common human experience” (*PS*, 13-14). In several passages, Willimon appears to have a negative view of the State (e.g., *PS*, 104; *IW*, 13, 47), which may be connected to his appreciation for pacifism (*PS*, 21-22). Even more significantly, Willimon expresses dislike for “satisfaction theories of the atonement,” in which sin is “associated with individual desires and actions” instead of with “those social and political forces, the ‘principalities and powers’ that embattle us” (*PS*, 104).

Furthermore, he rejects infant baptism, unless “the church is confident that it is able to be the agent of baptismal regeneration in the person’s life” (*PS*, 61). In fact, with the exception of a brief comment about Calvin’s view of baptism (*PS*, 107), Willimon does not connect baptism with God’s covenant. The distinction between the baptized and the unbaptized is important, however, precisely because baptism is the sign and seal of the covenant. The baptized are God’s covenant people and should therefore be addressed as such—with the covenant promises, but also with the covenant demands and the covenantal warnings.

There is another problem that is pervasive but somewhat difficult to pinpoint. Willimon writes in a type of postmodernist

framework, while at the same time distinguishing his position from more radical forms of postmodern relativism.

According to Willimon, there is no “common human experience.” “There are only different stories that evoke and engender various kinds of human experiences” (*IW*, 23). “There is no firmly established starting point for thought, some free-standing knowledge, independent of the background or coloration of a system of thought. All experience is theory laden....As Wittgenstein taught us, language conjures up a world. The world is constructed of words” (*IW*, 92; cf. 88). Reality is not outside us, but inside us: “Reality is comprehended, described, experienced as language....There is no world, no facts, until somebody tells a story about it” (*IW*, 90). Not only are all facts “theory laden,” so is reason (*IW*, 95).

These theories—the stories by which we define ourselves and our world—are shaped by communities (*PS*, 44). Baptismal speech makes sense only in the community of the baptized: “Baptismal speaking reminds us that very little speech makes sense apart from a narrative and a community that makes it make sense” (*PS*, 11). The Bible was created by this community, which “is in turn re-created by it” (*PS*, 12). Everything is relative—“all truth is historically, communally, narratively conditioned” (*PS*, 91)—but as Christians we recognize that everything is relative to *Christ the Lord* (*PS*, 92): “Christians believe there *is* truth, there definitely *is* reality. Truth has a face, a name: *Jesus*” (*IW*, 94).

Conversion is thus a switch from one defining story to another (*PS*, 41; *IW*, 89, 96). The evangelistic sermon lays the Bible’s story alongside all the other stories by which people define themselves and call them to switch (*IW*, 5, 24-25); preaching to the baptized means laying the story of Jesus alongside our lives so that we see Jesus’ story as our own (*PS*, 14). Preaching, baptism, and liturgy are all *reenactments* of Christ’s death and resurrection, which initiate an “entire person into the story of Israel and Jesus” (*PS*, 32; cf. *PS*, 105). Preaching calls us to step into the text, to identify with the characters, to enter the story ourselves (*IW*, 48). In this connection, Willimon disparages the use of “argument and syllogism” in sermons (*PS*, 16, 55); he

dislikes the didactic (*PS*, 106). He says, “So when change is the preacher’s goal, the preacher does well to forsake the sermon’s ‘points’ and stick with illustration and story” (*PS*, 55).

At first glance, some of Willimon’s statements may sound similar to Van Tillian presuppositionalism with its claim that “brute facts are mute facts” because all facts come with interpretations. But there are significant differences between Willimon and Van Til. For Van Til, the problem with “facts” results from sin: the unbeliever suppresses the truth about those facts, facts which he shares in common with the believer. Willimon, however, in rejecting “common human experience,” sees the problem with “facts” as rooted in human nature. Ultimately, no two human beings have the same experience and therefore none can really understand the facts in the same way.

Language is shaped by a community and its narrative, according to Willimon, and therefore language really ends up standing between us and the world and between us and each other. But the Bible presents reality—objective reality—through language; the barrier to understanding is individual sin, not simply one’s social conditioning or narrative shaping. Moreover, Willimon’s claim that all experience comes to us in terms of language—a claim which is drawn, at least in part, from Hans-Georg Gadamer—fails to match our experience: we can indeed experience apart from language; thought and language are not one and the same.

When it comes to preaching, Willimon prefers stories over logic and argument. But why? When we read Scripture, we do discover stories—which are not paradigms into which we must fit ourselves (e.g., *IW*, 57), but revelations of God’s acts in history for his glory and our salvation. However, we also discover didactic passages, epistles, wisdom literature, and law. Paul, for instance, uses arguments, arguments he expects his readers to be able to follow. Willimon often says that people today are being determined by the stories of modernism and individualism and rationalism. Perhaps Willimon himself has fallen prey to the equally determining stories of postmodernism and irrationalism.

*Peculiar Speech* and *The Intrusive Word* are well worth reading and quoting, not because we ought to agree with everything Willimon says but because we ought to think through the issues he raises and savor his exuberant emphasis on the power and authority of preaching. Read these books as a pep talk, as a call to preach the Word of God boldly and without apology, but read them with caution.

—John Barach