

John McTavish, ed. *Preacher: David H. C. Read's Sermons at Madison Ave. Presbyterian Church*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2017. 289 pages. \$28.

This volume proves that sermons, and books of sermons, can be theologically substantive, as well as inspiring for congregants and instructive for preachers. David Read was preacher and pastor at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York City, 1956–1989. The editor who selected these sermons is a pastor who knows well the challenge of weekly preaching, and who benefited from a summer school seminar for preachers led by Read at Princeton and from his sermon subscription series.

The book consists of 41 sermons by Read, all but one never published before, plus a brief biographical introduction, and, in the epilogue, a list of Read's numerous publications and reviews of twelve of these. The editor introduces each sermon with a half page comment, often making connections between Read's time and ours. Also included are two of the delightful Christmas fantasy tales which Read offered regularly on the Sunday before Christmas: "The Old, Old Man and the Baby," and "The Poodle in the Stable: A Christmas Tale for All Ages." These are highlights of Read's remarkable literary imagination.

We learn briefly of Read's early life in Scotland, as a student at the University of Edinburgh, as pastor, university chaplain, then as World War II military chaplain, captured and held for five years as prisoner of war in Germany. He spent most of his ministry in New York City. Because the editor knew Read personally, he is able to paint us a picture of a charming and lovable character.

The sermons published here are masterpieces of eloquence and theological insight, organized in seven chapters corresponding to the seasons of the church year: Creation, Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, plus, in the epilogue, one last sermon: "Virginia Woolf Meets Charlie Brown." We also find specific sermons for special occasions like Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. This selection exhibits a well-rounded program of preaching: doctrinal, ethical, apologetic, and personal, always well-grounded in careful exegesis.

What theological stance informed Read's preaching? Having done post-graduate work at Montpellier, France, under the Barthian Pierre Maury, he regarded Karl Barth as the most important theologian of his time, but he "never became a slavish Barthian" (4). He also learned from Rahner, Kung, Baillie, Niebuhr, Tillich, Bonhoeffer and others. These sermons illustrate how preaching can be informed by a neo-orthodox theology, together with an acute sense of contextuality.

Read clearly distinguishes between a properly evangelical theology and a fundamentalist one, and a number of these sermons can be described as "doctrinal," e.g., "The Organ and the Vacuum Cleaner: A Note on Creationism." His awareness of contemporary science is evident in the sermon, "The Gospel in the Galaxies: What Message for Mars?" Concerning the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, we find a fine sermon on "The Christ we Admire: The Christ we Worship;" for Easter, an unapologetic but intelligent *apologia*: "Easter Day: Resurrection! Why I Believe."

But we also find here insightful comment on the affairs of his day, always biblically and christologically based. We can observe his skilled use of the hermeneutical circle, showing how ancient texts can throw light upon our own time and circumstances while reading them with our own questions and contexts in mind. He shows how we can preach prophetically and politically without being narrowly partisan. For example, "Am I a Racist?" is a highly sensitive, nuanced exploration of racism in America. At a time when concerns about pollution of the environment

were only just beginning to surface, Read found grounds in scripture to address these concerns in two of the sermons presented here: “Advent Parables: The Case of the Troublesome Tenants,” and “Amok in Eden: Ecology for Christians.” The editor, in his introductory comment, indicates the urgent relevance of this for our own time, forty years later.

What about personal faith and spiritual life? A pastoral minister must address this too and Read seems to have done it superbly well. In the season of Epiphany, we find “A Life with Prayer in It,” and “The Psalm on the Avenue,” expounding the twenty-third Psalm; and “Pentecost Sunday: Alive Inside.”

These sermons do such a good job of theological exposition that, as a professor of theology, I can imagine assigning some of them as supplementary to explicit systematic texts. The book is certainly to be recommended to ministers, and to professors and students of homiletics.

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