The modern preacher and the ancient text: interpreting and preaching biblical literature

Eduard R. Riegert
By the end of the book it is clear that Droege’s enthusiasm for the imag-inal approach to death is no vain effort at control, but a means of accessing the profound opportunity of human life through the multiplex images of the Paschal Mystery that lies at the heart of the Christian tradition.

Christopher F.J. Ross
Wilfrid Laurier University

The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature
Sidney Greidanus
xvi + 374 pp.

This book is an excellent presentation of a conservative Evangelical understanding of biblical preaching. Greidanus is Professor of Theology at The King’s College in Edmonton, Alberta, and his concern is to further sound and authoritative preaching of the Bible. Well and widely read in both disciplines (23 pages of “Select Bibliography”) he seeks here “to bridge the gap between the department of biblical studies and that of homiletics” (xi).

In a time of strident—and sometimes vicious—argumentation in favor of biblical inerrancy and against any historical-critical methods, it is refreshing to observe a conservative scholar carefully evaluating source, form, redaction, rhetorical, and canonical criticisms, noting strengths as well as weaknesses, and appropriating their respective usefulnesses for expository preaching. And it is salutary to experience Greidanus’ steadfast emphases on the integrity of the text, the overarching theocentricity of the Bible, the need for a holistic approach to interpretation, and respect for the importance of preaching as derived from the kerygmatic nature of Scripture itself.

The initial chapter presents the familiar Evangelical emphasis on preaching the Scriptures (vis-à-vis the Lutheran emphasis on using the Scriptures to preach the Gospel): “If preachers wish to preach with divine authority, they must proclaim the message of the inspired Scriptures, for the Scriptures alone are the word of God written; the Scriptures alone have divine authority” (12). Preaching, therefore—by definition—is expository preaching, the “plain meaning” of which is “to exposit the Word of God” (10).

Three categories or dimensions of interpretation guide and control exposition and preaching. (1) Literary Interpretation (ch. 3), in which “one seeks to ascertain the meaning of the passage by focussing on the words” (297), includes not only such methods as source, form, redaction, rhetorical,
and canonical criticisms, but also biblical theology (I’m not sure why that is included here rather than in the category of theological interpretation) and the recent developments in literary analysis (such elements as rhetorical structures and literary devices). (2) Historical Interpretation (ch. 4, and also ch. 2 on “Historical Foundations”) where he discusses the historical reliability of the Bible in which “one attempts to hear the message the way the original recipients heard it” (255), and beyond that, to hear it in the context of the “universal kingdom history [Heilsgeschichte] that encompasses all of created reality: past, present, and future” (95). (3) Theological Interpretation (ch. 5) which “reminds us that the primary concern of Scripture is to acquaint us with God, his word, his will, his acts” (256). Only by attending to all three categories can one achieve a holistic interpretation and avoid falling prey to atomistic and anthropological interpretations (and the resultant distorted sermons).

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 deal with homiletical matters. “Topical” preaching is ruled out because the sermon theme must be “a summary statement of the unifying thought of the text”. The form of the sermon reshapes the form of the text, and the recent literary studies of biblical materials provide much help here. The sermon’s relevance is the relevance of the text itself, and focusing on the text’s own goal and the author’s own perspective will enable the preacher to bridge the historical-cultural gap.

The remaining half of the book is given to the investigation of preaching on texts from four major genres: Hebrew Narratives (ch. 9); Prophetic Literature (ch. 10); the Gospels (ch. 11); and the Epistles (ch. 12). Each genre is described and its literary characteristics examined. “Guidelines for Preaching” each genre include discussions of text selection (what, in this genre, constitutes a literary unit or pericope?); literary, historical, and theological interpretations; theme formulation; the form of the sermon; and the relevance of the sermon.

There is much to be learned in this book, and every preacher will be grateful to Greidanus for this thorough and informed examination of how dedicated biblical study and conscientious biblical preaching are integrated. One wishes, though, that the author had been more generous with examples, not least a sermon or two.

Less conservatively oriented persons will find their debate with Greidanus stimulating. His concern with the historical reliability of Scripture is close to wearisome and begins to smack of a defence against a charge of “liberalism”. Nevertheless, he is pressing toward a stance open to the valid gains of post-Enlightenment and contemporary biblical scholarship. In a certain sense we observe here the effort of the church to retrieve its Book from “scientific religion”.

Again, the high value he places on “progressive revelation” needs examination. While that is a favorite Evangelicalist concept to solve the problem of the relation between the Testaments and thus to provide continuity to doctrinal development and unity to the Scriptures, it has a significant evolutionary ring to it and therewith an ominous implication, namely, “we”
are superior to "them", and "they" were primitive while "we" have full knowledge. It seems to me that Abraham was as "fully saved" as any Christian, and God "saved" as effectively in the Old Testament as in the New Testament and the church.

Homiletically, Greidanus is to be lauded for his staunch theocentric emphasis: the preaching text speaks of God and about God, and thus to talk about parent-child relations on the text of Luke 15:11-32, or sibling rivalry, or the need of a child to leave home as the primary meaning of the text is a sad distortion. Still, he seems to miss the stress of "narrative" preaching which premises an incarnational theology in which human life and experience are the arena of the encounter with God rather than the "timeless truths" of a static biblicism. And that returns us to the classical Lutheran position which perceives the Scriptures to be not a compendium of "eternal truths" about God, but as the cradle in which Christ lies. Such a perception allows greater latitude to preaching and sermon forms than a solely expository form, while remaining biblically sound because they are true to the Gospel.

I recommend the reading of this book. In one swoop it will stimulate your biblical interpretation and help you review your preaching.

Eduard R. Riegert
Waterloo Lutheran Seminary