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The Other Side of the Pulpit: Listener's Experiences of Helpful Preaching

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Abstract: *The Australian National Church Life Survey identifies churches where the preaching is reported as "very helpful to my life." Six case studies of these churches were undertaken. Observation, interviews, focus groups, and a survey were used in each case to identify salient descriptors. A number of features common to all cases are discernible including, practicality, humor, passion, boldness, intellectual stimulation and a simple structure. However, the research also confirms that preaching is a highly contextual activity and that preachers need to adapt their style to their particular context. A continuum of helpful preaching styles related to context is developed.*

Introduction

Allen reports that since the 1960s, scholarship in preaching has spoken about "taking a turn to the listener." This involves a shift from focusing on the preacher to how congregations listen to sermons.¹ While there has been some social scientific research regarding the listener's experiences of preaching,² the dominant influence in the development of preaching has remained theoretical and theological. This theoretical approach is not without merit, but it does downplay a crucial element of the preaching event—the experience of the listener.

A number of research projects have focused on sermon *effectiveness* from the listener's perspective. In 2000, a group of researchers through Christian Theological Seminary carried out empirical studies of people who listen to sermons to find out what they find most engaging or disengaging.³ The project used in-depth individual and group interviews with 263 lay persons and 32 preachers in 28 Midwestern U.S. congregations. The questions used in the interviews were along the lines of three major categories from Aristotle's Rhetoric: logos, ethos, and pathos.

- How do listeners find ideas engaging (logos)?
- How does the congregation's perception of the character of the preacher affect their hearing of the message (ethos)?
- How do feelings generated by the sermon play into the ways listeners receive messages (pathos)?

Based on this research Mulligan and Allen identify⁴ the twelve most frequently mentioned qualities that listeners say engage them in sermons. Many of the themes that emerged from the study were already in the literature of preaching:

- The sermon should deal in a foundational way with what God offers and asks.
- Preachers should live in a manner consistent with the church's deepest theological convictions.

¹ Ronald J Allen and Mary Alice Mulligan, "Listening to Listeners: Five Years Later," *Homiletic* 34, no. 2 (2009): 4.

² See David Rietveld, "A Survey of the Phenomenological Research of Listening to Preaching," *Homiletic* 38, no. 2 (2013); Marianne Gaarden and Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen, "Listeners as Authors in Preaching-Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives," *Homiletic* 38, no. 1 (2013); Clifton F Guthrie, "Quantitative Empirical Studies of Preaching: A Review of Methods and Findings," *Journal of Communication & Religion* 30, no. 1 (2007).

³ For a summary see Allen and Mulligan, "Listening to Listeners: Five Years Later."

⁴ Mary Alice Mulligan and Ronald J. Allen, *Make the Word Come Alive: Lessons from Laity* (Chalice: St. Louis, 2006).

- Preachers should speak from their own experience.
- The sermon should center in the Bible and make the biblical material come alive for the listener.
- The message needs to relate in a practical way to the lives of the listening communities.
- The sermon should be short (although the meaning of short varies from congregation to congregation).
- Preachers need to be clear and easy to understand.
- Congregations are eager for sermons to help them make theological and ethical sense of the range of life's issues.
- Listeners do not want the preacher to dumb down the sermon; rather, they want to wrestle meaningfully with important issues.
- Preachers ought to be specific in helping congregations draw out the implications of the Bible and their deepest theological convictions.
- Preachers need to be lively when they embody the sermon, talking expressively as well as loudly enough to be heard, connecting with the congregation through eye contact, and speaking with appropriate movements of the hands, arms, and body.

Another research project on listener's experiences of preaching was conducted by Lori Carrell.⁵ Based on her research with 5,000-plus listeners Carrell identified the factors related to sermons most likely to succeed:

- Ask for Change: Sermons are built around a clearly stated change based goal that emanates from Scripture.
- Organized for Listening: Organization of ideas is key to the memory process.
- Well Delivered: Sermons are delivered in a way that authentically communicates relationship and emotion.
- Integrate Listeners' Perspectives: Content is connected to the listeners. (The listeners describe this as "relevancy.")

Although this research has been very helpful in understanding why listeners engage with preaching, the research described in this paper brings a more nuanced approach by asking listeners of *superior* preaching what things they appreciated about the preaching. This means the participants in the research have a more informed understanding of what superior preaching is because they are regularly experiencing it. This research is also a more "grounded" methodology in allowing listeners to describe their experiences of helpful preaching in their own language rather than through a pre-formed survey. Finally, it is an opportunity to validate the findings of Carrell, Allen, and Mulligan in a different context.

Methodology

The methodology for this research is a series of case studies.⁶ A case study is "an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident, and in which multiple sources of evidence are used."⁷ The case study is the preferred strategy when "how," or "why" questions are being asked. Hence case study is appropriate for this research because it seeks to

⁵ Lori Carrell, "Sermons Most Likely to Succeed," *Rev* May/June (2007): 71-73.

⁶ Approval for this research was given by Malyon College Human Research Ethics Committee.

⁷ Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1994). 94.

answer the “how,” or “why” questions related to effective preaching in real-life contexts. The advantage of survey research with large samples is breadth, whereas its disadvantage is lack of depth. For the case study, the opposite is true. Both breadth and depth are necessary for a sound development of knowledge about preaching.

In order to identify churches with superior preaching, the research drew upon the database of the Australian National Church Life Survey (NCLS). The NCLS sampled 3,000 local churches from 22 Christian denominations including over 260,000 adult attenders (aged 15+) and 6,000 leaders (lay and clergy) in 2011. The survey included the following question:

How often do you experience the following during church services at this congregation?:

23. Preaching very helpful to my life? (Always / Usually / Sometimes / Rarely or never)

The NCLS wrote to the 50 churches in Australia that scored the highest on this question in the 2011 NCLS asking if they were willing to participate in research on their preaching.⁸ Selection of these 50 churches was based on:

- Congregations being above the 90th percentile on the “preaching helpful” question (more than 47% of people had indicated “Always” on this question).
- The rating on the preaching being higher than the rating on the other similar “How often do you experience the following during church services” questions.
- At least 50 forms returned.

The composition of these “top 50” churches was:

- Anglican (Episcopalian) 18
- C3 (Christian City Church) 9
- Baptist 5
- Australian Christian Churches (Assembly of God) 3
- Uniting 3
- CRC Churches International 2
- Independent 2
- Lutheran 2
- Presbyterian 2
- Apostolic 1
- Christian Outreach Centers 1
- Churches of Christ 1
- Vineyard Fellowship Australia 1

Fifteen churches responded to the invitation to participate.⁹ Of these the researcher visited six on the basis of their denominational and geographical diversity and the ongoing tenure of the same preacher since 2011.

The methodology assumed some equivalence between the concepts of “effectiveness in preaching” and “helpfulness in preaching.” Some may question whether “helpfulness” is the ideal criteria for measuring the quality of a sermon. However, if we are to take seriously the

⁸ Thanks to Sam Sterland from the NCLS for his work in this regard. For more about the Core Qualities identified by the NCLS see John Bellamy et al., *Enriching Church Life* (Adelaide: Openbook, 2006).

⁹ Unfortunately no women preachers responded to the invitation to participate in the research.

notion of “taking a turn to the listener,” then the notion of “helpfulness” becomes a compelling measure of the effectiveness of preaching. If a sermon is not helpful to a listener, its effectiveness must be questioned, no matter how theologically or homiletically informed.

At each church the researcher:

- Observed the worship services.
- Conducted one or two focus groups discussing with the participants their experience of the preaching in their church.
- Invited the church attenders to complete a survey on the preaching.
- Interviewed the major preacher in order to better understand their philosophy of preaching.

Worship Services

The researcher attended one or more worship services to not only experience a typical sermon, but to understand the context in which the sermon was delivered. He noted various cultural artifacts that shed light on the culture of the churches in which this effective preaching was situated.

Focus Groups

The researcher conducted one or two focus groups in each church. The groups ranged in size from eight to 16 people with a range of age, gender, and ethnicity. In each case the focus groups reflected the general make-up of the churches they represented.

The compelling concern in collecting this data was giving the participants the opportunity to express in their *own language* their *own experience* of the preaching. For this reason the primary question for each group was: “What adjectives would you use to describe the preaching at this church?” The researcher recorded each of the adjectives nominated by members of the groups. When no more adjectives were forthcoming the group went back over the list answering the question “What did you mean when you used the word ... to describe the preaching?”

Notes were taken during the focus groups with more than 200 pages of transcript collected. The sessions were also recorded to subsequently confirm the accuracy of the notes.

Survey

The qualities of engaging and successful sermons identified by Carrell, Allen, and Mulligan formed the basis of the survey. In addition, questions were designed to measure whether preaching techniques like induction, narrative, interaction or use of multimedia were a significant factor in the helpfulness of the preaching. Finally, the researcher contacted preachers and academics from different Christian traditions in order to generate a better understanding of the dynamics of preaching in those different contexts. The insights of these “experts” were incorporated into the survey as well.

In an adaptation of Allen and Mulligan’s use of the categories of Aristotle’s Rhetoric the survey asked:

What, for you personally, is the most helpful part of the preaching at this church? (Please circle one):

- The content of the sermons
- The character of the preacher
- The power of the sermons

The survey required participants to prioritize the factors helpful in the preaching through the use of forced choice questions. The survey was only made available after the focus groups to ensure it did not “contaminate” the participant’s language. More than 45 surveys were completed by a representative sample from each congregation.

Interview

In each case the major preachers were asked a series of questions including:

- How would you describe your philosophy of preaching?
- How do you go about preparing for a sermon?
- Who have been the major influences on your preaching?
- What advice would you give to other preachers?

Six Cases of Helpful Preaching

The following six cases of helpful preaching are arranged as a continuum based upon the context in which the preaching is embedded. The contexts at one end of the continuum are characterized by an emphasis on the content of the sermon. The contexts at the other end of the continuum are characterized by an emphasis on the preacher. This continuum will be explained more fully in the conclusion.

Preacher A

Anglican, South Australia.

This church was planted in 2010 and had grown to 350 people. It is a “low” church (evangelical) Anglican (Episcopalian) church. Most evangelical Anglican churches in Australia are in the reformed tradition, placing a heavy emphasis on the importance of preaching and teaching the Scriptures. This emphasis is apparent in Preacher A’s church. The church services and the weekly small group Bible studies are structured around the theme of the sermon. The culture of the church places heavy emphasis on the reading, teaching, and preaching of Scripture and the sermons reflect these values. Preacher A is the founding minister and church planter.

The Preacher Speaks

The basis of Preacher A’s philosophy of preaching is that “God speaks today and we hear him through the Scriptures.” He aims to train people in how to read the Scriptures themselves by showing how they are relevant to today. Preacher A intentionally puts something of himself in each sermon to “let people in” to his world. These insights will often be humorous.

The preaching plan for a year is set in the October of the previous year. He normally takes 12-15 hours to prepare a sermon. “The sermon is not ready to be presented until you can say in one sentence what the passage is about.” Once this is in place he writes a full manuscript that he takes into the pulpit. His sermons run for a maximum of 30 minutes or 5,400 words. When writing he seeks to bring application at several points in the sermon keeping two to four kinds of people in mind. He aims to pose a question in the introduction to engage the congregation. The sermon has five to six points that are produced in a bulletin insert and/or projected on the screen.

Preacher A describes his preaching as “Very illustrative – too much so, my colleagues would tell me.” In selecting illustrations he is careful to draw on experiences (rather than knowledge) which overlap with the experiences of the congregation. Major influences include Warwick de Jersey, Chris Edwards, Peter Adam, and David Cook. He listens to lots of sermon podcasts from sources such as All Souls St Helens, UK.

His advice to other preachers includes, don't go to too many Bible passages, show you live in the same world as the people you are speaking to, and let people know you love them by the way you preach.

The Listeners Speak

When asked what adjectives they would use to describe the preaching at their church participants identified the following:

Adjective	Sample of Elaborative Statements
founded in Scripture	"No misunderstanding of where the sermon comes from" "Encourages us to explore the Bible for ourselves"
expository	"Works through a passage and the whole Bible"
clear	"You are never in doubt about what he wants to say"
structured	"Well prepared" "Logical sequence" "No fluff or tangents" "Although structured you don't know how it will end"
relevant	"The preaching program is deliberate but links to current events" "Finds the relevancy in every passage"
challenging	"Faithfully preaches the hard parts" "Not softened"
engaging	"Always a hook to get you in" "Self-depreciating humor"
practical	"Intellectual but communicated very practically"
gifted	"Articulate" "Well-chosen illustrations"
faithful	"Consistent" "No rude surprises" "Spends lots of time in preparation"
accurate	"Always refers back to the original language of Scripture" "Breadth of investigation"
encouraging	"I never feel 'preached at'" "Always 'us' and 'we'"
inclusive	"Always a challenge for Christian and non-Christian"

In describing what was most helpful in the preaching at their church the survey respondents indicated:

- The sermons give me a deeper understanding of the Bible (75% of respondents)
- The sermons relate in a practical way to our lives (50%)
- The sermons help make theological and ethical sense of the range of life's issues (45%)
- The sermons are well structured (36%)

The listeners also indicated that the preacher generally starts with a Bible passage and then explains and applies the meaning, focuses on only one passage from the Bible in the sermon, brings illustrations from a wide variety of sources, spends more time explaining the Bible than applying it, comes across as an expert in the Bible, and is generally consistent in his presentation.

The most helpful part of the preaching is the content of the sermon (92% of respondents) as opposed to the power of the sermons (5%) or character of the preacher (3%).

Preacher B

Anglican, New South Wales

Preacher B has been the Senior Minister of this Anglican Church located in a lower socio-economic area in the outer western Suburbs of Sydney since 2007. Although in different states, Preacher B's preaching is experienced in much the same way as that of his Anglican colleague, Preacher A.

The Preacher Speaks

The basis of his philosophy of preaching is that "the Word will move people better than you will." If people see clearly that something is scriptural then they will be more convicted than if it is just a well-put assertion. He also assumes that people are filled with the Holy Spirit. Preacher B seeks to preach as though he was talking to people in a conversation. Because Christianity is grace-based, he believes the application must start with feeding the desire to please God. When preaching narrative he works hard to get people into the world of the story including smells, tastes, and moods. No matter how challenging or negative a passage is, Preacher B always seeks to leave people glad they are Christians. He works hard at transitions between major points because people need to know when one point is finished before moving to the next. "This aids clarity, and clarity is what enables people to listen well and grasp truths."

Preacher B assumes non-Christians will hear his sermon, but focuses on the Christians. He uses visuals/PowerPoint as outlines but doesn't give away where the sermon is going. He deliberately does not "dumb the sermons down." He believes in giving people depth and richness by explaining complex concepts well. However, he admits that you have to work hard to do this. Preacher B also generally preaches systematically through the Bible a book at a time. It takes him about 10 to 12 hours to prepare for a sermon and he takes a full manuscript into the pulpit. Preacher B acknowledges that the major influences on his preaching have been John Chapman, David Cook, John Piper, Phillip Jensen, and Mike Raiter. He aims to preach for about 35 minutes.

The Listeners Speak

When asked what adjectives they would use to describe the preaching at their church participants identified the following:

Adjective	Sample of Elaborative Statements
true	"It comes from the Bible" "I can see it in his life as well"
accurate	"He knows his stuff"
biblical	"We are encouraged to pick up the Bible" "He gives cross-references"
applicable	"I feel I am back there at that time ... but it fits into my life today" "He goes out of his way to find application"
understandable	"He doesn't use jargon" "He doesn't 'dumb-it-down' – he makes it understandable and current"
encouraging	"He knows us very well" "He speaks as a fellow struggler" "You don't go home feeling you are the worst person in the"

	world”
engaging	“The introduction is always engaging” “The PowerPoint slides are engaging”
honest	“He uses examples from his own life” “The man you see preaching is pretty well the same man you talk to afterwards”
challenging	“He is not afraid to address the hard issues” “It is personal, as though he is talking about each one of us”
accessible	“Relaxed presentation style”
entertaining	“Usually a funny bit somewhere”
thorough	“He doesn’t skip over things”
relevant	“He makes the point early in the sermon, ‘Why this is relevant?’” “He tackles the tough subjects”
clear	“Well explained. Good diction. It flows together. You don’t get lost.” “He has clearly put a lot of time into it – he has thought it through”
deep	“You can see the appreciation he has for a biblical theology”
thought provoking	“Asks questions as we go”
basic	“He doesn’t complicate things to remind you he is “the teacher”” “Any stage in the Christian life you can come here and understand”
faithful to Scriptures	

In describing what was most helpful in the preaching at their church the survey respondents indicated:

- The sermons relate in a practical way to our lives (75%)
- The sermons give me a deeper understanding of the Bible (73%)
- The sermons help make theological and ethical sense of the range of life’s issues (40%)
- The sermons wrestle meaningfully with difficult issues (40%)

They also indicated that the preacher generally starts with a Bible passage and then explains and applies the meaning, focuses on one passage from the Bible, brings illustrations from a wide variety of sources, spends more time explaining than applying the Bible, comes across as an expert in the Bible and is creative in his presentation. The most helpful part of the preaching for most people is the content of the sermons (63%) and the power of the sermons (33%).

