

Charles L. Campbell. *The Scandal of the Gospel: Preaching and the Grotesque*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021. 98 pages. \$23.78

In *The Scandal of the Gospel: Preaching and the Grotesque*, Charles L. Campbell invites preachers and homileticians to take on the grotesque character of the gospel by drawing on a variety of artistic sources. In art, the grotesque “embodies contradictions, incongruities” (6) and engages radical hybrid forms that subvert dominant categories. Taking 1 Corinthians 1:23 and its affirmation that the message of Christ crucified is “both foolishness and a scandal (stumbling block),” Campbell asserts that, “the scandal of the gospel may simply be that it is grotesque” (5). This book offers a vision of preaching that reckons with the paradoxical and sometimes unsettling realities of life.

In Chapter 1, “Jesus in the Grotto: The Gospel as Grotesque,” Campbell uses ancient art to explore the grotesque nature of the gospel and its scandalous pairing of contradictions. For example, the ancient Roman graffiti, *Alexamenos graffiti* (ca. 238-244), is a mocking depiction of a young man worshipping a crucified, donkey-headed figure believed to represent Jesus. This kind of art was “radically at odds with the norms of clarity, balance, and harmony presumed to be features of a classical aesthetic” (5). Accordingly, says Campbell, this mixing of subversive, incompatible, unacceptable, and disorienting realities is exactly the condition of the gospel. As such, the grotesque serves as an invitation to preachers to relinquish the rigid patterns and resolutions that often serve as a way of escaping the paradoxical nature of life. Instead, he contends, faithful preaching listens to different voices, even as their grotesqueness shocks us. This, he argues, is where God enters.

Chapter 2 focuses on the concept of the “weaponized grotesque” as a lens to frame and interrogate “ideologically constructed whiteness and white supremacy” (20). Drawing on poetry and novels, Campbell describes the weaponized grotesque as the rhetorical tool employed by “those in power to denigrate people who are different from them in order to reassert their power and reinforce social hierarchies” (20). Locating the weaponized grotesque in political rhetoric, this chapter argues that by turning humans into animals or things, those who benefit from ideological whiteness dehumanize marginalized groups. The result is the reification of white supremacist categories and social hierarchies that ultimately lead to death. The call of the preacher is to interrogate and interrupt the weaponized grotesque with a resounding “No!” His intention is to issue a counter-rhetoric in which the humanity of those who have been made into animals and things is affirmed.

Chapter 3, “Incarnate Word: Preaching and the Carnavalesque,” posits the “carnavalesque grotesque” as the alternative to the weaponized grotesque. It examines the concept of *carnival* to suggest how Christ's incarnation is the actualization of the grotesque. “Carnival is the embodied theology of the marginalized that brings down the powerful from their thrones and lifts up the lowly” (45). Through the lens of the festive celebration of the carnivalesque grotesque, Campbell employs Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque body to establish an eschatological vision of the Body of Christ in which boundaries and binaries are transcended and the lowly are lifted up. “Grotesque preaching calls the church to be open to the world and calls the pulpit to be open to different bodies and new voices” (56).

Chapter 4, “Apocalypse Now: Preaching and the Environmental Grotesque,” describes the present environmental crisis as an enormous catastrophe that places us in the “interval of the grotesque” (64) in which we live in an “unsettled space of unresolved contradictions” (64). He argues that the most appropriate response of preaching is “grotesque hope . . . affirming a

testimony of hopeful affirmation and a testimony of that hope's negation" (66). From here, Campbell returns to the concepts explored in the first three chapters to invite new grotesque homiletical patterns.

The Scandal of the Gospel is a timely book for preachers and homileticians. It challenges readers to reassess the familiar patterns of preaching that too often rush to neat resolutions while avoiding the messy, paradoxical realities of life in an unjust world – realities that are embodied in the incarnate and crucified Christ. While Campbell writes that the grotesque transgresses patterns, his resolution returns to patterns by calling forth new ones. It would have been helpful if Campbell had explored what homiletical possibilities might exist beyond patterns and categories if the discipline is to truly take on a grotesque quality. Nevertheless, this short text is a wonderful invitation to those who are committed to preaching and teaching the scandalous grotesque gospel.

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