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# Preaching the Topical Sermon

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reaching agreement about a common humanity than about God. The future surely cannot depend on a unanimous decision. More than once in history the day has been saved by the "mighty minority".

Now, if none of us is really clear about what we mean when referring to God, we can simply recognize our differences and get on with other more important matters. This is an attractive alternative in the modern setting. There is a place, certainly, for making strategic alignments with various people in specific activities to accomplish certain ends. But what about resources to provide balance, purpose or hope? If God is (rather than "God" being a code word for our own ideals or ideas) and if God acts to reveal himself (rather than being merely a reference to our own best wishes or sincere decisions), then reference to God has a place of ultimate importance. This book is important because it explores the resources of Judaism and Christianity for our contemporary situation. The reader will be provoked, sometimes perhaps to criticism, but often also to insight and perhaps even to action.

Ben Wiebe  
Hamilton, Ontario

## Preaching the Topical Sermon

Ronald J. Allen

Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992

xii + 164 pp.

Ronald J. Allen, Associate Professor of Preaching and New Testament at Christian Theological Seminary, and a Disciples of Christ minister, has set himself the task of restoring the tarnished image of the topical sermon. Other than David Buttrick's model of "preaching in the role of praxis", a somewhat ignored section of his massive *Homiletic*, topical preaching *per se* has been in eclipse since its heyday in Harry Emerson Fosdick's "life situation" model; the tidal wave of the biblical theology movement quite washed it away—and with justification. Allen wisely asserts that "the topical sermon is an occasional alternative to regular expository preaching"; it is "a vitamin supplement to the nourishing fare of regular preaching from the Bible" (4). And he is careful to stress continuously that "the centre of the topical sermon is the interpretation of the topic in light of the gospel" (5), and therefore the preacher who takes up a topic must "analyze [it] with a credible theological method" (4) and in conversation with the Bible.

After locating the topical sermon on the current homiletical map to establish its nature and purpose (Ch. One), Allen discusses eight occasions when a topical sermon is appropriate, e.g., when understanding or action is urgent; when the topic is larger than a single text, image, or theme;

when time is short (Ch. Two). In Ch. Three Allen presents a method for preparing the topical sermon, ranging from determining whether the topic is fitting for a whole sermon (step 1), through understanding the topic (steps 2–10) and arriving at a *Christian* understanding of the topic (steps 11–13), to devising the homiletical strategy (steps 14–18). Ch. Four outlines six forms a topical sermon may take; Ch. Five discusses strategies for preaching on controversial subjects; and Ch. Six presents five sample sermons by parish pastors, on forgiving, evangelism, being “born again”, homosexuality, and abortion. Eight “Appendixes” [sic] provide valuable bibliography on pertinent areas.

This is an important, valuable, and eminently helpful book. It is important because of the increasing need for teaching sermons as biblical and theological literacy diminishes (cf. Allen’s co-authored book, *The Teaching Minister*, Westminster/John Knox, 1991)—the steady march of the lectionary can in fact impede consistent teaching. It is valuable because of its wise and deeply pastoral approach, especially in dealing with topics that seem, as he says, to be soaked in gasoline and waiting for a spark, or at once evoke numbness in the hearer (e.g., evangelism). It is helpful because it is oriented to the actual making of sermons; this does create some “dry” stretches in the book (especially Ch. Three); nevertheless, this careful attention to procedure and process disciplines the preacher to “know what s/he is talking about” so that all-important credibility is established and maintained, and “dumping” and haranguing are avoided.

Topical sermons, as a category, have, on the one hand, not been common among the so-called “liturgical” churches; on the other hand, “thematic” sermons taking up a theme from appointed lessons are perhaps the commonest of sermons. It is only a small jump from that to a fully “topical” sermon. *Preaching the Topical Sermon* is of significant help right there when we approach the lectionary texts hoping “something will leap out at me”, and it will surely broaden our preaching possibilities by helping us along the road to exploring not only topics arising from the text but arising also from every aspect of the church’s ministry in the world. This book comes highly recommended.

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### **Worthy To Raise Issues: Preaching and Public Responsibility**

James W. Crawford  
Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1991  
xiv + 158 pp.

James Crawford, a leading representative of the Black tradition in preaching, is senior minister, Old South Church, Boston. This is the church