

William Brosend, *The Preaching of Jesus: Gospel Proclamation, Then and Now*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010. \$20.

“Jesus was a Galilean Jew who proclaimed a kingdom and resisted a crown. He was a teacher actively reshaping a tradition for a new day, and who probably knew the outcome of his ministry of resistance and transformation, yet did not capitulate to empire, temple, or adversary.” (18) Jesus’ strategy for his mission was preaching, as opposed to “what many would consider more promising approaches.” (1) His preaching exhibits four rhetorical characteristics. It was 1. dialogical, 2. proclamatory, 3. occasionally self-referential, 4. persistently figurative. Brosend has discovered that Jesus’ rhetoric as exhibited in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke has been almost completely ignored by Jesus scholars for the past two generations, with the exception of Amos Wilder’s *Early Christian Rhetoric* in 1964. To a person, scholars assert only two things about Jesus’ rhetoric: he was a teacher/preacher, and his favorite rhetorical form was the parable. (3-4) Brosend goes beyond this to bring to light the four characteristics enumerated above. An Appendix charts the four features of the teachings of Jesus in each of the Synoptic gospels, and chapters treat each of these rhetorical marks. For each, Brosend first fills in the details of what he catalogues in the Appendix. Then he moves from the teaching of Jesus to contemporary preaching, its weaknesses and temptations and its possibilities. Each discussion concludes with a sermon by a well-known contemporary preacher that exhibits that feature.

Brosend wrote this book because since September 11, 2001, contemporary preaching in the formerly mainline churches has lost its public influence. It has nothing to say by way of the resistance to empire, temple, or adversary exhibited by Jesus. Why? Brosend proposes that, in contrast to Jesus’ preaching, it has been 1. unresponsive, 2. indecisive, 3. self-indulgent, and 4. unimaginative. Being *dialogical* in contrast to being unresponsive means speaking in response to an inquirer, or to a tradition or a culture that shapes people, often unconsciously and unquestioningly. (21) *Proclamation* is not self-certain, dogmatic pronouncement. It is clarity about one’s convictions stated in such a way that both challenges listeners and demonstrates respect for those who disagree, inviting and giving them space for engagement. For most of us it is a discipline that needs to be learned, honed, and practiced. (77, 82) *Self-reference* is a delicate subject about which Brosend gives wise counsel. He enumerates both the common pitfalls and the legitimate reasons for self-reference. Preachers will most likely employ self-reference wisely if they approach it with as much caution as most are inclined to use in talking about controversial issues. When it comes to *figurative language*, on the other hand, preachers need to be much more daring. Fabricating metaphors and stories rooted in our own experience requires constant practice and experimentation because few of us come by this skill naturally.

This book is a training manual for preaching that, like the preaching and teaching of Jesus, is daring and powerful, and at the same time respectful of our listeners. Preachers would do well to choose and re-read one chapter after drafting each sermon in order to revise it in the light of Brosend’s exposition. If we improve our ability to speak in ways that are clear and imaginatively provocative while addressing public matters that are of concern to people, we stand a chance of engaging them on those matters from the perspective of their commitment to Jesus. If we don’t reclaim the pulpit as a place to address those concerns, we will abandon our listeners to the influences of the media, unequipped to assess those influences with the help of the deep and rich resources to be found in the teaching and preaching of their Master.

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