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A matter of life and death: preaching at funerals

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caricature of canonical apocalyptic writings and their relationship to the rest of the canon. He might have benefited in his chapter on eschatology from consulting more recent Biblical research on the topic instead of using it as a mere foil for his thought. In fact, some would argue that a Pauline theology of the cross is in itself somewhat apocalyptic; see, for example, Alexandra Brown's *The Cross and Human Transformation: Paul's Apocalyptic Word in 1 Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995). He might have found there a more fruitful conversation partner. A second critique concerns a writing style that can be a little demanding. Occasionally the book engages in rather lengthy, convoluted sentences that make the reader's task more daunting. Nonetheless, the book is well worth it. North Americans, and especially Canadian Lutherans, may just find Hall's "Way of the Cross" a way not only of contextualizing our theological task but pointing a direction forward out of Christendom and into a renewed life of faith free to let go of the blandishments of a theology of glory and willing to find life in its opposite, Jesus' own cruciform shadow.

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A Matter of Life and Death: Preaching at Funerals

Charles Hoffacker
Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 2002
112 pages. \$15 Softcover

Charles Hoffacker, an Episcopal priest in Port Huron, Michigan, has written a fine book on one of the most important of "occasional" sermon forms: the funeral sermon. Although many pastors sense the importance of ministry at the time of death and find great meaning in articulating the Gospel in the face of death for the grieving, there are precious few print resources that push preachers more deeply into that task. This book is one of them.

One reason for Hoffacker's unique success is his insistence on the importance of the Good News in funeral preaching. In an age when the eulogy and personal remembrance for its own sake have all

but taken the place of the funeral sermon, Hoffacker insists that the Gospel must still be spoken. This is not to say that a funeral sermon ought ever be abstract or de-personalized – quite to the contrary. Instead, Hoffacker looks for the bits of grace in persons' lives that points to a Gospel only deepened in this moment of grief and loss. Lutherans might find something of value here: the notion of the "capax," that the finite is "capable" of bearing the infinite.

The beginning three chapters of the book are the strongest. From the outset Hoffacker lays out his sense of what funeral ministry and funeral sermons should be, distinguishing them from both eulogies on the one hand and abstract discourses on the other. Toward the end Hoffacker also offers helpful guidelines for funeral sermon construction. Throughout this section is a wonderfully understated, yet deep sense of the funeral sermon's potential.

The remaining two thirds of the book is made up of sermons. On many pages we see Hoffacker and his homiletical artistry. While the "key" of each funeral sermon allows the person's life to come through, that same key opens vistas to divine grace and mercy in the face of death. Naturally, as is typical for such collections, there is some unevenness in the sermons. Occasionally, some tend ever so slightly toward the mawkish. Still others evidence a theology that posits so much continuity between life and death that one wonders why death is such a big deal. Yet these problems do not diminish Hoffacker's accomplishment. In fact, one suspects that a powerfully sacramental view of life and death undergirds his funeral preaching – and untempered by a more dialectical view, this brings with it both great Gospel opportunities and liabilities.

For my part, I am tempted to adopt Hoffacker's book as a textbook for my classes. Although something of Luther's theology of the cross might serve as a helpful corrective to an overly optimistic sacramental view at points, one cannot argue that the Gospel of God's grace ever fails to come through – whether through the life of the deceased or through Hoffacker's sacramental vision of the funeral sermon.

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