

Timothy Matthew Slemmons. *Groans of the Spirit: Homiletical Dialectics in an Age of Confusion*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2010. 140 pages. \$18.

During a drive through most American communities one will most certainly pass multiple Christian churches with signs announcing that they are “welcoming,” or “open.” They want you to know that they are communities where you may “come as you are” because God loves you just that way. These churches have flung wide their doors and they seek to both proclaim and enact the hospitality and inclusivity they understand are the marks of God they follow.

In his book, *Groans of the Spirit*, Timothy Slemmons argues that while these may be the marks of God, they should not describe our approach to God. Rather, inclusivity and the wide path these churches and preachers are offering are signs of the age of confusion in which we live. Instead, he argues in this book, we should stand before God and one another in a position of penitence, and preachers should be pointing congregants and visitors alike to the narrow path, the “way of suffering, the ‘groaning gate’ *through* which all are called . . . the *only way*” (79).

This volume, part of the Princeton Theological Monograph Series, is a collection of three essays Dr. Slemmons produced during his doctoral studies at Princeton as well as two sermons in which he hopes to provide the reader with examples of the form and content of preaching for which he is arguing. The overarching goal of the volume is to argue for a penitential, “homiletically-concerned dialectics” grounded in the writings of Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth (xvi). We find ourselves in this state of confusion, he believes, because we have ignored what the Spirit is saying to the church and we have rejected the dialectic that reminds us “God is in heaven, and you upon earth” (Eccl 5:2).

The opening essay, “Not Our Ways,” Slemmons seeks to define, once again, Barth’s understanding of *dialectic*, i.e. “what can be known via the human enterprise of historical criticism . . . [and] what can be discerned only through the revelation of Jesus Christ” (2). Slemmons does so with the purpose of providing the student and preacher with an interpretive approach to reading scripture that honors and recognizes *diastasis*, “the infinite qualitative difference between God and human beings” (37). He offers these re-examinations of *dialectic* and *diastasis* with a view to his scholarly project. Slemmons argues that the homiletical community continues to offer “stiff resistance” to Barth’s theological method and understanding of proclamation (3), and he wishes to not only explain and discuss the error but also to champion Barth’s approach.

Slemmons reviews and critiques the writings of two contemporary homiletical scholars, David Buttrick and Ruthanna Hooke, focusing on their objections to Barth. He then, employing Barth himself, offers a rebuttal to their objections. *Diastasis*, he argues must be our homiletical approach because it is “*the* presupposition of the Christian revelation, respecting that transcending all particularistic hermeneutical claims, . . . unless we wrongly ascribe autonomy to ourselves rather than to the Holy Spirit” (37).

Slemmons concludes the essay with a pedagogical exercise to help students recognize the “infinite qualitative difference between God and human beings” (37) when reading scriptures in preparation for writing a sermon.

The second essay compares, contrasts, and critiques Kierkegaard’s understanding of “the infinite qualitative difference between the divine and human” (58), with Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutical approach to contemporaneity. After a very brief summary of *Truth and Method*, Slemmons offers his contention of the inadequacy of hermeneutics and the fact that Gadamer offers no evidence that “Christianity requires the assistance of the Holy Spirit” (71) in the

interpretive method. Here Slemmons overlooks the legitimate difference between philosophical and theological enterprises and ignores the fact that Gadamer was engaged in the former not the latter.

The final essay examines the content and task of preaching. To do so Slemmons discusses three *epistemic* standpoints which are each, in turn, divided into three *tensions*. The content of Christian preaching is done from the standpoints of: from where we speak – the present age, into that which we are called – the age to come, and finally the way of suffering, “the *only* way between these two ages” (79). The way of the cross, Christ crucified, he argues is the only true content of Christian preaching.

Slemmons raises a valid concern. However, as one who is grounded in the tradition of the sacramental/analogical imagination, I can only visit Slemmons’ world. Reading Prof. Slemmons approach did not encourage me to reside in that narrow world. I would rather wish to affirm that God’s grace is so expansive that it allows a much wider path. I do wonder about how broadly his appeal will be. However, while I would not agree with Slemmons’ approach, I was challenged to reflect upon how a “both/and” preacher would reject the vacuity that is his concern.

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