

# Reviews



**NARRATIVE CRITICISM OF THE NEW TESTAMENT: AN INTRODUCTION**, by James L. Resseguie. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005. Pp. 288. \$22.99 (paper).

Over the past quarter century narrative criticism has attracted widespread attention and gained a place in the roll call of familiar methods for biblical exegesis. Talk of implied authors, plot design, characterization, and focalization has become increasingly common throughout biblical scholarship as narrative criticism has influenced and joined with other methods. Perhaps more significant, narrative critics, in their efforts to explain the ways that stories can convey or generate meaning, have provided justification for interpreting biblical narratives as coherent, integrated wholes. Fixing their sights on literary conventions, narrative design, and the responses of ancient and modern audiences, their exegesis demonstrates that certain biblical writings make sense to readers as unified stories, whatever the circumstances of those books' original composition and collection. If we think this is no significant development, we forget that such a way of engaging, for example, the entirety of Genesis or Mark's Gospel would have seemed bizarre to many source and form critics of not long ago.

Biblical interpreters have devised multiple ways of conducting narrative criticism. What these approaches generally have in common is indebtedness to two branches of literary theory, narratology and reader-response criticism. Narratology tended to focus on elemental pieces of storytelling (such as character and setting) and their relationships to each other, sometimes treating "narrative" like a

transcendent medium composed of essential parts and structures. Reader-response critics explore interactions between texts and readers. They consider how a narrative might impact its readers, perhaps by drawing upon their repertoire of knowledge or bringing them to a point of surprise or change through the persuasive effects of its manner of communicating a story.

James Resseguie of Winebrenner Theological Seminary has previously published books that apply a narrative-critical approach to Luke, John, and Revelation. With his newest volume he offers a competent and readable introduction to narrative criticism. He guides readers quickly through the method's theoretical basis and technical jargon and devotes most of his pages to showing what narrative-critical interpretation can discover when it considers actual biblical texts. His chapters address several dimensions of narrative and literary analysis, including rhetorical techniques (such as type scenes, figurative language, and irony), setting, character, point of view, and plot. Through numerous brief explorations of biblical passages, Resseguie illustrates the contributions that these different aspects can make to one's understanding of a story. Chapters conclude with detailed, more sustained treatments of a passage. Even if he does not always offer explicit comments about the close interrelationship among various facets of a particular narrative, his work with biblical texts points to the realities of these connections through its attempts to demonstrate that meaning emerges from attending to the nuances of a narrative.

When Resseguie employs his narrative-critical categories to analyze a passage, he proceeds under the premise that a text itself

guides readers to read it as its author intended. He is a dedicated evangelist for a form of “close reading” that notes patterns and even the slightest detail in a book’s narrative structure. Yet he conducts this textual analysis while giving short shrift to the experiences of real readers and their roles in making sense of a story. That is, he presumes that narratives, their use of symbolism, and their internal rhetoric determine how their audiences should understand them. Contributions of reader-response criticism—that a reader’s own knowledge and perspectives inevitably contribute to her means of understanding a narrative—take a back seat in Resseguie’s construal of narrative criticism. In the last fifteen years literary theorists have convincingly emphasized that no narrative can be dissociated or isolated from cultural forces present in its composition and ongoing interpretation. The thick cultural context from which a narrative emerges and the contexts in which it is read deeply influence how diverse readers might understand that narrative and the particular functions of its parts. Resseguie’s book would benefit, therefore, by considering how narrative criticism’s practitioners have explored issues of culture, showing that careful narrative analysis allows interpreters to probe a book’s location within complex cultural landscapes. It might also consider the possibility that readers’ contexts (including such pivotal factors as gender, race, and socioeconomic class) can lead them toward very different conclusions about the semantic and theological significance of a narrative’s structures, point of view, and constituent aspects.

Despite these concerns about methodological foundations, this volume succeeds in its basic purpose of introducing its audience to the categories and objectives that drive many narrative-critical approaches to biblical exegesis. It does this by limiting the scope of its discussions about theory and abstract concepts to a minimum and instead putting those concepts to work so as to demonstrate their ability to breathe life into interpretations of biblical texts. The book’s concluding chapter, “Applying Narrative Criticism,”

succeeds especially in this regard. It offers a sustained interpretation of the story of Nicodemus (John 3:1–21; 7:50–52; 19:39), in which Resseguie puts multiple scenes from John's Gospel into conversation. This allows him to show that the overall movement of the narrative affects the interpretation of discrete scenes, and vice versa.

