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BOOK REVIEW

David Schnasa Jacobsen, ed. *Homiletical Theology: Preaching as Doing Theology*. The Promise of Homiletical Theology 1. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015. xiv + 186 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-1-62564-565-4. $23.00.

This is the first of a projected four volumes to publish papers from the Homiletical Theology Project of the Academy of Homiletics (the second volume, *Homiletical Theology in Action: The Unfinished Theological Task of Preaching*, also appeared in 2015).

In his "Introduction," editor David Schnasa Jacobsen (who also contributes the first two essays) explains that the volume (along with the larger project of which it is part) seeks to recapture the distinctively theological dimensions of the preaching moment, insofar as every sermon represents a theological conversation between preacher and hearers. Against the tendency to reduce sermon preparation to questions of method alone, homiletical theology explores the intersection between preaching and theology from five perspectives: regarding the basic content of the Christian message, in relation to Word and Sacrament as means of grace, and as concerns the theological content, function, and methodology of the sermon itself. For Jacobsen, homiletics is thus a constructive linguistic task that seeks "to name God into the world again" (19).

In "What is Homiletical Theology? An Invitation to Constructive Homiletical Theological Dialogue in North American Homiletics," Jacobsen then reviews recent discussion of the interface between homiletics and theology from three perspectives, distinguishing between preaching that articulates the theological claims of the gospel (a kerygmatic approach), preaching that instantiates or embodies theological claims (a

postliberal orientation), and preaching that constructively enacts the theological realities of which it speaks (by way of critical correlation or revisionist theology). He seeks to extend the third trajectory, proposing that preaching can serve as a vehicle for the mutual correlation of gospel and culture in light of each other. Hence, he suggests, "homiletical theology is not merely application, but a way of doing theology" (38).

In his next essay ("The Unfinished Task of Homiletical Theology: A Practical-Constructive Vision"), Jacobsen reviews the process by which, in the modern era, homiletics has been reduced to a largely technical or methodological concern. He concurs with Ronald Allen that preaching must take up the task of theological reflection already visible in the diverse forms of witness evident throughout the biblical canon, considering not only *how* but also *what* to speak concerning divine justice and saving purpose in situations not envisaged by past formulations. Notwithstanding his acknowledgement of the "givenness" of the Gospel, Jacobsen's insistence that even biblical texts and traditions are "unfinished" raises concerns about the extent of theological normativity or authority, and leaves open the problematic question of how sermon audiences participate in such a constructive theological enterprise.

In a more philosophically oriented contribution ("Preaching As Soft Heresy: Liturgy and the Communicative Dimension of Homiletical Theology"), John S. McClure seeks to situate homiletics in relation to liturgy, understood not simply as ecclesiastical ritual, but rather in the sense of establishing a context for the possibility of divine-human communication. McClure focuses in turn on (1) the liturgical leader as one who instantiates the human potential for communion with God; (2) intercession, as a kind of enacted empathy that participates in Christ's own mediation; (3) Scripture as "an inscription of the foundational events of faith in language" (61) that orients its hearers to Christ as the source of meaning; and finally, (4) the sermon, which represents the possibility of faithful speaking with respect to the things of God. For McClure, preaching (as human speech) joins its voice to God's self communication: "Preaching is an act of reference in which the congregation and God speak together a

new and immediate meaning that is a reference, not to God, but to a unique reality *spoken of (referred to) with God*" (64). The goal of the sermon, then, is not to delineate the character or identity *of God* so much as to refer participants to the existential meaning that becomes possible in light of God. It is in this sense that McClure proposes the notion of "soft heresies," by which he means successive (and competing) approximations of accurate reference with regard to God and God's reign. McClure thus answers the question of congregational participation, but in so doing makes the issue of normativity—or verification—even more acute.

Luke A. Powery ("In Our Own Native Tongue: Toward a Pentecostalization of Homiletical Theology") takes the opposite tack. Where the first three essays see homiletics as a truly *constructive* endeavour whose task is "to name God into the world again" (19), Powery cites the events of Pentecost as evidence that the very possibility of proclamation is itself a divine gift that in turn creates opportunity for effective communication and contextualized—culturally affirmative—understanding. Paradoxically, God's gift of the Spirit creates distinct communities of hearing while at the same time de-centering and de-absolutizing the cultural specificity of each. In this vein, Powery speaks of a homiletic characterized by "hospitable pneumatology" (80)—open, that is, both to human diversity and to the divine. Because preaching proceeds on the basis of divine gift, Powery calls for a homiletic marked in the first instance by prayer, but also by its affirmation of cultural embodiment, on the one hand, and pneumatological openness, on the other.

