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Pitfalls in preaching

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Westerhoff claims that preaching and teaching are “first of all, creating the space for the developing of questions and the search for answers” (43). The best metaphor for the human course is a pilgrimage (48).

Westerhoff takes some short cuts in trying to explain the schools of spirituality and this section suffers from a lack of clarity, i.e., kataphatic and apophatic typologies along with speculative and affective categories.

Using the metaphor of jogging, Westerhoff offers a number of practical suggestions for persons who wish to develop a spiritual discipline, noting that one needs to be rigid in following the discipline and maintain a regular time and familiar space (67). Although he doesn't state it explicitly, the tacit goal of the spiritual discipline is to “feel better” (66). He maintains that praying the Scriptures is the most important or central activity of the discipline (70).

In a summary he remarks that people are looking for “a faith founded on first hand experience”. He returns to his main thesis that in order to preach or teach one requires a vibrant spiritual life.

Finally, he admits to a disposition to the Orthodox and Roman Catholic spiritual traditions despite writing for a Reformed publisher. Indeed, Lutheran readers will look for a different kind of grace in the book. However, this book is mandatory reading for those who wish to preach or teach in the church today.

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Pitfalls in Preaching

Richard L. Eslinger

Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996

xvi + 152 pp.

Any preacher who has worried about or even despaired of communicating with contemporary listeners will welcome this book. Here is an excellent evaluative companion and guide for preachers. It is also an excellent introduction to what is called the “new homiletic” or “postmodern homiletic”. The new homiletic began with preaching-as-storytelling in the 1970s, blossomed in the loamy mix of metaphor, narrative, rhetoric, liberation theology, and literary and related biblical criticisms in the 1980s, and found consensus in the postmodern trends and characteristics in the 1990s. In effect, the new homiletic is the shift from a rationalistic and propositional (“three points and a poem”) base to a narrative base. The traditional “points”, which organized a set of ideas and followed a propositional logic, have given way to a sequence of “moves”, scenes, or episodes in a homiletical plot. The preacher attempts not to construct a rationalistic outline which appeals primarily to an intellectual way of knowing, but to

shape a narrative (not necessarily a story) flow which will appeal to many ways of knowing (experience, emotions, logic, metaphor, imagination, story, intuition, the voices and places of authority, and the symbols of authority).

Eslinger takes up the major areas of sermon-making: rhetoric, Scripture and interpretation, method, illustration, and context and delivery. In each area he pin-points specific pitfalls which will either confuse the hearer or prevent communication ("instant erasure"). That he begins with "the rhetoric of preaching" is a sign that rhetoric is one of the strongest engines driving the new homiletic. The rhetorical situation today is vastly different from that of even a decade ago. For example, sentences announcing the enumeration of "points" instantly "delete from consciousness". Enumerating points worked well in the "print society", but creates confusion in an oral-aural-visual society. The chapter on "Illustration" takes us deeper into the challenges of preaching to contemporary postmodern listeners—and shows the new homiletic to us most clearly. In sum, "un-imagined sermonic discourse is lost almost as soon as it is spoken" (111); it does not "form in consciousness" (to use the jargon). On the contrary, to be able to image something means to be able to experience it for oneself. Answering to this reality, the chapter on "Method" is packed with practical and exceedingly helpful material.

While Eslinger accepts David Buttrick, Fred Craddock, and Eugene Lowry as the "elders" of the new homiletic, Eslinger's book may be called the "triumph of Buttrick". Like many disciples, he swallows the master uncritically. Thus he accepts Buttrick's reservations about story sermons without exploring the nature of the several "narrativities" (Thomas Leitch, *What Stories Are*, 1986) which draw teller and listener into a community and construct world possibilities. As well, he out-Buttricks Buttrick in rejecting thematic and topical sermons without serious consideration of the work of Paul Wilson (*The Practice of Preaching*, 1995, ch. 10) and Ronald Allen (*Preaching the Topical Sermon*, 1992 and *The Teaching Sermon*, 1995). In a related vein he ably defends the absolute necessity of the biblical base of preaching; yet in sketching how sermons can increasingly distance themselves from Scripture (46–50) he comes close to a kind of bibliolatry that some Reformation traditions would challenge by arguing that the Bible is there to enable the preaching of the *gospel*; that is, theological traditions inform preaching, too.

In addition to the exceedingly helpful and practical format of the book (identifying pitfalls), Eslinger has added to each discussion side-bar commentaries and explanations as well as specific related bibliography. A subject and author index allows additional easy access to preachers who wish to check out their sermons.

Highly recommended both as a short course in the new homiletic and as a mentor to the preacher making a sermon and evaluating it after delivery.

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