

Reviews



PREACHING DOCTRINE FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY, by Robert G. Hughes and Robert Kysar. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997. Pp. 136. \$15.00 (paper).

Preaching Doctrine is at its heart a how-to book for producing teaching sermons. The authors seek to address the problem of a church membership that is increasingly secularized and doctrinally illiterate. They suggest ways that sermons can be prepared so that listeners will be led to understand their experience in terms of Christian theological categories. The goal is “preaching for the laity’s theological formation” (36). Doctrinal preaching will accomplish this goal by illuminating for a new day the theological structures within which Christians have traditionally made sense of their experience. Such preaching will also teach people to become “lay theologians” (34) themselves by modeling the theological work of seeking to understand human experience in terms of doctrine.

In the opening chapters of the book, the authors delineate problems associated with the church in a postmodern and post-Constantinian age and offer a “homiletic theology” that addresses these problems chiefly by urging pastors to reflect on how and what their sermons are *teaching*. Hughes and Kysar come very close to an outright rejection of the distinction between teaching and preaching. At the very least, they believe such a distinction has been pressed too far. “Proclamation is for theology,” they claim, saying that they mean to reverse the title of a book by Ger-

hard Forde (20). Their book aims to help pastors become more engaging, effective teachers from the pulpit.

Much of *Preaching Doctrine* reads like an introductory homiletics text. There are chapters on exegesis, the use of imagery and illustration, and varieties of sermon design. The chief difference between this book and other homiletics texts, however, is that built into the process of sermon preparation outlined here is self-conscious reflection on appropriating the doctrinal heritage of the church for the work of framing contemporary experience.

Hughes and Kysar note that the book is the result of work they have done to produce a preaching elective for seminary seniors. Seminarians and inexperienced preachers will probably benefit more from the book than long-time preachers. Many of its suggestions (like coordinating hymns with sermon imagery, or paying attention to “the rhythm of the Christian year as reflected in the church calendar and lectionary” [121]) will sound like common sense to those who have been preaching for a while. Sometimes suggestions sound tedious, such as when preachers are advised to use the weekly bulletin to “forewarn worshipers of issues to be addressed in the sermon. Theological terms can be noted and defined” (121). One wonders, is every moment of the Sunday service to be a teaching moment? Surely the authors do not mean to imply that worship should cease to provide space and time for direct communication between God and God’s people, yet the book sometimes leaves the unfortunate impression that teaching about God is more to

be desired from a sermon than ushering hearers into God's presence or speaking God's own word to them.

Perhaps the strongest elements of the book are its delineation of rhetorical devices for theological reflection within a sermon (chapter 5) and its description of different sermon designs (chapter 6). These are clearly described and helpfully illustrated with excerpts from actual sermons.

Those who agree with Hughes and Kysar that the sermon is or should be primarily a teaching tool will find their work helpful. However, those who believe that theology (words about God) should be distinguished from proclamation (God's word spoken to hearers), and that proclamation is the primary work of the sermon are likely to be dismayed by *Preaching Doctrine*. The authors say, "It is our conviction that central to every sermon are moments of speaking the gospel directly" (76), yet their description of such a moment fills only two pages of their text. Preaching as direct address is noted only once in the book, and then only as one of several types of "moments of theological reflection." The authors do not address the concern that their goal—preaching doctrine—may result in hearers who, although they are edified by theologically correct words about God, are left to experience an actual encounter with God somewhere other than in the sermon.

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FORTRESS INTRODUCTION TO THE GOSPELS, by Mark Allan Powell. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998. Pp. vii + 184.

With remarkable clarity and conciseness, Mark Powell presents an introduction to critical study of the gospels that will serve as a useful text for introductory Bible courses as well as church study groups. Powell makes the complex world of biblical

scholarship accessible to the uninitiated in a highly readable and succinct text. An introductory chapter gives a brief description of the religious, political, and social dynamics of the world of the gospels, as well as the methods which scholars use to discern these dynamics. Also included in this chapter is a helpful discussion of the genre of the gospels, in which Powell concludes that although the gospels resemble ancient biographies in some respects, they ultimately transcend this category and are best described as "sermons in story form" (8-9).

Chapter One, "From Jesus to Us," delineates six stages in the transmission of the gospel tradition and discusses the particular type of scholarly research associated with each stage. Powell begins with a discussion of the historical Jesus, including a balanced overview of methods and perspectives in contemporary historical Jesus research. Discussions of oral tradition, written sources, and redaction of the gospels are accompanied by explanations of form, source, and redaction criticism, respectively. The complexities of manuscript preservation in the ancient world and the modern field of textual criticism are elucidated, followed by a discussion of the work of translation into contemporary language. The chapter concludes with a discussion of reception in the contemporary world that focuses on modern and postmodern interpretive approaches, such as narrative, reader-response, feminist and womanist criticism, and deconstruction.

