

Peter K. Stevenson and Stephen I. Wright. *Preaching the Incarnation*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010. 229 pages. \$19.95

Stevenson, a Baptist pastor and tutor in England, and Wright, an Anglican priest and instructor at Spurgeon College, London, have followed on their earlier volume, *Preaching the Atonement* (T. & T. Clark, 2005; Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) with this book on the incarnation. The books follow the same format, commenting on selected biblical passages from the Old and New Testament (though here with a nine to one ratio in favor of the New Testament) having particular significance for the theme of the volume, then offering a sermon by one of the authors or a guest preacher, and commenting briefly on the sermon. The strength of this approach is also its weakness – while it encourages biblical preaching, the volume is purportedly theological in focus, and the specific outline of an incarnational theology is something the reader must distill from the treatment of the biblical passages and the sermons.

The authors have carefully chosen biblical passages fraught with implications for discussion of the incarnation, from Exodus 3:1-5, to the birth and infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke, to Philippians 2:1-11. They have also received sermons from among the most interesting and important preachers on both sides of the Atlantic, including Archbishop Rowan Williams, Thomas Long, William Willimon, and Anna Carter Florence (the only female preacher among the ten sermons in the book).

The book intends active preachers as its core audience, and many in that audience will find it useful and helpful. Lectionary preachers may be frustrated by the framing of texts without regard to the Revised Common Lectionary or Book of Common Prayer Propers. A more serious drawback for all preachers is the treatment of the passages chosen in relative isolation not only from the lectionary context, but from the sermons that follow. For example, the discussion of Philippians 2:1-11 by Stevenson, “The self-emptying Christ,” explores the possible meanings of the Greek term *harpagamos* (grasped? snatched? exploited?, pp. 131-2) and the potential misogynist implications of *kenosis* as developed by theologian Sarah Coakley (pp. 135-6). But the sermon in this chapter, “Going up? Going down?” by Michael Quicke of Northern Baptist Theological Seminary (now Northern Seminary), moves in an entirely different direction. Thus the reader misses an opportunity to see how the homiletical implications of the biblical and theological issues might be worked through. While this may be accepted as an inevitable consequence of using sermons by prominent preachers other than the authors, I find it also true of the sermons by the authors themselves (e.g., chapters six and ten).

The format precludes the kind of sustained theological discussion the topic deserves. As hard as it is for this biblical preacher to say, preaching on the incarnation is not finally a biblical task, but a theological one. It certainly is not a time for expository sermons. Reading this volume, fine as it is in many, many ways, may cause other readers to wonder as I did – what might a book on preaching the incarnation written by some of our leading theologians working in incarnational theology, including such disparate thinkers as Kathryn Tanner, Thomas Torrance and Roberto Goizueta, look like? It is surely unfair to chide the authors for not writing a book different from the one they wrote. But having claimed the title, “Preaching the Incarnation,” and suspecting that another volume, “Preaching Creation” or “Preaching Justification” say, is in the offing, I cannot help but hope for a more explicitly theological focus next time.

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