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# God's human speech: a practical theology of proclamation

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The weakness of the book is that it gives the impression that this is the way that all Catholics do moral theology. She fails to present the complexity of Catholic moral theology and does not present the strong emphasis on deontology and natural law. Also, her vignettes raise ethical dilemmas but do not come up with an answer. Certainly, in this era of ecumenical dialogue, this book is worthwhile to read for a more positive view of Catholic morality in the 1990s.

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### **God's Human Speech: A Practical Theology of Proclamation**

Charles L. Bartow

Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997  
xiv + 189 pages, \$22.50 Softcover

Much ink has already been spilled describing the conditions of post-modernism and then either lamenting how it has eroded the authority of God's Word read and preached or celebrating the new homiletical configurations which have been stirred up by the flood. Charles Bartow, in *God's Human Speech: A Practical Theology of Proclamation*, resolutely binds these two streams together. In echoes of Calvin and Barth, he refuses to compromise God's prerogative to remain the God revealed in Scripture and yet he articulates a way for us to press human experience and pluralism into God's service. *Sola scriptura* need not inhibit our entanglement with the world because the "reformative or transformational thrust of our kerygmatic expectation...if far from simply...keeping up with the temper of the times. In fact, it has little if anything to do with establishing the gospel's relevance to the world as we construe it and experience it on our own terms. But it has everything to do with the gospel's keeping *us* relevant to the purposes of God whatever the vicissitudes of life" (55). And about these purposes of God Bartow is clear; his statement of the Christian kerygma rings throughout the work: "In Christ Jesus, God takes us as we are and presses us into the service of what God would have us be."

Bartow hangs his theology of God's Word on analogies made with three figures of speech, oxymoron, metaphor, and metonymy. God's Word is oxymoron (contradictions held in tension) when it comes in its strangeness revealing itself in discontinuity with our lived experience. Metaphor (where things are both like and unlike each other) is God's device for simultaneously confirming our life experience without allowing a collapse into total

identification with it. Metonymy (where a part stands in for the whole) is Bartow's figure for the sacramental nature of the Word. "As the bread and the cup serve metonymically to draw attention to the real presence of Christ in communion, so the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments...direct the hearts and minds of the faithful to Christ Jesus who alone is the one Word of God which we have to hear" (20).

Bartow's theology of performance demonstrates his most creative exploitation of the tension between Word and world. He investigates the implications of how our vocal performance of texts, including tone of voice and embodiment, are indeed exegeses of texts. Consequently, for preachers and public readers of Scripture to work at developing imaginative, empathic, vocal, and physical gestural virtuosity is not to devote time to what is beside the point. It is "to condition one's total self (not just one's mind through study, but also one's body through drill) as a site for the acquisition of knowledge" (74). Every performance (that is, every occasion when the "form comes through") of a passage—and indeed every sermon on a passage—contributes to the church's understanding of it.

There is, finally, a strong practical aspect of the book. In the final chapter, Bartow offers a clear and profound five-point method for critiquing our own preaching. He suggests that our sermons must (1) have a present-tense tone, (2) emphasize divine initiative, (3) offer a clear, Christian interpretation of life, (4) be in the indicative mood, and (5) feature a "dexterous use of a variety of sermon strategies" and choose words which aim at "cause, not at effect" (128-129).

While it is appropriate for "people of the Book" to interpret their lives by way of literary analogies, the literariness of Bartow's style makes this book a challenge. He is in constant conversation with dozens of poets and theologians and quotes heavily from their work often at the expense of continuity and intelligibility. It is hard to get a steady sense of his "voice". Surprising, too, is the fact that the sample sermons included from his own corpus are quite literary. This author tried to preach them aloud (as Bartow recommends) but was unable to create an oral voice adequate to the task.

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