Powell's skills as an interpreter are displayed in his discussions of each of the four gospels (chapters two through five). Each gospel is analyzed in terms of its distinctive characteristics, historical context, and major themes. The historical context section deals with traditional questions of authorship, place of origin, date, and purpose. Insights gleaned primarily from redaction criticism and narrative criticism inform the sections on distinctive characteristics and major themes. Powell draws these major themes together to show how each evangel-

ist creates a distinctive portrait of Jesus. In Mark, Jesus is depicted as the one who ushers in the reign of God, and whose messiahship cannot be understood apart from his death on the cross. Matthew's Gospel presents Jesus as the one through whom God is present for his people, and whose teaching concerning matters such as the law, forgiveness, and prayer are to govern the life of the church. Luke uses both Judaic models (Messiah, Mosaic prophet, Elijah) as well as Greco-Roman models (philosopher, immortal, benefactor) for understanding who Jesus is: the one who liberates all who are oppressed in any way. Finally, John's Gospel presents Jesus as the one who reveals what God is truly like and who brings eternal life as a present reality. Powell's depictions of each of the four gospels necessarily involve some oversimplification, and scholars of each gospel will no doubt disagree with specific points. Nevertheless, Powell's identification of distinctive characteristics and major themes would ideally function as a helpful point of entry for students of the gospels, who should be encouraged to use the critical skills demonstrated to engage in their own interpretive performances.

One point of contention deserves special mention, and this concerns the gospel writers' views of the church in relation to Israel. Powell does acknowledge significant debates among scholars concerning the location of New Testament communities with respect to Judaism (e.g., 72-73). Nevertheless, throughout his book he frequently refers to "Christians" and "Christianity" (terms found nowhere in the gospels), and portrays the gospel writers as understanding their communities to be entities over against Judaism. Such assumptions seem to outrun the New Testament evidence and to overlook the extent to which the gospels are concerned with the faithfulness of God to Israel, without which there can be no "good news." This reservation notwithstanding, there are many strengths to commend this book as an introductory text—its concise, lucid, and accessible style being among the

foremost. Its usefulness for teaching is enhanced by numerous charts, an appendix on the apocryphal gospels, and a glossary of key terms. Powell's text is likely to be widely appreciated by pastors, teachers, and students.

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THE PARABLES OF JESUS: RECOVERING THE ART OF LISTENING, by Richard Q. Ford. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997. Pp. viii + 183. \$18.00.

In recent years several books have been written on the parables of Jesus that do not confine themselves to exegetical and theological matters, but go their own way to explore interests of other kinds. Such books tend to be selective in their choice of parables in order to fit the scheme that the author has in mind. That is the case with this book. In spite of its title, and in spite of the fact that some three dozen units in the synoptic gospels can be safely classified under the category of parables of Jesus, this author confines himself to only seven. Over two dozen others are not a part of the project of listening to the parables of Jesus.

The author is a psychotherapist, and he draws upon his training and experience in that field in order to explore facets of the parables under study. He has selected seven parables that have at least one thing in common. Each of the seven presents two persons, or groups of persons, in conflict. One side is stronger and in control; the other is weaker and obliged to comply. Yet each partner wants something from the other (1-2). The seven parables dealt with are the Parables of the Dishonest Steward (Luke 16:1-8), the Talents or Pounds (Matt 25:14-30//Luke 19:12-27), the Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18:23-35), the Unjust Judge (Luke 18:1-8), the Wicked Tenants (Mark 12:1-12//Matt 21:33-46//Luke 20:9-19), the

Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), and the Workers in the Vineyard (Matt 20:1-16).

The author considers the contexts in which the parables are presented in the synoptic gospels as artificial and thinks that they, in effect, distort the parables. The evangelists identify the stronger party in a parable (fathers, masters, kings) with God, and so others have done so in the history of interpretation. According to Ford, that has been unfortunate, since it has short-circuited the possibilities that the parables present. The reader or hearer takes sides and idealizes the superior character. If one is truly to listen to these parables, one will pay attention to how both parties within a parable interact with each other, thereby seeing how each affects the response that the other gives in the unfolding drama. In each of the parables the two main characters are captive to conventions (father/son, master/slave, king/subject, etc.). They play out their roles; neither the superior nor the inferior person is able to recognize the unspoken need of the other. It is left to the reader to complete the story and seek resolution.