Preacher C *Baptist, Queensland.*

Preacher C has been the solo pastor in this semi-rural shire on the western edge of the greater Brisbane area since 2004. The congregation has a significant proportion of farmers and retirees.

The Preacher Speaks

Preacher C describes his philosophy of preaching as to center on the Word of God but also ensure relevancy. The aim of the preaching is to bring a response. He particularly works on a good start (to capture people) and a good finish (to leave them with something to take home.) His structure is expository: he allows the passage to shape the structure and uses first person narratives where appropriate.

Preacher C normally takes between eight and 12 hours to prepare a sermon. He aims to preach for 20 to 30 minutes. He takes a full manuscript into the pulpit although recently he has been “ad-libbing” more frequently. If the sermon has a complex structure he will put the outline on PowerPoint.

Preacher C identifies Peter Francis, John MacArthur, Chuck Swindall, Mark Driscoll, and John Sweetman as major influences on his preaching. His advice for preachers includes understanding your audience, allowing the passage to impact yourself and taking people on a journey of understanding.

The Listeners Speak

When asked what adjectives they would use to describe the preaching at their church participants identified the following:

Adjective	Sample of Elaborative Statements
consistent	“Not hot one week and cold the next”
passionate	“Doesn’t leave you flat” “He lives his song” “He is not personally unaffected by his preaching”
biblical	“Preaches on the passage first” “Doesn’t just pull out one-liners”
relevant	“Not afraid to deal with an issue”
true	“Finds out the truth of a passage and puts it in the sermon”
interesting	“He has got feeling in his sermons” “He varies his voice” “Uses a story to get people interested” “He doesn’t mind a bit of interaction” “Sometimes he acts it out”
practical	“There is quite a diverse group in the congregation but he is able to get alongside everyone and draws applications”
fundamental	“Theologically conservative”
foundational	“Rarely a sermon where he doesn’t bring it back to the Gospel”
simple	“Uses language we can understand”
introspective	“He examines his own heart before he preaches”
challenging	“How do we take this out into the world?”
honest	“He will admit to his own shortcomings”
humorous	

In describing what was most helpful in the preaching at their church the survey respondents indicated:

- The sermons give me a deeper understanding of the Bible (44%)
- The life of the preacher corresponds to what they preach (40%)
- The sermons relate in a practical way to our lives (40%)
- The preacher is passionate about his/her message (40%)

They also indicated that the preacher generally starts with a Bible passage and then explains and applies the meaning, brings illustrations from a wide variety of sources, spends more time applying the Bible than explaining it, comes across as a fellow learner of the Bible and is creative in his presentation. The most helpful part of the preaching is the content of the sermons

(38%), although the power of the sermons (36%) and the character of the preacher (27%) were significant factors for many.

Preacher D

Lutheran, Queensland

This Lutheran Church conducts two morning worship services reflecting the two stages of the church's history. The church has a long tradition but in recent years has relocated and established a large school with which it shares the property. The first congregation, meeting at 7:15 AM, is largely older and more traditional. The second service, meeting at 9:30 AM, is younger and much larger.

The Preacher Speaks

Like Preacher A, Preacher D indicated that his preaching was not typical of that in his denomination. Preacher D says that the basis of his preaching is to communicate the gospel in every sermon. However, in contrast to many Lutheran preachers who seek to preach single point homilies, his preaching "digs more deeply" into Scripture. As a result he seeks not to "dumb down" the sermon but to explain the complex concepts. Some sermon series are thematic while others explore books of the Bible. Sermons are planned well ahead and he works consistently on sermons throughout the week collecting ideas for a number of weeks ahead.

When structuring the sermon he uses Buttrick's "moves"¹⁰ but utilizes them flexibly. He likes to begin with questions and leave people with questions and talk about real-life throughout the sermon. He uses interaction extensively to keep people active and utilizes imagery and PowerPoint. In preparing the sermon he asks questions like "Does this matter to them?" "Does this have jargon?" "How is this helpful?"

Preacher D normally takes about 10 hours per week in sermon preparation and writes out a full manuscript but only takes an outline into the pulpit. He identifies the major influences on his preaching as Mark Sayers, Rick Warren, Rob Bell, Luther, and Spurgeon. His advice for preachers includes: focus on your content first, before you focus on the mode of delivery or how to grab attention. If the Word hasn't done something in you don't expect it to do something in others. Don't read an essay from the pulpit-know and believe the message yourself. A sermon is not an essay and does not contain scientific axioms in all places and all time-it is a living/breathing part of a community.

The Listeners Speak

When asked what adjectives they would use to describe the preaching at their church participants identified the following:

Adjective	Sample of Elaborative Statements
challenging	"He says, 'Take another look at the text; take another look at yourself'" "He unsettles us"
understandable	
engaging	"Establishes common points of reference, for example movies" "Vulnerable – he bares himself willingly" "It is not just him telling us and talking at us, he really engages everyone with how passionate about it he is which makes you want to listen

¹⁰ David G Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

	and know more and explore it with him”
relevant	“Starts where people are at”
simplistic	“He is able to break a complex subject into simple terms” “Structure is transparent” “He uses dot points” “Anchors it around the graphics he uses”
theologically based	“He takes us back in time and makes it relevant to today and then he brings it back to our lives” “He really relates the Old Testament to the New Testament”
grounded	“He draws from his own experiences” “He has a certain woundedness which he is willing to share” “We feel we are on the same level”
passionate	
biblical	“Theologically solid at the centre but soft at the edges”
humorous	“If there is no laughter on a Sunday he feels he has failed”
compassionate	“Above all else it is about God’s grace”
visual	“You can see his train of thought through the slides”
interactive	“He is always throwing it back to us, asking questions” “He allows us to turn to each other and engage on a point”
purposeful	“He plans the sermons a long way ahead” “The whole service is integrated with the sermon”.

In describing what was most helpful in the preaching at their church the survey respondents indicated:

- The sermons relate in a practical way to our lives (56%)
- The preacher is passionate about his/her message (44%)
- The preacher speaks from his/her own experience (38%)
- The sermons give me a deeper understanding of the Bible (33%)

They also indicated that the preacher generally starts with a topic and then brings a Biblical perspective to it, refers to a variety of passages from the Bible, brings illustrations from a wide variety of sources, spends more time applying the Bible than explaining it, comes across as a fellow learner of the Bible and is creative in his presentation. Although the content of the sermons (46%) is the most helpful part of the preaching for most, the power of the sermons (37%) was also identified as helpful by many.

As we move towards the “preacher” focused end of the context continuum the preachers are marked by two descriptors: passionate and Spirit-empowered. There is a greater emphasis on the character, authority, and presentation of the preacher.

Preacher E

Assemblies of God, New South Wales

Preacher E has been the Senior Pastor of this large and ethnically diverse (more than 800 people from 50 different nationalities) Pentecostal church in the northern suburbs of Sydney since January 1996. Preacher E describes himself as a typical “old-style Pentecostal” preacher characterized by passion and an openness to the movement of the Holy Spirit during the preaching. It is also marked by having a “gospel appeal” at the end of every sermon. However, he also notes that in Pentecostal circles he is seen as “a Bible teacher.”

The Preacher Speaks

In describing his philosophy, Preacher E advocates “Factor E” (Energy, Enthusiasm and Excitement) as values of the whole church including the preaching. However he also identifies the centrality of the Word as the basis of authority. Further, the preacher is subject to the Word.

Preacher E usually spends 15 to 20 hours per week in preparation for a sermon. He only takes a sermon outline into the pulpit and the sermons in the two services varied significantly although following the same structure. He cites his experience as a Sunday school teacher as a major factor in his development as a preacher. It was in seeking to keep the attention of children aged five to 15 that he learnt to tell Bible stories with application and make the story come alive. He also points to an awareness of the Engel Scale¹¹ as a useful tool to make a sermon practical for everyone. He identifies the major influences on his preaching as Joseph Vitello, Billy Graham, and T.L. Osborne.

The Listeners Speak

When asked what adjectives they would use to describe the preaching at their church participants identified the following:

Adjective	Sample of Elaborative Statements
passionate	“He loves God’s Word” “It comes from the heart” “He gets you to feel what he is saying”
engaging	“He asks questions of the audience... you can’t be too passive- he draws you in” “You don’t just hear it, you feel it”
encouraging	“He brings a message of hope” “It’s never too late”
grounded	“Not the theoretical” “He gives new dimensions on the Word that we have not thought of before” “He takes his preaching seriously but he doesn’t take himself too seriously”
substance	“He is a great Bible teacher”
simple	“Not too deep even for non-believers” “Applies to everyone” “Simple not simplistic” “You don’t have to have a university degree to understand him” “Points are clear” “PowerPoint gives headline points” “There are so many nationalities in this Church but they all keep coming because they get the message”
trustworthy	“Lots of experience and he lives and does what he preaches” “Willingly shares his heart and worries” “We know he loves us” “We are sheep with a good shepherd”
funny	“He likes to laugh at himself”
authentic	“Life and message are in line” “He practices what he preaches” “He is open about his own struggles”
biblical	“He says ‘If I can see the depth of this Scripture, so can you’” “Helps you feel the emotion of the character in the Bible story” “Brings in the Greek” “He says ‘Don’t take my word for it – check out what the Word says’”
vulnerable	“He is very human” “Also shares about his failures” “He’s not a fake”

¹¹ James F. Engel and Wilbert Norton, *What’s Gone Wrong With The Harvest?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975).

humility	“Willingness to understand and respect other cultures” “He is very inclusive”
relevant	“He is able to transfer the biblical principle to our daily living” “Does not shy away from real human issues”
courageous	“Not afraid of offending” “He doesn’t water down the Word”
anointed	“Often you feel God is talking to you” “He hears from God”
convicting	“Raw with truth”
interesting	“Personal stories” “The historical context makes it interesting”

One participant who grew up in an Anglican church noted that Pentecostal churches are often criticized for not being biblical. Yet his experience was that Preacher E’s preaching was just as “biblical” as in the Anglican Church. The researcher noted that in the services he observed the Communion leader referred to three different Scripture passages at length. The first words of the sermon were “If you have your Bibles turn to Matthew 15.” The sermon then asked a question “What do we do when our prayer is delayed?” He read from the Scripture several times during the sermon and the Bible text was projected on the screen along with the sermon outline. Pentecostal churches are sometimes characterized as lacking an emphasis on the Bible. However, the preaching of the Scripture is a clear emphasis of this church.

In describing what was most helpful in the preaching at their church the survey respondents indicated:

- The sermons relate in a practical way to our lives (79%)
- The preacher is passionate about his/her message (51%)
- The preacher moves in the Holy Spirit’s power (42%)
- The life of the preacher corresponds to what they preach (32%)

They also indicated that the preacher generally starts with a topic and then brings a biblical perspective to it, refers to a variety of passages from the Bible, brings illustrations from a wide variety of sources, spends more time applying the Bible than explaining it and comes across as an expert in the Bible. The most helpful part of the preaching at this church is the power of the sermons (45%) although the content of the sermons is also helpful (43%) for many.

Preacher F

Christian Outreach Centre, Victoria

Preacher F planted this Pentecostal church in the outer suburbs of Melbourne in 1994. It is composed of about 230 people.

The Preacher Speaks

Preacher F describes his philosophy of preaching as bringing truth to the people. The Holy Spirit is crucial throughout the process. He aims to make sure the message is applicable and that people leave able to answer the question “So what?” He begins by identifying a need in the listeners. He then seeks to project the Bible narrative into the “cinema of the mind” by describing the emotions of the people in the stories. He seeks not to preach concepts, thoughts or ideas but stories in order to restate the main point. He tries to avoid using too many points but focuses on “the big idea.”

He produces a weekly blog which is basically the sermon notes and the Bible text and some questions for application at the end. The blog is “live” during the sermon so that people can refer to it through their mobile devices.

Preaching is planned well ahead. Although there is a preaching theme for the year, reflecting the vision of the church, there are a team of four preachers who meet once a month to plan and reflect. At these meetings they discuss the sermon topics, identify the main thought, what Bible texts are relevant, and begin the process of structuring the sermons. This monthly meeting usually takes several hours.

Preacher F’s sermon preparation time is about two hours, excluding the time spent in the planning meetings, although he does think about the sermon throughout the week. The sermons are usually kept to less than 30 minutes. He takes only minimal notes into the pulpit as he is looking to put energy into the preaching. He walks around the stage and the congregation, although he is not directly interactive. (However, the researcher noted that the congregation is highly responsive often shouting out encouragement to the preacher in the Pentecostal style.) Preacher F uses extensive multimedia including video clips, theme pictures, and words.

Preacher F cites Clarke Taylor, the founder of the Christian Outreach Centre movement, as a major influence on his preaching especially the way he relates to non-Christians and his energetic style. He listens to five or more sermon podcasts a week including John MacPherson, Jensen Franklin, Steve Furtick, Brian Houston, Mark Driscoll, Phil Pringle, and Shane Willard.

The Listeners Speak

When asked what adjectives they would use to describe the preaching at their church participants identified the following:

Adjective	Sample of Elaborative Statements
real	“Real life messages – pertinent and to the point and they talk to me” “He is active in our community so he has examples to make it relevant” “He is open about his failings”
application	“Not just information”
creative	“He gets into a role or character” “Stage design, graphics all integrated”
Bible-based	“He loves the Bible” “It is not just his take on things. Whatever he says he brings it back to the Scriptures”
uplifting	“Always leaves you with hope”
challenging	“The challenges are actionable-for example, ‘talk to your friends’” “At the foot of his blog each week there are a series of questions which are actionable”
practical	“He gives little things we can go and do” “And he gives the ‘how-to’”
encouraging	“There is always hope” “You can do this” “Even in challenging moments... it is still based on love”
relevant	“He doesn’t preach the Bible as a history book- it is a letter to you today” “He tailors the message to the audience”
direct	“He presses the urgency-we have to do something” “He doesn’t beat around the bush”
explainable/simple	“He can speak to the scholar and the layman and everyone in

	between” “He has the ability to unwrap the word in a way everyone can understand”
quality	“Not-half baked. He spends time.”
compassionate	“His heart is for the people and this town”
funny	“He does Mr. Bean impersonations” “A good preacher is a good actor – in a good sense”
passionate	“It is his whole life”
inspiring	“The sermons are Spirit-breathed”
determined	“A whole year on love – is that determination or what?”
purposeful	“All sermons are based on the purpose of the church.”

In describing what was most helpful in the preaching at their church the survey respondents indicated:

- The sermons relate in a practical way to our lives (66%)
- The preacher is passionate about his/her message (53%)
- The preacher speaks from his/her own experience (38%)
- The preacher moves in the Holy Spirit’s power (31%)

They also indicated that the preacher generally starts with a topic and then brings a biblical perspective to it, refers to a variety of passages from the Bible, brings illustrations from a wide variety of sources, spends more time applying the Bible than explaining it, comes across as an expert in the Bible 53% (although many disagreed, “The preacher generally comes across as a fellow learner of the Bible” (47%)), and is creative in his presentation. The most helpful part of the preaching for most people is the power of the sermons (56%), with the content of the sermons (34%) and the character of the preacher (9%) helpful for others.

Discussion

The research of Mulligan, Allen, and Carrell is largely confirmed in these case studies. The confirmation of their findings in another context strengthens the validity of their work. The factors in engaging and successful preaching they identify are observable in all six case studies of helpful preaching. Key factors in the helpfulness of the preaching in these contexts include:

“The sermons relate in a practical way to our lives.”