Resseguie writes with nonspecialists in mind, making his book clear and engaging. It is especially appropriate for students in undergraduate or entry-level seminary courses. Other readers of this journal, too, will appreciate a benefit of the book's breadth: by explaining and illustrating the importance of the numerous details that make a biblical text meaningful, the book can cultivate habits of careful reading. This makes it valuable for all interpreters, including preachers and any other Bible readers looking for guidance toward a deeper understanding of biblical narratives and how to read them.

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**READING THE BIBLE WITH THE DAMNED**, by Bob Ekblad. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005. Pp. 208. \$17.95 (paper).

The first question that begs asking is, who are the "damned"? The author considers the damned to be "fellow human beings who perceive themselves as condemned to poverty or permanent exclusion, beyond repair, unable to change" (xiv). Bob Ekblad, executive director of Tierra Nueva, an ecumenical ministry among and on behalf of the oppressed, specifically considers reading the Bible with prison inmates, Mexican immigrants, and Honduran campesinos or subsistence farmers.

First, Ekblad shares what he considers to be three dangers of reading the Bible solely within the confines of a religious community. In such cases it is tempting to read one's own viewpoints and assumptions into the pages of Scripture, as well as many assumptions of the mainstream middle class; to read

the Bible primarily as moral exposition; and to understand the Bible's characters to be heroes who are to be emulated. Additionally, Ekblad contends, the dominant reading of Scripture equates civil law with God's law. Such a reading of the Bible leaves little room for those who find themselves living behind bars, underneath the radar of immigration officials, or at the mercy of powerful political and business leaders. Bringing this population into the reading circle elevates a different biblical theme, one which uplifts God's frequent favor of the lowly and disenfranchised, in short, the damned.

Ekblad devotes the majority of the book to reconstructions of Bible studies that he has led with the aforementioned populations. Surrounding these reconstructions, Ekblad offers commentary and leadership suggestions as he ably exegetes the biblical text, being faithful to what the text says, the larger context of the text, and the lives of the people with whom he reads. Ekblad spends a great amount of time in the Old Testament, finding richness in a narrative that connects with the narrative of the reader's life. His treatment includes the creation narratives, expulsion from the Garden, Cain's murder of Abel, Moses and the exodus, the prophet Isaiah, and the Psalms. In one of the longer chapters, Ekblad considers the patriarchal narratives. He describes how the immigrants with whom he studies find a kindred spirit with immigrants Abraham and Sarah. The contemporary immigrants understand what it is to journey to a new, unknown land that is filled with promise. They are surprised to read that God chooses to work through this sojourning, disappointedly barren couple to establish God's people. Ekblad suggests that Abraham and Sarah's journeys are as much a journey toward God as they are a journey toward a physical location. This is a journey on which all can embark.

Ekblad also describes reading the Jacob cycle with those in prison. These readers have experienced how one questionable decision leads to another and another, and are sympathetic to Jacob's plight. They also understand what it is to feel trapped and powerless, as Jacob was as the younger of two

sons. They are surprised to read that Jacob, who stole and deceived, holds an honored position within the history of Israel and begin to wonder if they too might have a place in God's reign.

In the New Testament, Ekblad offers one chapter on the gospels and one on Pauline literature. In the section on Pauline literature, Ekblad compares *coyotes*, who lead illegal immigrants secretly across the border between Mexico and the United States, with Jesus who brings people, at no charge, into the reign of God. In drawing comparisons between the biblical text and the lives of those with whom he studies, Ekblad asks questions such as: Could the same God who spoke light into dark chaos at the dawn of creation be speaking into the dark chaos of your life? Could the same God who worked through the Hebrew midwives, who were disobedient to Pharaoh, the ruling power, also work through you? Could Jesus, who set free the Gerasene demoniac, set you free from that which oppresses you?

