

James T. Flynn, *Words That Transform: Preaching as a Catalyst for Renewal*, Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2010, 216 pages. \$31.

James T. Flynn, who serves as associate professor of practical theology at Regent School of Divinity in Virginia, presents a theological argument for the foundation of good preaching. The first five chapters establish the need for transformational preaching that flows out of the context of developing an intimate relationship with God. Chapters six and seven address the sermon itself describing its structure and the important role imagination plays. In the final chapter, Flynn concludes with his own personal journey in preaching. At the conclusion of the opening chapter, the author states his purpose: “. . . this book is a tender call toward intimacy with God in order to recapture the transformative power of preaching” (15).

For preachers to preach sermons that transform lives, their lives must first experience transformation. This is particularly true now, as Flynn illustrates in his opening chapter by citing shocking recent statistics on the spiritual and moral state of preachers (10). To correct this, preachers must establish an intimate relationship with God and incarnate God’s word in their lives. Out of a deep and personal relationship with God, preachers embody the word, which in turn produces transformational preaching.

This means that the preparation of the sermon must begin as a work in the heart rather than external work on words and style and form (31). Life experience “is one of the primary ways God grows the word in the preacher’s heart” (74). When preachers reflect on their life experiences as God works to shape their character, faith no longer becomes an abstract concept but a living reality. Preachers encounter God in those experiences and faithfulness is no longer a theological proposition (74). As Flynn begins Chapter Five, he delves into the formation of the preacher’s character. Flynn identifies three key virtues preachers must develop. These include: humility, forgiveness, and perseverance (106-114).

Chapters Six and Seven are devoted to the nuts and bolts of the sermon. Chapter Six unpacks the *science* of sermon preparation and Chapter Seven explores the *art* involved in sermon preparation. Sermon preparation involves a science which means sermons need structure in order to do their transformative work. Flynn identifies six key structural elements using parts of the physical body to identify each one. The sermon must have an eye (focus) and a skeleton (structure). In addition, the sermon must convey heart (emotion). It must also have joints (transitions), flesh (illustrations), and muscle (application). Using this body metaphor as a pedagogical tool for preachers and seminar students, in my estimation, has limited value.

As Flynn describes the sermon structure, he relies on David Buttrick’s preaching model. Yet there is one significant difference. Flynn argues that a move needs to be twice as long as Buttrick’s five-minute limit (123). This is for the sake of the listener’s ability to process a single idea. Thus a thirty-minute sermon would contain three points (123)! Actually Buttrick argues that a single move should be three to four minutes, not five. I am certain Buttrick would adamantly protest the kind of sermon structure Flynn advocates.

While it is true that sermon crafting is a science, which can potentially produce predictable results, it is also an art. Chapter Seven unpacks the art side of sermon preparation (139). Art is unpredictable, creative, and imaginative. Artists are keen observers who view life as an adventure. It is this perspective on preaching that enables preachers to develop imagination and creativity. As Creator, one of God’s most fundamental traits is creativity (148). Thus preachers must embrace this creative quality in their lives and preaching.

It is refreshing to read a preaching book that establishes the foundation of sermon preparation in the preacher's relationship with God and views that relationship not as God using people but partnering with them (100). When Flynn reaches Chapter Five, he makes this observation, "Notice we are already more than halfway through the book, and we haven't yet addressed the actual structure or form of the sermon itself. That is intentional" (94). He affirms that transformational preaching is 75% internal and 25% external, which is basically how he divides the book (94). While his theological premise is valid, this structuring of the book makes the first five chapters redundant. As one reads through them, the ideas tend to blend together and the movement of the book bogs down. This problem is further complicated because the author does not provide a road map to the organizational structure of the book at the outset. It would help the reader to know what to expect as the chapters unfold.

In addition, the connection between the preacher's intimate relationship with God and how this affects the actual crafting of the sermon described in Chapters Six and Seven is missing. These two chapters could easily stand on their own without the preceding five chapters. How does the preacher's intimate relationship with God directly influence the nuts and bolts of sermon writing? This question is not addressed.

While the book does not provide a lot of new insights, it still serves as a helpful resource for both preachers and teachers of preaching. It presents preaching as a lifestyle calling the preacher to foster a deep personal relationship with God. When this happens preaching will transform lives.

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