

James Wm. McClendon, Jr., eds. Ryan Andrew Newson and Andrews C. Wright. *The Collected Works of James Wm. McClendon, Jr.*, vol. 3. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016. 281 pages. \$60.

This is the third volume in a set of three that collects works by Neo-Anabaptists' most important systematic thinker. But this volume consists of *sermons*. Here is a theologian who writes *about* preaching and exemplifies it himself as one who also pastors a congregation.

James Wm. McClendon, Jr., grew up a Baptist. After a transformative experience in 1975 with John Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus*, he spent the remainder of his scholarly life interpreting the Gospel for heirs of the Radical Reformation, not just Baptists proper but also Brethren, Mennonites, Adventists, and others in Christianity's "third steam" (neither Catholic nor Protestant). Now there is growing consensus that his systematic theology—separate volumes on *Ethics*, *Doctrine*, and *Witness*—constitutes a theological landmark for the Radical Reformation point of view.

McClendon died in 2000, but not before taking an interim pastorate with a Church of the Brethren congregation in Pasadena, CA near Fuller Theological Seminary where he was Distinguished Scholar in Residence during his final ten years. Many of the sermons in this collection come from that period, and exemplify precisely from the pastoral setting the *practical* perspective that characterized his theology. As God's grace changes lives and church doctrine serves discipleship, so preaching, McClendon believed, helps the church to *be* the story it proclaims. When properly "prophetic," it trains a congregation's members to see their lives and context in gospel light, and to feel themselves directly addressed by the risen Christ. As with Bonhoeffer in 1930s Germany, priority must go to the story told in Scripture, not to the fashions of the present age. All the while Christ must shine forth not only through the preacher's words and skills, but also (and most importantly) through what his or her own life embodies and truly is. "The hearer must hear not merely me but Christ in me" (256, 257).

The publisher no doubt intends volume 3 of McClendon's *Collected Works* for theologians, not just for pastors. But if the book is another window into McClendon's theological perspective, pastors and teachers will certainly benefit from its relevance to their in-the-saddle concerns. In Part I of the collection, four sermons address the season of Advent. Here the theme of difficulty—something pastors know very well—finds comfort and healing on the anvil of hope. The birth pangs of the new age underscore sorrow, but the reality of "Christ present" (29) defeats resignation and fuels forward-looking passion.

Part II concerns "The Path of Discipleship." God has promised the end of war, McClendon notes in the provocative sermon entitled "Has God Made a Mistake about the Future?" But prophecies are calls to action. If the church cannot control what goes on in the wider world, the dream can "come true in us"—in our own refusal to learn war—and so can demonstrate the possibility of life freed from the myth of cynical realism (40, 41). Twelve more sermons in this section deepen the sense of stark difference between true loyalty to Christ and life lived by ordinary lights.

This theme continues in Parts III and IV, which consider existence engendered by Easter and sustained by the Spirit's presence in the community. Now, in some twenty-three further sermons, the anxieties of discipleship come into play as well as its shape and substance. One sermon is called "I Have My Doubts," and takes off from the Johannine passage on Thomas. Another considers the challenge of interpreting a Bible that may seem to support polygamy and slavery, not to mention war. Still another, called "Starting Over," was McClendon's first sermon

as interim pastor of his church, one that had suffered what he calls a “setback.” It offers one example of a strategy he recommends, that of the preacher invoking his own life story as illumination and encouragement. Here disappointments and struggles obvious from his own “bent” shoulders help him make the point that with God’s help the congregation can “confront losses” and “build again” (212, 215).

The book ends with three brief appendices, the last of which is again a sermon, simply titled “How to Preach the Gospel.” The phrase encapsulates the book’s subject matter. Even with the steep price, the book is worth getting—perhaps for your own bookshelf and certainly for any theological library.

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