

Ronald J. Allen. *Preaching and the Other: Studies of Postmodern Insights*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2009. \$21.99. 144 pp.

A decade ago, Ron Allen produced a book with co-authors Barbara Shires Blaisdell and Scott Black Johnston entitled *Theology for Preaching: Authority, Truth, and Knowledge of God in a Postmodern Ethos* (Abingdon, 1997). The subtitle of that book tried to identify the primary issues that seemed to be in cultural freefall compared to the ways in which previous generations of preachers could approach the task of speaking to a community of God's people. If theological issues of what counts as authority, truth, and even agreed upon knowledge of God were no longer shared as common assumptions, how does one speak meaningfully? What was in flux at that time was the changing paradigm of congregational identity. The task in subtitled theme of thinking about postmodern preaching was to help congregations and preachers come to terms theologically with both the diversity and the emerging pluralism of the people who would listen to the preacher's sermons (*Theology*, 140). Allen and his co-authors sought to invite preachers to relinquish modernist assumptions about authority, truth, and knowledge and be in conversation with the particularities of Christian communities, with the formative direction of their own theological tradition, with their thoughtful engagement of biblical texts and theological topics, learning to relate the emerging dialogue sermonically to a congregations where difference rather than uniformity was becoming the norm. The task was to help congregants to imagine ways that gospel rather than fading visions of congregational stability might be the way forward. The multiple perspectives of the authors was intended to model dialogue as a way of hearing from different voices when considering the task of preaching. The authors all appeared to share an abiding sense of excitement that the flux represented an opportunity to speak to congregations in new and invigorating ways.

In *Preaching and the Other: Studies of Postmodern Insights*, Allen returns to the subject of the implications of postmodern thought for preaching and revisits this illusive term of cultural ferment. The volume comes to its topic more critically, canvassing the broad themes of postmodern thought while acknowledging that that, by its nature, the postmodern identifies but does not provide new vocalities or modalities by which transformation of communities can occur. That would be a modernist rather than a postmodernist concern. For this reason Allen is "less interested in postmodern *approaches* to preaching" (6) and more concerned with how preaching can formatively engage such postmodern concerns as honoring the Other, exposing and critiquing vested interests in biblical texts, understanding how social location affects interpretation and preaching, the need to be willing to cross boundaries of separation (transgression), and—once again—acknowledge the significance of diversity that invites a pluralist orientation to proclaiming the gospel.

In this volume Allen assumes the voice of a working theologian who desires to help readers negotiate these aspects of postmodern thought, grasp how they can influence what occurs in preaching, hear what other working theologians wrestling with these concerns and issues are saying, adopt a clear perspective as to what can be gained (and lost) by engaging these concerns, and then seek to let these concerns shape ways of being faithful to gospel preaching in our time and place. In addition to this, Allen provides illustrative case study examples of efforts to engage these thematics in preaching. The task he places before readers is to explore how consideration of postmodern thought influences the way in which a preaching does theological work adapted to the context of a postmodern ethos in a new millennium.

This book is more challenging to read than the former volume. Allen writes with an assumption that his readers have already encountered aspects of these ideas elsewhere. This volume represents an effort to synthesize these encounters rather than introduce them for the first time. Allen invites preachers to engage the theological and the rhetorical questions of preaching in our cultural context in ways that should give them pause at the complexity of this task. But congregations whose pastors will engage these questions and explore these concerns can only be enriched by this kind of formative task. This is not to say that the book lacks attention to applied concerns. Case study reasoning is always a useful pedagogy and the appended materials such as the deconstruction of social power chart function as practical tools for sermon preparation. But the primary purpose of the book is formative. Allen desires that preachers be willing to attend to the concerns of the Other, the concerns of the text, the concerns of a congregation's particularity, the concern to thoughtfully transgress boundaries that have too often contained us, and the need to acknowledge diversity in ways that acknowledge the plurivocal rather than univocal ways that congregations speak and express faith in God in their practical week-to-week calling of preparing and preaching sermons.

Robert S. Reid
University of Dubuque
Dubuque, IA