This statement resonated throughout the research. The key factor in the helpfulness of preaching in each case is the practical nature of the sermon. However, this practical helpfulness is not achieved at the expense of exegesis. Listeners in all six cases also identified explanation of the Bible as a helpful part of the sermon experience. The assumption that practical application and theological explanation are mutually exclusive is rebuffed by this research. These preachers demonstrate that it is possible to exposit difficult passages of Scripture and bring practical application helpful for life. Preachers can err too far in one direction or the other. They can either spend too much time in application or too much time explaining the passage. The key is finding the balance between the two.¹²

¹² It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the practice of application. Readers are pointed to recent books on the topic to develop this skill. See for example Murray Capill, *The Heart Is the Target* (Phillipsburg: P & R, 2014).

Humor

All cases indicated that the preacher used humor. Of particular importance is that the humor is largely self-deprecating. Not only is self-depreciation a value in Australian culture it expresses the “realness” or “authenticity” of the preacher to the listeners and so builds the relationship through which the sermon is experienced.

Passionate

Four of the six cases identified the preacher’s passion about their message as one of the top four factors which contributed to the helpfulness of the sermon. The two cases which did not score this as highly were the Anglican churches which expressed a heavy emphasis on explaining the meaning of the text. It would be wrong to consider the two Anglican preachers as lacking passion, because this descriptor still emerged in the focus groups. However, the Anglicans did not value this passion as highly as the other cases studied. In practice the greater freedom emerging from not reading from a full manuscript allowed the preacher to be perceived as more passionate. The “cost” of this approach is the loss of preciseness of language and content possible when reading from a full manuscript.

Boldness

In each of the cases listeners indicated that the preachers were not afraid to “tackle the tough issues.” Listeners valued preachers who are courageous in their convictions and willing to address the tough ethical issues of the day.

Structure

Although the structure used by these preachers varied considerably, listeners identified that it was always clear and simple. Although a more complex structure may be helpful for preachers in developing their content, a small number of clear points which are readily obvious to the listeners are far more helpful in delivery.

Not “dumbed-down”

Almost all of the preachers and many of the focus groups identified that the preacher does not “dumb down” the content of the sermons. Rather they work hard at making more complex concepts understandable. This means they are able to deal with issues, including ethical ones, in theological depth without overwhelming their audience.

Preparation

The similarity in both the length of the sermons (30 minutes) and the length of time it takes to prepare (10 to 20 hours, although the exception of Preacher F should be noted) is informative. Listeners are looking for “substantial” content in the sermons. Substantial does not mean long (i.e. more than 35 minutes) but refers to an intellectual depth. Preachers need to be investing time in finding fresh insights for the sermons, and making the content understandable without “dumbing it down.” This takes time and effort.

Multimedia, Induction and Interaction

Interestingly, some of the newer developments in preaching (for example, the inductive structure) were not consistently identified by the listeners as key factors in making the preaching helpful, although the interviews with the preachers revealed they were using them. Perhaps this is indicative of their proficient use. PowerPoints with a summary of the sermon points were identified by many as helpful, and although some of the preachers used interaction, it was not as important to the listeners as features like practicality, humor, and structure.

Conclusions

The temptation with case study is to take the findings and generalize them to every context. This research confirms how dangerous this simplistic approach is. Although there are some commonalities between the preaching styles of these very helpful preachers, each has distinctives appropriate to the context in which they preach.

It is possible to identify a context continuum along which the preachers identified by this research can be placed. Anglicans, Preacher A and Preacher B, reflect one end of the continuum of preaching. It can be called the “Content-focused” emphasis. This end of the continuum is characterized by:

- A higher response to the descriptor: “The sermons give me a deeper understanding of the Bible.”
- The listeners perceive that the preacher spends more time explaining the passage than applying it.
- They are also more likely to indicate that the most helpful part of the preaching is the content of the sermons.
- The preachers use a full manuscript that they take into the pulpit.
- The sermons tend to be more expositional than topical.
- The descriptors generally relate to the content of the sermon rather than the preacher.

Application is still highly valued (“The sermons relate in a practical way to our lives” still scored highly), but the message comes first and foremost from the exposition of the text. The content is crucial as reflected by the use of the full manuscript.

Preachers C and D reflect a middle ground approach between the two extremes of the continuum. The content and the preacher were of similar importance in these contexts.

Preachers E and F preach effectively in what can be called the “Preacher-focused” end of the context continuum:

- The listeners perceive that the preacher spends more time applying the passage than explaining it. (This could be described as a “prophetic” role.)
- The listeners are more likely to describe the preacher as passionate.
- The listeners are more likely to identify that the preacher “moves in the Spirit’s power.”
- They are also more likely to indicate that the most helpful part of the preaching is the power of the sermons.
- The preachers preach from sermon outlines rather than the full manuscript.
- The sermons tend to be more topical than expositional.
- The descriptors generally relate to the preacher rather than the sermon.

Different congregations can be located at various positions on the continuum. The two ends of the continuum are marked by the answers to the question: “Does authority come from the careful exposition of the Bible text or from the Holy Spirit working through the preacher as she/he preaches the text?” In other words, “Are the listeners content-focused or preacher-focused?”

Preachers hoping to learn from this research need to carefully consider the context in which their preaching occurs. Congregations in Pentecostal, Baptist, Lutheran, and Anglican traditions have different expectations of their preachers. However, tradition does not pre-determine the expectation of the listeners as demonstrated by these cases. In order to be “helpful” practitioners need to adapt their style to each particular congregational context. The description of the context continuum and the examples of the cases provide guidelines on how to make sermons more helpful for listeners in each context.

However, it should also be noted that the preacher has the ability, and even the responsibility, to shape the expectations of the congregations which they minister to. The listeners must start with a compelling expectation to hear the voice of God whether that be through the exposition of the biblical content or through the voice of the Spirit-anointed preacher. It is as the preaching expectations are established by the leadership that the congregation will find the preaching more helpful as those expectations are met.

Brimstone and Treacle: Charles Spurgeon's Humor in the Teaching of Preaching

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Abstract: *While Charles Spurgeon's use of humor in his preaching has been well-documented, his use of wit in the teaching of preaching to students at his Pastor's College in London has been largely ignored. This article surveys his lighthearted approach to the teaching of preaching technique as seen in humorous anecdotes, sarcastic descriptions, and amusing illustrations. It concludes with a brief admonition for modern preaching textbook authors to follow Spurgeon's lead in the use of humor in their work.*

The late nineteenth-century preacher, and perhaps first mega-church pastor, Charles Spurgeon's sense of humor, both in and outside of the pulpit, was well known.¹³ One of the best known is Spurgeon the preacher's witty advice to his students at The Pastor's College. He spoke to preachers in training about the art of preaching, and although it has received little attention by modern scholars, the humor in his *Lectures to My Students*¹⁴ is unmistakable. The purpose of this article is to consider the ways in which Spurgeon used humor in his advice to students with a view toward gaining insight for modern authors of preaching textbooks.

Guides for developing and delivering sermons have been available in English for almost 300 years,¹⁵ and have been printed in abundance since the 1850s. In many ways, Spurgeon's *Lectures* reflect the same concerns that one finds in the majority of preaching manuals: proper respect for the subject matter, the importance of study, seriousness in forming the sermon, proper choice of illustrations, elocution, and so on. Like his contemporaries, Spurgeon showed a familiarity with other preaching guides, and with classical oratory and rhetoric. However, the wit and, at times, biting sarcasm reflected in his manual sets it apart from contemporary and modern sermon-development books. Considering Spurgeon's thoughtful philosophy of the use of humor in the pulpit, it is no surprise that he also used the medium to convey his wisdom to his students. Spurgeon explained his design in using humor in preaching:

It is a sort of tradition of the fathers that it is wrong to laugh on Sundays. The eleventh commandment is, that we are to love one another; and then, according to some people, the twelfth is, "Thou shalt pull a long face on Sunday." I must confess that I would rather hear people laugh than I would see them asleep in the house of God; and I would rather get the truth into them through the medium of ridicule than I would have it neglected, or leave the people to perish through lack of reception of the message. I do believe, in my heart, that there may be as much holiness in a laugh as in a cry; and that, sometimes, to laugh is the better thing of the two, for I may weep, and be murmuring, and repining, and

¹³ See chapter eighty-one entitled "Pure Fun" in volume 3 of Spurgeon's *The Autobiography of Charles H. Spurgeon Compiled from His Diary: 1856–1878* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1900), 338–361. My favorite in this chapter (p. 342) involves Spurgeon's response to a critic who inquired as to the reason for Mr. Spurgeon being late for his sermon. Spurgeon explained that he had to stop to vote: "'To vote!' exclaimed the good man; 'but, my dear brother, I thought you were a citizen of the New Jerusalem!' 'So I am,' replied Mr. Spurgeon, 'but my old man is a Citizen of this world.' 'Ah! but you should mortify your old man.' 'That is exactly what I did; for my old man is a Tory, and I made him vote for the Liberals!'"

¹⁴ 3 vols. (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1875–1897)

¹⁵ The earliest monograph in English I have found devoted to sermon preparation and delivery is Blaise Gisbert, *Christian Eloquence in Theory and Practice* (London: H. Clements, 1718).

thinking all sorts of bitter thoughts against God; while, at another time, I may laugh the laugh of sarcasm against sin, and so evince a holy earnestness in the defense of the truth. I do not know why ridicule is to be given up to Satan as a weapon to be used against us, and not to be employed by us as a weapon against him.¹⁶

What follows is a description of Spurgeon's playful advice given not *while* preaching but *about* preaching, specifically the delivery of the sermon. Before *Lectures* was a book it was, of course, a series of lectures given to students of The Pastor's College, founded by Spurgeon. In general, Spurgeon's manual provided little humor when it came to sincerity, devotion, piety, and study. His comedic skills were evident, however, when he dealt with technique: use of the voice, posture, action, gestures, and gaining the attention of the congregation. Occasionally the printer would insert remarks about the difficulty of replicating a sound or movement, indicating that Spurgeon's remarks were being taken down as lectured. Spurgeon at times referred his students to illustrations that were later provided in the book, indicating that he had worked with an artist before the lecture to render an image to be shown during the lecture.

On the Voice

Following his practical advice about using a natural, manly tone in preaching, Spurgeon took aim at what he called that "dignified, doctorial, inflated bombastic style," which he deemed "*ore rotunda*." Of note is the printer's parenthetical insertion that he could not find a proper way to express the mocking nature of Spurgeon's voice at this point: "Unfortunately the Lecturer (*sic*) could not be here reported by any known form of letter-press, as he proceeded to read a hymn with a round, rolling, swelling voice."¹⁷ Next Spurgeon decried the "very lady-like, mincing, delicate, servant-girlified, dawdling" style that some preachers displayed in the pulpit, though they would never think of using such contrived tones and language in their own parlors. While most Americans (and some Britons) might assume a nineteenth century Englishman at home would say something like, "Will you be so good as to give me another cup of tea; I take sugar, if you please," Spurgeon opined that a man "would make himself ludicrous if he did so."¹⁸ Spurgeon's concern that the preacher be respectful, yet avoid being artificial, meant that the minister should be careful not to take on a different persona when in the pulpit.

Spurgeon next admonished his students to acknowledge their idiosyncrasies in speech and learn to avoid them. He advised that the strong accents to be found throughout England (singling out Yorkshire and Somersetshire), though they could have their own beauty, should be modified for the sake of the hearers. Squeaky voices, "like a rusty pair of scissors," were to be eschewed, as were mumbling "sepulchral tones" which amounted to "ventriloquizing most horribly."

Having cautioned against regional dialects in England, Spurgeon then critiqued his fellow Londoners. His varied audience from all over the English-speaking world would have been amused at his next statements:

¹⁶ Spurgeon, *The Art of Illustration* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1897), 43.

¹⁷ Spurgeon, *Lectures*, vol. 1, 119.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 120.

Should an American student be present he must excuse my pressing this remark upon his attention. Abhor the practice of some men, who will not bring out the letter ‘r,’ such a habit is ‘vewy wuinous and wediculous, vewy wetched and wepwehensible.’¹⁹

Spurgeon was not mocking a speech impediment – Americans will probably think of Elmer Fudd and Britons Monty Python’s Caesar in *The Life of Brian* – but a common dialect variation linguists call labiodental /ɾ/. It persists in parts of (particularly eastern) London today, but can be found in other parts of the UK and the greater English-speaking world. In late-nineteenth century London it was apparently associated with lower-middle class Cockney, as opposed to the working class Cockney dialect.²⁰

On a serious note, Spurgeon offered advice to prevent “*dysphonia clericorum*, or ‘Clergyman’s sore throat.’” Any preacher who used a monotonous tone would, in addition to putting the congregation to sleep, risk bringing on bronchitis. He claimed to have spoken to surgeons who verified the *dysphonia* problem among the clergy, but the bronchitis seen among the preachers in the Church of England was different from that of the Dissenters because of their styles of speech. His sarcastic wit was evidenced again in mimicking the “ecclesiastical twang” of Church of England preachers, with its “steeple-in-the-throat grandeur”:

It may be illustrated by the following specimen. “He that hath yaws to yaw, let him yaw,” which is a remarkable, if not impressive, rendering of a Scripture text.²¹

At length, he advised his students to prepare and take care of their voices. He even offered the kind of advice modern preachers still hear about various home and folk remedies. While the effectiveness of these treatments may be doubtful today, the serious business of preserving his voice was surely a concern for Spurgeon, who preached several times per week over the course of many decades.

Attention

In his next lecture, Spurgeon turned to the matter of keeping the congregation’s attention. He included the customary advice of using captivating and succinct introductions, as well as of avoiding unnecessary repetition. A key to catching the hearers’ interest was in recognizing the intellectual capacity of the audience. He quipped, “Go up to his level if he is a poor man; go down to his level if he is an educated person.” He acknowledged the smiles on the faces of his students at this remark, but indicated that he was not confused in his statement because there is more difficulty “going down... to the illiterate than there is in being refined for the polite.”²²

¹⁹ Ibid., 121.

²⁰ See Joan C. Beal, “‘To Explain the Present’: Nineteenth-century Evidence for ‘recent’ changes in English pronunciation,” *Of Varying Language and Opposing Creed: New Insights Into Late Modern English*, eds. Javier Pérez Guerra and Dolores González-Álvarez (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 42–43. Beal documents the growing use of labiodental /ɾ/ in modern England. In general, the labiodental /ɾ/ is now associated with several parts of southeastern England where “Estuary English” is common. See Ulrike Altendorf, *Estuary English: Levelling at the Interface of RP and South-Eastern British English* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2003), 177.

²¹ Spurgeon, *Lectures*, vol. 1, 128. The quotation is perhaps best imagined as “He that hath *eahs* to *heah*, let him *heah*.” One can appreciate the difficulty faced by the printer when attempting to replicate this biting humor.

²² Ibid., 141.

He further warned against using a manuscript when preaching, because even the best of sermons Spurgeon had heard read from the page still “tasted of paper,” an unfortunate truth because “my digestion is not good enough to dissolve foolscap.”²³ To Spurgeon, a major Achilles heel to many sermons was their great length. He assured his students that ordinary folk will, after a period of around forty minutes, begin to think of other pressing matters. For example, a young mother will begin to worry about her baby, or the fire at home. He provided the following anecdote:

In some country places, in the afternoon especially, the farmers have to milk their cows, and one farmer bitterly complained to me about a young man — I think from this College “Sir, he ought to have given over at four o’clock, but he kept on till half-past, and there were all my cows waiting to be milked! How would he have liked it if he had been a cow?” There was a great deal of sense in that question. The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals ought to have prosecuted that young sinner. How can farmers hear to profit when they have cows-on-the-brain?²⁴

Anyone familiar with the behavior of a full milk cow knows that a farmer has good reason to keep his schedule. Surely, the threat of the SPCA provoked laughter in this lecture!

