

Heisler, Greg. *Spirit-Led Preaching—The Holy Spirit's Role in Sermon Preparation and Delivery*. Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2007. 156 pp. \$17.99.

Introduction

At the time of the publishing of *Spirit-Led Preaching*, Greg Heisler was associate professor of preaching at Southeastern Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina. He previously served as a pastor for eight years.

Heisler's book has nine chapters, each of which deals with the some aspect of the role of the Holy Spirit in the preacher, in his preparation, in his proclamation, and in relation to the Scriptures. David L. Allen urges, "Only the Holy Spirit can deliver a sermon from ineffectiveness. This book pierces to the heart of the issue of what makes preaching truly powerful. Only faithful exposition of the Scripture coupled with a firm reliance upon the Holy Spirit will truly produce life transformation. The man-centered circus of so much that goes under the banner of being 'anointed' these days is effectively countered by Heisler who tells us why and how we can learn to prepare sermons saturated with the Holy Spirit and preach them dependent upon the Holy Spirit's power."

Summary

Heisler's purpose can be detected in his lengthy statement: "*Spirit-Led Preaching* . . . is a call to preachers, pastors, and teachers of homiletics to recover the Holy Spirit for expository preaching in the same way we have recovered the biblical text. My hope and prayer is that we will approach the role of the Spirit in preaching with as much zeal and as much fervor as we

have the biblical text. In our boldness to return preaching to the biblical text, I believe we have unintentionally marginalized the ministry of the Holy Spirit, making the Spirit secondary to the needs of the text. For many preachers the Holy Spirit is relegated to the background of preaching, working behind the scenes, assumed but not readily understood. My intention in this book is to move the Spirit to the foreground of our preaching where his role in preaching is more clearly understood and more deeply depended upon. My plan for doing this is to recover the doctrine of pneumatology for our theology of preaching, resulting in a renewed emphasis on the powerful combination of Word and Spirit working together as the catalyst of all transformational preaching" (xvi). Heisler continues, "The recovery of the Holy Spirit's role in expository preaching will enrich and empower our preaching and our churches. Not only will students and practitioners of preaching understand the mechanics of the text, but they will also be conversant and experienced in the dynamics of the Spirit. . . . Our strong emphasis on preaching the Word of God will be matched with an equal dependence upon the Spirit of God. . . . The result will be powerful preaching that changes lives for all eternity—nothing less than 'a demonstration of the Spirit's power' (1 Cor 2:4)" (xvi).

More concisely with regard to Heisler's purpose he writes, "My conviction is that we have failed to connect the discipline of homiletics with the doctrine of pneumatology, and as a result we find ourselves 'surprised by the Spirit' when he does move. *Spirit-Led Preaching* seeks to establish a positive theology of the Spirit's role in preaching by building upon the theological fusion of Word and Spirit" (3). Similarly, toward the end of the book the author reflects, "The goal of Spirit-led preaching is to create an environment or an atmosphere in which the Spirit's empowerment is anticipated, welcomed, received, and demonstrated through the proclamation of God's Word" (145).

The author's emphasis on preaching God's Word matched by dependence on the Holy Spirit is emphasized also by John Williams in his book *The Holy Spirit—Lord and Life-Giver*. Williams writes, "While academic training may help a man to sharpen his mind and discover useful study methods, only the Spirit of God can give him ability and wisdom to grasp and share the Living Word of God (1 Corinthians 2:12-15).¹ Clark Pinnock says regarding the Holy Spirit's ministry of interpretation, "We have the written testimony (1 John 5:13) and the inner witness (verse 7), and they are not to be divorced. To appeal to the Spirit apart from Scripture is sub-Christian fanaticism; to appeal to Scripture apart from a humble dependence on the Spirit is presumption. The Spirit gives us a mind to see and hear His Word (Deuteronomy 29:4)."²

Spirit-Led Preaching addresses these topics: preaching with the power of God's Spirit; preaching without that power; a model for Spirit-driven preaching; the preaching ministries of the Apostle Paul, the prophets, and Jesus; illumination; the theological connection of Word and Spirit; the preacher's sanctification, preparation, and presentation; and the anointing of the Holy Spirit.

