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Yohan Go

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Book Review

Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach

Leonora T. Tisdale

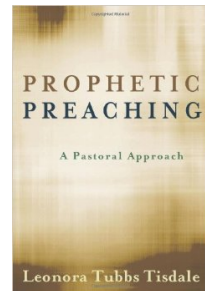
Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010

In this volume, Leonora Tisdale, Professor of Homiletics at Yale Divinity School, provides a comprehensive study of prophetic preaching: diverse definitions of prophetic preaching and its seven characteristic reasons why pastors avoid prophetic witness today, ways to restore prophetic voices in a pulpit by recovering a spirituality of prophetic witness, and sermon forms that are suited for prophetic preaching.

Instead of providing a single broad definition of prophetic preaching, Tisdale succinctly summarizes different understandings of prophetic preaching. She provides seven hallmarks of such preaching, insisting that it is: 1) rooted in biblical witness; 2) countercultural; 3) concerned with both individual and corporate evils; 4) able to name both what is not God in the world and what God will bring in the future; 5) able to offer hope of a new day and the promise of God for liberation; 6) transformative, so it can empower hearers to change the social order; and 7) by necessity, reliant upon an imagination and conviction by the prophetic preachers, in order to speak for God.

After providing a brief outline of the features of prophetic preaching, Tisdale explores the main reasons for the loss of prophetic witness in the American pulpit today and concludes that is fundamentally a spiritual problem. She claims that “we have lost our will to preach prophetically because we have lost the prophetic vision that comes from being intimately connected with God, with God’s world, and with God’s people.” (20) In this sense, the way to recover prophetic voices in the pulpit is through restoring a spirituality of prophetic witnesses. The core problem of churches today in losing the prophetic spirit lies in the division of Christian discipleship between the practices of spirituality and social activism. People tend to think that social actions (such as working for racial justice) and spiritual practice (such as prayer) are two different things. However, Tisdale argues that they are two aspects of Christian discipleship and need to be integrated again. What we need today is “a spirituality that can undergird, empower, and sustain us in our prophetic witness in the world,” (22) namely “a spirituality for activism”, in which the disconnect between the pastoral and the prophetic ministry is overcome. Tisdale also acknowledges the significant function of faith communities in prophetic witness. The task of prophetic witness is not a solitary task of preachers. Rather the whole Christian community is responsible for this fundamental mission of the church. A faith community is a place where a spirituality of activism grows and the prophetic task is supported by the whole congregation. In this sense, prophetic preachers not only nurture prophetic consciousness in congregations but they are also supported by communities of faith simultaneously.

Because of the difficult and countercultural word from God in prophetic preaching, one of the primary tasks of preachers is to make sermons more accessible to listeners. (42) Tisdale proposes speaking truth in love as the primary strategy for sermon design. Speaking challenging truth with authentic love opens the heart of hearers, building mutual



trust and disarming resistance. In this sense, prophetic preachers are also pastors at the same time. Furthermore, Tisdale points out that prophetic preaching is both word from the pulpit and deed of those who preach. This integral aspect of prophetic preaching brings us back to the issue of spiritual practices, which discipline both the inner life of faith and the external life of faith. Only with prayer and the support of a faith community can prophetic actions be sustained. (94) Thus, prophetic witness is an integrative task of preachers and congregations.

While Tisdale offers diverse sermon forms for prophetic preaching from many homiletics and preachers, most of them represent voices of either white or black churches. One would expect authors to include voices from other ethnic and cultural minorities. For example, Asian American may have different ways of reasoning and communication styles so they need different forms of sermons for prophetic preaching, which is more contextualized for their own culture. This book itself can more authentically show prophetic witness by embracing minor voices in American society.

All preachers are obligated to speak for God, criticizing evil in the world and empowering people of God to be agents to change an unjust society. With this difficult and challenging task, preachers need profound insights about their tasks as prophetic preachers and practical advice to do their work. Tisdale not only provides a comprehensive framework to understand critical issues of prophetic preaching today, but also rich resources to reignite and sustain the flame of prophetic spirit within a faith community.

Yohan Go
Boston University School of Theology