Impromptu Speech

Spurgeon also included a lecture on impromptu sermons, which he urged his students to generally avoid giving. He advocated patient prayer, preparation and meditation before presenting sermons, but admitted that there were times when an unplanned sermon must be given. Spurgeon’s primary argument against impromptu speaking was his assessment that most people are not very good at it. One wholesale exception to this lack of talent for ad-lib was the guild of lawyers, who were required to adapt their arguments as lines of inquiry changed. Spurgeon only begrudgingly complimented barristers, granting them this one admirable characteristic of the talent extemporaneous speech – “They should have some virtues!” However, he stopped himself from offering too much praise for the profession by interjecting an anecdote about a recent court case. A citizen had been indicted for “the horrible crime” of libel against a lawyer. Spurgeon considered such an event preposterous, and was dumbfounded that the lawyer had the nerve to present such a case. Spurgeon’s lack of respect for the legal profession was evident in these sardonic remarks:

[I]t is well for him that I was not his judge, for had such a difficult and atrocious crime been fairly brought home to him, I would have delivered him over to be cross-examined during the term of his natural life, hoping for mercy’s sake that it might be a brief one.²⁵

Instead of having the gift of unplanned oratory that most lawyers displayed, Spurgeon worried that most preachers were nearer in their abilities in this regard to speakers in the House of Commons. Although some politicians certainly had powerful public-speaking gifts, the vast majority droned unintelligibly:

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 144.

²⁵ Ibid., 154.

Let it be proposed that when capital punishment is abolished, those who are found guilty of murder shall be compelled to listen to a selection of the dreariest parliamentary orators. The members of the Royal Humane Society forbid.

It is remarkable to think of Spurgeon finding ways to humorously intertwine mention of the death penalty with dull preaching! The remainder of the lecture offered practical advice to his students who might need to learn to preach extemporaneously. Still, Spurgeon warned about the temptation to overestimate one's ability to speak wisely off the cuff with the result being "elongated nonsense, paraphrastic platitude, wire-drawn commonplace, or sacred rodomontade." He closed by invoking the character Snug from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Snug, who by trade was a carpenter, was asked to act the part of a lion in a play, but was worried that he would forget his lines. As Spurgeon quoted, the lion's lines were no bother because "you may do it extempore, for it is nothing but roaring."²⁶

Posture, Action, and Gesture

The preceding lectures can be found in the first published volume of Spurgeon's *Lectures*.



PAUL PREACHING AT ATHENS,
AFTER RAPHAEL

In volume two,²⁷ in a similar vein to the lecture on the voice, Spurgeon advised young preachers to avoid distracting motions and bad habits in the pulpit. He sympathized with those who had to preach from traditional pulpits (versus platforms) because of the difficulty presented by their constriction. He contrasted Italian Renaissance artist Raphael's powerful depiction of Paul preaching at Athens with the very stiff, tongue-in-cheek "Very Reverend Dr. Paul in London":



THE VERY REVEREND DR. PAUL
PREACHING IN LONDON

What was wrong with pulpits? First, Spurgeon said that all pulpits are ugly:

²⁶ Ibid., 165.

²⁷ Citations are from the New York: Robert Carter and Bros., 1889 edition.

A deep wooden pulpit of the old sort might well remind a minister of his mortality, for it is nothing but a coffin set on end: but on what rational ground do we bury our pastors alive? Many of these erections resemble barrels, others are of the fashion of egg cups and wine glasses; a third class were evidently modeled after corn bins upon four legs; and yet a fourth variety can only be likened to swallows' nests stuck upon the walls.²⁸

But even worse than their appearance were the problems pulpits created for the speaker. Lighted lamps with reflectors were normally placed on either side of the preacher (see the Very Reverend Dr. Paul figure above), thus providing plentiful light for the Bible to be read and unwelcome heat to the minister's head. Additionally, pulpits provided mere ledges upon which to sit, often with the door handle positioned in the preacher's back. Further, the depth of such pulpits assumed a tall speaker would occupy them:

They are generally so deep that a short person like myself can scarcely see over the top of them, and when I ask for something to stand upon they bring me a hassock (a padded stool for kneeling). Think of a minister of the gospel poising himself upon a hassock while he is preaching: a Boanerges and a Blondin²⁹ in one person. It is too much to expect us to keep the balance of our minds and the equilibrium of our bodies at the same time.³⁰

He recounted a time when he was preaching on the text 'We are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed,' only at that moment for the hassock upon which he was standing to give way. The result was that he almost spilled out of the pulpit onto the floor, much to the amusement of his congregation. He concluded that "boxed-up pulpits are largely accountable for the ungainly postures which some of our preachers assume."³¹

As all public speakers know, determining how to hold the hands when speaking can sometimes be difficult. Here, Spurgeon argued for a natural posture, without the need for gratuitous motions. He joked that many ministers who spoke with fists clinched looked like boxers:

Too many speakers appear to have taken lessons from Bendigo³² or some other professor of the noble art of self-defense, for they hold their fists as if they were ready for a round. It is not pleasant to watch brethren preaching the gospel of peace in that pugnacious style; yet it is by no means rare to hear of an evangelist preaching a free Christ with a clinched fist. It is amusing to see them putting themselves into an attitude and saying, "Come unto me," and then, with a revolution of both fists, "and I will give you — rest."³³

The accompanying illustration shows the comical way Spurgeon described these preachers, and his comment that, "I am not at all surprised at your laughing, but it is infinitely better that you should have a hearty laugh at these



²⁸ Spurgeon, *Lectures*, vol. 2, 158–159.

²⁹ Charles Blondin was a famous French tightrope artist in the late nineteenth century.

³⁰ Spurgeon, *Lectures*, vol. 2, 161.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 162.

³² Nickname for William Abednego Thompson, a famous English bare-knuckle boxer of the time.

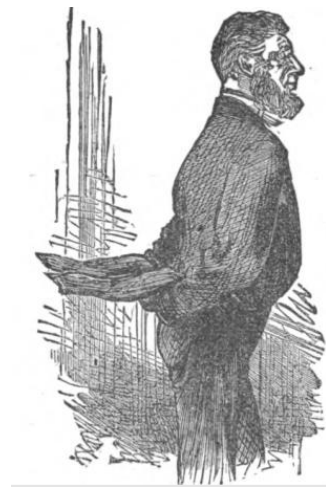
³³ Spurgeon, *Lectures*, vol. 2, 173–174.

absurdities here than that your people should laugh at you in the future,” shows that his description garnered the desired result.

Spurgeon picked at preachers whose arm movements were overly mechanical, as well as those who pounded upon the pulpit to excess. While a preacher should demonstrate passion, he should never become so animated that his movements distracted his hearers from the message. He especially warned that the apparent tendency by some speakers of his time to “grasp a rail, and to drop down lower and lower till you almost touch the ground is supremely absurd.” That Spurgeon had overseen the preparation of the printed illustrations to accompany his lecture is obvious from his comment that the woodblock (see below), which was first carved and then used to stamp the image into the page, could scarcely relay the kind of squatting posture (“a prelude to a gymnastic feat”) he was describing.³⁴



The next illustration (to the right) was nearly as comical. Spurgeon told of a preacher who kept his hands behind his back, under his coat tails, as a sign of confidence. However, whenever he became excited he would begin to flap the coat tails “reminding the observer of a water-wagtail.” Spurgeon opined that, regardless of the gracefulness of a dress coat, the garment did nothing to add solemnity to the sermon when the tails were seen “protruding from the orator’s rear.”³⁵



³⁴ Ibid., 189.

³⁵ Ibid., 190–191.

Other humorous postures to be avoided were:

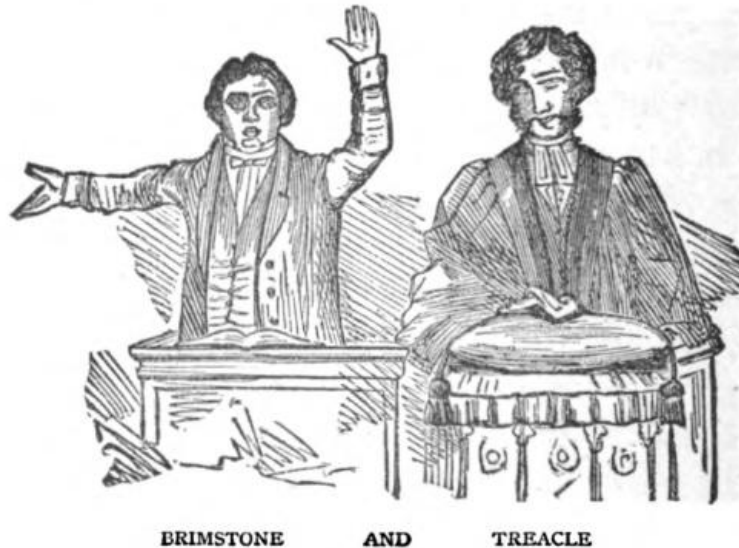


Placing the arms akimbo³⁶



Placing the thumbs in the arm holes of a waistcoat, or “The Penguin”³⁷

As far as dress was concerned, Spurgeon urged his students to worry less about fineries and more about their messages. He ridiculed “clerical foppishness” with all its dressiness and finely-combed hair. He included the next illustration when recounting how, twenty years earlier, a newspaper artist had dubbed him “Brimstone” and another “Jack-a-dandy” preacher as “Treacle” (see figure below).



Note Spurgeon’s proud, common, disheveled look, sans traditional pulpit, and the delicate features and elegant wardrobe of Treacle. Spurgeon considered it an honor to have been lampooned by the press because of the stark contrast it provided between his down-to-earth, intrepid presentation of the gospel and the tedious approach so often seen in Anglican churches.³⁸

³⁶ Ibid., 191.

³⁷ Ibid., 192.

³⁸ Ibid., 200.

Conclusion

To the modern reader, the presence of so many humorous images in a book on preaching may be surprising. Why is it that Spurgeon's preaching guide is replete with lighthearted anecdotes and images, when few others of the genre before or since attempt to teach through humor? In my own brief, unscientific survey of several of the common textbooks for university-level homiletics courses, while occasional quips or humorous intrusions into the text are made, the mood is typically very serious from beginning to end. I suggest there are at least two reasons for the uniqueness of Spurgeon's book. First, Spurgeon did not write the book, *per se*, but instead provided the lecture, which was given *ad hoc*, almost certainly without a manuscript at hand. A transcriber took down Spurgeon's remarks and delivered them to the publisher. Thus, Spurgeon's preaching personality came out in the lectures, and is still evident in the book. Second, Spurgeon's College was full of men who were generally not university material in late nineteenth-century England. Spurgeon's jocular attitude toward his students revealed a comfortability with his audience that an author of a modern preaching textbook would almost certainly not convey, especially in writing a college-level text. Spurgeon described his purpose for his colloquial and humorous approach to these lectures by explaining:

At the end of the week I meet the students, and find them weary with sterner studies, and I judge it best to be as lively and interesting in my prelections as I well can be. They have had their fill of classics, mathematics, and divinity, and are only in a condition to receive something which will attract and secure their attention, and fire their hearts... To succeed in this the lecturer must not be dull himself, nor demand any great effort from his audience.³⁹

While most professors do not write textbooks containing anything funny, humorous anecdotes and illustrations are often offered and encouraged by college-level preaching instructors in class during lectures. I suggest, following Spurgeon's lead, when modern scholars produce preaching guides, they consider including more of the humor found in their classrooms on the printed page. Of course, any modern text should offer humor appropriate to the very different circumstances from that of late nineteenth-century England. Who knows? Perhaps that textbook will receive mention 140 years later when contemporary works have been forgotten.

³⁹ Spurgeon, *Lectures*, vol. 1, Introduction, v.

Brennan W. Breed. *Nomadic Text: A Theory of Biblical Reception History*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014. 206 pages. \$51.97.

Rarely have I encountered a book with the power to reconstitute the governing assumptions of homiletics. Brennan W. Breed's *Nomadic Text: A Theory of Biblical Reception History* is that book. It is superbly crafted and patiently argued—a showcase of scholarship. Melding technical precision, crisp logic, and compelling prose, Breed showcases his scholarly prowess with equal measure to his pedagogical poignancy. Every homiletician and every biblical scholar—and I measure my words when I say *every*—needs to read this book. It will revolutionize how you think about the biblical text and how you preach it.

The singular beauty of *Nomadic Text* is found in its ability to deconstruct entire sub-fields of study while simultaneously paving the way for greater precision within those fields. His primary targets are biblical scholars who approach the text from a historical-critical perspective, drawing their conclusions off of the assumption of an “original text.” In addition, Breed deconstructs the context-driven assumptions of form, source, and redaction critics, as well as reception historians, who seek to stabilize the textual foundations of the Bible by attending to genre, culture, or history.

Breed's volume takes shape in two moves. To begin, Breed assumes a posture of reading his guild very much akin to the “readings” of Jacques Derrida. Pointing to the pluriformity and polysemy of biblical texts, Breed deconstructs the foundational assumptions of biblical scholars with regard to the concept of an original text (chapter one). In chapter two, Breed extends his critique to include scholars who recognize the pluriformity of texts but who still attempt to stabilize the text through a form of essentialism (realists/nominalists). Instead, Breed advocates a “nonessentialist ontology of biblical texts” (65) that leads to a reframing of textual criticism as “mapping the process of textual development” and a “charting of the trajectories and changes that the form of the text has always undergone” (68).

Chapters three and four attend to the problems of anchoring texts to their historical, cultural, or generic contexts. Attempts to tether texts through appeals to authorial intention or the original audience are misguided. Rather than seeking to anchor texts through these means, Breed suggests the metaphor of the spandrel for biblical scholarship. Spandrels, like texts, change over time. They are reworked for new contexts and purposes. They traverse semantic boundaries and contextual borders. Anchoring texts through appeals to the original text and the original meaning produces “specters” that thereafter “haunt” scholarship, leading to a lack of methodological precision. He writes, “The skill of escaping contexts is not an anomaly or problem but in fact a central feature of texts” (93), and “all texts continue to find new contexts regardless of writerly, readerly, and scholarly attempts to pin them down. This is how texts function” (104). Breed concludes the deconstructive section of his book by observing that if all of biblical history is constituted by “people taking a text and doing something with it,” then all biblical scholarship is reception history (115).

Chapters five through seven constitute Breed's constructive proposal for a way to analyze biblical texts as historical receptions in light of his foregoing critiques. He also showcases this new theory in action through a tight analysis of Job 19:25-27. Breed adapts Gilles Deleuze's concepts of the virtual and the actual, the problematic field, and topological identity to formulate this new, cartographic and vectorized theory of biblical reception history. Texts are not objects; they are “objectiles,” which is to say that because they are characterized by movement and variation they always harbor more capacities than they manifest at any given point in history. Scholars should map the trajectories of texts. They ought to “dramatize” the action of texts in various contexts because texts are inherently nomadic rather than sedentary: “Here is the

mandate: demonstrate the diversity of capacities, organize them according to the immanent potentialities actualized by various individuals and communities over time, and rewrite our understanding of the biblical text” (141).

Breed concludes by reshaping the governing metaphor for biblical studies. Texts are neither *exiles* yearning to return home, nor are they *migrants* who decide to leave their homeland for pragmatic reasons. No. Texts are *nomads*. They have no home because they are never sedentary, nor were they. Inasmuch as homiletics is dependent upon the work of biblical scholars, we ought to take Breed’s theory seriously. Imagine the homiletical potential of looking to a text’s myriad ways of meaning in various times and cultures. Breed opens a path beyond homiletical essentialism by helping us to see texts as *events* rather than *objects*.

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Jerome F. D. Creach. *Violence in Scripture [Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church]*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013. 286 pages. \$24.89.

For anyone looking for exegetical help to confront baffling passages like the call for genocide in 1 Samuel 15, Jerome F. D. Creach readily lends his scholarly hand in *Violence in Scripture*. For example, Creach appeals to the rabbinic interpretations of Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–1888) to assert that a narrative calling for the annihilation of the Amalekites does not recount a literal event. Creach suggests instead that upon closer examination God’s fury against Amalek symbolizes a larger redemptive purpose within Deuteronomic history and indeed the entire canon itself—to portray faithfulness to God and “God’s work to establish order in creation” (92–93). The hyperbolic prose of 1 Samuel 15 justifies neither violence nor transgressive interpretations like the historical one from Cotton Mather, who characterized Native Americans as Amalek to be eradicated. As a story, 1 Samuel 15 sets “word” against “sword” (96). It expresses violence ironically—as figuration that stands within an overarching canonical message against violence. Indeed for Creach, violence presented in the Bible not only within 1 Samuel but also from Genesis such as the tale of the Flood to the Psalter, the Gospels, and the “Lake of Fire” from Revelation bears witness again and again to a God who judges graciously and who promises justice that will bring order out of chaos for all of creation.

