

Richard W. Voelz. *Youthful Preaching: Strengthening the Relationship between Youth, Adults, and Preaching*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016. 226 pages. \$27.

Richard Voelz notes in his acknowledgments that, “preaching and youth have not proven to be the coziest partners in contemporary times, nor has there been much, if any, mutual academic interest between the subjects.” Writing with this premise in mind, Voelz seeks to remedy this situation. He is bold enough to say, “To my knowledge, this is the only book on preaching and adolescents in North America undertaken from the perspective of critical homiletics.” If his claim is true, then *Youthful Preaching* is a much needed addition to the library of homiletical literature.

Eschewing the ideas of writing some kind of “how-to manual” or producing a work based upon “developmental psychology,” Voelz seeks instead to create a “theologically and ethically grounded agenda for faith communities that take preaching and youth seriously.” His methodology consists of using historical research (by far his best section) as well as looking at both culture and rhetorical analysis to attempt to find a theological corrective to what he believes is the typical approach to understanding preaching and adolescence.

As noted above, Voelz use of historical retrospective is a fascinating and riveting section of the book. Over the course of the first two chapters he brings the reader into the world of preaching to and by youth over the course of North American history. Beginning with Puritan preaching and its corollaries, he traces the influences, themes, and changes that have occurred over the last 400 years. He also intersperses his analysis of preaching with an insightful understanding of how adolescents are viewed within each of those periods. This combination of homiletical approaches, social science constructs, and cultural/religious changes provides a helpful understanding of the approaches that have formed our current understanding of preaching to young people. As he notes in his summary, “Preaching helped shape perceptions of young people.” In addition, Voelz makes the critical observation that, “Young people have spoken back to preaching in important ways as much as preaching has spoken to them.” This symbiotic relationship is both helpful and, possibly, surprising to the modern mind. As a way of reinforcing this premise, the book concludes with a series of thirteen sermons by young people in full transcripts in an Appendix that gives credence to his idea that young people have helped to shape some aspects of the preaching approach.

Less successful is his chapter on “Renewing the Relationship” where he chooses to create his theological and ethical corrective to the typical approaches to youthful preaching (what he describes as silence, ontological adolescence, and deficiency). It’s not his analysis that is lacking but his terminology that muddles his case. His determination to reframe the issue of liberation theology to form the foundation of his theological corrective appears to get lost in the weeds of theological analysis. While he freely admits the difference between adolescent experience of “oppression and marginalization” and those of people groups most clearly aligned with the issues of liberation theology (African Americans, Latin Americans, feminists, womanists, disabled persons, etc.) is significant, his analysis remains dependent on making that connection. On a positive note, his attribution of the damaging results of mass media and mass marketing as primary tools for defining adolescence is well done. Depending on Henry Giroux and Nancy Lesko for insights into how adolescents are understood and defined, Voelz makes a strong case for how some preaching reinforces what he calls a “combative rhetoric toward adolescents.”

Finally, chapter four of *Youthful Preaching* is a most interesting and helpful analysis based upon rhetorical analysis. Voelz is most helpful here when he gives a methodological

approach to help hearers determine how preaching helps create both Christian identity and homiletical identity in young people. I think that teachers of preaching, students of preaching, seminarians, and those who preach to youth or who are training youth to preach will benefit greatly from Voelz approach and analysis. To further aid in this, Voelz also includes his Sermon Analysis Worksheets related to these two ideas just before he includes the thirteen sermons from youth. As a result, the reader can easily see how his ideas of Christian identity and homiletical identity can be evaluated through listening to *Youthful Preaching*.

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