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BOOKS IN REVIEW

PREACHING THE CREATIVE GOSPEL CREATIVELY

FRANCIS C. ROSSOW

St. Louis: Concordia
Publishing House, 1983
174 pp.

It is Rossow's conviction and contention that the Gospel, which is powerfully creative of saving faith and goodness, deserves to be preached creatively (158). He has clearly spent much thought and experiment on preaching creatively, both as a pastor and as a teacher (Concordia Senior College, Fort Wayne and, since 1976, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis). One of the measures of a homiletician is that person's own sermons, another is the sermons of the students taught; Rossow has included not only his own sermon examples but examples also from his students, and it is pleasing to see that some students out-do the teacher. Rossow's nurturing of creative preaching is to be commended.

After an Introduction which roots homiletical creativity primarily in steady growth in the preacher's sanctification and secondarily in language facility and mastery of basic homiletics, the book in four chapters offers four avenues toward greater creativity. Of these, the third and fourth chapters clearly represent the areas in which Rossow has expended his preaching energy.

Chapter One proposes that "a fuller understanding of what happened to Jesus on the cross," that is, of "the literal Gospel," is "conducive to creativity in our preaching" and, as well, foundational to any kind of creativity (21). This is the least satisfying chapter in the book, for it seems the author is more concerned to establish his biblical and theological orthodoxy than to explore how the Gospel of the God-man's atoning death and resurrection may be creatively proclaimed. For example, while he approvingly quotes C.S. Lewis to the effect that there are many theories which attempt to explain how Christ's death puts us right with God (23), Rossow himself proceeds (not only here but throughout the book) solely with the "substitutionary sacrifice" understanding of the cross, which he calls "the full, literal Gospel." It is, of course, an understanding which especially lends itself to the Law-Gospel hermeneutic he unflinchingly applies (let the non-Lutheran reader understand!); yet it would appear that the other New Testament understandings (e.g., ransom, redemption, reconciliation) could certainly qualify for discussion in a book devoted to creative preaching.

Chapter Two is devoted to attaining creativity "through more frequent use of biblical metaphors and images of the Gospel" (32). The mention of metaphor instantly drives the author into a defense of the historicity of the Gospel; this is annoyingly repetitious since Chapter One has already explicated "the full, literal Gospel." Thereafter the chapter gets down to business and presents a vast array of metaphors and images, from simple ones like food and water to infrequent ones like the Second

Adam, and finishes off with a host of Old Testament metaphors like scapegoat, shield, and shelter.

Chapters Three and Four are the most rewarding, and lavishly illustrated with actual sermon samples. Chapter Three addresses creativity through the use of something Rossow calls "Gospel-handles." The term is a clunker, admittedly, and, if I understand him correctly, a bit of a misnomer. By it is meant a word or words which occur in a text and which serve as a linkage to the Gospel. A given text may have little or no Gospel in it (according to a Law-Gospel hermeneutic), and such a handle enables the preacher to move to the Gospel, or to proclaim some "extra" Gospel, or help the hearer find an unexpected Gospel in a long-familiar text. An example: Hebrews 12:18-24 speaks of two mountains: "For ye are not come unto the mount that might be touched . . . But ye are come unto Mount Zion . . ." The Gospel-handle, Rossow suggests, is "mount," and it enables the preacher to include another mount, Calvary, and thus to speak of three mountains (54f.). Another example: In Genesis 18:23-32 Abraham pleads with God not to destroy the righteous with the wicked of Sodom and Gomorrah; the Gospel-handle is "fifty righteous"/"ten righteous" which suggests the tragedy of Romans 3:10, "There is none righteous, no, not one," and the Gospel of Romans 5:18-19, ". . . by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all . . ." Thus, from a text which contains no Gospel, according to Rossow, he has nevertheless been able to preach the Gospel (63f.).

The author is aware of the exegetical razor's edge he treads, but argues that "the main business of preaching is to preach the Gospel" (51), and therefore if a text contains no Gospel "the preacher must import the Gospel from elsewhere in the Bible" (51). In essence, he argues, this is simply the expression of the "cardinal hermeneutical principle" supplied by Jesus himself: "Search the Scriptures . . . they are they which testify of me" (John 5:39). While agreeing with his christo-centric intent, not all readers will agree with Rossow's understanding of the Scriptures (he does not hesitate, for example, to say that Jesus, as "God's Righteous One," spoke Psalm 22 [25]), and thus not every reader will be comfortable with some of the paths down which these Gospel-handles lead. For example, in Luke 23:27-31, Jesus is the green tree which becomes the dry tree so that the Israelites, the women of Jerusalem addressed, and we who are the dry tree may become the green tree (75ff.); in Matthew 7:6, God does in fact cast his "pearl", Jesus, before the "swine," us (78f.); and in Luke 13:6-9, Jesus becomes the fig tree that is cursed (79f.). In these and other instances, I begin to feel I am in a medieval preaching class. Nevertheless, the effect of the chapter is stimulating, enabling us to look at texts both with enormous attention to detail and with imagination. Not the least challenge emerging from the discussion of Gospel-handles is that of knowing the Scriptures. Luther was one who always had Scripture on the tip of his tongue.

Chapter Four is an excellent "show and tell" of a great variety of sermon approaches and formats. Creativity (and a blessed variety!) may be achieved, for instance, through the use of multiple texts (as when a N.T. text echoes an O.T. text, or when two texts express cause-and-effect, contrast, paradox, question-and-answer, or problem-solution patterns). He demonstrates the creative use of novels, poems, fairy tales, nursery rhymes, legends, and fables; he explores extended analogies, role playing, dialog, the letter format, word studies, even grammar, logic, and mathematics as sermon approaches and formats. Sometimes this gets gimmicky, as

when an omitted apostrophe converted "he'll" into "hell," inspiring Rossow to suggest "that Christ is the apostrophe that has invaded hell, split it apart in a sense, and totally altered its significance" (151). This chapter alone is worth the price of the book; there is little excuse for an endless repetition of stereotyped "three-pointers."

The book has been fastidiously written and edited—a welcome relief to the often sloppy proof-reading encountered in these budget-conscious days. I cannot refrain from one exception to this observation, namely, the consistent sexist language. Rossow seems to live and breathe only in a male world. It is understandable, given his membership in a church which does not ordain women, that the preacher will always be "he." But this does not excuse the unwavering use of male-oriented language when no clergy are in sight. Women appear only peripherally, as in textual, literary, and familial references; they are incidentally present in a uniformly male world. Indeed, they are distractions and worse: the twice-used phrase, "shapely blondes and shiny cars," presents women as seductresses and as objects (18), and, far more objectionably, links them with depravity of thought and the existence of the devil (139). From this perspective, one even begins to wonder about the very fine "letter sermon" in which a woman writes from heaven to her daughter, gratefully acknowledging how she had been brought to salvation through her daughter and especially her daughter's friend: why is it a *woman* who confesses her snobbery, selfishness, and lovelessness when in every other significant place the cast is male? A good editor should by now be alert to the inclusive use of language.

The book is a welcome and usable addition to the growing discussion of creativity in the pulpit, and its eminently practical intent can do much for the preacher concerned to preach a creative Gospel creatively.

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