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Quest for Better Preaching

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signposts for an alternative future more akin to the ancient values of the Christian faith. He praises the ecumenical movement in Canada by heralding its two-decade pattern of interchurch coalitions designed to rectify the inequities of Canadian life. He applauds the rise to life and action of the laity—especially in the form of women and native peoples, and he links spirituality and social justice when he speaks of alternatives for our consumerist society. His seven-fold pastoral strategy to face these issues is a masterpiece and can be used as a blueprint for change by Christians of all denominations.

In our own new Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada, God has given us a *kairotic* moment, an opportunity to let the Reformation gospel speak to and from the uniqueness of our own Canadian context. Ironically, it is the Catholic Remi De Roo who has pointed the way for us with such clarity. His book is both a gift and a challenge for us.

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Quest for Better Preaching

Edward F. Marquardt

Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985

\$15.85 paperback

“Can we have better preaching in the church?” For Edward F. Marquardt, the answer is a firm and resounding, “Yes!” Although “good preaching” might be beyond many of us, all of us, Marquardt claims, can become “better” preachers. It is to this quest that he calls us; the quest to become better and more effective proclaimers of Christ’s Gospel.

This is a book written for the parish pastor, by one who is himself a parish pastor. The value of his contribution lies essentially in his skill as a discriminating gatherer of challenging material from the field of contemporary homiletical scholarship. For our common edification, the author went “diamond mining...” attempting “to gather as many homiletical diamonds as possible into one collection”.

This text, however, is much more than just another patch-work collection of pithy thoughts. Marquardt is also an able organizer and manages to weave the various threads of his sources into a tapestry of solid construction and very attractive lines. Whether consumed in a single sitting or in isolated snippets, Marquardt’s text makes for a very good read. This is no dust gatherer, but an inspirational sourcebook that readers will comfortably refer to time and time again.

It is in the chapter dealing with “The Preacher as Theologian” that Marquardt most clearly expresses the primary intent of his book, inspiring

us to take our preaching seriously. He begins by effectively highlighting the role which preaching has played from Biblical times through the Reformation, then inviting the preacher to see him/herself, too, as a primary instrument in God's ongoing relationship to humanity. This is a theology of preaching which does not long suffer the "Saturday night special"! The author is deeply concerned about a collective sense of complacency which has crept into our North American pulpits. The nature of the quest which his title points toward is a corrective to this perceived homiletical decay.

Hence it is not surprising that Marquardt's operational motif for the office of preaching is found within the prophetic mode of proclamation. More than anything else, the church of today needs preachers who are also prophets. He claims that modern society, including the church, is characterized by a sense of loss; loss of personal significance, loss of meaning, and the like. The preacher as prophet speaks from and to that loss. We are "ordained by God to speak God's message to the particular setting in which we live. We cannot do otherwise."

Marquardt also has a lot to share concerning the "form" of such preaching. His presentations concerning the use of stories, the importance of language and variety in form are richly provocative. Hence we might forgive his creation of a new acronym, the "SAI", for "stories, analogies and images". In these latter chapters the author draws effectively from some of the best, Craddock, Buechner, Achtemeier and Steimle. His tone, again, is largely inspirational, and it is a highly effective tone. This entire text works upon the reader in much the same fashion as a good sermon, shifting perceptions to the point where one says first that "I should", and secondly that "I can!"

The first chapters of the book are weakest in comparison to the whole. Given the text's intended audience, a chapter outlining the standard "Criticisms of Preaching" seems somewhat redundant. We pastor-types are never so sharp or thorough as when we set ourselves to the task of criticizing one another's work in the pulpit! The chapter entitled "The Preacher as Person" similarly leaves us with a "so what?" kind of feeling. When Marquardt spins out the sacred litany of "What the Preacher Needs", does he really expect anyone to question the need for "authentic humanity". "selfless, caring love", and the like? Marquardt might have used this section as a text-book example of the shrill-sounding "do-this sermons" that he and his sources would laudably have banished from our pulpits.

As an appendix, the author includes a very helpful outline which can be used by pastors interested in setting up a parish group dedicated to helping the pastor improve the quality of his or her preaching. Though quite ambitious in scope, the process is very practical in its orientation.

Still, no matter how it is used, this text is an ideal resource for parish pastors. It inspires and challenges while also offering a solid survey of contemporary literature in the field of preaching. Edward Marquardt calls us to a quest that is well worth joining, effectively inspiring us to make that quest our own.

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A Trumpet in Darkness: Preaching to Mourners

Robert G. Hughes

Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985

109 pp.

"A mourner," writes Robert Hughes, "is a story in search of an ending." The funeral sermon, when it engages the particular grief dynamics of the mourners in the context of the theology of the cross, becomes a vital link in that story, perhaps even the energizer which moves that story toward an ending, namely, new life.

The problem, of course, familiar to every pastor, is to know where the mourners are "on the continuum of grief" (10). This requires careful listening. Using the case of a protracted death from cancer, Hughes demonstrates "a strategy for communicating with mourners" (chap. 1). By listening to the mourners' story of the death and concentrating on their feelings and questions, the pastor can identify emotions (eg "I really miss her"), discover images (eg "I feel alone in the dark"), and pick up theological clues (eg "Is it wrong to feel relief?"). These become vital elements for the sermon as well as for further pastoral work.

Furthermore, each type of death has its own peculiar "syndrome of emotions and questions" (24), and in chapter 2 Hughes discusses the following types: prolonged, sudden, untimely (eg child), timely, sought-for (suicide), unbeliever's, and anonymous (the deceased is unknown to the pastor). Each type is examined for its grief dynamics (eg guilt, anger, shame in the case of suicide), and its "variable factors" (eg state of the body as the result of an accident; the consequences of certain concepts of God). Appropriate Scripture passages are listed for each type.

In chapter 3, "The Cross in the Face of Death", Hughes correlates the theology of the cross and the theology of the mourners as the latter has been revealed in the mourners' questions and feelings (cf. chap. 1). For example, the question "Why?" involves *anger* and signals a probing of the goodness and justice of God; "What did I do to deserve this?" involves *guilt* and signals a salvation-by-works mentality: "God, where are you?"