

[MJTM 10 (2008–2009) R1–R3]

#### BOOK REVIEW

Michael P. Knowles. *We Preach Not Ourselves: Paul on Proclamation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008. 256 pp. Pbk. US\$24.99.

In *We Preach Not Ourselves: Paul on Proclamation*, Michael Knowles distills a spirituality of preaching from the apostle Paul's imitation of Christ as portrayed in 2 Cor 1:1–6:13. The preacher's stance modeled by Paul is Christocentric and cruciform. The preacher is constantly humbled (humiliated in the best sense of the word) at the foot of the cross, dying to self (to self-importance and self-reliance), resting solely upon Christ and the resurrecting power of the Holy Spirit. This is not an easy read for preachers. It is a reminder of both the gravity of the task and the continual need for self-emptying that allows God to fill the preacher with new life and power. If a preacher is ever effective, it is because God breathes life into the sermon.

Knowles delights with his careful exposition and commentary on Scripture, illuminating both Paul's language and the social context of the epistle. An example of the careful exegesis that graces the majority of the book and is its main strength can be found in Knowles' twelve-page treatment of 2 Cor 3:18 (pp. 122–38). In the subject "we all" he finds confirmation that cruciform preaching effects both preacher and congregation. The phrase "unveiled faces" allows Knowles to examine the tradition of Moses veiling himself upon coming down from Mt. Sinai. This tradition is contrasted with the new reality that in Christ the glory that was veiled with Moses (to hide its fading impermanence) has now been permanently unveiled. Knowles explains this allusion for modern-day readers who might otherwise lose the significance of the reference. He then comments helpfully on the biblical understanding of the "glory of the Lord." Paul says

to the Corinthian church that “we behold this glory as in a mirror” and Knowles is able to expound the meaning and significance of the metaphor of glory reflected in a city well-known for its bronze products, which included mirrors. In the same manner, Knowles makes detailed commentary on the remaining phrases of v. 8: “transformed into the same image,” “from glory to glory,” and “as from the Lord, the Spirit.” In each case, Knowles finds significant theological meaning and homiletical import in Paul’s phrasing and choice of words.

With an eye towards preaching, Knowles examines Paul as a counterintuitive leader and model who, having experienced his own affliction, embraces suffering as invitation to and anticipation of God’s grace. The preacher suffers as a direct response to God’s initiative or call in his or her life. Knowles asks with Paul, “Who can preach?” Considering the cruciform model set out for the preacher one might equally ask, “Who would want to preach?” Only someone captured by Christ and overcome by the vocation will submit to the sacrifices that accompany the task, refusing to become a peddler of the word, refusing to preach a gospel that is comforting or aesthetically pleasing, preaching only Jesus Christ the crucified Lord.

The apostle is also the model for God using the unseemly to effect change in the world. Paul does not dispute his detractors in Corinth when they point out his flaws, rather he points all the more to the grace of a God who works through such an unimpressive vessel. Lifting up the cruciform Lord’s example of power in weakness, the apostle holds together through faith numerous tensions: affliction and consolation, triumph and captivity, confidence and conviction, spirit and flesh, sacred and secular, heaven and earth, time and eternity, seen and unseen, and now and not yet. These tensions are not resolved as those outside of Christ would expect, but are held together in Christ in a manner that leads to glory and hope. Faith in Christ preserves the preacher within these tensions and transforms the congregation towards Christ-like glory. The preacher knows by experience the consolation of which he or she speaks. This personal knowledge verifies what is possible and made available through Jesus Christ, who is the initiator, the content, and the sustainer of

the proclamation. As with the effectiveness of preaching, the community's movement to glory depends not upon its own actions but upon the actions of God. The wonder continues to be that Sunday by Sunday and week by week God continues to use preachers who make themselves available to God as vessels, making them God's ambassadors on earth.

Just as Paul responds to supposed super-apostles in Corinth, Knowles reacts to modern preachers and ministries that appear too glossy, successful, or prestigious. Knowles wants to lift up and encourage the regular mundane sacrifices of pastors of small congregations who will never get much notice or esteem. Preachers discouraged by the difficulties and sacrifices of their calling are reminded that these are normal, even to be expected, in the course of faithful response to their calling, and preachers are encouraged and strengthened by a spirituality that is rooted in Christ and contemplates the cross. Knowles would seem to suggest that congregations and denominations concerned about preaching should emphasize spiritual development, particularly Christ-centered cruciform discipleship, at least as much if not more than oratory, rhetoric, or communication skills.

Those sharing Knowles' biblical assumptions and worldview will find support in this book for the reliance upon God necessary for the task of preaching. Knowles offers an interesting heuristic approach in his examination of 2 Corinthians to discern the apostle's homiletical method behind the text. This is a worthy contribution to the larger task of lifting out biblical examples of preachers and homiletical method. *We Preach Not Ourselves*, well-grounded in Scripture, looks up from the text regularly to comment on the current state of preaching, the voice of a New Testament scholar offered to anyone interested and concerned about faithful and effective preaching.

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