

[MJTM 16 (2014–2015)]

Book Review

Sweet, Leonard. *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014. 368 pp. Hbk. ISBN 978-0-310-51545-6.

There is bad news for those of us who learned how to preach in the twentieth century: the era of the classic three-point expository sermon is over.

So says Leonard Sweet in his seminal work *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching*, a well-researched monograph that is geared towards any who preach in this day and age, although it will also no doubt prove to be a valuable resource for all who are students of postmodern culture and its intersection with the postmodern church. Sweet is a professor and preacher who is well-known for his extensive research and writing on postmodern and emergent culture, ecclesiology, and missiology, and in this latest work, he explores the topic of preaching in a twenty-first century North American context, focusing on what will be required to engage this ever-shifting culture with the power of the sermon. Sweet argues that postmodernism (referred to often in this work as “the Google culture,”) will ultimately reject preaching that is merely grounded in points, propositions, and rhetoric; on the contrary, preaching in the postmodern age must be grounded in inspiration, imagery, experience, and storytelling.

Research has shown that one of the most damaging trends in churches today is a worrying passivity: “The majority of people in the majority of churches are not engaged in any significant ministry or mission. Christians have become passive spectators in worship rather than active participants” (24). Sweet believes that preaching has much to do with this problem; since the role of preaching is to instruct and inspire the Body of Christ, it is

therefore suggested that a lack of motivation or engagement in the Body must find its root problem in the preaching. This notion of preaching as an act that empowers and enlivens the Body is reflected in the title, *Giving Blood*, a phrase that serves as an elaborate metaphor used throughout the work, relaying the idea that preaching nourishes and motivates the Body of Christ, just as blood nourishes and fuels the human body. With many different aspects of preaching being likened to various medical aspects of human blood throughout the book, the metaphor at times seems to get stretched beyond its breaking point, although the overall picture is an interesting one.

According to Sweet, the sure-fire way to dampen the spirits of congregations today is to preach clear-cut expositions of exegetical treatments that are wrapped up in definitive truth-claims, particularly when this is done in a passionless delivery. Modernity valued information, clarity, and rhetoric; postmodernity places a greater value upon inspiration, authenticity, and experience. The world is better connected and better informed than ever before, and is changing at an incredibly rapid rate. Yet, in our multisensory and interconnected world:

we expect people to sit down in straight rows on hard seats and give undivided attention while we take them for a ride on some apocalyptic express or enable sleeper service during our hot-under-the-collar Aesopian moralisms and ramblings about the 1, 2, 3s of this or that? What are we thinking? (243)

Sweet feels that much of the dogmatic, information-based preaching of the twentieth century must evolve into something very different, or else we run the risk of losing our present listeners entirely.

The solution, he suggests, is to instead preach sermons that are “semiotic”: this is a preaching model that focuses less on authoritatively declaring clear points and principles from text-based exegesis, and instead focuses on intentionally connecting the listener to Jesus through stories, images, and metaphors, in a way that is inspiring and experiential. As Sweet explains, “A semiotic sermon reads the signs of what God is up to in the world, connects those signs in people’s lives with the Jesus story,

and then communicates the gospel by connecting people in relationship to Jesus through stories, images, and gestures” (22). To this he adds the notion of “EPIC” preaching, an acronym describing sermons that are Experiential, Participatory, Image-rich, and that Connect the listener to Jesus in a profound way. While Sweet has a tendency to be repetitive, and is occasionally at fault for mixing too many metaphors in a way that muddies his point, there is nonetheless great value here. For many, this will be a challenging idea with many implications for preaching in the twenty-first century, and in general, Sweet lays it out clearly and convincingly.

He argues his thesis by examining many aspects of preaching throughout the book, including various styles, delivery, the role of Scripture, the passion behind preaching, etc. On every topic, his overarching theme is that the preaching act must connect with our rapidly changing culture, and thus preaching must rapidly change in order to do so. He contends that the Google culture is highly suspicious of dogmatic statements of truth that are proclaimed in the form of points and principles, such as in the style of the classic three-point sermon; instead, he insists, the present culture is passionate about stories, and must engage with stories while navigating their own intellectual and spiritual journey to arrive at the truth themselves. With the billions of dollars in revenue generated by television, movies, and books, the point concerning stories is difficult to argue. And in post-modern culture, where truth is often considered relative and propositions are easily rejected, stories, metaphors, and imagery can become a non-threatening vehicle for people to engage with the gospel in a profound and receivable way. Logic-based rhetoric may be full of biblical truth, and may certainly reach some audiences, but if listeners are generally not able to receive this due to cultural prejudices that have influenced them to be highly skeptical of such statements, then the preacher has failed in the task of communication. Sweet feels that the only way to engage with a culture that speaks in stories is for preachers to become storytellers; by following the example of Christ and his many parables, we engage with our culture in a way that is accessible, and obviously, we follow the example of Christ’s teaching style

as we do so.

