

Adam, Peter. *Speaking God's Words*, Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1996. 173 pp. \$20.00.

Introduction

Peter Adam was born in Australia and was educated at Ridley as well as in England. He has served for many years as a pastor, a chaplain, and currently as Principal of Ridley College in Melbourne. He speaks regularly at conferences throughout the world on the topic of equipping preachers (www.ridley.edu.au).

Summary

The author writes, "My aim in this book is to provide a robust practical theology of preaching as part of the ministry of the Word in the local congregation." A *theology* of preaching is necessary because preaching in our day suffers from uncertainty in terms of a theological base. A *robust* theology is needed because there is a general mood in the church and world against preaching. Preaching is demanding and preachers are disheartened. Adam's concern is that his book be *practical*, especially for those in pastoral ministry (9).

The author expresses that he wishes to be practical in four ways: by showing that the Bible is practical, by illustrating effective models of ministry from church history, by sharing examples from his own ministry, and by way of practical advice (10). He writes with specific questions in view: What does Scripture say about the ministry of the Word? What are current questions with regard to preaching? What can I say that will have theological merit and practical

value to preachers?

He then expands on his aim. It is to consider eight matters: the role and priority of preaching, the need for the Bible to dictate the content and style of the sermon, what preaching will and will not achieve, the need for exegesis, application, and exhortation in preaching, the role of the sermon in "modeling and teaching responsible and theological use of the Bible and application to modern life," how we can learn from past preachers and preaching, "the need for the preacher to love and serve the congregation," and the role of preaching in bringing about conversions to Christ and growth in the faith (10).

The author builds on D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones as to the role and priority of preaching. Lloyd-Jones wrote, "to me the work of preaching is the highest and the greatest and the most glorious calling to which anyone can ever be called." It is also the "most urgent" need in the church as well as in the world today.¹

Adam summarizes the foundations of preaching thus: "God has spoken . . . it is written . . . preach the Word" (37). In the author's belief that the Bible must rule over the content and style of the sermon, he is in agreement with a long line of Bible expositors. One of those, David L. Larsen, is concerned with Adam about the trend away from the text of Scripture in preaching. He writes, "Evidence does exist of a paradigm shift underway in evangelical preaching from text-driven and text-dependent preaching to need-driven and market-driven preaching."² Peter Adam's insistence that "the Bible must rule over the content and style of the sermon" accords well with Larsen's "text-driven, and text-dependent" emphasis. It also harmonizes with John R.W. Stott's thoughts: "We need the integrity to discern . . . and to resist the temptation to give the text a twist or stress of our own."³

As mentioned above, Adam also aims to argue "the role of the sermon in modeling

and teaching responsible and theological use of the Bible and application to modern life" (10). This is a wonderful and unique point. In his preparation and preaching the pastor models careful, reverent, prayerful use of Scripture in interpreting and applying the message. Many write on interpretation and application, but few (none that I know) write that an aim of the sermon must be to *model* these things.

Adam also aims to guide his readers to learn from the preaching of past generations of faithful preachers. In this he works with David L. Larsen who wrote the above-mentioned *The Company of the Preachers—A History of Biblical Preaching from the Old Testament to the Modern Era*.

Critical Evaluation

Adam reminds us that we live in a world in which "people prefer a God who does not speak because he makes less clear demands, asks no questions, makes no promises, and threatens no punishments. One reason (some) people prefer the company of dumb animals to that of humans is that dumb animals make fewer demands, ask no questions and make no promises. Nowadays this rejection of the meaning and purpose of God goes even deeper. The postmodern move against meaning in words, and against words themselves, is part of an attempt to create not only a world without God but a universe without meaning" (23-24). In his book, *He is Not Silent*, Albert Mohler addresses Adam's postmodern concerns. The reader creates meaning as he reads, over against authorial intent. "Get rid of the author and let the text live as a liberating word. . . . Texts that are not pleasing to the postmodern mind are rejected as oppressive, patriarchal, heterosexist, homophobic, or deformed by some other political or ideological bias."⁴

The author argues against the Roman Catholic theologian Avery Dulles' view on

revelation. In Adam's words, Dulles "defines revelation as doctrine solely in terms of propositional revelation." Adam disagrees with this because, in Adam's view, "propositional" is just one of many forms of biblical revelation. He writes, "Although biblical revelation includes propositions, however, it also includes many other forms of revelation, such as stories, parables and descriptions of the temple. A biblical doctrine of God's words will certainly include the idea of propositional revelation, but needs to include other categories of revelation as well" (19). Adam believes that Dulles is leaving out stories, parables, etc., as part of the revelation of God, because Dulles only believes in propositional revelation. And propositional revelation, according to Adam, does not include such things as stories and parables.

