

METHODIST RECORDER

## BOOK REVIEW

by

**Tom Stuckey**

It is an unexpected delight to read a book on preaching which makes you want to preach. Timothy Keller has given us such a book. **Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Scepticism** (Hodder & Stoughton 2015. Hardcover £14.88. Kindle £8.99) not only does what the title suggests but as a compelling preacher and leading evangelist in Manhattan he shows us how the Gospel can be presented with power. Sadly, bemoans Keller, too many preachers evoke in their congregations the response of Mary Magdalene: ‘They have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him.’

This 290 page book is in effect a contemporary exposition of Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5. Preaching, according to Keller, becomes effective when it shines the spotlight on Christ, is empowered by the Holy Spirit and when rhetoric is skilfully used. Following the advice of St Augustine, Keller argues that preaching must instruct and prove, rivet and delight, and move people to action. He shows us that Paul has an academic understanding of the cultural context of each of his audiences and with theological precision is able to effectively confront and transform that culture in the name of Christ. His sermons are not like clubs that beat upon the will ‘but like a sword that cuts to the heart.’

In **part one**, Keller brilliantly illustrates his belief that a preachers understanding of the character and inspiration of the Bible not only affects how the text is handled but also the inherent power of the message itself. He argues for creative ‘expository preaching’ and wants the preacher, in the words of Charles Spurgeon, to open the door of Scripture ‘and let the lion out’.

Although all roads in the Bible lead to Christ, the preacher has to be true to the text and its context. Keller shows us how this can be done through recognising Christ the Word in each genre of the Bible and in the themes, figures, images, and deliverance stories. He gives us no rigid formula arguing that the preacher’s instinct and creativity play a crucial part. This section is stocked with illuminating examples from the Bible.

In **part two** the author addresses the issue of culture. How is the preacher to affirm the cultural assumptions of a particular congregation yet at the same time allow the Bible Word to expose and confront the ‘elements of contradiction’ within those assumptions? He reflects on the significance of the vocabulary used: the words, images, anecdotes, defeaters and authorities employed. Language is a boundary marker which either includes or excludes. The Gospel must push on culture’s pressure points.

In a brilliant chapter on context he exposes the secular belief systems which shape contemporary ‘late modern’ culture. He shows how questions of identity, justice, meaning and choice can become, through Biblical exposition, springboards for the redeeming work of Christ. There is nothing superficial in his analysis as he draws on the insights of Miroslav Volf, Michel Foucault, Nietzsche and many others. The preached gospel is needed because contemporary people, even church people, have become victims of their culture. When the preacher confronts its assumptions he is not so much waging a war as initiating a prison break.

Such preaching however, even when done with intellectual accuracy is not enough. Preaching has to ‘capture the listeners interest and imagination’. Preaching must be compelling and penetrate to the heart (Acts 2:37). The ‘heart’ is not just the place of emotion; it is the seat of the mind and the will. In exploring how ‘affections’ can be transformed and changed the author turns to the 18<sup>th</sup> century revivalist and theologian Jonathan Edwards. He shows us how preaching can become ‘logic on fire’. In a practical conclusion to this second part of the book Keller gives us helpful tips on how to reach our hearers with the specific aim of making Christ beautiful and allowing the gospel message to evoke wonder.

Having given attention to the *text* and the *context* the author, in **part three**, turns to the *subtext*; the work of the Spirit. When the Spirit is at work a complementary message arises under the preacher’s message. The preparation of the preacher is therefore just as important as the preparation of the sermon. To preach **to** the heart of a congregation the preacher must preach **from** the heart.

The final appendix is an invaluable ‘mini –manual’ on ‘how to’ prepare an expository message.

Here is an extremely readable book founded on sound scholarship. The author has achieved this by moving much of the ‘academic stuff’ to the fifty pages of notes at the end. Having read the main text I am still absorbing these footnotes which are proving to be equally enriching.

Just one word about this book: BUY IT. This is the most practical and inspirational book on preaching that I have read for years! Like PT Forsyth’s 1907 book on ‘Positive Preaching and Modern Mind’ this book comes with prophetic power to challenge the superficial verbiage often dished out upon longsuffering congregations. Reading this book has made me want to preach Christ not only in a new way but with the expectation that the pulpit can again become a place of miracle.

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