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Preaching while the church is under reconstruction: the visionary role of preachers in a fragmented world

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Preaching While the Church Is Under Reconstruction: The Visionary Role of Preachers in a Fragmented World

Thomas H. Troeger

Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999

176 pages, \$26.99 Softcover

With an abundance of books on preaching, what is unique about Thomas Troeger's *Preaching While the Church Is Under Reconstruction*?

First, Troeger's book is not about three points and a poem. It is about the people to whom we are preaching and God's strong desire for us to hear...stronger than our own desire to hear. Troeger writes, "The capacity to illuminate visionary preaching in a church under reconstruction extends not only to hymns but also to spiritual poems, prayers, legends, sermons, visuals and dramatic presentations of the gospel. There are witnesses in the cloud who still speak to us through this diversity of media. Their varied means of expression remind us that part of our visionary role is to amplify our repertoire of methods for communicating the gospel of Christ."

Troeger uses these "witnesses in the cloud" to dialogue with us about multi-sensory preaching: Helena, mother of Constantine, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, John Donne, and a host of others. These instruct us that there always has been a "God-shaped hole" in the church's roof through which God speaks to us. The temptation has been to fix the hole. These witnesses, as well as Troeger's use of poems, hymns and other media, inform us that the hole is there on purpose: "The God-shaped hole invites us to preach not answers but the living Christ." Troeger argues that in listening to these voices and sensations, we preachers might just find fresh ways of communicating the gospel.

That should be a welcomed relief. In a time when mainline congregations and their institutions are crumbling, preachers – and their members – are prime candidates for falling pray to the twin idols of "fundamentalist biblicism" and "scholarly biblicism". Mega churches spring up that promise to give "happy times" but ignore the personal pain and global injustice. Troeger reminds us that it is God's vision, not our own, that we are called to proclaim and that it is God's power to create new life out of chaos, conflict, and controversy.

The book has four stimulating chapters: chapter 1 looks at the post-modern fragmentation of the church under reconstruction (He acknowledges that the church has always been under "reconstruction" but Christendom gave a false sense of power, prestige and security). The next three chapters focus on how the Spirit sighs: in the search for the true cross, in following Christ, and in expanding and enlightening the landscape of our hearts.

Pastors and church leaders will benefit from Troeger's experience. He is the

Ralph E. and Norma E. Peck Professor of Preaching and Communications at Iliff School of Theology, Denver, Colorado. But the interested lay person can also gain new insights into the challenges facing the church and the hope that calls to us through the “God-shaped hole”.

Richard A. Thrift

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Preaching in the New Creation: The Promise of New Testament Apocalyptic Texts

David Schnasa Jacobsen

Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999

144 pages, \$31.50 softcover

This is a fine book on a difficult and timely subject for the beginning of a new millennium, the recovery of New Testament apocalyptic texts for the pulpit. So much apocalyptic discourse today seems manipulative and destructive. David Schnasa Jacobsen, Assistant Professor of Homiletics at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, presents in a lively way an intriguing road map for readers to negotiate apocalyptic biblical terrain. If they follow his route, they will better appreciate this difficult genre and be better equipped to preach the new age that God is creating and has begun in Christ.

The clear organization of Jacobsen's book contrasts the chaotic possibilities of apocalypse. Apocalyptic texts often resist close historical-critical scrutiny, partly because their language is symbolic; instead of expecting exegesis to open the world behind the text, preachers should focus on the world the text opens in the foreground. He offers three exegetical steps: first, do a rhetorical analysis of the text to assess what the text is trying to accomplish. Mark 13:24-37 is trying to move its hearers from one kind of “watching out” to “watching for” the new thing God is doing. Second, learn to analyze apocalyptic form. Whereas Hebrew apocalypses commonly move in a fearsome manner from divine action to cosmic convulsion and sometimes also to eschatological judgement, the apocalypse in Mark 13 moves to eschatological salvation. Third, consider what social reality the symbols employed by a text disclose in front of it, as opposed to trying to determine what they refer to, or what feelings they generate. They may function either to construct, maintain, or delegitimize the world. The symbols in Mark 13:24b-25 (“The sun will be darkened...”) are from Isaiah where they delegitimize Babylon and thus stand as a promise for Israel that again is not to be feared. Preachers ought to avoid the swamp of discussing what the symbols in the text