

Ronald J. Allen. *Preaching and Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Commentary on Paul and the Arrogant Gentiles*. Library of Homiletics 1. T&T Clark, 2025. 272 pages. \$120.

This is the first volume in the new T&T Clark Library of Homiletics, which seeks to “[foster] interdisciplinary conversation about preaching theory and practice that should be of interest to practical theologians and many others in the humanities” (xiii). Such an audience is clearly—and rightly—in view in *Preaching and Paul's Letter to the Romans*. At the same time, pastors and others who regularly preach will also find themselves addressed in this book. Ronald Allen offers an extensive introduction situating both his approach to preaching within a taxonomy of different homiletical goals and methods, and his approach to the interpretation of Romans in the landscape of contemporary Pauline scholarship. In the main body of the book, Allen investigates the text of Paul's letter section by section, in each case discussing not only the text, but the place of the passage in the lectionary and possibilities for preaching. Although he is not explicitly addressing preachers in a North American context, much of the discussion seems particularly apt for a US context.

With regard to homiletical theory, Allen lays out two general approaches to the purposes of preaching: “proclamation” and “conversation.” The basic goal of the first approach is to communicate the message of the text to the congregation (18–20). The key question is: “Do you, as a preacher, endeavor to bend your thought to the Scriptures, or do you use the Scriptures to support your thought?” (56).¹

The conversational approach recognizes many sources of authority, including the experience and beliefs of the preacher and the congregation. It appeals to reason in terms of what is “logically consistent with other things the congregation believes” (22). For preachers, such an approach entails asking how the text is consistent with their own lived experience. Allen identifies with this approach. In his words, “I have a theological Geiger counter tuned to my life that I pass over the text to indicate the degree to which the text seems theologically appropriate and believable in the contemporary world” (25 n. 73). Here the goal is to use the text to invite conversations about what the congregation believes.

As for Romans itself, Allen's interpretation is in line with the work of other scholars who reads the letter as solely to and about gentile Christ-followers. According to this view, as Allen articulates it, Paul sees Christ as graciously extending the offer of Israel's covenantal relationship with God to gentiles. Gentiles need to repent and accept this offer; Jews, already in covenant with God, need do nothing, although Paul would like them to recognize Jesus.

Allen models conversational preaching based on this interpretation. In practice, this focus means that the central interpretive questions throughout the letter concern how the text does, or does not, criticize gentile arrogance and promote a positive view of Judaism for Paul's day and ours. For example, in preaching from Romans 9–11, one might invite a conversation about what the congregation believes about the Jewish community, or invite a local rabbi to speak, or sort out what the congregation believes about God's work in the world.

Some questions linger, however, at least for this reviewer. Given Allen's emphasis on evaluating texts' “theological appropriateness” based on principles of congruence with the readers' values and worldview, how might a text challenge and resist the status quo? How might the practice of simply sidelining or even rejecting problematic passages short-circuit the discoveries that often come from in-depth engagement with difficult passages? Furthermore,

¹ Allen is quoting Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Sermons*, 3rd ed. (Baker Academic, 2014), 5.

while it is certainly the case that Paul criticizes gentile arrogance, does not a single-minded focus on this theme silence other major themes in the letter and miss out on further rich resources for preaching?

Such questions aside, Allen is clear about the diversity of approaches to both preaching and the interpretation of Romans, and his own location in that complex landscape. He also models a winsome humility in the interpretive task, along with transparency about his own process of reading and preaching. All preachers would do well to follow his example in these matters.

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