

[MJTM 16 (2014–2015)]

#### BOOK REVIEW

Donald R. Sunukjian, *Invitation to James: Persevering through Trials to Win the Crown*. Biblical Preaching for the Contemporary Church Series. Wooster, OH: Weaver Book Company, 2014. 123 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-1-941-33704-2.

———. *Invitation to the Life of Jacob: Winning through Losing*. Biblical Preaching for the Contemporary Church Series, Wooster, OH: Weaver Book Company, 2014. 157 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-1-941-33710-3.

———. *Invitation to Philippians: Building a Great Church through Humility*. Biblical Preaching for the Contemporary Church Series. Wooster, OH: Weaver Book Company, 2014. 113 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-0-989-16714-7.

Books about preaching are inevitably filled with theories and strategies that are intended to enable the preacher to be more effective in their homiletical endeavors. For those of us who have read many of these kind of books, there can be a sense that it would be helpful to see these theories in action. In other words, “give me an example.” Donald Sunukjian, professor of Christian ministry and leadership at Talbot School of Theology (Biola University), is well established as a contemporary leader in the field of homiletics from within the evangelical tradition. He is the author of the book, *Invitation to Biblical Preaching*, which is a standard textbook used in many introductory preaching courses. The three books under consideration in this review are from the *Biblical Preaching for the Contemporary Church Series*, which is a series of books that seeks to offer models of biblical sermons that are examples of the principles elucidated in Sunukjian’s *Invitation to Biblical Preaching*. In this way,

Sunukjian is seeking to “give us an example” of how biblical preaching can be done effectively in the church today. To further increase the usefulness of the series, the sermons included in all three books were all preached before a live audience before they were ultimately transcribed into written form.

In the introduction (included in each book), Sunukjian says, “A sermon comes alive when it is true to the biblical author’s flow of thought, clear in its unfolding, interesting to listen to, and connected to contemporary life” (xi). Each of the volumes under consideration in this review reflects a genuine attempt to accomplish these ideals. The author/preacher moves deftly between illustrations, analysis, exhortation, and challenges, making the exploration of the text interesting and engaging.

*Invitation to Philippians* draws on Sunukjian’s own extensive experience as a preacher and an academic. The quality of these sermons is clearest in their introductions. Sunukjian’s use of contemporary imagery is powerful, and he sets a strong example for students and active preachers with his vivid introductions to each sermon, effectively demonstrating the importance of this aspect of the preaching event. Each image manages to captivate the imagination and draw the reader into the particular situation or theme of the sermon. It should be noted that Sunukjian’s sermons reveal a high level of insight into the text while remaining relevant to the modern audience. This seamless transition from the biblical text to the contemporary situation is to be admired, and the reader who is using these sermons as a template for effective preaching will note these features and find themselves being challenged to emulate them in their own preaching. Further, each sermon is brief, which makes this text a practical resource. A busy student/preacher can pick up this book and read a chapter in a few minutes and be inspired.

However, the material in these sermons tends to fall short in practical application. While the concepts and themes that Sunukjian has developed in each sermon are clear and well-described, they rarely make their way back into specific, concrete examples of how these concepts take root in everyday life. In most cases, while Sunukjian starts his sermons on a strong note, they tend to fall short in their conclusions. Many of the

conclusions are brief, if not limited to one sentence, and may leave the reader with a sense of incompleteness in regards to some of the sermons.

In *Invitation to James*, Sunukjian preaches and then writes a thoughtful commentary on the book of James, walking through the biblical text with an expository approach. Verse by verse, he explores the scripture, giving helpful explanation on the original context of the passage, as well as demonstrating a thorough understanding of its meaning. He explores the major theme of James—that we will experience trials as Christ-followers—and encourages his listeners, much as James did with his original readers, to persevere through difficulty. The overall tone of Sunukjian’s sermons is encouraging and hopeful. This is one of the helpful elements of the approach to the book of James that the author offers. Unlike *Invitation to Philippians*, one of the strengths of *Invitation to James* is the practical application that it offers to the hearer or reader. Each sermon included is full of practical examples and challenges for what the text means when it is lived out; because of this, there is much “real-life” implication for what is being discussed in each sermon, and the author presents all information in a thoroughly down-to-earth way.

