

Samuel Wells. *Speaking the Truth: Preaching in a Pluralistic Culture*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008. 196 pages. \$20.

Samuel Wells has served as dean of Duke Chapel since 2004. Before he joined Duke University, he ministered to churches in England as an Anglican priest for fourteen years and published numerous books and articles as a Christian ethicist. This volume is a collection of his speeches, mostly sermons that he preached at Duke Chapel over the course of two years. It comprises eight chapters, speaking the truth about: 1) God, 2) faith, 3) the Bible, 4) discipleship, 5) resurrection, 6) salvation, 7) economics, and 8) sex. Each chapter includes three to four sermons and speeches preceded by a brief outline and background information.

Wells understands that the American church today lives in “chapter three” (8). According to him, the first chapter is the period of the first half of the twentieth century when churches struggled to retain their institutional influence, and the second chapter is the period of a revolt by women and racial minority groups against the privilege and hierarchy of the social structure. However, says Wells, it is hard to define the unique identity of chapter three because it has not yet formed; it is ambiguous and pluralistic in which the first two chapters coexist (6-9). Thus, Wells insists that the task of contemporary Christian preaching be to address realistic issues and concerns emerging from chapter three through profound theological reflection. The sermons and speeches included in this volume are the words in which the author has attempted “to speak the truth in chapter three” (8). The collected words are like precious jewels, illuminating their unique colors and shapes representing different theological themes.

In many of his sermons and speeches, Wells, on the one hand, as an outsider who is relatively new to the United States, analyzes social and ethical issues with critical and prophetic insights which are readily slipped by insiders and develops cross-cultural dialogue by sharing his pastoral experience in England with his American congregation. On the other hand, walking on the spiritual and intellectual journey with his community of faith as the pastor, Wells situates himself as an insider, sensitive to issues and problems emerging in his community and its wider world and tackles with pastoral sensibility and a sense of humor a variety of subjects from the fundamental Christian doctrines such as the concept of God, the Trinity, Christology, heaven, and hell to quite complex and controversial issues such as war, wealth, sex, and homosexuality.

As a gifted scholar and preacher, Wells does not force his listeners into a pigeon-holed view on a certain topic. Instead, most of his sermons and speeches present a multifaceted view of the topic with three to four different perspectives and invite the listeners to think it through in a pluralistic way and connect to the Christian faith by listening to God honestly and truthfully.

This volume is an invaluable resource for both clergy and laity. The theological and ethical topics dealt with in this book are so crucial to other pastors that they will quickly engage in theological conversations with the author. For lay people who are interested in learning Christian theology, this book will be a practical guideline which helps them think theologically about their faith issues and concerns in plain, ordinary language. Furthermore, this book will be cherished by campus ministers and chaplains who are seeking the renewal of their vocational goals. Wells’ statement that his role as dean of Duke Chapel is to “bring the heart of the university to the point of genuine listening” to the heart of God (16) reaffirms the significance of their ministry and encourages them to enjoy speaking the truth to and for their communities as he has done.

Considering that Wells’ congregation is an intellectual community composed of the university’s students, faculty, and staff, it is not surprising that most of his sermons collected in

this volume involve intellectually rigorous arguments. Admittedly, his sermon structure with three to four perspectives or a point-making style is efficient when the preacher aims to clearly deliver his knowledge and theological thought on a topic. Yet, it remains a question whether this structural form is the best way to speak the truth in a pluralistic culture. Plurality is a big challenge for contemporary preachers not only in dealing with theological topics but also in communicating with listeners. How can the preacher appeal more effectively to listeners whose listening process is various? The awareness of plurality in the process of listening challenges the preacher to think creatively about the methods of preaching as well as its substance. In addition, it would have been more educational if the author had used inclusive language and gender-balanced images of God in his sermons and speeches.

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