

The New Interpreter's® Handbook of Preaching

Paul Scott Wilson, et al., eds. *The New Interpreter's® Handbook of Preaching*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008. 506 pp. \$55.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780687055562.

Homiletical dictionaries and encyclopedias are few and far between. There was a veritable rush on the genre in the 1990s, with Michael Dudoit's *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching* (1992) and William Willimon and Richard Lischer's *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching* (1995). Recently there has been a similar mini-explosion, with John McClure's *Preaching Words: 144 Key Terms in Homiletics* (2007) and now *The New Interpreter's® Handbook of Preaching*. The *Handbook* proves to be a brilliant but flawed work—though like an exotic gemstone, its flaws are of a piece with its brilliance.

Outwardly, the typography and layout blend with other entries in the *New Interpreter's®* series. The contributors list reads like a veritable Who's Who of the Academy of Homiletics: venerable figures joined by new voices, diversified in denomination, expertise, and experience, but largely confined to the U.S. and Canada. The *Handbook* follows a unique subject arrangement (see below), supplemented by cross-references and an alphabetical listing of articles, but no index. Articles are signed and have bibliographies; longer articles include summaries and outlines. As for scope: the general focus is on biblical preaching in the Christian tradition, and there are no biographical articles (as in the Willimon/Lischer volume)—but otherwise, it's everything a preacher might dream of, and more. Subject choices reflect the preoccupations of the times, such as "Globalization," "Gender, Race and Ethnicity," "Learning Styles," "Seeker Messages," and "Internet Preaching Forums." There is even a mention of "Godcasts."

The volume's stated goals are to provide the best of recent scholarship with a practical focus: "Here is something that works well" (xxv). Intended both to document the present state of homiletics and set benchmarks for the future, it is nothing if not ambitious—the editors claim that it is "the best single resource on homiletics today and sets new standards for the coming years" (xxvii), and that "there is nothing on the market that comes close to this resource in terms of the range of its subjects and their practical application to preaching" (xxix). In case we missed the marketing copy, the title is cited often, and never without its trademark symbol.

The order of the *Handbook* is, to say the least, idiosyncratic. Two introductory articles, about using the volume in the classroom and for weekly sermon preparation, address its two primary audiences: homiletics students and working preachers. The bulk of the articles fall under eleven sections: "Bible," "Bible Genres," "Ethics," "Literary Criticism," "Poetics," "Preacher," "Social Location," "Experience," "Rhetoric," "Sermon," and "Theology," with articles arranged alphabetically within the sections. The logic of this order is not patently clear, especially when one editor seems to think that the book consists of "nine sections that correspond to tasks the preacher normally engages" (xxvi)—even with the benefit of the doubt on the math, since when is "Social Location" a "task"?

But why these headings, and why this order? A homiletician might rightly begin with "Bible," but why two separate sections for the Bible, and why then move to "Ethics" rather than "Literary Criticism"? Wouldn't "Poetics" and "Rhetoric" stand together? Why would "Preacher" (someone presumably shaped by society and personal

experience) come before “Social Location” and “Experience”? Why save “Theology” for the end? Or for that matter, separate “Sermon” from any of the above?

Similarly perplexing is the choice of the articles themselves. Most glaring is the omission of “Delivery” in favor of “Performing the Manuscript,” a move that will be sure to puzzle those preachers who never write manuscripts, let alone perform them. They may find comfort in the article “Without Notes,” unless of course they went looking for it under a more traditional heading like “Extemporaneous Preaching.” Not so egregious, but still puzzling, is the duplication of articles on similar (or even the same) topics in different (or even the same) sections: the aforementioned “Without Notes” (under the section “Sermon”) and “Memory” (under “Rhetoric”), which overlap with “Pulpit, Use of” (under “Social Location”) and “Manuscript” (under “Sermon”); “Apocalypticism” under “Bible,” but “Apocalyptic” under “Bible Genres”; “Prophetic Preaching” under “Bible Genres,” but “Prophetic Message” under “Sermon” (not to be confused with “Controversy” under “Ethics”); a section on “Canonical Criticism” in the “Exegesis” article, yet a whole article on the same topic a few pages earlier. The examples can be multiplied, as articles frequently duplicate and overlap each other, not always harmoniously.