A limit to the book, which Ekblad himself admits, is a lack of attention to biblical passages that encourage readers to be subject to civil authority or in which God works through those who are in power. Because these are themes often championed by those within religious circles and are often used to distance people from participation in the church, the author understandably chose not to highlight them in this book or in his work with those on the fringes of society. However, the alternate reading reached by ignoring these passages emerges as just as one-sided as the dominant reading he seeks to avoid.

Painting with broad strokes, Ekblad inserts some social commentary that describes the life situation of many with whom he studies, and critiques the American legal system. Whether the reader agrees with the critique or not, it is a window into the viewpoint of jail inmates and illegal immigrants. The book offers great insight to those who anticipate ministry with those at the margins of society. Not only does the author comment on many texts where God is on the side of those who are "damned," he also gives leadership suggestions and ques-

tions that may be used in such ministry. After reading the book, one has the beginnings of a curriculum for work within these settings.

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**AFTER THE SPIRIT: A CONSTRUCTIVE PNEUMATOLOGY FROM RESOURCES OUTSIDE THE MODERN WEST**, by Eugene F. Rogers Jr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005. Pp. 251. \$22.00 (paper).

Eugene Rogers's book intrigues and surprises at almost every turn, but an early remark in the acknowledgments remains for me the most tantalizing. Rogers mentions that his book, *After the Spirit*, is simply an extended footnote on a comment he made in a previous work, *Sexuality and the Christian Body*. There he claimed "that the congregation at a wedding found itself caught up in the office appropriated to the Spirit, that of celebrating and rejoicing in the love of two" (ix). Seldom has a statement in the acknowledgments of any book so invigorated my interest in reading the rest of the volume, or been as suggestive of the author's argument and interests!

The book follows a straightforward (yet profoundly entertaining) two-part structure. Part I exercises an interpretive strategy reading a mix of ancient and contemporary authors "*optimam partem*, in the best light" (3-4). He begins (and how could he not?) with Barth. In a few brief chapters he then surveys key figures in the trinitarian revival (Pavel Florensky, Sergei Bulgakov, Alexander Schmemmann, Rowan Williams, among others), concluding with John of Damascus, that "the Spirit rests on the Son" (61). But this quote, as exact as it is in expressing the substance of Rogers's major thesis, is not as suggestive as a quote that comes a few pages later, where Rogers himself writes of the Spirit's particular *tropos hyperxeos*: "When the Spirit rests, she is as static as water, as contained as oil, and as passive as fire. The Spirit rests like the wind" (71).

Part II is arranged according to biblical events in which concrete elements (water, oil, wine) are narratively embedded—Resurrection, Annunciation, Baptism (of Jesus), Transfiguration, Ascension, and Pentecost. Part II is therefore a productive foray into what we can certainly term “embodied pneumatology.”

When Rogers gets constructive, he sets the program early and clearly. Rogers’s first “dogmatic” thesis in his introduction is: “*Opera trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*. The works of the Trinity toward creation are indivisible” (11). Nevertheless, according to Rogers, although the works of the Trinity are indivisible, it is possible for us to know something of the intratrinitarian life inasmuch as the New Testament narratives make explicit this intratrinitarian life. This being the case, it appears that all embodied pneumatology will by its very nature need to be constructed in relation to the Son, since “the only interaction of the Spirit with plot and circumstance that could *distinguish* the Spirit from the Son, will be the Spirit’s interaction *with* the Son” (7). Making use of biblical narratives as the basis for a constructive pneumatology is therefore also a testing of the hypothesis that “identity description” works better than other, more abstract methods for portraying the Spirit’s distinctiveness.

At this point, I’ll make a confession. Having read Part I, I violated one of the primary unwritten rules of narrative—I skipped to the conclusion! And when I did, I was in for a surprise, because apparently Rogers knew me—or his readers—well enough to know that we would do this. So he begins his chapter “About-Face” with these words—“If you have turned to this section looking for conclusions to take away, and without having read Part II [*mea culpa!*], consider how odd that is. Would you turn to the ends of other narratives looking for conclusions—*David Copperfield* or *Pride and Prejudice*?” (208).