Creach offers his monograph as a resource “for those who wish to read the Bible as Scripture and who seek ways to interpret the Bible’s violent passages as integral parts of the Bible’s authoritative word to the church” (3). Reading the Bible as Scripture for him entails empathic reading informed by two convictions. First, at its center, the Bible testifies to Jesus Christ. Creach addresses supersessionist concerns by qualifying that “Jesus presents for Christians an authoritative *interpretation* of the Old Testament, not a repudiation of it” (italics Creach, 4). Second, the Bible communicates at a deeper level a consistent message that violence opposes God and God’s will for the world (4–5).

Readers need not, however, share Creach’s theological commitments in order for his scholarship to help disentangle or embolden preaching, Bible study, classroom learning, and personal investigation that wrestles with making sense of violent scriptural passages. I suspect that an array of audiences will find provocative his claims that the authors of the Old and New Testaments are “colonial” people under the throws of empire and that degradation of women in Judges 19 emblemizes deterioration of Israelite society (8, 146).

Creach also carefully highlights the limits to his commentary – that he does not discuss sacrifice, atonement, and what he calls “the legal material of the Old Testament” (14–15). All three of those categories, however, seem crucial for the Christocentric anchoring of the Bible he espouses. Perhaps *Violence in Scripture* warrants a companion volume that establishes or explores a biblical Christology. Notably, he does point readers with further curiosity to additional resources that locate themselves at the limits of his work.

And as it is, Creach’s commentary is timely. The shocking savagery of the Islamic State, domestic “terrorists,” and the military actions of the United States presents particular challenges to preachers and homileticians daring to interpret violent texts toward hope in a violent world. Returning to the opening example, linking “[a]nd Samuel hewed Agag in pieces before the Lord in Gilgal” (1 Samuel 15:32) to Jesus establishing order in global mayhem today will require proclamation engaged with the expertise of Creach and then some.

Gerald C. Liu, The Theological School, Drew University, Madison, NJ

John Goldingay. *Job for Everyone*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013. 215 pages. \$16.

In *Job for Everyone*, one volume of John Goldingay's 17-volume *Old Testament for Everyone* series, the author combines sound exegetical scholarship with spiritual theology—in the tradition of Eugene Peterson and Diogenes Allen—to produce a study volume that is accessible to anyone and everyone, as the title implies. One strength of *Job for Everyone* is that Goldingay does not clog the reader's mind with twenty-first century side-arguments like identifying the historical Job. Instead, the author encourages the reader to receive the narrative as those of First Testament times likely received it—one that illustrates and explains some of the intersections between humanity and God. In this, *Job for Everyone* and the *Old Testament for Everyone* series functions as an Old Testament complement to N. T. Wright's 18-volume *New Testament for Everyone* series.

Goldingay's stated purpose is to encourage Christian readers to spend more time with the Old Testament or *First Testament*, which he reminds us was for Jesus and New Testament writers "a living resource for understanding God, God's ways in the world, and God's ways with us" (1). The Book of Job "does not focus on God's dealings with Israel over the centuries" (3), it looks more at those issues that cause us to struggle with our faith, which is why we study Job.

Job for Everyone is written for serious inquiry and not for casual reading. Each chapter begins with the author's own translation of the pericope under consideration. These translations prove helpful in understanding the original text. The author's translations are followed by a short contemporary illustration designed to link the meaning of the text to everyday experience. He uses stories that any twenty-first century reader would recognize, like the recent financial crisis of 2008, long-term illness, or the tragedies that we are likely to encounter on the evening news. The translation of the text and the author's short illustrations are followed by a substantive reflection on the text that includes cultural/ historical contexts, biblical customs, and linguistic notes on the Hebrew text. To understand Job's story it is important that we understand the difference between the *adversary* and *Satan* in Old Testament literature. These are presented in an easy-to-read narrative style that is characteristic of John Goldingay's many volumes about Old Testament books. On the back cover, the publisher makes an appropriate recommendation that the book be used for "daily devotions, group study, or personal visits with the Bible" (back cover).

The author of *Job for Everyone* supplies details often overlooked when we study Old Testament books from such historical distance. Though Job likely predates the Abrahamic covenant and the promise of the Messiah, we often mistakenly read Job through the lens of covenant. Similarly Goldingay reminds us that it would be a misrepresentation of the text for us to superimpose New Testament ideas about death and resurrection upon Job's frequent wish to die.

John Goldingay also does a good job of humanizing the characters and distilling the issues they face. Job is *Everyman*, so much like any Christian attempting to live an upright life. He is both admirable and pitiable at the same time. Admirable in the sense that he holds to his confession of faith—in spite of personal anecdotal evidence that imperils what he believes to be true about God. Job is pitiable in the sense that he is suffering without the comfort of his friends or community. His three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite are more intent on remaking Job in the mold of their theological presuppositions than in sitting in sorrow with their friend. Job's wife does not understand his faith, and his community has decided to focus more on the spectacle of his suffering than on his humanity.

Job is also one who suffers, like so many of us, without having all the information. One key to understanding the entire volume lies in conversations that took place at a “heavenly committee meeting” where Job was not present. Why *did* Job serve God so joyfully? Was it his prosperity? Was it good health, or a good name in his community? Or, was it something else?

Job for Everyone is about so much more than the question of theodicy. The themes of Job include bad theology, poverty and wealth, the nature of God, and more. In *Job for Everyone*, Goldingay reminds us of the significance of the book of Job in contemporary conversations.

Safiyah Fosua, Wesley Seminary at Indiana Wesleyan University, Marion, IN

Sheila E. McGinn, Lai Ling Elizabeth Ngan, and Ahida Calderón Pilarski, eds. *By Bread Alone: The Bible through the Eyes of the Hungry*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2014. 224 pages. \$29.

You never know what will come out of a conference address! In 2009, Kathleen M. O'Connor gave her presidential address to the Catholic Biblical Association of America (CBA), in which she lifted up Dorothy Sölle's "hermeneutics of hunger" (described by O'Connor as "an interpretive stance that engages the religious content of Christian traditions and feeds the world's physical and spiritual hungers") to respond to the then-recent challenge of Catholic bishops to Catholic biblical scholars to pair their strong historical-critical exegetical work with equally strong (but in the bishops' opinion, often lacking) theological work.¹ Without the latter, said the bishops, the Bible risks being seen as a historical curiosity, rather than a living voice in our present times. Sölle sought to counter feminist theology's "hermeneutic of suspicion," to make room for "a sense of hope" alongside critiques that expose the powers of oppression. O'Connor bluntly calls for a hermeneutic of hunger as an expansion beyond historical-critical approaches. Using Genesis 11 (the tower of Babel) as her text, O'Connor demonstrated how a hermeneutic of hunger might open up the text in new and living ways.

The Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics Task Force of the CBA latched on to O'Connor's address, as it tied in with a communal exegetical project they had begun to undertake in 2008. In 2010, they focused this undertaking on hunger. Thus, the idea of *By Bread Alone* was born, which grew into this collection of essays that follow O'Connor's example.

After a forward, an introduction by the editors, and O'Connor's 2009 address, nine additional essays are presented (four each drawn on the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, and one on the *Gospel of Thomas*). Each takes up a particular biblical passage related in some fashion to hunger, and brings Sölle's approach to bear. By the end of the book, we have heard the voices of Isaiah and Jeremiah (along with their take on the Torah authors), Hebrew poets, gospel writers Mark and Luke, Paul the proclaimer, and a host of modern voices. We have taken up topics like the link between fasting and feeding the poor, climate change, hunger as a weapon of war, the importance of social location, urban food deserts, the social concept of honor/shame, the social notion of sacrifice, the imperative to address hunger, patron-client relationships, and the relationship between religious belief and politics. Along the way, we hear the hungry not only in the Ancient Near East but also in Saskatoon and Zacatecas; we journey not only in the ancient empire of Rome but also the modern empire of the United States.

The results are precisely what the Synod of Bishops might have hoped for—substantive biblical exploration that seeks to understand what God was doing in ancient times so that we might see what God might be doing in today's world. They also are what O'Connor might have hoped for, as a group of her CBA colleagues embraced her challenge.

As one would expect in an anthology, the specific authors take different tacks. Some explicitly draw on Roman Catholic documents, while others may do so implicitly or not at all. Some delve more deeply into the ancient world and some live more vividly in the modern world, but all of them seek to move between the two, letting the ancient stories speak anew in the present. Given this back-and-forth, *By Bread Alone* is a wonderful book not only for biblical scholars but also those in practical fields, and especially homiletics.

Of particular interest to readers of *Homiletic* would be Lauress L. Wilkins' essay, "War, Famine, and Baby Stew: A Recipe for Disaster in the Book of Lamentations." Wilkins makes the most direct connection between her exegesis and contemporary preaching. She notes, for

¹ "The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church," *Instrumentum Laboris*, (Vatican City, 2008) http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20080511_instrlabor-xii-assembly_en.html

instance, that “the biblical texts that speak most clearly [to war and war-related hunger], namely, Lamentations 1-2 and 4-5, rarely are preached from Catholic pulpits. . . . This oversight practically guarantees that the laments that would most strongly challenge those who promote aggressive military operations in the name of patriotism and national security are muted in Catholic preaching” (86).

This is not to say that the other essayists are not of interest to preachers and scholars of preaching—far from it! Taken together, they invite readers of all stripes to follow in O’Connor’s footsteps, walking with the hungry in two worlds and hearing God’s voice speaking in each place.

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Rick Blackwood. *The Power of Multi-Sensory Preaching and Teaching*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013. 218 pages. \$17.34.

Do you want to gain more attention from your congregation during your preaching? Do you want to make your sermon more attractive to people's ears? Do you want to render your sermon more understandable and memorable? Here is one way to do that, says Rick Blackwood, the senior pastor of Christ Fellowship Church in Miami. His premise is this: The more senses you stimulate in preaching, the higher levels of learning you can achieve in people. In other words, multi-sensory preaching will accomplish higher levels of attention to, and comprehension and retention of, the sermon message for today's multimedia-saturated people.

In order to make his case clear and applicable to other church contexts, he divides the book into three parts. The six chapters in Part I show biblical and scientific evidence that supports the application of multi-senses in effective learning. In particular, the use of three senses is highlighted: verbal, visual, and interactive (or touching). He realizes that out of the five senses (hearing, seeing, touching, smelling, and tasting), the first three can be maximized for better learning during the sermon delivery, though he does not exclude the use of the last two senses.

Part II contains three chapters about the actual "how" of the multi-sensory preaching. Chapter 7 specifically discusses multi-sensory change in the preacher's message creation and delivery, the audience's perception of the transformed message, and the function of ministry teams. By his own experiences he acknowledges that gradual change in all three of these groups is absolutely required for the most effective multisensory preaching. Chapter 8 includes specifics of multi-sensory preaching prepared and offered by the preacher and the ministry teams. To briefly summarize, three teams (teaching team, design team, and implementation team) work together during six months of content creation, worship design, implementation, preparation, rehearsal, execution, and evaluation of the series sermon. The sermon message will be the core content of small group resources for bible study and prayer meetings. A key to the success of multi-sensory preaching is collaboration among the whole ecclesial community dedicated to the envisioned transformative work.

The three chapters in Part III provide three sermon examples of multi-sensory preaching actually delivered by Blackwood at his church. Using these three sermons as examples, he shows the first simple level of multi-sensory preaching, the second intermediate level, and the third most advanced one. He suggests that the preacher and her ministerial team carefully determine the target level of the multi-sensory preaching depending on the congregational understanding of it and available resources at hand.

Blackwood does a good job in presenting his case clearly and succinctly, in spite of the complexity of the subject (i.e., multi-sensory preaching), especially in describing the actual practice of it. Anybody who wants to try multi-sensory preaching will find this book very applicable and useful. My only reservation is that this book would be much better if it included the learner's DVD packet. The DVD will help novices in this practice to learn comprehensively by actually *seeing* it, not "reading" it. Fortunately, the church's website provides free VODs of Blackwood's multi-sensory preaching, which are very helpful to watch.

A last word is needed. Does Blackwood simply want to make his preaching more entertaining and so more attractive, even sacrificing the hardness or seriousness of the biblical message? Absolutely not! As he firmly acknowledges, his ultimate concern is to make the solid and sound biblical message more attractable, comprehensible, and memorable so that the message itself is truly lived out in people's daily lives. This is why I would not hesitate to recommend his vision and this book with applause.

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J. Ellsworth Kalas. *Preaching in an Age of Distraction*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2014. 165 pages. \$17.29.

One of the most salient features of our society is ubiquitous distraction. Teachers, preachers and writers know this reality well. We find ourselves in contexts so replete with distractions that focus and discipline seem elusive concepts rarely to be engaged. In his latest book, J. Ellsworth Kalas acknowledges that distraction in our time has reached fever pitch. Even so, he cautions against claiming ours as the most distracted generation in history. He frames distractedness as an innately human experience as old as the creation story itself. Through an exploration of distractions past and present, Kalas reminds the reader that a romantic time of undistracted engagement never existed. He instills hope in even the most distracted person by offering creative possibilities for overcoming and engaging distracting temptations. Kalas encourages preachers to see not just the frustrating qualities of distraction, but also distraction's fruitful possibilities. *Preaching in an Age of Distraction* contains useful analysis of the role distraction plays in the lives of congregants as well as preachers. It places distraction in the broader context of spiritual need and hunger. Preachers are encouraged to embrace their role in providing focus for those adrift in a sea of distractions—even as they struggle in that same sea. “We need to remember that the longing for God is older than the longing for more and that the sensation the secular world sells cannot be fully satisfied short of God” (61).

How does the distracted preacher invite distracted listeners into a safe harbor in the midst of rough seas? Kalas offers useful focus questions that will resonate with preachers hoping to cut through the wind and waves: “Will this ‘distraction’ lead to more life or to less? Will it bless me so that I will bless others or will it diminish me so that I will enjoy diminishing others?” (77) In addition to encouraging a discerned engagement with distractions in order to harness their power for good, Kalas makes a case for excellence in preaching as a counterforce to distraction. He argues that excellent preaching can overcome given distraction by being more interesting, accessible, and compelling than the alternatives. “We must give our generation a call to the excellence that is the essence of life in Jesus Christ. And we must do so with an excellence of thought and delivery worthy of the subject that is our trust” (93).

The challenges facing the every-Sunday preacher receive special attention in this book. In a chapter dedicated to creativity and distraction, Kalas artfully discusses the unique circumstances of preaching in the same pulpit week after week. He lays out possibilities for maximizing creative potential in the sermon writing process by engaging in deep listening and spiritual renewal. Practical considerations to minimize distractions during the preaching moment itself are also shared. This is done with sophistication and candor offering advice and strategies that are significant and timely, not faddish. In his discussion of sermon content in our distracted age, Kalas covers a range of topics from scripture to current events to doctrine. Throughout, he reminds readers that good sermonic content must be matched with a sensitivity to the way our congregations listen and hear today. “I wish that all of us preachers... would remember a basic rule: what matters is not how long we preach but how long the hearer listens, not how much we say but how much people comprehend and apply to their lives” (133).

Each chapter in the book is punctuated by narrative offerings from preachers in the field. These reflections are diverse and edifying. They offer perspective, witness, and additional strategies for dealing with distraction dilemmas. Perhaps the most challenging and prophetic questions come in the final chapter. On the topic of preaching in a context of distraction that leads to emotional over-saturation, Kalas asks, “Is there a limit to our sensory equipment so that having passed the limit we drop into an abyss of boredom? . . . In a world of distraction, ennui may be the coming plague” (146). If this prediction is true, then his book is all the more

important. Kalas comprehensively engages the seductive and productive powers of distraction with incision, wisdom, and whimsy. Preachers, teachers, and writers alike will find useful and accessible engagement with a topic that is unavoidable in any discipline.

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Justin Wise. *The Social Church: A Theology of Digital Communication*. Chicago: Moody, 2014. 180 pages. \$14.99.

There have been a number of books written over the last decade about social media as a ministry option. Many of them have delved into the options for utilizing digital media for preaching, worship, social outreach, children and youth ministry, prayer concerns, and more. Some of these resources offer a theology behind the use of these media platforms, but not all. This book, *The Social Church: A Theology of Digital Communication*, offers options for using digital media and a theological framework for the use of that media. Justin Wise has written a book that is accessible, informative, and engaging. The book is a quick read, which is appropriate for the times in which we are living. The book is divided into three sections: “The Why of Social Media, The Embedded Values of a New Media Culture, and To Whom Shall We Go?”

The first section, “The Why of Social Media,” takes a look at the historical evolution of mass production through a number of technologies—the printing press and eventually social media (23). The risk churches and pastors have to take is delving into social media for effective two-way communication for the 21st century (30).

