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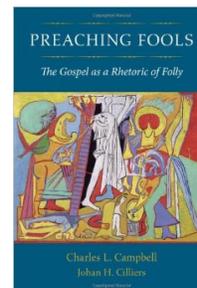
Book Review

Preaching Fools: The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly

Charles L. Campbell and Johan H. Cilliers

Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012.

This remarkable work comes from the collaboration between Charles Campbell and Johan Cilliers after they presented an academic lecture on the foolishness of preaching at the 2008 meeting of *Societas Homiletica*, the international academy of homiletics. This book begins with these words, “The gospel is foolishness. Preaching is folly. The preacher is a fool.” (1) Based on a close reading of 1 Corinthians 1:17-25 and 4:9-10, the authors contend that the foolishness of preaching and the folly of preachers lie at the heart of the gospel, thus presenting an odd and troubling image of the preacher: the fool. Campbell and Cilliers describe interruption, liminality, perception, and discernment as central to the work of the fool. They surprisingly provide us with various examples from their deep and wide expertise, not limited to bible, theology, and homiletics, but expanded to the visual arts, cultural history, literary criticism, politics and so forth. Among these central elements, they assert that liminality is the foundational (temporal-spatial) ground of the fool and that liminal spaces, while potentially spaces of reactionary fear and violence, are indeed spaces of creative change and transformation.



The preaching fool discloses the theological tension between form and re-form (Spirit-led), fragment and fullness (of identity), and being and becoming (of community). Also, he/she provides an alternative-liminal image of God as the one powerful in weakness and of church as the fragmented body of Christ, encountering the church’s resistance (with “closed seriousness” or “iron theology”) in its quest for security, stability and certainty. The other three elements relate to the fool’s disruptive activity: “(1) the fool’s role in instigating and sustaining liminality; (2) the fool’s goal of changing perspective; and (3) the fool’s call for discernment.” (70)

In chapters four and five, the authors first suggest that the stories of Jesus are best read through the lens of a hermeneutic of folly, based on the fact that he performed the same disruptive function of the fool’s activity through his deeds (crossing boundaries) and words/rhetoric (riddles and parables, paradoxes and humor). Then, they explore theological dimensions of two primary and often inseparable tools of the fool, laughter and lament. These are joined together through liminality, interrupting the closed seriousness by their incongruity. In chapter six, Campbell and Cilliers turn to conflate the four above-mentioned characteristics of preaching fools in a theological and homiletical perspective.

In sum, preaching fools as embodied agents of interruption, move the church into liminal spaces, where the three following dynamics are in play through the character of preaching fools. First, the Spirit is at play forming and re-forming the Body of Christ. Second, new perception is possible amidst the fragments of the old age and the new. Third, discernment is required in the dynamic movement of being and becoming. (162) Following the interplay of these dynamics, in the final chapter, the authors suggest that preaching pool should employ a rhetoric of folly, which not only confronts the “heavy, clanging

sounds of iron rhetoric” of the iron theology to maintain the status quo, both within and outside the church, but also opens a space for a new creation. This rhetoric of folly is characterized as bivocal (paradox and metaphor, against the iron rhetoric’s tautology and timelessness), disruptive (irony, parody, and lampoon, against legitimation and reification), transgressive (crossing boundaries and facing others, against fear, making, and defacing) and ambiguous/indirect. After reading this book, the reader may be able to rephrase their words in the first page of this book creatively, “the preaching, the preacher, and the language (rhetoric) of the preacher, revolve around the foolishness of the gospel.”

Among many, I will mention three major contributions of this book. First, not only homileticians but also preachers will appreciate this book’s refreshing and unsettling image of the preacher as the fool. This image is in contrast with the existing images of the preacher such as the herald, the pastor, the storyteller/poet, the witness, the prophet and so forth. I believe this type of preacher is definitely necessary, especially when we find ourselves situated within the mentality of the status quo or numbness to any issues that need to be changed and we cannot handle them within the existing images of preacher. Second, the authors, with the underlying notion of liminality as spaces of creative change and transformation, help preachers as well as laity with hope and courage, think, preach/speak, and act differently as preaching fools. In the face of everyday issues (of social, economic, and political justice), preachers will interpret them not with a dominant discourse, but with a counter (and liminal) discourse.

Liminality challenges the iron rhetoric of stability, control, security and domination, which maybe unknowingly but is deeply imbedded in people’s minds. As a result, it brings about the transformation of individual, (faith) community and society through the liminal gospel of Jesus Christ. Third, this book provides diverse rhetorical tools for preaching fools and helps them gain a deep understanding of the interplaying dynamics among opposite rhetoric, so that they can identify and cope with it. Though their intended readers are primarily homileticians and preachers, I think laity will also benefit from this book. Indeed, they are the ones who will individually and communally engage in the battle with the world’s dominant discourse, after being transformed into preaching fools by their preaching fools’ preaching. Since I am deeply challenged and stimulated by this book, I highly recommend this book for homileticians, preachers, and laity who want to live a life with a transformative liminality.

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