

Michael Pasquarello III. *The Beauty of Preaching: God's Glory in Christian Proclamation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2020. 288 pages. \$26.79.

As I was learning how to preach, somewhere I absorbed the lesson that each sermon should respond to the question, “What is the good news?” In a way, this is Michael Pasquarello’s vision in *The Beauty of Preaching: God's Glory in Christian Proclamation*. Pasquarello is intent on helping preachers behold and proclaim the beauty of God in their sermons, and for Pasquarello that beauty is nothing more—and nothing less—than the gospel message that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself (19). Beautiful preaching is doxological speech that glorifies God and shares the good news of the arrival of God’s beautiful, saving reign in Jesus, who is “both the messenger and message of God’s joy” (33). “Proclaiming the fullness of God’s work in Christ,” Pasquarello writes, “summons listeners to perceive the beauty of Jesus’s self-emptying death on a cross” (40).

The Beauty of Preaching elaborates this theme using scripture and the writings of historical figures including Augustine of Hippo, John Wesley, and Martin Luther. In chapter 1, Pasquarello examines the text of Isaiah 52:7 and the meaning of the “beautiful feet” of the messengers who announce God’s reign of peace. In his focus on the arrival of God’s reign, Pasquarello draws a connection between the life and death of Jesus and the beauty of humility and self-emptying for God’s glory, demonstrated by the widow in Mark’s Gospel who gives her last two coins to the temple treasury. Similarly, in chapter 2 Pasquarello lifts up the woman in Mark 14 who anoints Jesus with expensive nard, an act Jesus calls “a beautiful thing.” For Pasquarello, the woman’s self-giving act reflects those who are called by the Spirit to delight in “participating in the Son’s offering of himself back to the Father in undivided love” (62).

Chapters 3 and 4 turn to the life and works of Augustine, particularly his shift from a love of the “natural beauty” of human wisdom, elaborate language, and created things, to praising God as the Creator of all that is beautiful. Pasquarello reflects on Augustine’s love of attention and approval, noting that the primary obstacle to hearing and seeing God was his pride. For Augustine, right appreciation of created things required humility to see the beauty of the “weakness” of Christ and thus the glory of God. Pasquarello writes, “To see the goodness of things is to see them in God, to delight in them in God, to enjoy them in God, and to proclaim them in God” (97). Preaching, then, humbly follows “the wisdom, language, idiom, and movement of Scripture that points beyond itself to Christ” (113).

In chapter 5, Pasquarello looks to John Wesley’s preaching, which offers the beauty of Christ’s holiness to hearers so that they might be convicted and pardoned of their sins, and empowered to live holy and grace-filled lives. Preachers themselves must be suffused with the beauty of divine love because “Beautiful preaching springs from the faith and love of preachers who have been swept up by the Spirit in the church’s offering of itself in prayer and praise to God through the ministry of Christ” (160). In chapter 6, Pasquarello reviews the preaching of Martin Luther, who suggests that in Christ the “ugliness” of sin is transformed by grace through faith into beauty that praises God and loves neighbor.

Pasquarello follows other postliberal homileticians in affirming the “strangeness” of the gospel and its peculiar power to shape and convert the hearer in its retelling, and as such he does not give much attention to issues of interpretation or language. Additionally, Pasquarello makes assertions that may not feel universal to readers, such as that the “primary” sins are pride and self-centeredness—sins which though grievous tend to reflect the experiences of those in power and privilege, rather than the lives of those suffering hardship and oppression. Even

Pasquarello's treatment of the Magnificat emphasizes the ways in which Mary is humbled by her encounter with God, rather than lifted up. Additionally, his orientation toward personal conversion from sin and his occasional correlations of humility with poverty and suffering leave unaddressed questions about systemic sin and injustice.

The Beauty of Preaching is a profoundly theological and spiritual text, and as such is not a handbook of advice on how to preach beautifully. However, Pasquarello's gift to preachers is the reminder that "We cannot preach that in which we do not participate through the work of the Holy Spirit" (147). Key is the formation of preachers shaped by scripture and prayer, and who are engaged in a life of holiness and faithfulness to the Triune God. Within this frame, preachers are relieved of having to impress or dazzle with their skill and wit. The beauty of preaching is a theological aesthetic in which we "attune our perceptions and words to the incarnate beauty of Christ, who is the image and expression of God's glory in human form" (193).

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