

Robert Smith, Jr. *Doctrine that Dances: Bringing Doctrinal Preaching and Teaching to Life*. Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2008. 224 pages. \$19.99

When the early church fathers sought an image to describe the intra-relationship of the Trinity they turned to an interesting dimension of life – dance. The three persons of the one God, they declared, were in a *perichoretic* state; a dancing state. As Robert Smith, Jr. observes in his book *Doctrine that Dances*, our fathers in the church were building on an image, a metaphor that was woven through the scriptures. We are a people who are created in the image of God and who therefore have dance in our very genes. Miriam danced when she reached freedom. David danced before the Lord. (Fortunately, Dr. Smith does not advocate naked doctrinal preaching!) Smith also observes that he is not the first to liken preaching to dance – Eugene Lowry employed an image suggested by David Buttrick to entitle his homiletical text, *Dancing the Edge of Mystery*. But what Robert Smith does do is invite the preacher into a fascinating, creative exploration of our genetic make-up and challenges us to become better dancers.

I must confess, I am a terrible dancer. As soon as I am taught a dance step I forget it, so one would never confuse me with Ginger Rogers. Therefore, I took comfort in Dr. Smith's reminder that the Holy Spirit is both our choreographer and teacher. With that assurance I was able to venture into a book that I would recommend for both novice and veteran preachers alike.

Smith argues that doctrinal preaching is “*the magnifying of Jesus Christ through the explanation and application of the basic truths of the Christian faith*” (25). And it is the goal of doctrinal preaching to escort the listeners “*into the presence of God for the purpose of transformation*” (25). Too much of our contemporary preaching, he argues, has focused on one dimension of Augustine's triad – namely delight. He hears preaching that is more about entertainment than about content; weak and anemic; “These are times when preaching has exchanged its birthright of sound doctrine for an unsatisfying bowl of doctrinal heresy” (127). Likewise, many sermons that do lift up the doctrines of the church are dull and plodding. Powerful and effective preaching, he argues, must be grounded in the grace of God, the truth of the cross, the historic doctrines, and a connection between “*traditional theological language and contemporary relevant imagery*” (86). The preacher, he reminds us, is both biblical scholar and resident theologian. Without both, the preaching life of the congregation suffers.

Smith begins his project by arguing for the importance of metaphor, images, and analogy. Preachers explore life and death. They talk about joy and suffering, justice and oppression. And ultimately all our talk is about the God who called all things into being. To do that preachers must talk about what they see, what they hear, what they feel. And there are times when words are not enough. “When words fall exhausted at the feet of futility, another medium has to be used to translate human experience and expression . . . metaphorical language . . . ‘silent pictures’” (29). Preachers, he suggests, are engaged in the ministry of metaphor.

Yet the book would seem to be misnamed. Smith presents the preacher with not one metaphor of the preacher – dancer, but two. The preacher, he argues, must be first an exegetical escort; and then a doxological dancer. The escort “*is to embrace the text of Scripture in order to usher the hearer into the presence of God for the purpose of transformation*” (35). And the dancer communicates “*the doctrinal message of the Bible with accuracy and ardor so that the exuberant hearer exults in the exalting of God*” (36). Preaching, he argues, must appeal to both the head and the heart. It must have both content and style. It must be “both accurate in its textual interpretation and ardent in its proclamation” (36).

The book explores both of these metaphors. The exegetical escort explores that substance of preaching. Drawing on the insights of a wide-ranging wealth of preachers and scholars, Smith discusses responsible exegesis. From Anselm to Martin Luther to his colleagues at Beeson, Smith helps the preacher understand the way that the Scriptures teach doctrine through the authoritative text. The preacher as dance instructor helps the listener through the “arresting *tune* of style in tension throughout the preaching moment” (39). Smith also draws on his extensive knowledge of and experience as an African American preacher to teach us a set of sermon dance steps. Likewise, he explores the jazz of preaching.

The reader will appreciate Smith’s inclusion of two of his sermons so that they can see that he “practices what he preaches.” Likewise – those of us who teach preaching will appreciate his turns of phrase: “The gospel is inspired . . . but the gospelizer who carries the gospel is *perspired*” (29). Preachers must be both priest and prophet – they must know when to use the “balm or the bomb.” And “I challenge my students to write every word of the manuscript and then to let the Holy Spirit turn the ink of the manuscript into the blood of spiritual passion” (153). These will definitely find their way into the classroom!

Thank you for the reminder that our preaching depends upon what we say and how we say it.

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