

William H. Willimon. *Undone by Easter: Keeping Preaching Fresh*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2009. 116 pages. \$14.00.

For those who are regularly called into the pulpit, there is an ever-present burden to keep their preaching fresh. It is to this challenge that William Willimon's most recent book, *Undone by Easter*, speaks. As Willimon himself states in the book's introduction, "There is an undeniable tendency of religious language to diminish over time into platitude and shibboleth." (xi) With a finite number of passages in the biblical text, yet a seemingly unending number of sermons to preach, how does one avoid saying the same thing over and over? Willimon contends that the call of preaching is not to say something new, but to faithfully preach the gospel again and again.

Undone by Easter originates largely from Willimon's dialogue with some of the works of Karl Barth and Soren Kierkegaard. Comprised of only four chapters, this compact work is still charged with keen observations and challenging discussion. Each chapter is followed by a sermon that illustrates to some degree the preceding discussion. The title of the book may seem misleading to some observers, as this is not a book that exclusively address preaching on Easter. Rather the title points toward a central tenet of Willimon's argument, that all preaching is Easter preaching. (29)

The first half of the book provides a sharp critique of the current worldview permeating many pulpits today. Willimon takes many preachers to task for adopting a consumerist approach to preaching the gospel. He rails against the rise of "PowerPoint Preaching" and its attempts to boil the gospel down to comprehensible messages aimed at the uninitiated. Thus preachers today pursue innovation and embrace technology through which they can present lessons that seem relevant, yet they abandon the ancient, powerful message of the gospel. Willimon suggests that it is an impossible pursuit to try and initiate someone into Jesus by means of a message and method that is at odds with his gospel (56).

Chapter Two is particularly powerful in its call for sermons to proclaim a God who enters time and takes time for his creation. Willimon challenges his readers to see that the biblical story, and Easter in particular, is not a moment in history upon which we merely look back and reflect. Instead we are to proclaim the miraculous truth of Easter as reality today. The challenge of any Sunday is to preach, "not only that Jesus Christ is Lord, but that he is Lord *now*." (38) As Willimon argues, "preachers 'make it new' by 'making it now.'" (29)

Willimon later combats the notion that repetition is disastrous in preaching. Preachers need not consume themselves with finding something new to say. Preaching which constantly pursues innovation sees the imparting of some new knowledge as its goal. Instead, preaching ought to aim for the further embracing and embodiment of the biblical message in the lives of its listeners. (66) This goal is far better served by faithful repetition of the gospel. While Willimon does acknowledge some need for innovation, he ultimately reminds his audience that keeping preaching fresh is God's prerogative. It is the activity of the Spirit that is the key to the effectiveness of a sermon. (89) According to Willimon, the call of the preacher is not to succeed in their preaching, but rather to persist in it.

Though this book is heavily concentrated upon the theoretical, Willimon does provide two sections of pragmatic material. (57-58, 87-88) These helpful suggestions

may leave some readers hungry for more tangible direction about how to continually rediscover the freshness of the gospel. Furthermore, much of Willimon's critique of those who elevate homiletical innovation to the place of primacy in preaching is done with a rather broad brush. Consequently, very little space is left to acknowledge the responsibility of the preacher to remain informed and engaged in the ongoing improvement of their capacity to faithfully proclaim the gospel week after week.

Nevertheless, Willimon has provided a valuable contribution to the discussion of how to keep preaching fresh. This volume will serve as a helpful guide to the seasoned minister and the young preacher who seek a way to keep their preaching fresh and proclaim faithfully the gospel in their world, again.

Joshua Ray
Harding University Graduate School of Religion
Memphis, TN