This is the first point at which I take friendly umbrage with Rogers, and not just because he has “outed” me. I disagree with his argument primarily because, although his book is an analysis of specific biblical

narratives that when read reveal the *tropos hyparxeos* of the Spirit, his book is not itself this narrative. Furthermore, it is simply the case that he has done himself the very thing he critiques—he has provided a statement. The outline of each of the chapters in Part II, though different in substance because they consider different iconic narratives in Scripture, does follow a similar pattern. The first move is consistently from narratives about Jesus to, by analogy, claims about trinitarian relations. The second move is, by reverse analogy, from trinitarian relations to human participation. A third move sometimes goes even further by analogy “to the way in which material things are caught up sacramentally as means to the deification of human beings” (56).

Maybe this is the time to once again make reference to Rogers’s comment on weddings and the Spirit. For a wedding to be a wedding, all there need be are the parties to it, those who are to be wed. They are the bodies that become “one flesh” in marriage. Those who attend or witness a wedding are superfluous, but only in the sense that they are caught up, like the Spirit, in celebrating the love of two. It is an essential office, one that “makes” the wedding, but it is an office of excess, of community, of superfluity.

This is just the direction Rogers takes us in his analysis of his various iconic narratives. For example, the Spirit’s function in the resurrection is not just resurrection from the dead, but the superfluity of the resurrection of the really dead, that is, the Gentiles. In a close reading of Paul, Rogers presents a compelling case for replacing errant supersessionism with excessive superfluity.

Spirit as excess is central to Rogers’s argument in his narrating of “Annunciation” as well. Here, he transitions from superfluity to paraphysicality, “para-” modifying physical not as in excess of or apart from nature, but in addition to it, like a friendly amendment. So God, who has no need of flesh, is conceived in the waters of the womb. This dilating and opening up of the flesh is a happy opening, *felix dilatio*. Furthermore, like his mother, Christ opens “an aperture to the Trinity, a way in” (123).

Rogers then goes on to point out that this opening up of the Spirit makes the wine of the eucharist paraphysical by means of the epiclesis in such a way that it becomes a Marian/Eucharistic version of the Athanasian dictum that God became human that human beings might become divine. The epiclesis in this sense becomes a mutual invocation.

As Rogers proceeds, we see that the paraphysicality of the Spirit and its celebrating of the love between two is very much intratrinitarian. It is the love between the Father and the Son that is celebrated in this wine, and this just so because the sacrificial meal is not a breaking apart of Father and Son (Son abandoned by Father or Father punishing Son) but rather, it is the Trinity breaking open and incorporating by means of divine hospitality those who incorporate the meal into themselves into God's own life. Or, as Rogers has it in another wonderfully suggestive summary, "At the Annunciation, God's love is turned into a human being. At the Eucharist, a human being is turned into God's love" (132).

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**ANXIOUS SOULS WILL ASK: THE CHRIST-CENTERED SPIRITUALITY OF DIETRICH BONHOEFFER**, by John W. Matthews. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005. Pp. 80. \$13.00 (paper).

As a parish pastor who is intrigued by the writings of the late German pastor/theologian/martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, I look for resources that not only help in my personal studies but also are accessible for study and discussion by laypeople. *Anxious Souls Will Ask: The Christ-Centered Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* is just such a resource. Long a scholar and instructor of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life and writings, John W. Matthews has taken some of the most complex and fundamental tenets of Bonhoeffer's theology and presented them in a readable, teachable 80-page book.

In the introductory segments—the pref-

ace, "God's People Embrace God's Future," and "Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Prophet of Truth and Transition"—Matthews describes his purposes in writing the book. He strives to simplify some of Bonhoeffer's most basic beliefs and teachings and to make them relevant to the person in the pew. Specifically, he aims to make Bonhoeffer's theological texts written from prison in the early spring and summer of 1944 more user-friendly to all, thus showing clearly his Christ-centered spirituality. Matthews writes in the preface, "While Bonhoeffer's sacrificial life—like his academic tomes—have caught the attention of select audiences, his reflections regarding the substance of Christian faith and the shape of Christian spirituality that were crystallized during his imprisonment are considerably less known. In the following pages I intend to make these reflections more accessible and, I hope, more influential in the church today" (xx).