Wise’s use of anecdote and story is powerful and provides the reader with multiple entry points into the discussion. The use of story to present the historical shifts in broadcasting news and changing events is intriguing (40). The transition from one voice to a multiplicity of voices on the web is a well-known reality; but his take on the difference between openness before and openness now is well done (44).

Chapter four includes a helpful look at how generational cohorts view social media (56–61). The new media values of interactivity, personalization, ubiquity/connectedness, and sharing are vital for many generations, but especially for Gen Y (59–60).

In the following chapters (Chapters 5–8), section two of the book, the reader is given more specificity about these new media values. The author helps the reader understand how these values are experienced anew in the ever-growing social media landscape. Chapter nine looks at the ways “the medium is the message” (102). But, the author is clear to remind the reader that the message does not necessarily change; just the medium needs to evolve (103). One of the helpful pieces in this book is that Wise provides both positive options for social media and cautions for its usage with equal affect.

The final section of the book, “To Whom Shall We Go?,” is a practical guide for persons and communities of faith who choose to use social media to present their message and the message of the Gospel in a new day. Having a Big Idea is an important concept for the church today. Jesus communicated his Big Idea and “it’s clear that it was heavily influenced by the power of narrative” (125). The narrative of God’s love and Christ resurrected for our salvation is a simple message but it need not be simplistic in its delivery system (125). The church must determine its best mode of communicating their big idea in the new media age.

Creating a unique and creative website that attracts the viewers’ attention in this media age is vitally important. Wise states that most visitors to webpages only view them for 7–12 seconds before deciding to move on if it does not grab their attention (139). That means working to convey the message is of upmost importance in a media saturated world.

The final piece of advice that the author provides is to understand the generational divide in culture today. There is a “tug-of-war” happening with a perfect storm of issues affecting the church today: “change in communication methods, transition in leadership, and social cultural shifts as far as the eye can see” (159). We are called as the church to understand our context, utilize new mediums to tell the story of faith, and create relationships (168).

Churches must determine what media platforms work for them, how to limit their interactions in appropriate ways, and move outside of their four walls to interact with the world, especially through social media platforms. Wise helps the reader understand this as being both a possibility and a theologically sound option. One criticism of the book is that it is fairly simplistic; however, for many readers that might be an asset. There were moments in reading this book that I wanted the author to be more detailed; however, I still found it a worthwhile read and recommend it to others.

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Tércio Bretanha Junker. *Prophetic Liturgy: Toward a Transforming Christian Praxis*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014. 159 pages. \$18.90.

Professor Tércio B. Junker, a Brazilian American liturgist and theologian, reorients the Christian practice of worship based on the perspective of Latin American liberation theology. For him, Christian liturgy should be a “prophetic praxis” that “foster[s] the community’s transformative vocation towards freedom, equality, justice, and peace” (4). Junker understands the nature and function of liturgy as the agent of transformation of socio-political and economic life for all and reinterprets the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist as means of such transformation. According to him, both sacraments are not merely an individual personal experience of the presence of God but a transforming praxis of the church, a “prophetic community,” in its particular historical context.

Chapter One focuses on defining such foundational concepts as “prophet” and “praxis,” and Chapter Two explores the meaning of the prophetic praxis of the sacraments as “the ultimate means of transformation” (39). For Junker, “the fullness of the baptismal meaning” is a call to the involvement “in the communal struggle for human rights where they are thwarted by oppressive regimes, unjust economic systems, distrustful political power, and unbalanced ecology on earth” (47). The Eucharist, states Junker, is also a transformative praxis in the sense that “the gesture of taking, breaking, blessing, and giving the bread has in its foundation the imperative political claim to resist hunger, oppression, violence, and unjust socio-economic order” (51). In Chapter Three, Junker grounds the theological foundation of prophetic liturgy in the prophetic image of the Triune God: “God, as Prophet of prophets; Jesus Christ, as Incarnated Prophet; and the Holy Spirit, as spirit of prophets” (63) and reminds the church of its identity as “a vehicle of transformation in society” (75). The last two chapters concentrate on how the worshiping community can experience the ultimate level of “total sacramental rituality” through prophetic liturgy. Junker suggests that the three levels of ritual communication— theology (spiritual/transcendental language), culture (cultural/contextual language), and ethics (socio/political/economic language)—should be foundations for the “matrix of total sacramental rituality” and explains how the matrix can be built, through which the community of faith may experience and live out the “transformative prophetic dimension of Christian liturgical praxis in the world” (143).

Throughout the book, Junker rightly emphasizes the significance of the “concreteness of political consciousness” in the particular socio-cultural, economic context and suggests that interdisciplinary studies with social sciences, such as sociology, anthropology, political science, economics, and so forth, should be used as “critical and analytical tools” for “a responsible theological discernment” (81). For the readers in North America, such a practical theological approach to the liturgical study is insightful. Yet, it is their responsibility to critically analyze their *Sitz im Leben*, since the book does not provide them with concrete assessment of the North American context for prophetic liturgy. It would have been more reader-friendly if Junker had elaborated such confusing terms as “militant Christian praxis” (xxiii), “unconditional life” (53), “a ‘prophetic delay’ and ‘non-identical repetition’” (99), and “grace . . . nurtured by praxis.” In addition, some of the descriptive statements in the book imply serious debatable issues. For example, Junker simply states that “Rituals have the power of transformation” (110). This statement is, however, disputable because not every practice of rituals has the power of transformation but rather some have the power of maintaining the status quo.

Despite these concerns and notions, this book seems to be a good resource for teaching fundamental courses in liturgics, for it not only provides the readers with rudimental knowledge about the theological concept of Christian liturgy based on biblical and historical information but

also challenges them to stretch the understanding of Christian liturgy from the practical theological perspective. Most of all, the book encourages readers to practice Christian worship as a prophetic praxis for the transformation within and beyond the Christian community.

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Emmanuel Y. Larrey. *Postcolonializing God: New Perspectives in Pastoral and Practical Theology*. London: SCM, 2012. 224 pages. \$36.

In *Postcolonializing God: An African Practical Theology*, Emmanuel Y. Larrey declares that “African practical theology must pursue and engage in the activities of postcolonializing God as a counter-hegemonic practice” (129). Larrey in this volume performs theological examinations of African postcolonializing activities in cooperation with the Divine especially as found in African indigenous religious, spiritual, and cultural heritages. For him, African agents’ postcolonializing praxis, whether they are indigenous Africans or diasporan Africans, is innovative practical theological work that subverts hierarchical European Christianity’s misinterpretation and mischaracterization of African life, religions, and thoughts. This postcolonializing task, the author hopes, will eventually contribute to (African) human liberation specifically through pastoral theological work, community-building, and culture-transforming work. Throughout the book, he tries to unveil postcolonial discourses and performances in African faith communities in the effort of constructing unique African practical theology. His work is truly an interdisciplinary dialogue between biblical studies, postcolonial theory, pastoral theology, and Black theology, just to name a few.

Toward theological re-affirmation of African churches’ postcolonializing activities, Chapter One re-interprets biblical passages with a postcolonial reading of them, e.g., God’s counter-hegemonic and pluralizing activity in the Tower of Babel and the Spirit’s affirmation of diversity and plurality in the event of Pentecost. Chapter Two conveys the inquiry into primitive African religious and cultural heritages that are already embedded in Black Christianity and its spirituality. Larrey identifies obvious characteristics of African heritages in Black Christianity. Especially, he contends that the New Religious Movement among diasporan Africans has historically represented African churches’ postcolonializing activity by means of its synthetic thinking and dynamic hybrid creativity, quite different from dominant Western analytical thinking (36–37). Chapter Three analyzes and re-conceptualizes public theological ceremony enacted in Elmina, Ghana in 2007 through his particular theological perspective of indigenization and postcolonialism. Chapter Four re-elucidates the Ghanaian mystic Ishmael Tetteh’s African mysticism and his innovative Etherean Mission that predominantly relies on practices of African traditional priest healers. Larrey finds Tetteh’s mystical religious practice a vividly lived example of African postcolonializing activity (117). Chapter Five explores postcolonializing pastoral practice that seeks to build healthy community, well-being for all humans, the total dignity of humanity, and the transformation of colonizing culture, which all goes far beyond individual pastoral care and healing (121–122). The last chapter concludes the book by proposing practical theological strategies such as imitation, improvisation, and creativity needed for the further development of postcolonializing activity.

A notable strength of the book is the author’s insightful investigations of the representative African indigenous inheritance found in African postcolonializing activity, the hallmarks of Africans’ synthetic ethos, and African-indigenized pastoral care. This book is a remarkable example for theologians and ecclesiological leaders of other ethnic groups who want to develop their own ethnic/racial postcolonial practical theology. Larrey thus invites readers from any specific ethnic/racial groups to courageously engage in innovative postcolonial religious and practical theological work by re-examining the deleterious effects of the prevailing colonization legacy in their own contexts.

Nonetheless, this book includes some questions that should have been more explored. For example, Chapter Six leaves behind the inevitable question, “What would be the standard for imitation and improvisation that leads to the articulation of creative ethnic practical theology in a particular context?” Also, in Chapters Six and Seven, readers might expect to hear more of the author’s own voice on the interpretive concept of African pastoral and practical theology, beyond the analysis of the African church’s pastoral performance and demonstration of an example from Tetteh’s mysticism.

Overall, Lartey's work is a significant contribution to the field of practical theology, Black theological studies, postcolonial biblical study, postcolonial theory, and ethnic postcolonial study. His effort to divulge and analyze African indigenous spiritual movement wonderfully rediscovers the constructive interplay between the Divine and humanity toward the latter's postcolonial liberation. Moreover, his work emphatically stimulates other ethnic groups' ongoing postcolonializing theological works and practices. I recommend this book as a critical textbook for any classroom where a discussion on provocative and transformative roles and practices of postcolonialism is welcome, especially for the promotion of indigenous and unique practical theologies among marginalized ethnic/racial groups around the world.

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Adam L. Bond. *The Imposing Preacher: Samuel DeWitt Proctor and Black Public Faith*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2013. 247 pages. \$26.10.

Religion news editor George Dugan's *New York Times* feature article "An Imposing Preacher: Samuel DeWitt Proctor" headlined on July 24, 1972, the day after interim pastor of Harlem's historic Abyssinian Baptist Church enthusiastically voiced, "Stand and meet your pastor!" Historian Adam L. Bond's magisterial theo-biography, penned just four decades following Proctor's appointment as successor to Abyssinian's famed clerico-politician Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., represents the most comprehensive treatment of the intellectual and clerical legacy of one of America's most influential Black public theologians of the mid-to-late twentieth century. In this work, Bond describes Proctor as a bridge figure, pragmatic religious harmonizer, and theological barometer for the Black Christian community, whose deft rescue of a vanishing Black social gospel tradition forged a crucial middle ground between a Black Theology revolution that rocketed in the late 60s and 70s and the well-ensconced tradition of American Protestant fundamentalism (3, 70).

Bond places Proctor in his historical context as a sagely black Baptist pastor's pastor, whose Black middle-class upbringing, theological embrace of 20th century liberalism and Personalism, U.S. presidential appointments, international travel, and work as college president, professor, and pastor uniquely equipped him for civic and religious engagement in the public square. With such legendary preachers as Gardner Taylor, Martin King, and Howard Thurman being an important exception, Proctor's mentoring influence on some of the nation's most prominent African American preachers is without parallel. Bond helpfully notes that Proctor's biography "is eerily similar to that of Martin Luther King, Jr.," since both men hailed from the deep South, acquired their seminary and doctoral degrees in Boston, preached a social gospel centered on the ethics of Jesus, fought for racial de-segregation and racial integration, and through moral suasion sought to reform America's political system. Nonetheless, this work is a valiant attempt that points out the distinctive paths of the two men. For example, King was "a marching activist" whose career was cut short; Proctor's career spanned four decades, and unlike King he nurtured his voice as public theologian primarily within the strictures of the academy (4).

The Imposing Preacher is organized into six chapters, each followed by a compendium of source notes, which provides the reader relative ease in tracking the author's citations. In Chapter One Bond presents Proctor as a theological genius who skillfully linked together or divorced himself from several Black public faith options. Bond labels him a Black Social "American" Gospel theologian. Here Bond examines at length diverse traditions of Black public faith describing their tenets and leading proponents. Analyzed are James Cone and J. Deotis Roberts' Black liberation projects, Katie Canon's womanist program, E. V. Hill's biblical literalism platform and association with the Religious Right, and Jesse Jackson's (a mentee of Proctor) Rainbow Theology political evangelism model. Chapters Two and Three survey Proctor's historical and cultural roots, specifically, the ideals that encouraged and shaped his public ministry. Chapter Four, titled "Everybody is God's Somebody"—one of Proctor's familiar adages—synthesizes the social construction of Proctor's theology, faith commitments, and concern for society's "least of these." In this chapter, Bond also describes the nature of Proctor's allegiance to Baptist faith, debts to White liberal preachers, especially Harry Emerson Fosdick, and mentoring influences of African American religious intellectuals such as J. Pius Barbour and John Malcus Ellison.

As a self-described "race man," according to Bond, Proctor's response to racism classifies him as a member of Cornel West's "Humanist Tradition," which takes the tack that African Americans have "just as many positive and negative qualities as any other racial group."

Opposite exceptionalist, assimilationists, and marginalists, subscribers of this tradition “see in electoral politics the opportunity for social change” (142). Chapter Five holds particular interest for readers who seek a deep exposure into the preaching life of Samuel Proctor. In this segment, Bond exercises his chops as a homiletical historian. After carefully distilling the distinguishing features of two African American preaching traditions—folk/revival preaching and college chapel/lecture preaching, Bond presents the nuts and bolts of Proctor’s sermon preparation method—an approach based on German philosopher Georg W. F. Hegel’s dialectic method.

Finally, in Chapter Six Bond discusses why Proctor’s Christian vision has relevance today for constructing a vision for “genuine community” —one that affirms the ideals of personhood, freedom, as well as educational, racial and socioeconomic justice. Few proposals since the release of Henry Mitchell’s *Black Preaching* in 1970, or ones appearing as late as Cleo LaRue’s *Heart of Black Preaching* in 2000, have furthered the discussion of Black preaching and Black public faith beyond carving out Black preaching’s nomenclature as has Bond’s research. Fewer still have examined African American preaching beyond contrasting it with Eurocentric preaching traditions. Bond’s book, a much needed resource, offers readers an invaluable look into the window of the complex identity and life world of the Black intellectual preacher—a window made opaque due to the oft unsuccessful task of rescuing the Black preacher from dreadful caricature.

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Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen. *Dialogical Preaching: Bakhtin, Otherness and Homiletics*. Arbeiten zur Pastoraltheologie, Liturgik und Hymnologie 74. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014. 199 pages. \$78.

With this text, Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen offers a promising revision of her Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Copenhagen. Here she uses Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of dialogism and carnivalesque genres of literature to examine a range of homiletical approaches.

In Chapters One, Two, and Four, Lorensen surveys Bakhtin's thought in relation to preaching in general. Chapter One sets up Bakhtin's "pragmatist" view of the inter-relation of theory and practice, as opposed to the linear view of theory informing practice, as a lens for proposing a trans-linguistic approach to homiletics and preaching.

Chapter Two introduces main themes of Bakhtin's dialogism that will inform the analysis to follow in the book. Lorensen explores the ways Martin Buber, Søren Kierkegaard and speech act theory influenced his thought at the same time that he moved beyond all of them. She explores his critique of a transfer/transmission theory of communication. Especially important to her project is her analysis of Bakhtin's three senses of dialogicity. First, is the sense of addressivity: language is always addressed to an other in response to and in anticipation of the "foreign" word of the other. Second, is the sense that all words a speaker uses have already been shaped and inhabited by former use, requiring speakers to choose how to use other's words in conveying new meanings. And, third, is the sense that dialogicity is not simply an approach to speech but is an other-oriented ethic.

In Chapter Four, Lorensen surveys Bakhtin's concept of carnivalesque genres in which "a reversal of roles and hierarchies, dissolving traditional lines between actors and audience" occurs (96). She thereby argues that preaching is/should be this sort of genre.

In the remaining chapters, Lorensen uses Bakhtin's concepts to evaluate a range of approaches by various homileticians, some of whom are directly influenced by Bakhtin and others who are not. In Chapter Three, she briefly surveys German, Swedish, Danish and North American homiletical works that lean towards dialogue in some way or another. A great deal of the attention in this chapter is focused on the "New Homiletics," [sic] especially Fred Craddock's inductive approach.

