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Speaking the truth in love: prophetic preaching in a broken world

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on sporting event tickets than the work of God (101)? One preacher announces that he will increase his giving to over \$4500 for the year, which “sadly makes him one of the church’s top nine givers” (101). What ethical problems are raised by such an admission intended to shame? Several sermons judge us for being a consumeristic culture that spends and hoards to the detriment of our souls and the third-world’s needs. Yet, the \$64,000 question is, how can the church live differently in a culture that almost won’t permit it. What can we do practically that might make a difference in world hunger? The sermons point out the big problems, but don’t go in depth enough to offer workable solutions. The general answer is to give more money to the church, but is that enough?

Still, this book gets ‘two thumbs up’ for pointing us to a tricky and neglected theme in preaching, and for giving us fine examples of how to craft our sermons.

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Speaking the Truth in Love: Prophetic Preaching to a Broken World

J. Philip Wogaman

Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998

221 pages, \$20.50 Softcover

Philip Wogaman, long-time professor of Christian Ethics and now Senior Minister at Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, D.C., fills a needed void with this helpful book for preachers. Both the message of the Bible and the condition of society demand that we preach on social and ethical issues. But how? Who of us wants to enter into controversy, say the wrong thing, and likely offend hearers? Thankfully, Wogaman is a helpful guide both through his instruction (Part I) and his sermons (Part II). This reader was left with the confidence that not only does the author know experientially what he is talking about – he has tested his method in many actual sermons. Thus, I found the book to be empowering.

The author begins by dismissing the notion that prophetic automatically means “negative, harsh, confrontational or predictive regarding the future”. Rather than contrast pastor with prophet in a “comfort versus judgment” or “Gospel versus Law” dichotomy, he argues that they are two sides of the same coin. Since a prophet is “one who speaks for God”, to be pastoral is to be prophetic, and vice-versa. Genuine prophetic preaching draws people into the reality of God in such a way that they can no longer be content with the way things

are. Wogaman's call needs to be heard and heeded – the church needs to stop accommodating to culture and begin transforming it through its preaching and the changed lives of its members.

Through ten chapters (100 pages) Wogaman gives pointed tips and names pitfalls to avoid: “All ethical issues must be interpreted and preached theologically, not just humanistically” (chapter 1); “increase your pastoral skills and people will not be as upset when you preach on a controversial subject” (chapter 2); “preach on specific issues (use of money, sexuality) not just broad ideas of social responsibility” (chapter 4); “deal fairly with the other side of the issue and kindly with those who disagree” (chapter 5); “always offer hope; do not just preach against an issue” (chapter 8), “don't fear and avoid criticism, welcome it as a constructive opportunity to deepen the dialogue over an issue” (chapter 10). Wogaman even gives suggestions about how to deal with high-profile people in your congregation who are closely tied to an ethical issue – in his case, this involves President and Mrs. Clinton.

His thirteen sermons serve as decent examples of how to preach on racism, politics, the economy, sexuality gender equality, and homelessness. They are mostly topical, rather than exegetical/expositional, yet all are based on a biblical text. Each sermon begins with a description of the context in which it was preached (date, purpose, state of the church or nation). Some of them are so rooted in and suited to his American context, that Canadian pastors will have to “translate” as they read. The sermons struck this reviewer as being good, but not outstanding. A few less (six to seven sermons) would be enough with more space given to explaining how his theory in part one influenced the shape and content of the sermons.

Still, there is not much written in homiletics on this topic of prophetic-social preaching. Wogaman's volume is well worth the read.

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For All God's Worth: True Worship and the Calling of the Church

N.T. Wright

Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1997

144 pages, \$15.99 Softcover

Tom Wright, a British Anglican, is the dean of Litchfield Cathedral. He appears, according to some of the comments in this little volume, to have served