

Mohler, Jr., R. Albert. *He is Not Silent: Preaching in a Post-Modern World*. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008. 174 pp. \$19.99.

### **Introduction**

*He is Not Silent* is a book that addresses the decline of expository preaching with an urgent call for its renewal. In the "Preface: The State of Preaching Today," Mohler lists six factors that have resulted in the weakened state of preaching: loss of confidence in the power of the word, infatuation with technology, embarrassment before the biblical text, emptying of biblical content, focus on felt needs, and an absence of the gospel message in preaching (16-21). The author analyzes the problems, then goes on to propose biblical solutions.

### **Summary**

The author's purpose is to analyze the problematic state of preaching (Preface), to point out biblical solutions (chapters 1 - 7), to understand our current culture (chapter 8), and to remind and urge preachers that preaching is the vehicle God uses to enliven dry bones (chapter 9, 10, and Epilogue). The thesis: Preaching is declining. The solution is to interpret the biblical text and to let the text dictate the form and content of the sermon, then to interpret the audience in its unique setting and give them the message of the text in the context of the overall story of the Bible.

There are several points to be made relative to Mohler's work as compared to that of others in the field of preaching. With regard to Mohler's concern that preaching is weakened by

the emphasis on "moralistic fables" (95), he supports and builds on Martin Luther: "Luther contrasts preaching that offers Christ as a gift with moralism, or the preaching of Christ-as-example."<sup>1</sup> Mohler also builds on the work of C. H. Dodd, specifically his theology of *kerygmatic*, "primitive preaching."<sup>2</sup> Mohler's terminology is not "primitive preaching" but rather "first-order doctrines . . . essentials" (109). The author contradicts the views of Harry Emerson Fosdick in terms of the starting point of the sermon. Fosdick wrote, "This is the place to start, with the real problems of people."<sup>3</sup> To the contrary, Mohler says that a faithful sermon is "one that takes its message and its structure from the biblical text" (50). Whereas Fosdick emphasized the counseling model of preaching,<sup>4</sup> Mohler responds, "the therapeutic concerns of the culture too often set the agenda for evangelical preaching. Issues of self predominate, and the congregation expects to hear simple answers to complex problems" (51).

One of the biblical solutions to the weak state of preaching which the author argues is to see preaching as worship (chapter 1). Mohler states, "Thus we should be reminded that the purpose of . . . the preacher is to serve the church so that the people of God worship Him more faithfully. By understanding God's revelation . . . we know how He would wish to be worshiped" (24). Mohler states, ". . . if you want to know what a people really believe about God . . . watch them worship. . . . Would an observer have any idea of the God of the Bible from our worship (31)? The central part of worship is the preaching of God's Word. It is primarily from preaching that we gain a true vision of the holy, living God of Isaiah chapter six (35).

Preaching is also weakened when, as alluded to above, preachers focus on humanity and its needs instead of focusing on God and His Word. People do not usually even *know* what they *really* need. What is the solution that Mohler suggests? We must start with the God who created us and listen to His word as He defines both our needs and the best way for those needs

to be met. The Father speaks, the Son saves, and the Holy Spirit illuminates (40). This must be our focus. The people must yield; their needs must not be primary in determining what the preacher says. The preacher must also yield: will *he* determine what is said or will he let God and the text have its rightful place in determining what is said (42)?

Another of the biblical solutions to the problematic state of preaching which Mohler argues is the telling of the grand metanarrative of the Bible (chapter 6). We must not just preach "little" Bible stories (89). There is a big, sweeping story of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. God's people are in the story, God has a plan for them, and God's preachers must show their people how to enter that big story (95-101). Hugh Litchfield references Edmond Steimle with regard to the "story" as well. Steimle taught that the sermon must weave together three different stories: "God's story is presented through the preacher's story with the hope that it will become part of (the listener's) story."<sup>5</sup>

Further, the problem exists in our post-modern culture that truth, authority, metanarrative, and text are scorned (116-120). Into this mindset we must, with the same kind of provoked spirit that the Apostle Paul had (Acts 17), bring the true God to the error and confusion of our day (124-130).

### **Critical Evaluation**

Though it is true, I believe, that the best staple diet for a congregation is expository preaching, I cannot agree with the author when he states, "I believe that the only form of authentic Christian preaching is expository preaching" (49). He further states, "Many evangelicals are *seduced* (emphasis mine) by the proponents of topical and narrative preaching" (50). Are topical and narrative preachers really seducers? Some may be. But certain expositors

might also be seducers. Let us remember that the author himself has subtitled chapter six, "Preaching the Bible's Big Story" (89). He speaks of "Scripture's grand narrative" and that Jesus "imposes a metanarrative" (92).

Bryan Chapell writes that the most noteworthy advocate of storytelling is Jesus. A narrative is simply a parable. He goes on to say, "Such preaching has Christ's imprimatur and rich historical precedent. . . ." In quoting his own book, *Life Situation Illustrations*, Chapell says, "Three-quarters of Scripture is historical narrative, image or parable. Preachers who are committed to preaching the truth of the Scripture should not fear communicating in its forms."<sup>6</sup> From reading their sermons in the Old and New Testaments we see that not every prophet and apostle was an expositor. Some would argue that they seldom were. When Nathan confronted King David he was narrative in his approach and his message was powerfully used by God (Second Samuel 12).

The author defines an expository sermon as "one that takes its message and its structure from the biblical text" (50). From my perspective, certainly at least the message must come from the scriptures, and in most cases, the structure as well. But is not H. Grady Davis correct when he writes in *Design for Preaching*, "A sermon is not necessarily unbiblical because it has no text, nor biblical because it uses one"?<sup>7</sup>

The sinful behavior of preachers is a big issue with regard to the decline in preaching. Hypocrisy and other forms of sin were not presented by the author as part of the reason for the decline in preaching. Jesus said, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so practice and observe whatever they tell you—but not what they do. For they preach, but do not practice" (Matthew 23:2-3, ESV). Also, the role of prayer as it relates to preaching was not addressed.

There is a vital link between preaching power and prayer: "And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness" (Acts 4:31, ESV).

This book will be most accepted, I believe, in American evangelical churches. With its dismissal of narrative preaching it may be less appreciated in American subcultures or in developing nations where a given culture may emphasize "story" and other oral tradition. Also, in the fifty-plus nations of the world in which persecution and suffering has been "granted" (Philippians 1:29) for followers of Jesus, it is most often true that there is not the decline in preaching that the author observes in America. There is revival in many of those countries, with tens of thousands of people each month coming to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. The preaching there is prayerful, powerful, brave, and bold.

### **Conclusion**

*He is Not Silent* is a valuable book, and one that I have both quoted and recommended. The six factors that have resulted in the weakened state of preaching (16-21) were very helpful. The definition of postmodern culture and how to respond to it (chapter 8) was excellent as well. I have already applied many of the principles in my preaching. The idea that people must leave the sermon asking the right questions is a principle that I have implanted into my own sermons. I have done the same with the author's teaching on the grand, sweeping story of the Bible, the metanarrative, and our place in that story. As a pastor, I am seldom in the pew. Good, Bible-based, Christ-centered books are sermons to me. And the authors are my pastors. This book falls into that category.

-----

<sup>1</sup>Richard Lischer, *The Company of Preachers: Wisdom on Preaching, Augustine to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 115.

<sup>2</sup>*ibid.*, 25.

<sup>3</sup>*ibid.*, 398.

<sup>4</sup>*ibid.*, 400.

<sup>5</sup>Michael Duduit, ed. *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 170.

<sup>6</sup>*ibid.*, 125.

<sup>7</sup>H. Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958), 33.