This work is well-researched; in addition to thorough scriptural reference and analysis, and in-depth study into the homiletical methods of Jesus, Sweet also calls upon a vast variety of sources relating to modern homiletics, church history, semiotics, and postmodern culture. Although others have written on the issue of preaching in the twenty-first century, Sweet is perhaps the most well-known “mainstream” author to discuss the matter, making this work an important one, as he has done ample research in order to create something substantive and authoritative on the topic.

It may not be possible to be considered an “expert” on postmodernism, as this world changes so rapidly, but if anyone can be called such a thing, then Sweet can safely be considered in that category. He rightly defines and explains the generational and cultural shifts that we are currently navigating, and correctly discerns the ecclesiological shifts that must accompany them, lest we find ourselves ministering in ways that have long since lost their effectiveness. His consistent contention that the Google culture tends to resist dogmatic truth statements is well-established in the field of postmodern studies, and the acceptance of this idea will no doubt have a major effect on preaching, as preachers must consider how to proclaim their understanding of truth in a way that is accessible to the listeners in the pews.

Sweet, a preacher himself, also understands the “art” of preaching with beautiful clarity, and any preacher will likely feel their heart stirred, even as their minds are challenged, as they consider the effect that the Word of God can and should have on their hearers. Sweet in no way diminishes the primary role that preaching should hold for a congregation (as postmodern preachers are occasionally wont to do); rather, he wrestles with how preaching must adapt to a new millennium, to engage a culture swamped with information-overload. He effectively demonstrates the beauty and the power of preaching, but also the reality of the world that we live in, and does so in a manner that is simultaneously challenging, convicting, convincing, and inspiring.

One issue with the book’s premise, which seems to affect many authors who engage the issue of the postmodern church, is

that there is an assumption that “postmodernity” affects everyone in equal measure, and that all people in a church are in agreement on such matters. We know experientially, however, that there are great generational divides in our churches, and that not everyone agrees with the Google culture’s view of the world or the church. Churches are full of Boomers who are well-grounded in modernity, and who would almost certainly be frustrated with a major shift in preaching that moved entirely away from their own values of clarity and propositional truth (to make the point, even this is a generality!). Sweet runs the risk of overgeneralizing what “culture” entails, as much of what he says regarding the Google culture may certainly be true of the under-40’s in any given church; however, this of course is not the entire makeup of the church. What is a multi-generational church to do in order to take Sweet’s message to heart, and understand the changes that must come, while still ministering effectively to older generations who feel differently? Unfortunately, the book has little to say on this difficult matter, instead implying that churches must simply embrace the semiotic model, or risk losing people. The message is that the Google culture needs to be reached in a new way, and this is certainly true—but this is not the only cultural factor at play within our churches. Thus, the entire issue must be wrestled with prayerfully and carefully by pastors and preachers everywhere, even as we move forward towards the type of preaching solutions that Sweet proposes.

As a research tool, this book is an important resource for anyone who preaches, of course, but also for anyone who seeks to understand postmodern culture and the postmodern church; it is full of essential resources and information for further study on ministry in the twenty-first century. Denominational leaders would also do well to investigate it, as it gives crucial insight into the nature of the generational challenges that we are facing in our churches. Although lacking in suggestions for how to bridge generational gaps on the issue of preaching, Sweet clearly and persuasively lays out the case for new ways that the Google culture can be reached with the sermon and how preaching might shift for a new generation.

A master of semiotic preaching himself, Sweet “practices

what he preaches” throughout the work, filling it liberally with stories, metaphors, and powerful images. In describing the role that preachers play for their listeners, he says, “Preaching is holding in one hand the visible world, holding in the other hand the invisible world, then clapping hands until the thunder rolls, the seas roar, the lightning strikes, the heavens cheer, and ‘glory crowns the mercy seat’” (207). This is the language to which Sweet calls preachers for preaching in the twenty-first century: metaphoric, image-based, and inspirational word pictures that not only involve the mind, but also stir the heart and engage the soul. *Giving Blood* compellingly demonstrates a new path forward for preachers, and should be given serious consideration that reason.

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