

John C. Holbert and Alyce M. McKenzie. *What Not to Say: Avoiding the Common Mistakes that Can Sink Your Sermon*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011. 160 pages. \$20.

John Holbert and Alyce McKenzie have written the book all homiletics and preachers want to write (and added delightful example videos at <http://holbertmckenzie.wjkbooks.com>, as well). We want to tell people what they are doing wrong, because we have seen it so often (usually in our own sermons). Given the topic, Holbert and McKenzie could have easily gone the route of insult comics, making fun of the foibles of preachers. They instead help us laugh at ourselves and offer good habits to replace our bad ones, with each chapter including both what not to say and what to say in sermons.

Chapter 1 deals with problems in speaking about God and warns against naming God as the direct cause of either troubles or blessings in life and offers instead ways of speaking of God's purposes and presence more deeply.

Chapter 2 deals with the Bible and suggests ways to avoid presenting Scripture as a book of answers, an idol, or a source of lots of quotes to fill out a sermon. In place of such practices is an invitation to focus on God through the text, recovering the language and imagination of the Bible.

Chapter 3 struggles with beginnings, warning against those that distract from the message to come (such as "overcutting" one's self or telling a canned joke or long emotional story). Instead, the book offers helpful ways to use a story in the introduction, create interest, and connect with the congregation's memories and hopes.

Chapter 4 examines four pitfalls in the ways preachers name their congregation: isolating the message from their particular life circumstances, stereotyping that denigrates people, underestimating hearers' ability to listen critically, and compartmentalizing sermons to address only the hearers' intellect, emotions, or behavior. The reverse of these four problems is then proffered.

Chapter 5 deals with sermonic form in the middle of sermons suggesting that preachers avoid multiple, disconnected points. Instead, each segment should pull the hearer into the next, and a number of forms proposed in contemporary homiletics are suggested for doing this.

Chapter 6 discusses the dangers and advantages of speaking about yourself in the sermon. Avoid making yourself the hero/heroine of the sermon or revealing too much about yourself or your family, and instead place yourself in the role of observer or generalize your experience in a way that congregations can relate to it.

Chapter 7 deals with stories more broadly, warning against using them poorly or for the wrong reasons (such as self-therapy). Positive suggestions, on the other hand, deal with ways stories can expand the congregation's experience.

Chapter 8 deals with endings that ruin a sermon by letting it fall flat or trying too hard to tie the sermon up with a bow. Strong endings proposed include symmetry with earlier elements of the sermon, answers to "So now what?", and celebration.

Problems with the book are in the area of style and organization more than content. The book looks at homiletical errors in theological, pastoral, and rhetorical categories, but is not organized by these categories. In some ways, such a neat categorization is impossible because the categories overlap (e.g., advice about what not to say and what to say in stories involves all three categories). Still, the chapters on the beginning, middle, and end of sermons should be placed together (they are separated in chapters 3, 5, and 8). Related is the fact that the chapters were written individually by the two authors. McKenzie wrote chapters 1 (God), 4 (Your

People), 7 (Stories) and 8 (Endings); while Holbert wrote chapters 2 (Bible), 3 (Beginning), 5 (Middle), and 6 (Self). Throughout the book, both have much to offer, but moving back and forth between the different authorial voices and homiletical categories leaves the reader with a somewhat disjointed experience.

Nevertheless, the book and online videos are provocative. Every student of the art of preaching who reads this book will take issue with this element being emphasized too strongly, that one being emphasized too little, or another being ignored altogether, and this is part of the work's strength. Holbert and McKenzie start the conversation, knowing full well that readers will need to keep it going and expand on it. I suggest before reading this book, one be prepared first to repent of some bad homiletical habits and then to fill up the margins and inside book covers with habits you would add to their list.

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