

Ryken, Leland and Wilson, Todd. *Preach the Word: Essays on Expository Preaching: In Honor of R. Kent Hughes*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2007. 287 pp. \$19.99.

## **Introduction**

*Preach the Word* is a book about expository preaching from the hearts of sixteen men, some of whom are scholars, some pastors, all of them preachers of God's Word. Among the contributors are the two editors, Leland Ryken of Wheaton College and Todd Wilson, formerly of College Church, Wheaton, Illinois, and currently at Calvary Memorial Church in Oak Park, Illinois. The contributors have at least two important things in common: a commitment to expository preaching, and a love and admiration for R. Kent Hughes, in whose honor the book is written. For over forty years Hughes preached faithfully from the pulpit of College Church.

The book under review in this paper covers many aspects of expository preaching: hermeneutics, methodology of sermon preparation, biblical and extra-biblical examples of preachers of the past, current challenges in preaching, training preachers, and disciplining oneself for maximal effectiveness in the preaching task.

## **Summary**

Todd Wilson states, "Our primary goal has been to produce a volume of good essays on the subject of expository preaching" (1). The authors purpose to help in "raising the standard of expository preaching in North America and beyond" (1). This purpose is accomplished in the

book as pastors are encouraged to increase their interpretive skills (Part One), increase their learning from biblical and historical examples (Part Two), increase their skill in navigating "contemporary challenges," (Part Three) and increase their strategic training of others for the preaching ministry (Part Four).

I suppose that many, if not most, books on expository preaching could say that their purpose is to raise the standard of expository preaching. Albert Mohler wrote *He is Not Silent* to help remedy what he calls "one of the most troubling developments . . . the decline and eclipse of expository preaching."<sup>1</sup> Mohler then enumerates six reasons why "contemporary preaching suffers".<sup>2</sup> Haddon Robinson agrees about the need to raise the standard of expository preaching. In his book *Biblical Preaching* he begins with these words: "This is a book about expository preaching, but it may have been written for a depressed market. Not everyone agrees that expository preaching—or any sort of preaching, for that matter—is an urgent need of the church. The word is out in some circles that preaching should be abandoned" and that other means of ministry have a greater impact in our day.<sup>3</sup>

In Part One the standard of expository preaching is raised as preachers increase their skills relating to the interpretation of God's Word. David Jackman writes in chapter one that we must not approach every text in the same way: "All too often, evangelical preaching has put every text through the same mincing machine . . . so that its content is dissected" with propositions and applications "in an identical way, irrespective of whether the original was poetry or prose, proverb or parable" (18). In chapter two Ryken reminds us to approach the Bible as literature: "a literary approach to the Bible is one that does justice to the literary aspects of the Bible" such as genre, rhetorical features, etc. (44). Paralleling Jackman, Ryken continues,

do not "reduce every passage to a set of theological propositions . . . making every exposition seem as though the Bible consists of only one type of writing" (45).

In chapter four Wayne Grudem brings us closer to our goal of raising the standard of expository preaching by giving ten "General Principles of Right Interpretation." The first is: "Spend your earliest and best time reading the text of the Bible itself" (55). In his tenth principle Grudem says more in three substantial paragraphs about prayer in sermon preparation than most authors say in a whole book about preaching. That tenth principle is: "Pray regularly for the Holy Spirit's help in the whole process of interpreting the Bible" (65).

In Part Two the standard of expository preaching is raised as preachers increase their skills relating to learning from biblical and historical examples. The ministries of the Apostle Paul (chapter six), Richard Baxter (chapter eight), and Charles Simeon (chapter nine) are discussed as paradigms worthy of imitation.

In Part Three the standard is raised yet higher as preachers are admonished and encouraged to increase their skill in navigating the challenges of the present day. In chapter ten Phillip Jensen reminds us of the unattractiveness and negative connotations of preaching today. "The individualism and moral relativism of Western culture make all preaching seem arrogant, self-righteous, opinionated, and oppressive" (164). D.A. Carson helps us confront the challenges to preaching in chapter eleven. There are perennial challenges such as the preparation and qualification of the preacher (174-176) and a firm, growing understanding and obedience to Scripture (177-178). Twenty-first century challenges include multiculturalism, biblical illiteracy, and postmodernism (179-186).

Part Four bring us full-circle. Raising the standard of expository preaching involves the strategic training of others for the preaching ministry. In chapter thirteen ("The Seminary

and the Sermon") Jensen states, "Classes on homiletics, even by master preachers, do not by themselves yield good preachers. It is the business of the whole faculty and the whole curriculum to produce preachers. "The total aim of the seminary" must be the sermon (209-210). Jon M. Dennis writes in chapter fourteen of the need to apply Second Timothy 2:2, taking the Word we have learned and entrusting it to some who will then teach others. Chapter fifteen, written by David Helm, gives a fascinating case study of the preaching workshops of Norwich, England in the late fourteenth century.