Matthews also strives to draw attention to the similarities between the twenty-first-century Western church and the European church during the 1930s and 1940s. Those similarities include a *world* "in which there appears to be a high degree of secularity, with less interest for many people, not all, in the ways and wonders of God" (xxii) and, "In the face of diminishing church membership and the (perceived) threat of religious pluralism, churches often resort to *defensive tactics*, attempting to show a world that feels little need for things religious of its real need for Jesus Christ" (xxiii). Finally, Matthews says, "As a Lutheran parish pastor, I have spent more than twenty-five years striving to integrate some of the profound and provocative insights of Dietrich Bonhoeffer with the experiences of the people I shepherd" (xxiii). He lifts up a faith and spirituality occasioned by, and known through, Jesus Christ.

The book's title, *Anxious Souls Will Ask*, comes from one of Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*, written to Eberhard Bethge on July 16, 1944 (only four days before the conspiracy's failed assassination attempt on Adolf Hitler). In speaking about some new ways to practice and understand

the Christian faith, Bonhoeffer wrote, “Anxious souls will ask what room there is now left for God” (9). Matthews explains that the quote “reveals that Bonhoeffer was keenly aware that some of his reflections about God, the world, the church, and Christian faith might possibly upset people, causing them to wonder whether everything familiar and secure was up for grabs. My sense is that many people who begin to read these profound—yet challenging—reflections of Bonhoeffer become anxious, concluding prematurely that he had abandoned his Christian faith” (10). Bonhoeffer was accused of preaching the “death of God” when he asked the questions, “Who is Jesus Christ for us today? What do a church, a community, a sermon, a liturgy, a Christian life mean...? How do we speak of ‘God’?...What is the meaning of worship and prayer...?” (11). Yet examinations of his *Letters and Papers from Prison* show a man of deep faith offering encouragement and exhortation to his family and friends to hold onto faith in Christ even in the face of death and destruction. Matthews helps the readers see this point.

Perhaps the most contemporary feature of Bonhoeffer’s prison-developed theology is that of the differentiation between “Christian faith” and “religion.” In the same context, Matthews explores the concepts of the “reaching down” of God and the “reaching up” of the people. He also names the “pillars of the church” that Bonhoeffer determined were crumbling in his lifetime: community, otherness, God’s redeeming presence in all of life, theology of the cross, and maturity of believers and appropriate dependence on God. He hoped that in demolishing these outdated pillars of religion, “it was ultimately for the purpose of erecting new and relevant pillars for the Christian faith in the future...all built to lift up, support and witness to the eternal, biblical God, incarnate in Jesus Christ!” (32). From Bonhoeffer’s writings, Matthews identifies the new pillars needed: community in Christ—with Christ as the center; an understanding of God as intimately involved with creation—“beyond in the midst of life” (36); prayer and righteous action—“the

church is the church only when it exists for others” (73); sharing in the suffering of God in Christ; and authentic maturity of life with God in Christ—taking responsibility for what one does in Christ’s name.

In parish study, *Anxious Souls Will Ask* poses challenging questions that participants quickly translate to examination of the present state of Christian religion, as well as introspection into their own religiosity and spirituality. Especially helpful resources in the book are poems by Bonhoeffer (17; 23–24) and excerpted selections from *Letters and Papers from Prison* (68–73). A question that comes up again and again is: “What does Bonhoeffer say to present-day Christians and to the church today?” *Anxious Souls Will Ask* is a useful and effective vehicle for both inward and outward exploration of Christian spiritual issues, with the Christ-centered theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer simplified but by no means watered down.

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**AWAKENED TO A CALLING: REFLECTIONS ON THE VOCATION OF MINISTRY**, edited by Ann M. Svennungsen and Melissa Wiginton. Nashville: Abingdon, 2005. Pp. 84. \$10.00 (paper).

These reflections originally were sermons preached to groups of young adults who were thinking about whether they should become pastors. While some of the writers/preachers say a bit about Christian vocation more generally, in most cases this book is about the specific and unique calling to be an ordained minister. Yet the potential audience for the book is not only those considering such a ministry but also parents, teachers, pastors, mentors, counselors, and friends with whom potential pastors might be in contact.

