

5-1-1998

The foolishness of preaching: proclaiming the Gospel against the wisdom of the world

Mike Rattee

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

Recommended Citation

Rattee, Mike (1998) "The foolishness of preaching: proclaiming the Gospel against the wisdom of the world," *Consensus*: Vol. 24 : Iss. 1 , Article 17.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol24/iss1/17>

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

The Foolishness of Preaching: Proclaiming the Gospel against the Wisdom of the World

Robert Farrar Capon

Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishers, 1998

154 pp. \$26.00 paperback

Readers beware: this book *will* stir you up! Whether the stirring comes from its stress on radical grace (we are saved in our deaths, not by our efforts to lead a good life, nothing counts but the cross), its attacks on leftist liberals (who don't believe Adam actually existed) and right-wing conservatives (who believe creation happened on a Sunday morning in 4004 BC), or the interesting tips on how to preach better (talk the sermon into being in front of your spouse or friends), you will wrestle with Robert Farrar Capon.

Along the way you will encounter many creative one-liners. Some of the positive ones to remember and re-use include: "God is as pleased as punch with them in Jesus"; "preachers need a passion for the Passion"; "we don't need to be good, holy, smart, accountable, or even faithful: we need only to be dead"; "Raise your standards for prayer by lowering your sights"; "my delivery has more faults than the state of California"; "preachers are peddling Sleep-Eeze, when they ought to be selling No-Doze".

Many others are more provocative and be less useful: "preachers qualify as useful representatives of the Ultimate Loser"; "if sermonettes make Christianettes, then lessonettes make preacherettes"; "tell God you'd like to stop chasing skirts...but not yet"; "be on your guard against wanting to be seen as a humble servant and a good egg". The final command of the book: "have a cigar".

The first half of the book (The Bedrock of Preaching) is more theological than homiletical. Here he blasts religion that minimizes the Gospel while maximizing the Law, calling it "a drug that gets people high and addicted, but leaves them bankrupt". Preachers will be of no use in the pulpit until they "get rid of their own dope of acceptance", and then "like bad kids, sneak up and steal the congregation's religion pills". Capon says to focus on the "dark center of the Gospel" (Jesus' death and our death are required before resurrection life occurs), which is the foolishness of preaching (1 Corinthians 2). This "passion for the Passion" is a highlight of the book, and a needed emphasis, since many sermons are not strong enough on grace by putting the burden of salvation onto God.

However, in his hyperbole, Capon sounds like a universalist. If Christ has saved everyone already ("He or She [God] will love you no matter what because He or She is stuck on you, everybody is raised with Jesus, unbeliever and believer, we don't get raised, we are raised now"), then what is the role of human faith? If sin is not to be feared but cherished since it magnifies the Gospel, and there is no hell to fear, then of what importance is ethical living, evangelism, and sanctification? Such questions

do matter to preaching, but this book does not address this other side. Capon's overstress on grace leads him to call his own adultery, divorce, and remarriage a great thing that happened since he experienced more deeply the mercy of Christ. This implication toward sinning boldly so that one can be a better Gospel preacher is ethically confusing. This book may be proof that there is danger in shouting a good thing too loudly.

The second half of the book (*The Practice of Preaching*) gives practical homiletical skills, most of which are derived purely from Capon's own style. He counsels against trying to be a great chef, serving world class sermons, and argues for a simple, household cook, who gives sound gospel nutrition. Capon demonstrates this with four to five good examples of how he exegetes a passage, and two to three full sermons he has preached. His exegetical tips are more interesting than his actual sermons.

A high view of scripture leads Capon to say that this is *the* main ingredient in preaching, and that extensive reading of the text ("living in it") is the best sermon preparation. He advocates using the Common Lectionary, but condemns the way it splices texts, and omits the tough verses. Preachers need to study the context well, include what is left out of the lesson ("the tough texts make for the best preaching"), and hear the Scriptures out loud ("faith comes by hearing the Word"). Preachers who don't like a certain passage need to hear it and wrestle with it. Never throw it out simply because it is politically incorrect. Though Capon says that at times Paul's opinion may need to be distinguished from the Holy Spirit's revelation, there is no instruction on how to do this.

The bulk of this second half deals with preaching from brief notes, which Capon favors, and/or from a full manuscript. The sermon is to be written by Saturday morning (no later!), and then left alone until Sunday morning, which is devoted to hearing how it sounds. Capon advocates getting up at 4:00 a.m. to reread the sermon aloud, so it can live again in one's ears. The notes are to be so digested that they are hardly needed. By seeing just a word or phrase (e.g., ILLUST-bread) one should be able to recall and retell an entire point. If new thoughts come in this practice period, he suggests following them, for that may be the Spirit breaking through. Above all, one should relax on Sunday for the work of preaching is ultimately up to God more than the preacher. Nice advice. Tough to apply.

Strangely, Capon is against working extensively on introductions and conclusions. He says that the best time must be spent in the middle, and that two lines are all that is needed at the start and end. One wonders what harm could come from making the start and end excellent, especially if communication studies are right that people remember these parts of a speech the most. Capon answers this charge by saying it is a waste of good time, they are "windy beginnings and gassy endings, amounting to mere throat clearings and a belch", and they may get in the way of God speaking. It is a unique view that suggests God only speaks in the middle of a sermon.

To his credit, Capon demonstrates in his writing the oral/conversational style that he says makes for good sermons. His tips about how to use slang

appropriately, make punchy sentences, avoid academic/theoretical language are all excellent. One wishes the author would have focused more on these language/writing issues, which are so helpful to us speakers and writers.

Less time could have been spent on the advice and visual demonstrations of how to use computer software in preparing sermons. Interestingly, this 73 year old priest expounds the advantages and fine points of using the computer in preaching, where few other books would cover such ground. However, 22 pages of windows pasted from his computer into the book seems excessive, and details about changing font size, naming the file, underlining, etc., are not that instructive.

Stylistically, the chapters are short and well organized. There is energy on every page. Like watching a good movie or hockey game, it is easy to stick with this book to the end to see how it will turn out. The pot shots taken against those whom Capon disagrees with are stimulating at first, but after a while become bothersome as one hears arrogance more than redemption. The book is quite one-sided in that it focuses only on what one preacher believes/practices, and doesn't interact with any other literature and views from another side. Its opinionated style suggests it could be a good conversation starter at a ministerial meeting, book reading club, etc. Overall, it makes a decent, but not significant, contribution to homiletics. As Siskel and Ebert would say, "one thumb up".

Michael Rattee
Toronto School of Theology

Sermon Seasonings: Collected Stories to Spice Up Your Sermons

Ralph Milton

Edited by Wendy Smallman

Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books Inc., 1997

192 pp. \$14.95

Canadian lay theologian Ralph Milton lives in Kelowna, BC, and is the husband of a United Church of Canada minister. He is one of the founders of Wood Lake Books, and the author of more than a dozen books, and of the bimonthly periodical, *Aha!!! the preacher's research assistant*, published by that press. A popular speaker and workshop leader, he brings a wealth of experience from his work in radio, a stint as a missionary in the Philippines, and countless workshops and seminars with congregations, pastors, lay groups, etc.

Wendy Smallman has gone "through his work and picked out those stories, anecdotes, thoughts she felt would be useful to speakers and preachers and resource developers" (5). These are topically arranged in alphabetical order, beginning with "Advent" and concluding with "Worship". This