### **Critical Evaluation**

In chapter one David Jackman writes about application of the biblical text in the sermon. He states: ". . . Applications are usually in the form of obligation: 'We ought to . . .,' followed by the challenge, 'so are you . . .?'" Such applications "quickly develop into legalism and soulless duty. The emphasis is then more and more on doing Christian things (giving, praying, witnessing) so that grace is effectively evacuated from the preaching. Attention becomes focused on the present—on me and my world, on my current concerns, or on our congregation and its growth and prosperity. It is almost as though there is no great eternal plan and no universal church. We become entirely obsessed with our own concerns, the prisoners of our inflated egos" (19).

In response, the word "ought" (*dei* or *opheilo*) is used frequently in the New Testament. Note that in the *English Standard Version* gospel accounts Jesus uses the word "ought" eight times. In the epistles we find "ought" twenty-seven times. Would the author say that Jesus was leading the disciples into "legalism and soulless duty" when He told them they "ought" always pray and never lose heart (Luke 18:1)? Preaching that one *ought* to do

something that is God's will for both preacher and hearer does not evacuate grace, does not focus only on the present, does not focus just on me and my church and its growth, does not imply there is no eternal plan and no universal church, and does not mean that we who feel we "ought" to be obsessed with our own concerns and egos. There is logical fallacy abounding here in the author's crusade against those who see in God's Word things they *ought* to do!

Jackman continues, "There is a dangerous and immediate consequence of this contemporary sort of preaching. The hearers soon become adept at screening out the all-too-predictable challenges that masquerade as application. Successful life-changing application, however, is launched from the text in its original context and flies under the radar screen with an irresistible power. When the text surprises me, so that my response is, 'so, *that's* what it means . . . of course!' then the Word is really at work. The mind is persuaded by the truth and the heart is softened to receive it and put it into practice. Finally, the will is energized to active obedience, to make the necessary life changes in thought and behavior, in the power of that same Holy Spirit who has been communicating through his inspired Word" (19).

By way of rebuttal, predictable applications can be powerful. By the time Jesus got to the third of the seven "woe" statements upon the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23, His opponents probably knew what was coming. Jesus had become predictable. When I read the sermons of Jesus, Peter, or Paul in the New Testament their applications are predictable to me because I have read them before. But they are still true, and still powerful. The author argues that successful application "flies under the radar screen" and "surprises me" with an *aha!* moment of discovery. When this happens, says the author, "then the Word is really at work." When the Philippian jailer asked what he had to do to be saved, Paul and Silas said that if he believed in the Lord Jesus he would be saved (Acts 16:30-31). No flying under the radar in that

mini-sermon! And really, does the biblical text have to fly under the radar and surprise us in order for that Word to be "really at work"? David Jackman's approach as discussed above reminds me of Fred Craddock-style inductive walk-off preaching. Such an approach can be used of God, and can hold attention, but even that very approach is also susceptible to predictability. And, in my mind, a little of that approach goes a long way. It can indulge in the "cleverness of speech" (I Corinthians 1:17) which preachers are admonished to avoid.

In chapter fourteen Jon M. Dennis discusses the topic of "Multiplying Men." He relates that as a youth pastor he had complimented a parent on the nice job he seemed to be doing raising his children, as evidenced by how well his children were doing. The parent replied, "You won't know how good a parent I am for several more generations—until you see if my children's children are still praising God." Dennis commended this parent's outlook as being "the same generational view that Paul had (228-229)." I do not agree that we cannot tell how good a parent is until we see how well the next several generations turn out. We all know godly parents who have lousy kids. Our adoptive heavenly Father has children who rebel, but that does not sully God's reputation. Manasseh was evil and had an evil son, Amon. Amon was evil, but had a godly son, Josiah. Josiah was godly, but had two evil sons (II Chronicles 33-36). One never knows. But God does. Godless children do not always have bad parents. Just because a child (or an adult) lives a godly life does not necessarily mean that the parenting they received was good. If good children always had good parents who raised them, then we would have to conclude, against Scripture, that Amon was a good parent, for he had a godly son. This has implications for pastoral ministry, and the children we beget spiritually (Philippians 2:22; I Timothy 1:2; Titus 1:4).

Regarding its overall perspectives, *Preach the Word* has contributing authors from a variety of theological and denominational traditions. This prevents its substantial value from being limited to just one group. Its value will be enhanced by the fact that it seeks to raise "the standard of expository preaching in North America *and beyond* (emphasis mine)."

### Conclusion

The four parts of *Preach the Word* serve as a reminder to me of four essential areas that will constantly need my attention if I am to raise the standard of expository preaching in my own ministry: hermeneutics, history, challenges, and training. It is a book that I will recommend to those who hear me preach. As they understand *the* task of preaching they will, it is hoped, better understand *their* task in the preaching event from the pew, and *my* task in the preaching event from the pulpit.

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<sup>1</sup> R. Albert Mohler, Jr., *He is Not Silent: Preaching in a Post-Modern World* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008), 16.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 16-21.

<sup>3</sup>Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 15.