Critical Evaluation

In his recommendation of Heisler's book, Steve Gaines says, "All is vain unless the Spirit of the Holy One comes down!" Indeed, effective preaching requires the Holy Spirit. He is the One who . . . inspired the Scriptures . . . saves, calls, and equips the preacher, and . . . convicts, convinces, and converts the listener." The descriptions of the ministry of the Holy Spirit given by Gaines leads me to see a God who is in sovereign control, who is in charge, who acts and is not acted upon, who is the Helper (John 14:26). In a few places the Spirit described by Heisler seems to need help. (We need to "recover the Holy Spirit for expository preaching

. . . ." Or, "We have unintentionally marginalized the ministry of the Holy Spirit, making the Spirit secondary to the needs of the text." Or again, "The Holy Spirit is relegated (My intention in this book is to move the Spirit to the foreground.") It is true that Heisler most often speaks of the power of the Holy Spirit. And no doubt Heisler agrees with Gaines, but *in some places* Heisler's wording leaves the Spirit passively, helplessly acted upon, instead of acting powerfully. It reminds me of the "making Jesus Lord" wording of recent years. There is a better way to say that, and perhaps the same is true in the present case. If we receive the ministries that the Holy Spirit brings to us (His ministries of convicting, regenerating, baptizing, indwelling, filling, anointing, teaching, reminding, sealing, testifying), then we will not have to "move the Spirit to the foreground" for our preaching. We will be the ones being moved: "men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21).

Regarding the work of others in the field, Heisler states, "In a survey of the literature, the Spirit's empowerment seems to be directly associated with the following factors: prayer, fullness, faith, humility, and weakness" (145). Again assessing the literature with regard to the Holy Spirit and preaching, the author opines, "The fruit of evangelical publishing and scholarship over the last two decades demonstrates that as evangelicals we are far more able to tell what the Spirit *does not do* in preaching as opposed to what the Spirit *must do* (author's emphases) if powerful proclamation is to take place" (3). It would have been helpful if the author had provided examples to prove his opinion. In the absence of such proof we can move on, noting some of that evangelical publishing to see what may be of value with regard to Spirit-led preaching. Albert Mohler is very helpful.

The preacher stand before the congregation as the external minister of the Word, but it is the Holy Spirit who works as the internal minister of that same Word. A biblical theology

of preaching must take the role of the Spirit into full view, for without an understanding of the work of the Spirit, the task of preaching is robbed of its balance and power.

The Spirit performs His work of inspiration, indwelling, regeneration, and sanctification as the inner minister of the Word; it is the Spirit's ministry of illumination that allows the Word of the Lord to break forth. The Reformation saw a new acknowledgment of this truth, the union of Word and Spirit. And this Trinitarian doctrine produced preaching that was both bold and humble—bold in its content, but spoken by humble humans who knew their utter dependence upon God.

Both the preacher and the hearers are dependent upon the work of the Holy Spirit for any adequate understanding of the text. . . . The absence of a conscious dependence upon the Holy Spirit is a sign that the preacher does not understand his task and calling.³

In his book *Between Two Worlds* John R. W. Stott complements Heisler's emphasis on the necessity of Word and Spirit in preaching. Stott reminds preachers of their need for humble dependence of God. We must not rely on ourselves, our extroverted nature, nor our intellect. We should not imagine that God-given talents are sufficient without God-given blessing. Further, Stott urges preachers to remember the pitiful condition of people without Christ and the ominous evil power at work against God's kingdom. Humanity without Jesus is blind, deaf, lame, dumb, even dead in sin. And, Stott goes on, if we think this is a myth or a fallacy, then we will see no need for God's help. We will think that our own resources are quite adequate. But if people really are blind and dead in sin, then it is foolish to think that our mere human preaching without Christ and the Spirit can rescue people in such a desperate state of affairs. Stott then quotes Spurgeon: "I shall not attempt to teach a tiger the virtues of vegetarianism; but I shall as hopefully attempt that task as I would try to convince an unregenerate man of the truth revealed by God concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment to come." Only Jesus Christ by His Holy Spirit can open blind eyes and deaf ears. Thus the preacher must be "clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49), so that with the Apostles we may "preach the gospel . . . by the Holy Spirit sent down from heaven" (1 Peter 1:12), and the gospel will come through our preaching "not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (1 Thess 1:5). Why then, Stott

wonders, does the power of God's Holy Spirit seem so seldom to accompany our preaching? He suspects that the main reason is our pride.⁴