There are eight “sermonic essays” in this volume, by seven noted preachers and teachers. I began reading those whose work I already knew and liked. Tom Long’s message is based on Eph 3:1–13, “Of this gospel

I was made a minister.” In response to the question of why someone has become a minister, Long points out that even after one answers there remains something irrational about it, because finally we did not choose it. It chose us. “Something happened outside of him [Paul]. Whatever was inside of him was summoned by something *outside* of him” (39). Or, again, “Paul didn’t get to God. God got to Paul” (41). Here we have the ministry of the gospel defined truly in terms of the gospel itself.

Walter Brueggemann draws from Isa 43:8–13 and Luke 21:9–19 to proclaim that ministry is bearing witness and testifying when truth is being contested—whether in the ancient past or in our time. In Isaiah God calls the Jewish exiles in Babylon to testify against the imperial version of reality (and its gods) by giving an alternate version of reality—a “sub-version” centered on the God who creates and saves, who brings justice and love. God says to surprised exiles, “*you are my witnesses*” (Isa 43:10).

Likewise in Luke’s gospel, the church had to contest the claims of the dominant Roman empire, offering a sub-version that claimed that Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection provided the only true version of reality. Such witness is risky, Brueggemann warns, and reminds us that the Greek word for *witness* is “martyr.” Yet it is precisely when believers are persecuted, arrested, and imprisoned, Jesus says, that “this will give you an opportunity to testify” (Luke 21:13).

Recognizing that such odd and unlikely claims are difficult for us to believe, let alone to convince others of them, and that there are many reasons for not going into this ministry of contesting the truth when we may only half believe it ourselves, Brueggemann holds up an astonishing point from Isa 43:10, “You are my witnesses *so that* you may know and believe me and understand that I am he” (70, emphasis added). We are to be witnesses so that we will talk ourselves into believing this sub-version of the truth and be free of the dominant (and false) versions of reality. Here we have professional ministry as a particularly vivid form of the witness to which all Christians are called.

Jeremiah Wright Jr. is the only one in the book with two sermons—and they are sermons! Wright’s dialogue with the biblical texts—word by word, verse by verse—and his narrative style make the sermons hard to summarize, nearly impossible to encapsulate. They go straight for the heart—and the ego. They reveal a God (and a preacher!) who knows us better than we know ourselves and cares about each of us more than we care about others or ourselves. Here the new life created in the one whom God calls to faith is virtually identified with being called to be a preacher, even if the former is by far the more important if the latter is to be answered in the affirmative.

Barbara Brown Taylor also explores the importance of one’s manner of life if one enters a church vocation. “In this vocation, the currency is not technical skill or billable hours. It is how much people see Christ when they look at you” (50). She continues,

Your parishioners are going to watch *everything* you do.... They will do this because you are their parson—their representative person—who stands on the tippy edge between God and God’s people, having promised to be true to them both. People will watch you to see what a life of faith really looks like. They will watch you because they want to see Jesus, or at least one of Jesus’ best friends. (52)

Lest this be misleading in suggesting that ministry is all about one’s own progress in becoming holy, she draws on the apostle Peter, beginning with the portrayal of him in Matt 16, in which Peter moves from being the foundation of Christ’s church, because he listened to God and thus came to know that Jesus was the Messiah, to becoming Satan-the-stumbling-block in a matter of a few verses. This pattern of Peter remembering and then forgetting, being restored and failing again—that is, the wonder of being simultaneously sinner and saint—is what people need to see in their pastor. “Like Peter, our chief virtue is that we know the sound of God” (55).

Yet the temptation to think one has to be perfect to be a pastor dies hard. Taylor recounts telling a “wise and moody priest” that



her greatest fear about being ordained was “the perfection thing” and the fear that people would see right through her. The priest said, “That’s not your job. If you decide to do this, then you’re not promising to be perfect. You’re just consenting to be visible—to let other people watch while you try to figure out what real life is all about” (55–56).

She concludes by announcing this good news: “You are not Jesus. That position has already been filled” (56). This is helpful not only for candidates for ministry but for all of us who are today’s disciples of Jesus the Christ.

By the time I had finished listening to these four preachers, I couldn’t stop reading. Somehow I had missed Fred Craddock and then there were two preachers whom I didn’t know yet, Brad Braxton and Ellen Echols Purdum. I even read the foreword and the introduction and by then I had missed my favorite TV show! We owe a debt of gratitude to the editors, Melissa Wiginton and Ann Svennungsen (Luther Seminary M.Div., 1981) for making this inspiring book available.