Surprisingly, when read in succession, the articles can appear to flow and eddy around a central topic, offering similar yet different perspectives: The “Preacher’s Creative Process” takes place during the “Preacher’s Week,” so that “Preaching Out of the Overflow” can result from “Sermon Research,” all of which requires “Time Management.” There would seem to be clusters of overlapping significance in articles on “Plagiarism,” “Preaching, Ethics of,” “Self-Disclosure,” “Stories, Ethics in Use of,” “Authority of the Preacher,” “Illustration and Stories,” and “Character.” But even when there seems to be a growing logic, there are contrasting, sometimes even contradictory, standards. For example, the old saw that it takes an hour of preparation for every minute spent preaching is cited as a fact (242), then called a “luxury” (246), and finally commended as exemplary (248). So which is it? The implicit message is: make up your own mind. Such topical juxtapositions can multiply serendipitously: in the article on “Allegory, Allegoresis” by David Bartlett, we read that allegory often turns to moralism, especially in the children’s sermon, where “any text . . . can be enlisted to remind the boys and girls that they had better be good” (9). Further along, Carolyn C. Brown in “Preaching to Children” elaborates on the faults of the typical children’s sermon, only to conclude that including one might be prudent, in light of popular opinion—apparently, after reading the many compelling reasons to resist using children in worship for their entertainment value, preachers will need to be reminded that they themselves had better be good.

The editors are serious when they claim to be prescriptive as well as descriptive; while many articles cover known territory, often in depth, there is advocacy here, sometimes moving towards inspiration. Joseph Webb’s “Memory” could well spark a preacher to leave the manuscript at home next Sunday. “Exegesis” by Thomas Long is itself an exegesis of 1 Corinthians 8:1-3, plus reflection on understanding the text “not simply as a vessel containing an idea, but as an interactive field of meaning” (18), i.e., as a preacher would read it. Similarly, Stephen Farris in “Hermeneutics” admits that “it is difficult to be precise about the distinction between exegesis and hermeneutics” (31), but the article itself demonstrates the distinction, as it wonders aloud whether reading a text can transform a person. And you have to love an article that begins, “When preaching on controversial issues, every preacher must decide whether the aim is to influence her or his hearers, or simply to irritate them” (117); “Controversy,” by Adam Hamilton, goes on to offer sage advice for thorny ground.

The flaws of multiplicity, contraction, redundancy, and sometimes even confusion prove to highlight the brilliance, as if they were all part of the plan. Could this be the first truly postmodern preaching handbook, where various

authors spiral around various topics, as if in an echo chamber that resounds with cacophonous voices by design? This would explain why the *Handbook* veers so frequently from description to prescription, not satisfied merely to describe the state of the question but also wanting to change it. The differing perspectives reflect the book's purpose, because it is not advocating one particular position, but the process of dialogue itself. It is not a monograph but a multi-graph, a polyglot, diverse piece of advocacy, if not a full fledged free-for-all. This is not a criticism; it is perfectly consonant for a homiletical handbook to speak from many corners of its mouth, just as the Gospel is proclaimed from many pulpits and perspectives.

The New Interpreter's® Handbook of Preaching is thus, despite its flaws, highly recommended for seminaries and colleges with ministerial preparation programs. The editors (and their marketing folks) are right—there really is nothing else like it. It is overstuffed with information, opinion, and argument. And at a street price lower than most textbooks, it's a bargain not only for libraries but for working preachers. The pomo approach can be less than helpful on a purely informational basis; someone looking for a concise statement of the distinction between “exegetical” and “expository” preaching won't find it here. But to those looking for up-to-date reference, instruction, dialogue, debate, counsel, and stimulation on the way to Sunday morning, here are fine companions. To quote selectively (and thus postmodernly) from Paul Hanson's article on “Apocalypticism”: “it is important that preachers possess sufficient knowledge . . . for the proclamation of good news to those most sorely in need of hope and comfort” (13). One can only say, Amen.

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