In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, for example, the father's complying with his younger son's demands and dividing his property between his sons could not be done without inflicting psychological damage upon both of the sons. What the sons need is the father's confidence in the ongoing significance of his own life's work coupled with a sure expectation of his sons' independent growth (95). The author goes on to list nine possible emotional responses of the younger son in regard to his father that the listener may imagine. Then he analyzes what he perceives to be the dynamics between the father and his son. Among the things that he thinks to be there are that the son does not really want the father's property; he wants the father to be a father for him, one who will make demands on him. The father, on the other hand, has his own needs. He wants the son to remain a dependent child, and the son's homecoming

means that the son is still the dependent one that the father needs. Neither one will change. It is up to the listener of the parable to imagine a resolution of the situation.

The author contends that by listening to the parables of Jesus with care, readers can catch on to the misperceptions that disable the parable characters and discover the same within themselves. In short, they can gain empathy and be changed (130-31).

It is important for the author that the seven parables can be considered authentic, actually spoken by the historical Jesus (1, 124). Jesus lured his listeners into participating in the completion of each story. His parables function as does a therapist (129).

The strength of the book is that it provides insights into dynamics between persons within the parables treated. Some will find that of interest. But there are major problems with the approach taken. First, the author indulges in an excessive amount of psychologizing of texts, as though one can and ought to get inside the head of characters in the fictions that the parables are. Preachers have done that through the ages, introducing all kinds of thoughts and dialogues in their retelling and expounding the parables. Usually those exercises have been taken with a grain of salt and with good humor. But in this book there is a seriousness undergirded with reference to psychotherapeutic work and literature.

A second problem is that the parables are emptied of their primary metaphorical functions and referents. It is simply the case that fathers, masters, and kings are stock in trade symbols for God in Jewish parables of antiquity (illustrated in current studies of rabbinic parables), and so they are in the parables of Jesus.

Finally, the excising of the parables of Jesus from their gospel contexts, which is often done in parable studies today and in this book in particular, allows the interpreter incredible freedom to make of them what one wants. The allegorists of the patristic and medieval eras worked with less freedom than one sees here, since, at least, they had a

theological perspective within which to work. It is obvious that the evangelists provided interpretations of the parables by means of placing them into certain contexts and editing them, but in principle one should not assume immediately that the evangelists have always caused problems. On some occasions they may aid interpretations, not impede them.

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WHY CHRISTIAN? FOR THOSE ON THE EDGE OF FAITH, by Douglas John Hall. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998. Pp. 182. \$15.00.

Douglas Hall has provided an introduction to his trilogy in this small, easily accessible volume. He has avoided theological jargon and is careful to relate theological concepts to real life experiences, frequently his own. He is convinced that what is meant by Christianity is being narrowly defined by a few conservatives and delivered by the media in such a way that other voices are overwhelmed. Therefore, Hall provides an alternative definition of Christianity that is both faithful to the reformation tradition and speaks clearly to the questions raised in the present North American context. The text is aimed at students and others who find themselves on the outside of the church looking in, who are put off by the conservative approach to the scriptures and to theology and so remain on the edge. He is aware that for many of us these outsiders are our own children.

The text is constructed as a dialogue between Hall and a composite student he has created who asks questions to which Hall responds. In each chapter, the student introduces a question or issue which Hall clarifies and to which he finally composes a written response. Questions that are raised include: "Why be Christian when there are so many other options?" "Why continue to

focus on Jesus?" "How do we know who God is and what God is like?" and "How does God relate to the world?" Hall consistently interprets the scriptures as an example of how to do it, and is clear that the fundamentalist approach is dangerous. He mentions some issues facing the church and the context, such as human sexuality, but his focus is on basic beliefs: God, Jesus, faith, and how they respond to the stated problem which is meaninglessness. Thus, he defines sin as "whatever stands in the way of our full entry into life in all of its admixture of joy and sorrow" (62) and he is clear that salvation is a universal healing which reconciles God, people, all creatures, and the whole creation. Hall speaks of being saved from meaninglessness for solidarity and caring by paying attention to the presence of God in the world that makes healing possible.

The primary limitation of the book is the composite student who seems very white, male, and middle class and who raises questions from this perspective. Perhaps a collection of students would have made the text more concrete and the issues more diverse. The assumption that the problem is the same for everyone is questionable and means that the response will be similarly limited. It is time for theologians to take race, class, and gender seriously instead of assuming that all people experience the world and God in the same way. I realize that this is a request for a different book based on different assumptions.

Nevertheless, *Why Christian?* is an *hors d'oeuvre* that whets our appetite for the main course, the trilogy. Thus Hall refers to further discussion of topics available in his other works. I found these references frustrating since I would have preferred more in-depth discussion, however, such a request is clearly beyond the scope and intent of the book.

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LAW AND GOSPEL: PHILIP MELANCHTHON'S DEBATE WITH JOHN AGRICOLA OF EISLEBEN OVER *POENITENTIA*, by Timothy J. Wengert. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997. Pp. 232.

