

O. C. Edwards Jr., with James Dunkly. *A Nation with the Soul of a Church: How Christian Proclamation Has Shaped American History*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2013. 366 pages. \$52.20.

In his classic work, *A Brief History of Preaching*, Swedish church historian Yngve Brilioth referred to American preaching as “an impenetrable forest to the outsider.” That impenetrability becomes especially evident when one attempts to write a succinct history of preaching as it has been done for the more than four centuries of Christian religious practice in North America. Given the complexity of the American religious landscape and the multiplicity of Christian traditions that have come to define American religion, any attempt at a synthesis of the act of proclamation is a daunting if not impossible task. If anyone is equal to that task, it is O. C. Edwards. The retired Episcopal priest and former president and professor of preaching at Seabury-Western Theological Seminary dedicated his many decades of scholarship to historical interpretations of the word written in scripture (*How Holy Writ Was Written*) as well as the word proclaimed (*A History of Preaching*). With the publication of *A Nation with the Soul of a Church* he has turned his attention specifically to the shape and influence of preaching in the United States.

Edwards locates the assumption of his survey of American preaching in the conviction that the United States has, at its core, the “soul of a church,” as English author G. K. Chesterton once observed. That conviction has been confirmed again and again through the centuries since Protestantism was brought to the American colonies. French political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville made much of the “habits of the heart” that he observed while traveling through the young United States in the 1830s. Almost two hundred years later and despite the recent decline in religious participation among Americans, polls continue to report what is the highest percentage of religious affiliation—most of that Christian affiliation—of any Western nation. Given such a history of religious commitment, it seems obvious to look at sermons, a (if not *the*) central element of most Protestant worship and the major means of communicating the faith, as the primary instruments for shaping America’s faith as well as its values and behaviors.

In order to discern the role that preaching has played in shaping American history, Edwards looks at nineteen preachers who represent the sweep of American Protestant history from the settlement of the Massachusetts Bay Colony to the first presidential campaign of Barack Obama. The essays on each of the nineteen preachers are primarily biographical, providing interesting religious, cultural, and political backdrops for the work and, more specifically, sermons of these preachers. The biographical and contextual material is written in a very engaging style, offering interesting vignettes of figures who had significant influence on the shape of American religion and life. Within each biographical portrait, Edwards offers either an in-depth “exegesis” of a particularly influential, even transformative—and sometimes infamous—sermon given by the preacher or, where that preacher’s influence was more diffuse than might be captured by one sermon, a more general depiction of the preacher’s sermonic style. Rather than pointing to homiletical changes, Edwards identifies sermons preached at critical turning points in American history, both secular and religious, and assesses the aftermath or ripple effects of each sermon, whether for good or ill. Reading through the book thus provides the reader with a broad but interesting and helpful understanding of how particular preachers and sermons have shaped American belief and, consequently, American culture.

The challenge, of course, of providing such a historical narrative is deciding which voices to include. That is where the “forest” of American preaching, as Brilioth called it, becomes

particularly dense if not impenetrable. Edwards' narrative follows a clear stream of what is usually identified as mainline Protestantism with a few departures for dissenters (Anne Hutchinson), evangelicals (Billy Sunday, Billy Graham), and non-Protestants (Father Coughlin). Most of the "usual suspects" of the American preaching tradition can be found here: familiar names such as Jonathan Edwards, Henry Ward Beecher, Harry Emerson Fosdick, and Billy Graham. They are, indeed, the preachers who represented the public face of American preaching, those who were in prominent positions and whose pulpits and platforms gave them access to large groups of listeners, many of whom were socially and politically influential. Their sermons were preached in some of the best-known urban churches, read in some of the most popular newspapers, and, by the twentieth century, heard on radio and watched on television.

While *A Nation with the Soul of a Church* offers readers an interesting and engaging survey of influential American preachers and sermons, there are a number of things readers will *not* find in this book. The book is not attentive to homiletical changes through the centuries, focusing on discrete sermon moments rather than shifting patterns of preaching. It also provides descriptions of the sermons addressed rather than texts of those sermons. Readers will want to supplement this book with a collection of American sermons. Perhaps most notably absent, however, is the multiplicity of voices that make up the tapestry of American preaching. Only one woman (Anne Hutchinson) and two African Americans (Martin Luther King, Jr., and Jeremiah Wright) are included. Edwards acknowledges that lacuna in his introduction to the book, making the case that his choice of preachers reflects not "what should have been but . . . what actually was" (xi) and hoping that the injustices of that reality will become evident. But a book such as this by such a highly-regarded historian could help to rectify those injustices by identifying influential voices outside the "mainstream," especially in light of recent scholarship that has proved the presence of female and African American preachers, among others, in American Protestantism in greater numbers and influence than the traditional narrative suggests.

Despite its limitations, Edwards' work stands as a reminder of those who have traveled this way before us and navigated successfully the complex relationship between church and state that continues to define our political life and discourse in the twenty-first century. It also stands as testimony to the enduring power of faithful proclamation in any age of the church.

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