Consensus

Volume 21
Issue 1 *Women and Men in Theological Education: Exploring the Present, Creating the Future*

Article 24

5-1-1995

The Mystery and the Passion: A Homiletic Reading of the Gospel Traditions

Eduard R. Riegert

resurrection. "When you're dead," Tillich is supposed to have said, "you're dead all over." Only then can God's "new thing" be done.).

Robert Hughes (*A Trumpet in Darkness: Preaching to Mourners*, Fortress, 1985) advises that two things are essential in a funeral sermon: to communicate the reality of death; to communicate Christian hope. It is ultimately humbling to accompany these preachers as they valiantly address themselves to that task.

Eduard R. Riegert
Waterloo Lutheran Seminary

The Mystery and the Passion: A Homiletic Reading of the Gospel Traditions

David Buttrick
Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992
x + 246 pp.

Dear Pastor: *Buy this book!* Read it every Epiphany in preparation for Lent–Easter. Buy it at once! I read it in Epiphany and now again in the Easter season, and each reading revealed fresh insight and provoked theological and imaginative thought. It is a boon to preachers, and a theological companion in any season. Buttrick is not afraid to ask and deal thoroughly with the vexing questions that overshadow the Resurrection and Passion narratives (e.g., Did the resurrection really happen? What does it mean that Christ died for us? What was Jesus's self-understanding? Does God suffer?), but he does this always from the homiletic perspective: "I am seeking to get at a word to be preached" (p. 54).

After a Prologue in which he describes the formation of the Resurrection and Passion narratives he devotes Part One to "The Mystery of the Resurrection" and Part Two to "The Passion of Jesus Christ". The Epilogue is a theological discussion of sin, how it is manifested, how it is dealt with on the cross, and what salvation means.

Buttrick has at least four concerns. One is to read the texts with integrity. He prepares for this in the Epilogue by noting how the early Christians worked their way backward from the Resurrection. Then in each Part he examines all the texts pertaining to Resurrection (he includes 1 Cor. 15) and Passion in the Synoptics and John. This is an invaluable lectionary resource in itself.

A second concern is to be theologically astute and disciplined. In Part One he devotes three chapters to a theological discussion of the Resurrection ("The Reality of the Resurrection", "A Risen Crucified Christ", and "Resurrection and God's New Order"); similarly, in Part Two he devotes three chapters to a theological discussion of the Passion ("The Patterns of

Sin", "The Crossed Man", and "The Mystery of God"). His commentary on the lections is theologically driven. "My aim," he writes, "is to get at the theological substance of texts, that is, the gospel to be preached" (p. 134). For example, he acknowledges that Mary's encounter with the risen Jesus Christ (John 20:11–18) is poignant, but hastens to say that this lection "is less emotive than it may seem; it is undergirded by a complex theological pattern" (p. 83), adding, "Preachers should not psychologize the passage or romanticize the intimacy between Mary and Jesus, lest the theological agenda be lost" (p. 85). Buttrick deliberately resists the current contemporary penchant to approach every text from an "inner" and "personalistic" and "counseling-therapeutic" perspective because he is convinced that it merely feeds an individualism that destroys community, drives a wedge between God's nature and God's activity, and leads to idolatry.

A third concern is to face squarely the contemporary challenge to preaching and faith. Evil is systemic. Human beings are social realities. The biblical metaphors of the atonement are dated. The resurrection "sounds" mythic yet we are perpetually trying to "prove" it historically. Sin has become so psychologized we look to *Psychology Today* to deal with it. Concepts of God are schizoid. Buttrick's basis is essentially Mark 1:15, namely, that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus initiated a new world order. "If the Epistles are any kind of witness, the apostles announced a changed world. The human world, they claimed, has begun all over again; we are now living in a 'new creation'. They invited startled listeners to join God's new humanity. Did they use the world *salvation*? Yes, but when they spoke of salvation, they were not handing out stamped tickets to heaven or offering a happy armful of Jesus. Salvation certainly did not mean a cop-out from the wised-up worldly world. No, for the apostles, salvation was a new social order, forgiven and free, in the midst of a worn-out world" (p. 1–2).

A fourth concern, of course, is homiletical. His theological chapters are laced with punchy anecdotes; his style is a preaching style of direct, engaging conversation. Always he is concerned with the preaching task, for preaching is, finally, the bridge between the text (which is already a form of preaching) and the present listeners (p. 228). Out of his theological discussion come preaching strategies (e.g., p. 27); the homiletical methodology he presents in his earlier book, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Fortress, 1987), informs his pericope studies and thus offers immediate stimulus and momentum to the preacher.

Buttrick can be jarring both in his thinking and his style. He has no patience with the dominant psychological paradigm. "When the church is reduced to church management and the soul is scaled down to psychological promptings, who can speak of resurrection or spot surprising signs of redemptive power among us? No burned martyrs light our skies; ministers burn out instead. No Christians are persecuted; they merely perish from boredom" (p. 25). His hard-driving economical style occasionally gets away from him: Jesus may have been "tossed into a Jerusalem drunk tank" (p.

127) but he surely did not "toss mercy to a repentant, dying criminal" (p. 171). But all this only makes him not only excellent but enormously stimulating. We are in a new era; Buttrick helps us think about what shape the gospel and our preaching and theology may take in it.

One curious editorial mishap: the sub-title on the cover and back says, "A Homiletic Reading of the Gospel Traditions"; but the inside title page as well as the Library of Congress data say "A Homiletic Reading of the *Biblical* Traditions".

Eduard R. Riegert
Waterloo Lutheran Seminary

A Captive Voice: The Liberation Of Preaching

David Buttrick
Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994
iv + 164 pp.

If you have ever read a book by David Buttrick you know how engaging, controversial, and critical he can be. His newest book, *A Captive Voice: The Liberation Of Preaching* maintains that Buttrick tradition. Unfortunately, with this work the level of "angst" reaches a new high (or low!).

I counted at least 13 different types of Christians that are sharply criticized in this book. Some of them include: those who view other religions as wrong, those who are right-wing and use the Bible to suit their biases, those who have a past tense view of God in the Bible, those who preach therapeutic and positive-thinking messages, those who promote church-marketing and church-growth strategies. The list even goes on to include Buttrick's grandmother who reads a Bible verse a day from her "Daily Bread" devotional.

If you can see beyond this disrespectful assault, Buttrick provides some helpful and positive contributions to homiletics. With 164 pages of text, and 317 endnotes, his research is very thorough and he commendably interacts with other disciplines like theology, history, literature, sociology, etc. Though the title of the book isn't that exciting, it does summarize his thesis. Chapter titles include: 1. Preaching and Bible, 2. Preaching and Church, 3. Preaching and Culture, 4. Preaching and Method, 5. Looking Towards the Future.

Buttrick promotes a very high view of preaching when he says "preachers are the very mouth of God" (p. 28), "the character of the church is shaped by preaching" (p. 42), and "preaching can never be merely one part of the service if it is the voice of God" (p. 45).

He argues well for more evangelical and evangelistic preaching: which "must renew Jesus' message of 'the kingdom of God is here"' (p. 49),