

Angela M. Yarber. *The Gendered Pulpit: Sex, Body, and Desire in Preaching and Worship*. Cleveland, TN: Parson's Porch Books, 2013. 151 pages. \$18.95.

Angela Yarber has shared a precious gift with us in her book, *The Gendered Pulpit: Sex, Body, and Desire in Preaching and Worship*. This gift is less of a scholarly treatment on how human sexuality—and LGBTQ sexuality in particular—bisects Christian worship spaces than it is a manifesto for justice. In her call to “gender the pulpit toward justice,” Yarber invites us to consider how gender and sexuality play out in the preacher’s life as well as in the preacher’s proclamation. Throughout, she displays a rare blend of pastoral transparency and liturgical awareness—in fact her willingness to share the intimate fears, joys, triumphs, and setbacks in her own ministry do much to advance the central preoccupation of her book.

Writing as both a scholar of art and religion and an ordained Baptist minister, Yarber’s intended audience are those who have been marginalized on account of their gender and/or sexuality (12). The book reads as an extension of her pastoral ministry—embodying her unique gifting, calling, and orientation by God for the sake of those marginalized by society as well as the church.

The book follows a clear structure, with chapters that include personal testimony followed by biblical, historical, and theological treatments on the chapter’s theme, and ending with practical application/examples on how each topic might play out liturgically and homiletically. Appropriately, she focuses on her own Baptist denomination when examining the pejorative history of its (mis)treatment of women (preachers) and the different kinds of Baptists who have supported or denounced the welcoming and affirming movement.

Gendering the pulpit toward justice is multivalent. The practice hovers between discursive and non-discursive acts involving “personal narratives, scripture, history, theology, [and] inclusive language” and calling us to “recognize that our gendered, sexualized, and racialized bodies preach a message before we even open our mouths” (48-9). Or, as she puts it a bit later, “gender[ing] the pulpit in the direction of justice [is] for my sexuality to step boldly with me into the pulpit and proclaim the Word with my sexualized body” (52). Later, she adds that gendering the pulpit in the direction of justice also “involves queering preaching and worship” (69).

From a scholarly perspective the book was rather disappointing. The text is littered with many typographical and grammatical errors, which grate like nails on the reader’s chalkboard. More substantively, Yarber breezes over how racial identity impacts pulpit proclamation, lumping racialized bodies in with sexualized and gendered bodies (33), and she fails to acknowledge the nuanced scholarly perspectives that divide lesbian and feminist scholars. Further still, most of her scholarly interlocutors are somewhat out of date (many of her sources are from the 1970’s and 1980’s) or curiously peripheral to current debates on these themes (the exception being her chapter on dance). These shortcomings are rectified a bit by Yarber’s strong and compelling work on the body and its power in liturgical and sermon dance, as well as by her candid and much needed discussion of eating disorders.

As for teaching preaching, I was frustrated that Yarber offered scant advice on how gendered/queer preaching might disrupt or challenge traditional sermon methods. She does recapitulate a way of reading Scripture from a queer perspective and how a gendered/queer understanding of the incarnation can shape sermon discourse; but nowhere do we find how Yarber understands gendering the pulpit to affect sermon development and delivery per se. She advocates the importance of gender inclusive language and candid testimony on the part of

LGBTQ preachers, but as with theology and queer hermeneutics these merely form the *content* of sermons and liturgies. How does a preacher's gender and sexuality call for a reexamination of sermonic/liturgical *forms* and *delivery styles*? These limited approaches seem to miss an important opportunity for homiletical critique.

These critiques notwithstanding, Yarber has written an important book and its greatest contributions to the homiletical and liturgical guilds, as well as the church, are her radical transparency and passion for breaking the millennia of silence about matters of gender and sexuality in sermonic and liturgical discourse. Liturgical theologians and homileticians will find her insights—particularly her harrowing personal narratives—welcome supplements to more traditional texts. Here we have one female, lesbian, Baptist! preacher brave enough to let us read her life as a text written against injustice and oppression—a welcome gift to be sure!

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