What is perhaps lacking in this journey through the book on James is a sense of connection with the larger Christian story. Jesus is rarely mentioned, and the cross is almost non-existent as a topic of conversation among the many sermons. One could argue that the point of the sermon series was not to discuss the cross, but rather to give real-life application for Christian living. Even so, the lack of reference to the greater story of Jesus, his death, and his resurrection fails to put the focus on Christian living in the broader context of the Gospel story and mission. As a result, we are left with a series of sound biblical life principles, all valuable and true—but which lack a sense of divine purpose and connection to the larger picture of what God is up to in the world in light of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Placing the wisdom of James in this larger context is a part of the preacher’s task, and here Sunukjian’s examples does not offer any guidance.

*Invitation to the Life of Jacob* reminds us that “we are Jacob” (1), that is, a study on this biblical character can reveal much to us about who we are and what it means to live faithfully with God in this world. Unlike the other two books being considered in this review, this particular text deals with a different kind of genre of biblical literature—Old Testament narrative. Sunukjian’s sermons all carry a narrative feel to them, which provides a helpful example as to how to approach this form of literature that makes up a large part of the biblical canon. Further, Sunukjian demonstrates a thorough engagement with matters like Hebrew words, literary forms (e.g. chiasm) and the broader theology of the Old Testament. This kind of detail, woven into the telling of the story and its implications for real life, makes each sermon richer and provides the audience with greater insight into the text as a whole. Each of the sermons demonstrates a brisk, but not hurried movement to them; even when stopping to consider a more detailed part of the text the preacher/author does not allow himself to get bogged down so as to compromise the pace of the sermon. This again is a fine example to all preachers.

The one area where *Invitation to the Life of Jacob* may leave readers slightly frustrated is Sunukjian’s approach to application. He employs a “principalizing” approach (some may call it “moralizing”) that provides a perspective that in the end each sermon is about life principles that can be derived from the story of Jacob. While this does contribute to making the sermons seem relevant, it loses the larger picture that is crucial to the book of Genesis—the God who is behind the text. There is little attention given to the nature and character of God as the point of the text. These issues are not completely ignored, but the conclusion usually calls attention to characteristics displayed in Jacob’s life that we should either learn from or avoid. This is not altogether wrong, and it is always a temptation when preaching narrative to find these connections in order to “speak to life.” But the stories in Genesis are designed to reveal God and his relationship to Israel as a community, so preaching these texts should ultimately lead us to consider his character and its implications as much as, if not more than, how we should or should not emulate the

human characters in the story.

These books offer the reader lively, helpful, positive examples of contemporary preaching. It is worth noting that they tend to lean to the more conservative side theologically, and in some cases, they assume an audience that is relatively biblically literate. Further, as a companion to Sunukjian's earlier text, *Invitation to Biblical Preaching*, this series would be strengthened if, after each sermon, or at least in some kind of concluding chapter, there were clear connections made between the homiletical approaches and theoretical ideals espoused in between the former text and in the sermons found in the present one. This kind of reflection on the form and technique of the sermon(s) would have helped the books in this series to accomplish their goal of being "a model" to other preachers. Without it readers are left to make the connections on their own. Having the opportunity to read a master preacher like Sunukjian reflect on his own preaching would be of great value. The lack of this kind of reflection lessens the overall value of this series.

Nonetheless, as already mentioned, these books are easy-to-read examples of engaging preaching that any preacher can learn from and adapt to their own work. For some, these sermons may even qualify as good devotional reading, as they offer insights into the biblical text as well as challenging applications of it. Not everyone will find Sunukjian's approach satisfying at every turn, to be sure, but an observant student of preaching will note that many of the techniques he employs are the kinds of things that help audiences hear the word and be formed by it. Taken with his *Invitation to Biblical Preaching*, these resources provide guidance to the challenge of twenty-first century preaching.

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