John Calvin also had much to say about Spirit-led preaching. In *The Company of the Preachers—Wisdom on Preaching, Augustine to the Present*, the editor, Richard Lischer introduces Calvin's chapter, "The Internal Testimony of the Holy Spirit." Lischer says, "The doctrine of inspiration affirms the Spirit's role in the production of the Scriptures, and preachers have long relied on the Spirit for both the 'inspiration' and the delivery of their sermons. . . . The process is circular: the word teaches us about the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit authenticates the word beyond all rational dispute. The Spirit causes some who hear to believe; others who hear the same word refuse to believe, but by their own will. Why this should be so, says Calvin, alluding to Augustine, is a 'depth of the cross.' For Calvin the tasks of biblical interpretation and preaching are closely linked. His description of the Spirit's testimony in both serves to set the whole cycle of sermon preparation, delivery, and reception into the context of the ongoing activity of God the Holy Spirit."⁵

The material that Calvin shares in "The Internal Testimony of the Holy Spirit" is from his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Books I and II. There is not space in this review to do more than to spell out Calvin's headings with regard to Spirit-led preaching. Some of those headings are: "The Witness of the Holy Spirit: This is Stronger than All Proof; The Word Becomes Efficacious for Our Faith Through the Holy Spirit; Only the Holy Spirit Leads Us to Christ; Without the Spirit Man is Incapable of Faith."⁶

Martyn Lloyd-Jones' book *Preaching and Preachers* greatly helps our understanding of the Holy Spirit and preaching. Chapter sixteen is "Demonstration of the Spirit and of the Power."

Some men fall into the error of relying on the unction only, and neglect to do all they can by way of preparation. The right way to look upon the unction of the Spirit is to think of it as that which comes upon the preparation. . . . Elijah built an altar (1 Kings 18), then cut wood and put it on the altar, and that then he killed a bullock and cut it in pieces and put the pieces on the wood. Then, having done all that, he prayed for the fire to descend; and the fire fell. That is the order."

And, when the Tabernacle was being built in Exodus 40, Moses first carefully performed every detail of what God commanded him, and only after that did the glory of God come upon the Tabernacle.⁷ Lloyd-Jones goes on to exhort the preachers.

Do you always look for and seek this unction, this anointing before preaching? Has this been your greatest concern. . . ? It is the Holy Spirit falling upon the preacher in a special manner. It is an access of power. It is God giving power, and enabling, through the Spirit, to the preacher in order that he may do this work in a manner that lifts it up beyond the efforts and endeavours of man to a position in which the preacher is being used by the Spirit and becomes the channel through whom the Spirit works.⁸

To conclude this section, Stott exhorts and reminds preachers of the life of Cotton Mather.

Cotton Mather was a very able and scholarly man. . . . All those Mathers were able men; and he had the still abler Cotton influence in his blood as well. He was a grandson of both John Cotton, perhaps the most scholarly of the first American preachers, and also Richard Mather. No man could have a better pedigree, a better ancestry from the standpoint of intellect and ability; yet nothing is more striking about this man than his realization that he could really do nothing without this unction and power of the Holy Spirit, and his sense of utter dependence upon it.⁹

Conclusion

Did this book fulfill its purpose? It was published in 2007. It has had some time to make its impact. Were there any research instruments used to gauge the need before the book was written and to survey its impact after it was written? As always, I heavily highlighted and annotated the book, and appreciated it. My plan is to review it carefully in the near future, and hopefully to use it to train others to preach.

¹John Williams, *The Holy Spirit—Lord and Life-Giver* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1980), 109.

²Ibid. 73, 74.

³R. Albert Mohler, Jr., *He is Not Silent—Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008), 45.

⁴John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 328-330.

⁵Richard Lischer, ed., *The Company of the Preachers—Wisdom on Preaching, Augustine to the Present* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 362.

⁶Ibid. 363-367.

⁷John R.W. Stott, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1972), 304.

⁸Ibid. 305.

⁹Ibid. 318.