The later chapters of the book are each focused on the work of a particular homiletical scholar. In Chapter Five Lorensen examines the homiletical work of Danish theologian, Svend Bjerg, who draws on Bakhtin to argue for dialogical sermons that create space for a polyphony of voices and "a mighty room of experiences" (117). Chapter Six focuses on James Henry Harris's use of Bakhtin to reflect on the heteroglossia of African American preaching. Chapter Seven explores John S. McClure's *Other-wise Preaching* and suggests ways that Bakhtin's valuation of dialogism and the carnivalesque fit with McClure's use of Levinas in grounding a homiletical approach that emphasizes otherness in the preaching event. In Chapter Eight, she lifts up Charles L. Campbell's work on preaching in a liminal setting "on the street" (as opposed to preaching in a strict liturgical setting) as a model for a carnivalesque approach to the preaching assuming the role of the fool for the sake of the gospel and the dialogicity of the experience on the street with the word from scripture.

In the concluding chapter, Lorensen shifts directions. Here she works to reconcile the emphasis on otherness and difference in Bakhtin and various homiletical approaches and the emphasis on God as Wholly Other in Kierkegaard, Karl Barth, and Eberhard Jüngel.

Dialogical Preaching reads like a dissertation that needs refinement and focus. Tangents often interrupt the discourse. The author tries to do too much, resulting at times in surface-level analysis and unsupported claims. Most problematic is the fact that the work is not controlled by

an overarching methodology. In other words, Bakhtin's work is not used in a consistent manner to evaluate the approaches of the various homileticians considered and to build a cohesive argument.

That said, this work foreshadows great potential for bringing Bakhtin into the homiletical conversation in new and significant ways. Lorensen has lain out before (and others) a number of trails to follow in considering preaching through the lenses of dialogism and the carnivalesque. Especially helpful would be a narrow analysis of various works based on Bakhtin's three senses of dialogue (as she did partially with Craddock, 82–84) followed by a constructive proposal concerning how to preach in a way that involves all three senses. As someone committed to preaching as conversation, I very much look forward to her continued voice in the homiletical dialogue.

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Cornelius Plantinga Jr. *Reading for Preaching: The Preacher in Conversation with Storytellers, Biographers, Poets, and Journalists*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013. 133 pages. \$12.54.

Cornelius Plantinga, a theologian and past president of Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, writes this book as a result of teaching a summer seminar on “Reading for Preaching” over the previous ten years. The book argues for a disciplined reading program beyond biblical resources.

Chapter One introduces the general reading program Plantinga explores in this book. Chapter Two, entitled “Attentive Illustrations,” speaks to the responsibility of preachers to carefully attend to what is going on in the world around them. Attentiveness is the preacher’s gift and calling (27). Good reading habits are an excellent way to nurture this gift. Plantinga, however, issues a word of caution that reading “just for illustrations is slightly perverse” (22). At the end of Chapter Two he offers a suggested reading plan that involves reading one novel, one biography, and some part of a book of poetry once a year (42).

Chapter Three engages the field of communication describing how the preacher crafts the language of the sermon in order to engage listeners. Preachers can learn skillful sermon writing from reading widely. Plantinga, however, cautions against using extreme styles of language. On the one hand, preachers should avoid “tuxedo formal” language but on the other hand they should also avoid “tank top casual” (49). He advises a “business casual” kind of colloquialism. At the same time, different contexts demand different degrees of formal and informal language.

The last three chapters (half the book) are devoted to the importance of the preacher gaining wisdom. The first half of Chapter Four provides a realistic and sobering description of the complexities involved in the task of preaching. Every week preachers are challenged to bring a fresh message to the same congregation made up of diverse listeners. The challenge is daunting even for the most experienced. Preachers need wisdom to know how to meet the challenge. Therefore a preacher must develop qualities of a sage; a sage who has developed a broad knowledge base out of which to preach and adapt to the diversity of listeners (73). Having a general reading program helps preachers understand a variety of issues, connect specific examples to biblical concepts, and manage the complexities of the task (74).

Chapter Five elaborates further on the theme of wisdom. Good literature and the literary characters that inhabit the pages complicate the issues in life. Preachers, like many people, tend to develop “dogmatic myopia” about individuals, groups, and issues (93). If preachers carry their narrow-minded perspectives into the pulpit, they become irresponsible. “The preacher wants his program of reading to complicate some of his fixed ideas, to impress him with some of the mysteries of life, with its variousness, with its surprises, with the pushes and pulls within it” (95).

Chapter Six, the final chapter, describes the complexities of sin and grace and the wisdom to understand how to appropriately address both. Sin brutalizes its victims. When preachers treat sin lightly then grace is trivialized. Preachers who read widely will discover sin’s power to destroy lives but will also surface ways that God’s grace intercedes in surprising ways.

There are minor concerns I have about some ideas expressed. For example, Plantinga uses the term “middle wisdom” to describe those insights a person gains from reading that are not as profound as say a biblical proverb but neither are they mundane (74–75). Most scholars, however, would describe biblical proverbs as more on the mundane side than the profound. One of the qualities of wisdom is that it is not that interested in making profound statements.

The section on “Things We Should Not Know” was ambiguous (82–85). Is Plantinga saying there are ideas or issues we should not explore? If so how does one know whether or not one should explore them unless they are first explored? Or is he saying there are ideas or issues

or knowledge that preachers should not share from the pulpit? It seems he is saying the former but it is not clear.

In the opening of Chapter One Plantinga asks whether we preach text or gospel (1–2). He raises the issue that some texts like a proverb or a genealogy or Job 38–41 do not contain much gospel. The solution he offers is less than adequate. He maintains that such texts should be paired with another that contains more gospel. This solution depends in part on how one defines gospel. At any rate such a complex issue needs more than the cursory treatment it received or it should not be addressed at all.

Every page in the book is chalked full of specific examples and illustrations from a variety of reading resources. Most of the time these examples are brief. On a few occasions they are longer and more detailed, like the example of Philip Carey in Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage* (109–113). Plantinga appeals to the value of reading broadly as a means of developing the qualities of wisdom and attentiveness. Reading hones a preacher's ability to pay attention to the world around, even the most boring conversations (26). He is quick to emphasize that a reading program is not a magical solution. It will not automatically make one a good preacher (18). Neither does he claim that all terrific preachers are wide readers (20). Preachers who develop a reading discipline, however, strengthen their understanding of human nature, deepen their spiritual lives, and gain wisdom for the task of preaching. For a majority of preachers who are not naturally gifted speakers, he rightly claims that a disciplined reading program will significantly strengthen us personally and professionally (21). Preachers will greatly benefit from Plantinga's work.

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Peter Sanlon. *Augustine's Theology of Preaching*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2014. 177 pages. \$24.

The influence of St. Augustine upon our current studies of preaching is hard to fully comprehend. On the one hand, Augustine's theology has filtered into the ground water of Christianity. Augustine's influence is so widespread and so deep it is nearly impossible to trace. Can there be a Chrysostom or a Luther or a Barth without Augustine? Augustine has a privileged place in the history of Christian thought and to pretend as if his thought hasn't influenced the field of homiletics as now configured is foolish. Augustine's *On Christian Teaching* is widely considered to be the church's first preaching textbook and *Confessions* has served as the headwaters for all of the spiritual memoirs that are so popular among preachers. And yet, on the other hand, within the field of homiletics scant attention has been paid to Augustine's actual preaching. When Augustine climbed those pulpit steps what did he say? How did he say it? What operative theology guided his proclamation? How did Augustine organize his sermons?

In his work, *Augustine's Theology of Preaching*, Peter T. Sanlon invites a more substantive conversation about the preaching of one of the church's most favorite sons. Sanlon's work is a deep dive into Augustine's vast corpus in the hope that one might find some helpful lenses for reading Augustine's sermons. Sanlon surfaces with two important hermeneutical keys: interiority and temporality. Augustine's preaching, Sanlon argues, was primarily concerned with using scripture to change the hearts and minds of his listeners. In a sense, Augustine sought ways to communicate the deep meanings of the scriptures in a way that met the hearts and minds of the listeners. By focusing on the themes of interiority and temporality in scripture Augustine found ways to connect with interior desires and temporal lives of his congregation.

The strength of this book is its careful attention to the underexamined places of the Augustinian canon. Sanlon does not limit his study to what Augustine said about preaching, but carefully examines Augustine's actual preaching. *The Sermons of Augustine (Sermones ad Populum)* are a ragged bunch of proclamations that are guided more by the urgencies of everyday life than by a single, consistent theological worldview. In this way, Augustine's sermons are like the corpus of most preachers in history. Undeterred by the challenges of understanding such a disparate body of work, Sanlon provides a thorough reading of Augustine's sermons. In particular, the final three chapters of this book are its best. When Sanlon finally arrives at the examinations of the sermons, the book immediately becomes more lively and interesting. The case studies that end the book give Sanlon an opportunity to stretch his legs and do the synthetic thinking that marks the best of homiletics.

It is the lack of this synthetic thinking that hinders the initial chapters of the book. The historical discussion of Augustine's preaching context is rarely tied into specific instances of Augustine's sermons. Sanlon describes the context of Augustine's preaching in order that we might begin to read the sermons, but doesn't work backwards to help us understand how the sermons might inform our understanding of context. The same problem comes from when Sanlon examines Augustine's theories of preaching as espoused in *On Christian Teaching*. Does Augustine's vision of ideal practice match his *actual* practice? In what way ought *On Christian Teaching* be amended according to the practice of Augustine's preaching? These questions are left unanswered.

Sanlon's work is full of interesting ideas and it should be commended for cracking the door for homiletics to shine more light on the influence of Augustine preaching. As an initial foray into a new conversation it is meant primarily for other scholars. The prose is at times overly academic and prone to jargon. As such this book is probably not suited for master's level

students or clergy. It would, however, be welcome reading for those interested in thinking not simply about Augustine's theories of preaching but about Augustine's practice of preaching.

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Brian K. Blount. *Invasion of the Dead: Preaching Resurrection*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2014. 135 pages. \$10.81.

Brian Blount's book, based on his 2011 Beecher Lectures at Yale, is a marvelous invitation to preaching apocalyptic texts that goes beyond critical-exegetical matters to deeply important cultural and theological ones. Blount's subtitle is not decoration, but programmatic: preaching resurrection. This theme becomes important as Blount unpacks the apocalyptic dimensions of Revelation, Pauline literature, and the Gospel of Mark. However, the implication of his careful work emerges clearly as his cultural-studies approach welcomes the move from ancient text to contemporary context. Blount is incredibly adept at doing so.

By the same token, *Invasion of the Dead* is much more than a sexy title. Blount describes the reading of apocalyptic texts in light of four different kinds of death and life. Life is life lived in proximity to God, for Blount a classic formulation of apocalyptic thinking. Death type A is the cessation of bodily functioning. Death type B is eschatological death—the truly permanent death in contrast to the only relative death that type A represents. The fourth type is *the living dead*. This last type becomes a major focus of the book. For Blount, it is precisely the zombie-like state of the living dead that characterizes the world in which books like Revelation, Paul's letters, and Mark's Gospel do their work. Jesus' resurrection is the key to God's invasion of the realm of the living dead—to release the virus of life by means of a resurrection inoculation.

The book, corresponding to Blount's Beecher Lectures, moves from Revelation, to Paul, and concludes with Mark in odd-numbered successive chapters. The even-numbered chapters are Blount's own sermons, which comprise much briefer chapters between the meatier lectures with which they alternate. Both lectures and sermons are substantial. However, the lecture chapters go into greater exegetical detail for someone who wants to appreciate the critical resources upon which Blount relies and the problematic exegetical, hermeneutical, and theological traditions (Barth, Bultmann, Schweitzer) with which he is contending. In some ways, the purpose of his writing is to undo in (mainline) Protestant Christianity an undue fascination with the cross and replace it with a reinvigorated resurrection proclamation—and in such a way that the resurrection interprets the cross, rather than the other way around. The concern Blount has is that our fascination with cross, satisfaction, atonement leaves the living dead *the living dead*.

I find Blount's approach startling and arresting. Operating from a cultural-studies perspective, Blount does careful exegetical work but sees the meaning-producing dimensions of that text in profound dialogue with culture. The connection to cultural phenomena like the zombie apocalypse or shows like "The Walking Dead," helps Blount to articulate that these apocalyptic texts from the New Testament meet us in an age already obsessed with death. For this, preaching resurrection represents a full frontal assault, first through the witness and life of Jesus Christ, but then also in the empowered praxis of the church and disciples today. This is why Blount's text is a must-read.

At the same time, I have some critical concerns. In some sections, his desire to interpret the cross in light of the resurrection almost becomes a diminishment if not quite the outright displacement of it by the resurrection. The point is well taken. Satisfaction and atonement theories have led to cruciform deformations of Christianity that are anything but life-giving and are in fact death dealing. Yet sometimes I get the impression that what Blount calls a theology of the cross is really atonement theology that has become culturally warped. For me, a theology of the cross is not about atonement, but revelation. In fact, in the hands of theologians like Douglas John Hall, Jürgen Moltmann, and Deanna Thompson the cross reveals not a suffering prescription, but a powerful anti-triumphal witness at its center. Sometimes Blount seems almost to gloss over these differences. As an exegetical matter, the claims he makes about the role of the

cross are much more compelling in the sections about Revelation. The irony is that Mark seems himself to narrate the cross as an apocalyptic moment, with a darkening sun from the Day of the Lord tradition. Perhaps this would help Blount emphasize his earlier point: that the cross needs to be interpreted *in light of* the resurrection. To my mind, this more modest version of his point is both more compelling and more consistent with Markan and Pauline theologies.

Yet I view these criticisms as relatively minor. Blount makes an excellent case and helps to push the church to reclaim resurrection language and resurrection praxis. I intend to use Blount's book in my own course on apocalyptic preaching. I urge others to read it closely and rethink yet again how the resurrection, an *apocalyptic* resurrection, stands at the center and not as an afterthought of Christian proclamation in a church of the living dead.

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John D. Caputo. *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013. 307 pages. \$26.70.

John Caputo is a postmodern philosopher in love with theology, a unique vision Caputo calls in these pages a “radical theology.” In an earlier work, *The Weakness of God*, Caputo made a kind of apology for his unusual dalliance. He is aware that his work sends both the orthodox theologian and the atheist to the exits. He is not interested in the ways confessional theologians nor philosophical critics have talked about God, but in tandem with the “weak theology” (imagine a kind of theology of the cross with the foundations kicked out from under it) of his earlier book, wants to talk about God, perhaps.

This recurring “perhaps” is no mere dangling adverb for Caputo. It is at once the book’s subtitle and what passes for its subject matter. This is revealed in part by considering the title itself. For Caputo, the insistence of God is a claim, or better a call, that comes to us under the divine name, though it cannot be identified with it. As such it is an event, not “being.” Caputo, in postmodern, deconstructionist fashion, does not speak of God’s existence, but God’s *insistence*. This is not your father’s theology. It is rather an attempt to join Deleuzian language of the event with a kind of Derridean sensibility of an ever-deferred eschatology. God insists, but does not exist. God is not “Being,” but we still pray through tears “come, come.” Just as Derrida can speak not of justice or democracy as an entity, but can speak of its “promise,” so also Caputo can speak of a promise of God—a promise not guaranteed, a promise, perhaps.

That the insistence of God is central to this work is clear. Part I is devoted to that claim and the desire, through the story of Martha and Mary in the New Testament, to link that claim to life as lived and not some two-worlds Augustinian, neo-Platonist vision. Just as Martha perceives through worldliness and creaturely need (in contrast to the more contemplative Mary), so Caputo wants to be sure that his weak, radical theology of divine insistence remains tied to life. Yet in the same breath, he continues to talk of insistence in other ways. In Part II, the focus is on the insistence of *theology* itself in “theopoetics.” Something is astir in the name of God, but its connection to us is not through fixed and finished doctrine. In this section Caputo also wrestles with a philosophical tradition stuck in Kantian mode, challenging it with a “weak” reading of Hegel. In Part III, he speaks of the insistence of the *world*. The section features one of the most beautiful chapters in the book, “A Nihilism of Grace.” It is a rewarding read.