Lutheran theology cannot be divorced from its origins. Today's carnival barkers and custom-designers cannot reduce it to gimmicks or convenient packages and summary statements. The difficult character and subtlety of its vocabulary demands a careful watch on how the reformers used "word" or "law," for instance. Failure to recognize the need for speaking carefully as a Lutheran can controvert its whole project and lose the hard-won evangelical insights. Thus Timothy Wengert's volume *Law and Gospel* is especially valuable. He writes the history of Philip Melanchthon and John Agricola's controversy over *poenitentia*. *Poenitentia* is usually translated as "repentance" or "penance," but Wengert retains it in the Latin and German in this text to respect the debated meaning, to present the conflict in its fullest, keeping the question open for the reader (15).

This is one of many moves which makes this book helpful. Examining this work and paying attention to how Agricola and Melanchthon approach the interpretation of scripture, the catechesis of Saxony, and the public instructions given to pastors, aids immensely any reflection on the role of *poenitentia* in one's own preaching, teaching, and sacramental administration. This book provides grounds for a Lutheran laboratory, a testing ground for radical notions and new experiments on the role of the law in not only the Christian life but also in the preaching and teaching of the preacher.

Previously, most scholars—and presumably most persons thinking about the reformation—have given more time to the differences "almost always between Wittenberg and Rome." Instead, Wengert examines the breaks and difficulties among the two friends, Agricola and Melanchthon,

concerning the Saxon Visitation Articles of 1527.

To begin with, "Luther's statements [on *poenitentia*] may well have appeared ambiguous not only to his opponents but also to his followers" (16). Wengert documents this difficulty without using Luther's theology in such a way that "his work becomes a kind of *regula fidei* by which the disputants in the controversy may be measured" (20). He focuses on Melanchthon and makes full use of Agricola's early exegetical and catechetical development to formulate and exposit Agricola's attack on Melanchthon's Visitation Articles. This proves especially interesting.

These early developments of Agricola concern his sermons on Colossians and his catechetical contributions. There he articulates his view of law and gospel, wishing to exclude rules from the gospel (86). "[The] gospel has two offices: to condemn whatever is exalted and stands against true worship of and faith in God, and to announce the remission of sin in Christ" (29). In Agricola's early exegesis and catechisms, the gospel takes the function of killing and making alive. He despises the law (28), since it makes persons hypocrites (31). Wengert later notes that stacking up the functions of condemning and forgiving sins on the gospel permits the law to "sneak in," that precepts given the Christian by Agricola function in the same manner as the law he wished to abolish from the pulpit (127).

In his catechisms, Agricola asserts that the person cannot know anything of God or of sin before faith; he begins with the "total impossibility of knowing matters of faith" (36, 72). Thus, in matters of *poenitentia*, "the person who is sorry for something is already free from sin" (74).

Contrast these views of law with Melanchthon's own: sorrow over sin is the beginning of the Christian life (78). Melanchthon's understanding of *poenitentia* is "a summary of the whole Christian life" (75). In his own scholia on Colossians,

Melanchthon finds precepts for the Christian life, where Agricola ignores them (89).

After the Saxon visitation, Melanchthon drew up the Visitation Articles. In a letter to a friend, he summarized them: “they contain nothing except some children’s catechesis, as I call it, of the Christian religion” (94). In this, he instructed pastors to first inculcate the fear of God, for there cannot be faith without such a fear and sorrow (96-7, 99). “The preaching of the law rouses [a person] to *poenitentia*” (97).

Agricola and some others addressed Luther, their contacts at court, and even were exchanging letters with Melanchthon to state his case concerning the law and the Visitation Articles. They accused the Articles of a return to Rome (109). Agricola’s final response was his most popular catechism yet. In 130 questions he hammered at Melanchthon’s understanding of *poenitentia*. Wengert summarizes the obvious: “the law has no positive function whatsoever” (127). Regardless of his severity, Agricola’s order remains: absolution and announcement and then faith first, and only after that, *poenitentia* (128-129).

The exchange in letters took place to bring thought of a serious conflict among the reformers. However, despite the diffi-

cult battle of letters, the debate to ensue at a meeting in Torgau at the end of November “came to nothing” (131). After Torgau, the rest of Agricola’s history lies with Luther and the Antinomian controversy (140). Here also we can place Luther’s catechisms in the historical conflict concerning the law. This sheds new light on how to understand the Catechism, with its concentration on the Ten Commandments and then on absolution.

Melanchthon’s later theology continued to maintain an important role for the law (178). Wengert shows in his last chapter how the debate over *poenitentia* with Agricola paved a way for the so-called third use of the law. It also considers Melanchthon’s concepts of forensic justification and how they demand a greater role for the law (185, 192, 200).

With such insights, Wengert’s valuable study provides some interesting perspectives on the Reformation, and should help any preacher open again the question of the role of the law in Christian preaching and catechesis.

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