

Charles L. Campbell and Johan H. Cilliers. *Preaching Fools: The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012. 253 pages. \$39.95.

In 2008 Charles Campbell presented a paper entitled “Principalities, Powers, and Fools” at the international conference of *Societas Homiletica* in Copenhagen, Denmark. The respondent was Johan Cilliers. (Both papers were published in *Homiletic*, 33 no. 2, Winter 2008.) So began the collaboration that has given us this remarkable volume.

“The gospel is foolishness. Preaching is folly. Preachers are fools” (1). These opening words become a refrain throughout the book, but, thanks to Paul’s seminal rhetoric in 1 Corinthians, their sentiment is also something of a commonplace among those who think about preaching. What are we to do when even our scandals become canonical—wear smooth with use, like keys that slide too easily into the same old locks, affording entrance to the same old places? Campbell and Cilliers teach us what to do by showing us how to *think more* about the image of the fool and the fool’s way of being and talking. This pedagogy takes the form of an interdisciplinary journey through the expected regions of biblical interpretation, theology, and homiletics, but with surprising and extended detours into the visual arts (including sources as diverse as ancient Roman graffiti, Picasso, and political cartoons), cultural history (the jester, the clown, the trickster), literary criticism (Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, Flannery O’Connor), South African history and politics, and philosophy of language. Along the way we learn that throughout history and across cultures, from Symeon the Holy Fool to the iimbongi of South Africa, a guild of misfits labors (or rather, plays) to resist the “closed seriousness” (42) of the world as we know it. Armed with nothing more than “hermeneutical dexterity” (109) and a peculiar but profound form of linguistic competence, these bizarre artisans go about their work of “melting the world” (Chapter Four) that tends to congeal around ordinary talk with its subtle but relentless bid to manage difference and enforce hierarchy. The authors organize their analysis of this foolish activity around four themes: interruption, liminality, perception, and discernment (153).

For this reader, the final chapter, entitled “The Rhetoric of Folly,” was especially rewarding because it explores in detail the difference the analytical tools developed in the interdisciplinary exploration described above can make in sorting out the actual language of the sermon. The authors argue that an “iron theology” of settled propositions and certain answers manifests in the pulpit as “iron rhetoric” that is too often a thinly veiled attempt to use God talk to obscure unjust power arrangements, affirm the inevitability of the status quo, and manage dissent. They supply several striking examples of such dissimulation and manipulation taken from sermons preached in defense of Apartheid. The skillful and detailed unmasking of this “preaching” fascinates even as it horrifies. Readers may find themselves challenged to think more carefully about what their own sermons (and those of their students) are *doing*. On the other hand, the foolishness of the gospel begets a rhetoric of folly that deploys metaphor, ambiguity, and irony in a bid to disrupt the givenness of the world, and provoke openness to an alternative. In addition to the expected biblical examples of this kind of talk, a diverse collection of non-biblical instances are explored, including fascinating examples from the preaching of “the contemporary jester-prophet Desmond Tutu” (214).

This is an ambitious and wide-ranging book with broad appeal. Homileticsians will welcome this work because it expands our repertoire of images of the preacher with a newcomer both generative and timely. In the twilight of modernity and amid the ruins of Christendom, some may be eager to imagine the preacher as an orienting voice in the midst of unsettling change. Campbell and Cilliers have the opposite instinct, and in their capable hands, the Fool

makes a robust and necessary conversation partner for the Herald, the Witness, the Storyteller, and others. Likewise, preachers who want to think hard about the subtle ways sermonic language functions to legitimate or challenge received understandings of the world will appreciate both the argument and its skillful display through many compelling examples. Finally, this book is also for theologians and students of religion who want to ground their reflection in a rich engagement with embodied practices, particular linguistic performances, and a diverse array of cultural artifacts. Anyone interested in the ways religious language shapes identity and constructs the imaginative worlds we inhabit will find this book a helpful conversation partner.

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