To the homiletician a book such as this may seem at first impression opaque. Yet homiletics has just come through its own period where the language of event reigned supreme, tied to a late Heideggerian ontology. What Caputo’s work may just do is to allow homiletics to revision its work in a postmodern mode, not as an event of Being’s self-disclosure, but as an event of promise impinging from the future. I suppose we could imagine our future is not so much in foundationalist ontologies, but in eschatological hope, perhaps.

Given that the book is written at the intersection of language theory, theology, and philosophy, homileticians will want to read it as way of both questioning and reinvigorating their own work. So much writing in deconstruction has seemed far too anti-theological to be of value. Some, contra Caputo, actually read Derrida himself this way. But Caputo’s book is worth the effort for imagining homiletical theory and theology beyond the new homiletic. In this sense, Caputo’s theology of perhaps may just be promising.

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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 sermonic 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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David P. Gushee. *In the Fray: Contesting Christian Public Ethics, 1994–2013*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014. 230 pages. \$25.20.

If I were to capture in a word how I feel after reading David P. Gushee's *In The Fray: Contesting Public Ethics, 1994–2013*, it would be this: *convicted*. What unifies this collection of essays is Gushee's relentless quest to present a bold public witness for Christ in the midst of cultural, political, and theological turmoil. Gushee couples a concrete pragmatism with a theological hopefulness, embodying the ideal of dwelling *in* the world while not being *of* the world.

The essays are all striking in their clarity and forcefulness. Gushee does not veer to the right or left, but drives right to the heart of each matter at hand. Many of the essays were originally delivered as speeches and one can still discern the orality of Gushee's prose in them, which makes for delightful reading. This book functions as a sort of primer on Christian public ethics, and thus it could be useful for homiletics professors teaching courses at the intersection of preaching and justice. While I did not acquiesce to all of Gushee's arguments there was no denying their import. It is a book that I highly recommend.

In the Fray consists of eighteen essays and a concluding, evaluative essay by the recently departed Glen Stassen. Several of the essays (chapters one, four, five, seven, and thirteen) build upon Gushee's seminal work on "the righteous gentiles" who offered protection and care for persecuted Jews during the *Shoah* and the enduring legacy of their witness. These essays are must-reads in my opinion because, in spite of their occasional nature, they bear timeless significance about how Christ-followers are to relate to the state. Several of the essays deal with interpersonal relationships, addressing divorce (chapter two), marriage (chapter eight), homosexuality (chapter twelve), and race relations (chapter seventeen). Another important concern that Gushee addresses is ecological ethics, and especially the reality of climate change (chapters eleven and sixteen). And several more essays challenge facile notions of Christian political theology vis-à-vis evangelicalism (chapters seven, nine, and thirteen), war (chapters three and fifteen), poverty (chapter fourteen), and Israeli-Palestinian conflict (chapter eighteen). Chapter six stands alone as a very helpful exposition on the discipline of Christian ethics, tracing its evolution and casting a vision for the future.

An alternative subtitle for this book could easily have been *Inaugurating a Moral Vision* because that is what Gushee does throughout. With patience and an unrelenting passion for Christ, the Church, and the world God loves, Gushee leads the reader through a kind of socio-political catechesis. As he puts it in one of his essays,

[W]e must seek to nurture morally fruitful Christian communities. Such communities would be the kind of communities that would produce rescuers working alongside friends and strangers, Jews and other Christians, in skillful supportive networks. . . . The development of this kind of community with these kinds of skills and commitments ought always to be the churches' goal, regardless of the particular immediate crisis or lack thereof. This commitment is simply the character of an authentic Christian community—a community ready at all times to act on behalf of the victimized, the powerless, the hungry, the homeless, and the stranger (10–11).

We could read this as a thesis for the entire book. Gushee is indefatigable in his conviction that the Church is called to nurture a "repertoire of piety and spirituality" that is marked by "compassion and orientation to others' needs" (12); the former fuels the latter and vice-versa. Or, as he puts it otherwise, "the weaker our ecclesiology, the stronger our tendency to confuse the identities "American" and "Christian" and to offer excessive loyalties to worldly powers" (78).

One of the themes that I found personally convicting was the importance of Christians and churches to actively engage the state in matters of faith and praxis. As a Baptist, I had always affirmed the radical separation between church and state. However, Gushee's brand of evangelicalism—a "New Evangelicalism"—offers a nuanced understanding of separation. In his "Evangelical Declaration Against Torture," Gushee avers, "One aspect of this discipling process is to help congregants prepare for the exercise of their citizenship responsibilities" (116). Or, as he writes elsewhere, "Christians need to urge the political leaders who represent us to specific, policy-based action. . . . We are accountable to God for our choices. Judgment begins with the household of faith" (180). Not only is this book important for Christian ethicists, homileticians, and political theologians, it is accessible enough to aid the preaching of pastors and the moral development of thoughtful Christians.

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Véronique Altglas. *From Yoga to Kabbalah: Religious Exoticism and the Logics of Bricolage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 408 pages. \$31.50.

Sociologists of religion have often defined *bricolage* as the assemblage that results from crafting “religious life and identity by picking and mixing from a wide range of religious traditions” (2). In contrast, Véronique Altglas argues in *From Yoga to Kabbalah: Religious Exoticism and the Logics of Bricolage* that this is an inadequate analysis of bricolage. Based on deep engagement with cultural/historical sources, as well as participant observation for two years in the Siddha Yoga and the Sivananda Centers in London and Paris, and for more than one year in the Kabbalah Center in Paris, London, Rio de Janeiro, and Tel Aviv, she rejects the idea that bricolage is an amateurish practice of religion that is highly individualistic. Altglas shows that the formation of bricolage is not as free, disorganized, or individualistic as had been previously suggested. Instead, postmodern, bricolage-style use of foreign religious resources is not free, but constrained by access and by local and national factors. As a practice, bricolage is not disorganized. Rather, it is organized around a persistent trajectory toward self-realization. It is not individualistic. Rather, it is structured by societal norms functioning within political, class- and gender-based systems. With great insight, she identifies a “logic” of bricolage that is an overarching organization system, which challenges the sociological idea of bricolage as a random assortment and instead poses bricolage as an enduring system (23).

Altglas goes on to argue that cultural and historical factors either limit or make available religious resources, such as yoga or Kabbalah. She shows how religious resources, appropriated in a bricolage-style religion, break with the constraints and meanings that are embedded within them by the originating religion so that the practice can contribute instead to a goal of self-realization. She further shows how resources are neutralized (from their particular functions) and psychologized. While yoga historically originates from Hinduism and Kabbalah from Judaism, Altglas convincingly shows how western usage shapes the practice before it is adopted. The practice is domesticated, universalized for its “ancient and primordial knowledge” (62), adjusted toward a therapeutic end, and appropriated for alternate use. She concludes that modern bricoleurs incorporate *exotic* (by which she means foreign) religious resources “despite” the religion from which they originated. “Their pragmatic quest for useful techniques and their belief that truth is beyond all religious particularisms also contribute to rendering the Hindu character of the neo-Hindu teaching they follow irrelevant” (64).

While Altglas is examining the religious life of those within “advanced industrial societies,” she does not address Christianity directly. In addition, the working understanding of “religion” is broad, often unrelated to notions of the divine. Within this book, religious orientation is focused toward self-fulfillment and self-realization. “Religious incursions in yoga, meditation, or Kabbalah often contribute to a quest . . . in which any teaching that promotes self-fulfillment is considered” (213). Foreign religious resources are borrowed, de-contextualized from their original meaning, and used toward this end. In fulfillment of her purposes in this book, Altglas reports what adherents say; however, her analysis stands in sharp contrast to discourse on practices, which would suggest that more may be happening than the adherents articulate. For example, Alasdair MacIntyre situates his work on practices in a much larger framework that also includes tradition and narrative, which is necessarily historically embedded. MacIntyre would question whether a practice, stripped of its tradition and narrative, is, anymore, the same practice.

Her identification of a “logic” of bricolage is brilliantly compelling; however, her conclusion could benefit from nuance. It is unlikely that all bricoleurs of exotic religious resources share one goal, which she identifies as actualizing the self. Even though she does not

mean “inherently other” by “exotic” (3), one must wonder if, by the sheer force of colonialist history, she inadvertently participates in extending the long arm of colonialism.

Overall, Altglas’s book raises awareness that there are logics of bricolage at work all around us. On the one hand, her book can push us to ask what Christian bricolage may entail. On the other hand, it can compel us to become all the more articulate about why Christian proclamation is not generalizable to a domesticated wisdom tradition.

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Robert M. Geraci. *Virtually Sacred: Myth and Meaning in World of Warcraft and Second Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 348 pages. \$35.

Geraci's *Virtually Sacred* is approachable and provocative to those without even an introductory knowledge of virtual worlds and gaming. Using the fields of the history of religions, anthropology of gaming, and actor-network theory, as well as his own quantitative and qualitative research methods and participant observation, Geraci convincingly illuminates the real possibility that virtual worlds are not inherently absent of or from reality. Rather virtual worlds are frontier spaces where popular religion—faith and practices of the laity—emerges to reassemble and reorient religion and reality.

Often the Internet is conflated with virtual worlds to the effect that one dismisses virtual worlds as being no-places with no time and no sense of history (202). This, according to Geraci, is an ignorant assumption. Geraci utilizes Mircea Eliade's *axis mundi*, or center of the world, tempered by J. Z. Smith to highlight human actors who choose, create, affirm, and strategically orient themselves within a virtual world (203). The case studies that neatly divide Geraci's book into two halves are *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life*.

World of Warcraft, a multi-player online role-playing game (MMORPG), exhibits new analogues for religious devotion that are found specifically in the virtual gaming community (62). These analogues and practices help the user re-enter conventional reality with a new sense of purpose. The second half of the book is a case study on *Second Life*, a virtual world designed to mirror our world but enabling users to exert more control than is possible in conventional reality, presents another life for religion, both traditional and novel.

While there are participants in virtual worlds who casually play, Geraci recognizes that there are many others who deem these spaces, through their investment and co-creation, virtually sacred. Those are the interlocutors for Geraci's project. Virtual worlds, scripted (*World of Warcraft*) or unscripted (*Second Life*), receive the "religious intentions" and interpretations of these users (212). Geraci uses a general definition of religion as "work" that "establishes the meaningfulness of human existence" (204).

At the beginning of his book, Geraci asserts "video games and virtual worlds are rearranging or replacing religious practice" as "designers, users, and the virtual worlds themselves now collaborate in the production of a new spiritual marketplace" (1). Ultimately, one may not be convinced that these case studies present enough evidence for a sort of technoevolution wherein religious practice in conventional reality is replaced by virtual worlds inhabited and transformed by religious consumers. However, Geraci is adept at imagining how virtual worlds provide "feedback loops" to practices in conventional reality and already are infiltrating the way we are religious (165).

Geraci's balanced in-depth analysis is a corrective to technophobia and technophilia in religious and philosophical discursive spaces. Geraci convinces this feminist scholar with research interests in embodiment that activities in these virtual worlds are in fact embodied, communal, and impactful on conventional reality, perhaps even more so than "watching a congregation on television or through a service streamed over the Internet in a video format" (119). One cannot participate in these worlds without acting. Here, they can "build churches, temples...offer theologies or design new practices" (166). Unfortunately, the same opportunities are not offered in some religious spaces in conventional reality today.

Geraci's interlocutors, especially in *Second Life*, are not passive consumers of religiosity. Rather, they are imaginative and engaged practitioners and meaning-makers. Christians, Muslims, and the not-yet categorized religious find in this unbounded space the opportunity to create religious practices and nuance them in ways conventional religions with rigid hierarchies

will not allow. Some occasional outlaws enter the space to torment and disturb the utopian play (146), but this is certainly not unique to virtual reality. Kimberly Knight's Holy Heretic Pub and the Virtual Hajj in *Second Life* enable those unauthorized to lead and participate in conventional religious spaces to have a voice. Geraci demonstrates how they are *actual* spaces "where ecumenism reigns and religious acceptance" and innovation "is possible" (132).

One could argue that throughout history, some ritual frames and spaces in Christianity have themselves acted as virtual worlds wherein participants engage with a sacred vision that is unlike the vision of conventional reality. Just as most participants of virtual worlds do not stay inside of them forever so too has the Christian tradition discouraged disengagement of the Body from the world (to varying degrees). Both the Christian tradition and Geraci's interlocutors often encourage reengagement with conventional reality with hope that the experience of the sacred/virtual reality will in fact have some transformative impact upon conventional reality.

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Andrew B. McGowan. *Ancient Christian Worship: Early Church Practices in Social, Historical, and Theological Perspective*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014. 320 pages. \$25.06.

Ancient Christian Worship: Early Church Practices in Social, Historical, and Theological Perspective, by Andrew B. McGowan, provides a scholarly survey of the origins and multiple narratives of ancient Christian worship practices from New Testament times through the fourth century (16–17). This text is designed for teachers, seminarians, pastors, church leaders, and readers interested in the practices of Christian worship among the earliest Christian communities.

McGowan asserts that within the New Testament there is no worship practice pattern that can be regarded as univocally normative. The more one digs into the primary sources, the deeper one finds diversity rather than uniformity. From their very origins, Christian liturgical practices reflect a considerable variety of narratives, creativity, and multiplicity, as a result of differing theological and biblical interpretations and in particular, differing social and cultural contexts. From McGowan's research, one draws the conclusion that one cannot really talk of standard patterns of ancient Christian worship practices. To emphasize what is common and to ignore what is distinctive in early Christian worship in the early churches seriously distorts our understanding of the variety of ancient Christian worship practices, and leads to erroneous understandings for the ongoing revision of Christian worship.

McGowan's work also contends that in the early Church, the methods of Christian worship practice were not as important as the worship itself. This book emphasizes not only the diversity of early Christian liturgies. It also points to the overarching commonalities, indicating Christian worship practice itself, as "the set of communal practices of prayer" (1), . . . "as acts of obedience and service [allegiance], and as the [ritual] characteristic habitus of the followers of Jesus" (261). In my view, McGowan's research in *Ancient Christian Worship* articulates that the emergence of Christian liturgy was influenced by the Jewish concept of communal worship and rituals, as well as by Greek/Roman religious rituals in the first four centuries. However, his survey confirms that Christian worship gradually created its particular liturgical sense, principles, and practices on the basis of their sincere faith and participation, even if the earliest Christians did not clearly acknowledge their performances as worship, per se.

Examining the above-mentioned evidence in the New Testament texts, Jewish literature, and church orders such as the *Didache*, *Apostolic Traditions*, *Didascalia Apostolorum*, *Apostolic Constitutions*, and *Testamentum Domini*, together with resources of patristic literature such as writings of the apologists, McGowan categorizes the multiple practices of the early Christians, in six ways: 1. Meal (Banquet and Eucharist); 2. Word (Reading and Preaching); 3. Music (Song and Dancing); 4. Initiation (Baptism, Anointing, and Foot Washing); 5. Prayer (Hours, Ways, and Texts); and 6. Time (Feasts and Fasts).

McGowan does not comment on these rituals, perhaps because they had not yet been recognized as sacramental Christian liturgical practices among the earliest Church leaders (261). Yet one can find numerous references among the early Church Fathers to their recommendations on liturgical principles or instructions for the early Christians regarding rites of passage. For example, Tertullian refers to the costly anointing of the Christian dead, and asserted that Christians should not buy incense for use in idolatrous worship of pagan gods. Chrysostom forbade the hiring of professional mourning women, and condemned Christian women for uttering wild cries and tearing their clothes at funerals. Others such as Ignatius of Antioch, Clement of Alexandria, and Augustine, also mention the significance of marriage. It would have been advantageous for the reader to encounter discussion of these meaningful exchanges as one considers the role of ritual and practices in early Christian life.

Overall, McGowan's book outlines the multilayered quality of ancient Christian worship practices by indicating the diversity as well as particularity interwoven between liturgy and theology amidst various social/cultural contexts and specific historical periods in primitive Christianity. For anyone with interest in the kaleidoscope of historical accounts regarding ancient Christian worship practices, *Ancient Christian Worship* provides the reader with rich commentary. Additionally, for those hoping to prepare seminarians and young scholars with a deep understanding of early liturgical principles, McGowan's interdisciplinary approach functions to help students of the early Church to understand more clearly the contextual, spiritual, and liturgical roots of later sacramental liturgical practices. Finally, McGowan offers the reader an excellent bibliography for further reading on these topics on relevant works published in the new millennium.

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