Defending what she terms an "understanding of homiletical theology as the exercise of an inductive, sapiential hermeneutic" (87), Alyce M. McKenzie ("The Company of Sages: Homiletical Theology as a Sapiential Hermeneutic") critiques the reduction of homiletics to little more than a "delivery system for the harvest of other disciplines" (88) in the theological curriculum. Drawing (like Jacobsen) on Farley's *Theologia* (1983), as well as her own studies of biblical Wisdom literature, she identifies the preacher as "sage," that is, "not a figure who dispenses knowledge so much as one who models its discovery and its

ongoing contextualization" (92). In this view, preaching seeks to discern the principles or beliefs that make for human flourishing and transformation within each local context. This kind of practical theology will require, says McKenzie, qualities such as humility, the ability to tolerate ambiguity, and attentiveness to others. One of the more interesting sub-texts of this essay—lingering just beneath the surface of the discussion—is its critique of conservative American Protestantism.

The essay by Michael Pasquarello III ("Dietrich Bonhoeffer: On Becoming a Homiletic Theologian") takes a distinctly historical turn, first reviewing Bonhoeffer's early questioning, while he was a student in Berlin, of the German church's social and intellectual captivity to German idealism, his encounter with Luther's insistence on the centrality of Christ and Scripture, and in particular Bonhoeffer's growing appreciation of the faithful church as an expression of divine activity in the world. The upshot of this lengthy recitation is to locate preaching (and homiletical theology) within the context of worship—not liturgy *per se*, but in the presence of its proper subject and object, which is God. Not unlike Powery, Pasquarello invites us to situate homiletics "within a 'pneumatological ecclesiology' that [seeks] to join the word of God to the world by extending the movement of the Spirit and the power of the gospel into the depths of human language and experience" (125).

The final two essays return to the question of methodology. In "Preaching as Spark for Discovery in Theology," Ronald J. Allen endeavors to identify the constitutive elements of homiletical theology (his "partial" list names 22 such components), the theological frameworks that shape theological analysis and integration (here with respect to homiletics), and the different ways in which the preacher's theological perspective can either develop further or remain fixed around prior commitments (citing Barth, Niebuhr, Whitehead, and liberation theologians by way of illustration). Unlike most other contributors to this volume, however, Allen resists the notion that homiletical theology is *sui generis*. His description of "homiletical theology as homiletical spiral" (136–37)—essentially the ongoing process of approximative theological

reflection and contextualization—is similar to what Teresa Stricklen Eisenlohr proposes in the final essay of the group, "The Way and the Way of Homiletic Theology." Like several other contributors, Stricklen Eisenlohr turns to Edward Farley for help in articulating the contours of focussed theological reflection that constitute homiletical theology. She draws in particular on Farley's cycle (from *Ecclesial Reflection* [1982]) of "Portraiture" ("examining linguistic portraits of ecclesial faith" [164]), discerning theological patterns, "Judgment" as to the consistent principles of God's way with humanity, and "Appropriation" of this divine reality as a theological model of the process by which one prepares to preach. True to Farley's intent, her ultimate contention is that this process invokes the divine reality of which it speaks:

> Defining homiletic theology as theological method gives preachers a way of *theologically* pursuing the elusive truth of this Presence that flashes forth with redemptive glimmers of revelation in human history, so that our meager words of testimony, offered to God for divine use, might, God willing, be helpful in carrying out divine purposes (173).

It will be clear from the foregoing summaries that "homiletic[al] theology" (and even the terminology used to describe it) is still in process of definition, with proposals addressing a range of concerns that include contextualization of the Gospel, the role of the preacher, the potentially constructive character of theological discourse, and the nature of divine action in the world. This exploration of diverse—indeed, divergent—perspectives is a necessary step on the road toward clearer definition. While there is growing (although by no means complete) agreement as to the distinct theological character of preaching itself, an important next step will be the search for consensus on overarching hermeneutical frameworks within which to continue the conversation. Perhaps this project is best understood as a species of practice-led research, endeavoring to redress the balance between overly-theoretical approaches to preaching, on the one hand, and preoccupation with mechanistic methodologies, on the other. If so, more attention could perhaps

be given to both ends of the process: both the actual artifacts that form the basis for theological reflection (as in Powery's appeal to African-American "spirituals") and the concrete implications of such research for the weekly practice of preaching (perhaps strongest in the essay by Stricklen Eisenlohr). How the discourse develops remains to be seen from the volumes yet to come; in the meantime, however, this collection is particularly helpful in identifying key issues and mapping the scope of future debate.

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