

Tyshawn Gardner. *Social Crisis Preaching: Biblical Proclamation for Troubled Times*. Brentwood: B&H Academic, 2023. 208 pages. \$18.57.

In *Social Crisis Preaching: Biblical Proclamation for Troubled Times*, Tyshawn Gardner redraws the boundaries of preaching in light of what seems to be cultural upheaval. While many homileticians such as Kelly Miller Smith, Sr. and James Earl Massey have done so before, Gardner tackles the task of addressing the public square where the church meets with culture. *Social Crisis Preaching* brings the homiletic academy up to date as it accounts for the unresolved tensions in culture that foment social crises.

He defines social crisis preaching as “biblically rooted, Spirit-enabled proclamation that develops and drives congregations to compassionately care for and radically confront social crises in the communities where their neighbors live, work, worship, and play.” (2) The thrust of Gardner’s definition is driven by an indirect yet intentional diagnosis of culture that consistently confronts one social crisis after another. In fact, at certain points the cataloguing of the social crises, at both macro and micro levels, presents the firehose-like intensity that parishioners face week after week without relief. The definition is further supported by his steady commitment to faith-based principles throughout the balance of the book. Gardner’s remedy draws upon discourses from sociology to make the homiletical and theological case that the pulpit is an appropriate place to respond to the social ills that afflict regular church attendees.

Arguably, Gardner sees preaching as an enterprise that is flexible enough to respond to culture, but also grounded enough to have authority. Invoking Black liberation theologian James Cone in the introduction sets the tone for the ultimate direction of the book. Cone’s Black liberation theology serves as both compliment and foil to his ethical rationale for social crisis preaching. On the one hand Gardner retrieves from Cone an assessment of racism and white supremacy in the United States that he agrees with. On the other hand, Gardner rejects Cone’s insistence that the gospel must come from oppressed communities arguing that “the depth and breadth of Christian theology encompasses more than the Black experience.” (13) Rather, Gardner’s ethical aim for social crisis preaching is an incarnational one where pastors are encouraged to *be* with their congregations “developing them to intentionally care about and confront the crises in their neighbor’s communities.” (18) The preacher’s task, according to Gardner, is to be like the pre-exilic prophet Ezekiel and sit with the people in their lament.

Chapters 1, 2, and 3 lay the groundwork for social crisis preaching, offering insights into its hermeneutic, the preacher’s habitus, and a heuristic for practical application. In chapter 1, Gardner introduces the concept of “cues and clues,” serving as a guiding principle for identifying social crisis themes within biblical texts, serving as a central thread throughout the book. He challenges conventional hermeneutics by advocating for preachers to adopt a Ricoeurian approach to stand “in front of the text.” Gardner emphasizes the significance of this approach, stating that “for social crisis preachers, this is vitally important, because the preacher is positioned to cast God’s intended vision before a congregation ripe with social calamity and upheaval.” (52) Chapter 2 introduces the notion of the preacher as a “sacred anthropologist” tasked with “both the text at hand and the pew before them.” (62) As this chapter directly confronts the fault lines of race in America, Gardner logically moves through a paradigm that ultimately identifies congregational involvement as the preferred end result. Gardner names pulpit swaps and prayer meetings as anemic responses toward racial reconciliation, thus issuing a demand that it is the duty of congregations to “interrupt the habits, systems, and policies that continue to perpetuate pockets of communal despair.” (93) Chapter 3 provides practical guidance

for sermon design, and emphasizing the importance of incorporating cues and clues while embodying the role of sacred anthropologist. Though the heuristics Gardner offers for sermon development may seem extensive, each element is indispensable for seminary students or parish ministers engaging in social crisis preaching.

Chapter 4 considers the basic pastoral questions of when one should preach on social crises. In this regard, Gardner focuses largely on those who pastor, rather than the ministry of itinerant preaching. Ultimately, he suggests relying on Aristotle's modes of persuasion—ethos, logos, and pathos—to determine both delivery and timing of social crisis preaching. In chapter 5, he concludes by highlighting the preaching careers of Kelly Miller Smith, Samuel DeWitt Proctor, and Helmut Thielicke as examples of sacred anthropologists who practiced social crisis preaching.

It is no coincidence that the victims of the social crises that Gardner names throughout the book live in communities that are most easily distinguished by race. Yet, one may wonder whether his dismissal of James Cone's emphasis on the gospel originating from oppressed communities and the rejoinder that Christian theology is broader than the Black experience is a point worthy of contention. To put it another way, Gardner's disagreement with one of the core tenets of Black liberation theology seems to function as a dog whistle to readers that may perceive him as bringing politics into the pulpit. While such a decision is left up to the reader, Gardner's direct confrontation of the third rail of social crises as it pertains to race, is theologically and biblically supported by his objective that preachers have a duty to respond to social crises.

As this book resists the oversimplified idea that there is a correct doctrinal theology that will solve the world's social problems, it opens itself to a wider audience so that the reader can adapt as needed to their context. *Social Crisis Preaching* provides grist for the mill that can aid pastors who struggle with how to make homiletical connections between theology, the Bible, and culture as well as seminarians learning how to address matters of culture in their preaching courses.

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