D. B. Knox wrote an article entitled "Propositional Revelation—the Only Revelation." The title makes his view clear. Though Knox's quote below does not make the point quite as bluntly as the title of his article, yet one is able to discern in it that "propositional" is not, as Adam suggests, just one of many kinds of revelation within Scripture, but rather that it describes all of biblical revelation in its various forms. Knox states:

For some time now it has been fashionable to deny what is called 'propositional revelation.' The term has been coined by those who are opposed to the concept, and by it they appear to mean that revelation is not given to us by God in the form of truths couched in words, or propositions, but that all the revelation that God has given has come to us primarily as acts and events" (www.acl.asn.au).

Adam laments the "preoccupation . . . with the application of the Bible to the individual. 'What is the Bible saying to me?' The Bible is treated as if it were God's message to the individual. This preoccupation with personal and individual application probably begins when we do one-to-one evangelism . . . and it is facilitated by the availability of Bibles for individuals to own and read on their own. But the Bible's main address is to the community of faith, the church. If this is what the Bible is doing, then preaching that is true to the Bible will

follow its lead, and aim for corporate edification . . ." (70-71). My response is that if in the text of Scripture an individual is being addressed, then the sermon should reflect that, but make corporate application as well if that is fitting. The opposite is also true: if in the text of Scripture the whole church is being addressed, then the sermon should reflect that, but make individual application as well if that is fitting. "One-to-one evangelism" and "the availability of Bibles" are not to blame for "personal and individual application"—as though those were bad things.

Adams' tradition tends to emphasize the corporate aspect of the faith; my tradition tends to emphasize the individual aspect of the faith. We can learn from each other and thus come in from the cold, from the extremes of overemphasizing either the individual or the corporate, sometimes to the exclusion of the other. Phillips Brooks agrees with Adam's emphasis on the corporate body as opposed to the individual, while admitting that there can be "delusion" in this:

There is no doubt greater receptivity than there is in the individual. Many of the sources of antagonism are removed. The tendency to irritation is put to rest. The pride of argument is not there; or is modified by the fact that no other man can hear the argument, because it cannot speak a word, but must go on in a man's own silent soul. It is easier to give way when you sit undistinguished in an audience, and your next neighbor cannot see the moment when you yield. . . . And besides this, we have all felt how the silent multitude in the midst of which we sit or stand becomes ideal and heroic to us. We feel as if it were listening without prejudice, and responding unselfishly and nobly. So we are lifted up to our best by the buoyancy of the mass in which we have been merged. It may be a delusion. Each of these silent men may be thinking and feeling meanly, but probably each of them has felt the elevation of the mass about him of which we are one particle, and so is lifting and lifted just as we are.⁵

Conclusion

As the author purposed, *Speaking God's Words* is a robust, practical, theology (9). I appreciate the book for its clear statement of its aim from the very beginning. We who preach are trained to distill our sermons into one crystal-clear, meaningful, powerful, accurate sentence that is the essence of all we are about to say or have just said. But the writers of the books on preaching rarely follow this rule. They seldom do readers this favor. Adam has done that for us

and I found it helpful.

Peter Adam has brought *Speaking God's Words* into a world at war against words. With Dick Lucas, I am thankful for Adam's "modest claims and mastery of material" (7) and practical help for preachers.

¹D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), 9.

²David L. Larsen, *The Company of the Preachers: A History of Biblical Preaching from the Old Testament to the Modern Era* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1998), 16.

³John R.W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds—the Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 224.

⁴R. Albert Mohler, Jr., *He is Not Silent: Preaching in a Post-Modern World* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008), 119-120.

⁵Richard Lischer, *The Company of Preachers: Wisdom on Preaching, Augustine to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 392.