

5-1-1994

Worthy to Raise Issues: Preaching and Public Responsibility

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Recommended Citation

Riegert, Eduard R. (1994) "Worthy to Raise Issues: Preaching and Public Responsibility," *Consensus*: Vol. 20 : Iss. 1 , Article 23.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol20/iss1/23>

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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

from which Samuel Adams, a deacon, led a band of colonists to dump English tea into Boston Harbor in 1773. The title of this book of sermons is taken from a plaque in the vestibule of the church which, referring to those long-ago town meetings held here, states, in part, "Here the men of Boston proved themselves independent, courageous, free men, worthy to raise issues which were to concern the liberty and happiness of millions yet unborn" (2). Crawford is proud to stand in that tradition, and calls upon it to justify and undergird not only his preaching but the social programs of the congregation. They are, he insists, worthy to raise issues of public responsibility.

The development of the book out of doctoral studies at Andover Newton is apparent in the extensive Introduction in which Crawford details eight "Convictions" which underlie the sermons, ranging from the conviction that "biblical faith makes a difference" to the conviction that the history of the Old South Church "provides ample authority for raising issues, for wrestling with the public vocation of Christian ethics" (17). Here is the heart of Crawford's concern, namely, "that confessing Christians are public Christians, serving with energy, imagination, and love amid the broken public realm" (2).

The twelve sermons (including two Advent, one Christmas, three Lenten, and two Easter sermons) are grouped into three categories, "Human Community", "Economic and Social Justice", and "Political Power", though several sermons defy their categorization. Specific issues addressed are economics, homelessness, AIDS, the status of women, abortion, and educational funding (the latter two with specific reference to legislation in Massachusetts). The twelfth sermon challenges the congregation through an intriguing perspective on Judas, namely, that Jesus proved to be too radical for him! In a fascinating "Postscript" Crawford chews on the heavy question of whether his preaching has made any difference.

There are several genuine strengths that are instructive to the discipline of preaching on ethical issues. One is Crawford's conscious stance in the history and ministry of his old congregation, reaching as it does to the primal convictions and philosophies and forces that birthed the U.S.A. Another is his equally conscious persuasion that social issues are moral and spiritual issues. A third is his theological certitude that confessing Christians must be *public* Christians, and preachers must be prophets, not house chaplains. Especially the first strength also tips Crawford into "weakness". Under the "Political Power" category, a 1988 sermon on the eve of a presidential election speaks of civil liberties and the balance of liberty and power. Taking as his text Samuel's opposition to Israel's clamour for a king, Crawford seems to forget that Samuel was working in the framework of the Covenant, and as a result falls into the American ideology of individual liberty, quoting with apparent agreement the opinion that republicanism is designed by the Creator (104), quite oblivious to his other emphases on community, and contradicting the next sermon (rather, a lecture) on Lincoln as a touch-stone for presidential talk of God (God, according to Lincoln, is not necessarily "on our side").

Non-Americans will do a bit of gagging in this last section, but ultimately we get from the book a picture of a venerable congregation and its preacher facing disturbing new realities head-on with a tough faith and a living history, boldly yet humbly attempting to be public Christians.

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Womanprayer, Spiritjourney

Judy Esway

Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-third Publications, 1987

70 pages

Womanprayer, Spiritjourney is a collection of 56 meditations in which Judy Esway weaves together scripture and reflections on her own life. Each meditation might be used as the basis for a daily devotional time. The book's strength is in Esway's ability to see the holy in the very ordinary events of daily life, like driving home on the freeway, holding an infant grandchild or taking note of grey hair. Through her openness and expressiveness we see Esway's deep trust in a loving God.

One frustrating aspect of the book is the use of scripture passages employing male sexist language. This book is written by a woman and it shares the spiritual life of that woman in a very creative way. There is no doubt that this book would appeal to other women. Unfortunately, the sexist language may obstruct the message. For example, the reflection "You are Precious in My Eyes" is about self-esteem. It is based on the scripture quotation which says: *My son, with humility have self-esteem; prize yourself as you deserve. Who will acquit him who condemns himself? Who will honour him who discredits himself?* (Sirach 10:27, 28) This male language presents a rather jarring and distracting way to begin the day's reflection. Many women in our society suffer from low self-esteem and need to hear those words "You are precious in my eyes". But it is hard for some women to receive that message in a meditation that begins with the words "my son". I think that it would have been helpful to either replace the male sexist language with female sexist language, e.g. "my daughter" instead of "my son", or perhaps better yet try for gender inclusive language, "my child".

It is interesting that Esway does make a language change for the title of one of her meditations, "It is Not Good For Woman To Be Alone". Here she speaks with warmth and love of her husband and their journey together. She also expresses her fears about losing him. "God, how it frightens me. You know I couldn't live without him. Please remember, God, it is not good for woman to be alone." Esway is being very open and spontaneous