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**PREACHER, CAN YOU HEAR US LISTENING?** by Roger E. Van Harn. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005. Pp. 143. \$15.00 (paper).

Best known recently as the editor of the three-volume *Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday’s Text* (Eerdmans), Roger Van Harn is a former parish pastor, Ohio State University campus pastor in Columbus, Ohio, and lately retired as pastor of Grace Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Much of this volume already appeared in the author’s 1992 book, *Pew Rights: For People Who Listen to Sermons* (Eerdmans).

The thesis of this book is that a preacher must first listen before preaching—listen to the text, listen to the audience, and listen to the culture around us. The author makes a grid contrasting “preaching is central” to

“listening is central,” emphasizing how we must we listen before we preach: rather than the preacher being the focus of the action, the congregation is the focus of the action; rather than thinking that the congregation comes for the sermon, we need to see that the sermon comes for the congregation; rather than thinking that “the minister speaks the sermon and listens for response,” a minister rather “listens and speaks a response in the sermon”; rather than thinking that a sermon’s “value lies in what is said,” the truth is that “the test of value lies in what is heard” (11). Bad preaching happens when the preacher has not listened deeply either to the text, or to the people in the pew, or to the culture around them.

These insights are not new, but the author has some very helpful suggestions about effective listening as we prepare sermons. In listening to the text, Van Harn urges preachers to be “pioneer listeners” on behalf of the community of faith. Instead of rushing to one’s computer keyboard with one’s first ideas about the text, we should rather “cut through the crust of familiarity and taste the bread of life afresh before breaking it for others” (20).

Van Harn notes that the first sermon, i.e., word from God, in human history was addressed to people afraid and in hiding, namely God’s “Where are you?” to Adam and Eve. Likewise, preachers can assume that God’s word in the sermon is always intended for people in their weakness, suffering, chaos, or lack of meaning. People come to church with high expectations.

“Once upon a time” is the subtext of every sermon, because the grand story of God’s actions throughout history with Israel and then with Jesus as the crucified and risen Messiah is the background for all preaching. All preaching is done in the context of one’s culture, so the preacher’s task is always to probe “God’s Story” with sufficient insight to discern how that story is God’s yes, and no, to any culture. The accounts of Cornelius in Acts 10 and the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 are examples of how the power of the gospel upset cultural perspectives.

“Can a sermon be the word of God?” Van Harn asks. The staggering and audacious answer is yes. It not only can be, but it must be. The author quotes Karl Barth: “Who dares, who can, preach, knowing what preaching is?” If the preacher has listened intently to the text, to the audience, and to the culture, then we trust that the congregation will hear God’s word as they listen. When a college student unexpectedly went to church, his roommate asked, “Did you hear the word of God?” The young man answered, “If what I heard is true, then it will make a difference.”

Every chapter revolves around the theme of listening, except for chapter nine, which is a brief excursion into what is presumably an important concern of the author, namely a plea that we preach as part of the one church, not a fragmentation of multiple church bodies.

This book will not tell preachers what they don’t already know. But for those—I fear, many—preachers who have slipped into the habit of skimming some superficial thoughts from the text and adding a few cute stories to round out the message, the book will prod them into more serious study and listening. The discussion questions concluding each chapter make it a usable volume for parish groups wanting to

benefit more from sermons. The last chapter also suggests a plan for meeting regularly with parishioners to engage them in the preparation of and listening to sermons.

Arndt Halvorson, one of my predecessors as a homiletics instructor, once told a class after a student’s first seminary sermon, “We came here this afternoon to hear a sermon, and we haven’t heard one yet.” The student was crestfallen and probably at that moment considered changing schools. Then Professor Halvorson continued, “It was a fine Bible study, but not yet a sermon.” That student needed the advice of this book: first listen, then preach.

The problem with homiletics books is not that there are too many or too few. There are plenty of good ones. The problem is that the people who need them don’t read them. Good preachers read books and become better preachers. Poor preachers simply become poorer preachers with time. This book, and others like it, can start a poor preacher on the way to becoming a better preacher. Maybe parishioners should give their pastors books like these for Christmas rather than a box of Florida oranges.

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