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Book Reviews

Jesus Christ in the Preaching of Calvin and Schleiermacher

Dawn DeVries

Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996

114 pp. \$15.00 Hardcover

Earlier this century Swiss theologian Karl Barth decried the reigning liberal theology as an aberration from the theology of the reformers, especially Calvin's. Chief among Barth's theological villains was Friederich Schleiermacher, who had turned the "Word of God" into a (spit here) liberal "word of man (sic!)." In her new book, Dawn DeVries, Associate Professor of Theology at Union Theological Seminary (Virginia), bravely revises Barth's own revision of theological history by reconsidering Calvin's and Schleiermacher's views of preaching not solely in opposition, but in light of each other. She shows deftly that there is a fundamentally sacramental understanding of the Word operative in both Calvin's and Schleiermacher's theologies and preaching practice. Thus DeVries seeks to realign the very theologians whom Barth had turned into enemies.

The shape of DeVries' case is rather straightforward. In chapter 1 she focuses on the historian and the preacher. Yet, for her, historical criticism poses more than technical, exegetical problems for the preacher, but for Christology as a whole. Indeed, a theology of preaching sees the challenge of historical readings of narratives precisely at this point: do we preach assuming the text has literal, historical reference, or do we demythologize? Does the truth of the Christ we preach come into question through the application of the historical-critical method, or is the point of preaching actually to re-present Christ sacramentally? This two-sided problem posed by historical criticism forms the nexus for her investigation of Calvin and Schleiermacher. Chapters 2-5 proceed to test these questions with respect to both thinkers' theological works and in their sermons on the life of Christ from synoptic Gospel texts. Throughout her analysis, DeVries focuses on how both claim to re-present Christ in preaching. For Calvin, the Word as sacrament re-presents Christ for contemporary hearers. Its value as a source for "true" history is irrelevant to Calvin; better, it is presupposed and then

passed over on the way to a Word that facilitates sacramental participation. For Schleiermacher, however, the Word is made flesh in Christ. Unlike Calvin's Christology, Schleiermacher's does not even depend on the historical event of Jesus' death on the cross. It is enough to know that the Word which became flesh in Christ continues to become Word for us in proclamation. The upshot of this distinction in DeVries' analysis is found in chapter 6, "The Living Word and the Work of Christ". In this final chapter she argues that Barth's assessment of Schleiermacher is fundamentally wrong. Indeed, to the contrary, DeVries views Schleiermacher as a legitimate heir to Calvin's own sacramental understanding of the Word. Contrary to Frei's assessment of Calvin and other reformers as "pre-critical" interpreters of narratives, DeVries sees both Calvin and Schleiermacher as devoted to understandings of preaching that make Christ present to hearers today beyond the purely historical issues of the narratives themselves. Indeed, for both thinkers the issue is not a history-like narrative whose truth can be gauged apart from referential concerns, but rather a re-presentation of Christ in the sermon. It's not the Christ from the past, but the Christ in the present.

Clearly DeVries deserves our thanks for putting the lie to Barth's breezy consignment of Schleiermacher to the ashheap of theological history. Indeed, DeVries' own analysis further reinforces the idea that Barth bears the mantle more of a Zwingli than a Calvin or Luther. Yet the fundamental claim that Calvin's theology of the Word is unambiguously sacramental could be nuanced a little further. Indeed, were Calvin's position as incarnational as DeVries claims, the division between him and Luther over sacramental theology should not have been so marked. Besides, one cannot get around the decidedly didactic bent to Calvin's "sacramental" Word. This alone should force one to view his accommodationist theory not solely in the sacramental terms of *Christus praesens*, but also in the theological and epistemological terms of the starting point of his great system, the problem of the proper knowledge of God. Nonetheless, DeVries rightly focuses on the importance of viewing Schleiermacher as a proper heir to Calvin. With both we are encouraged to preach more than a word "about" Christ, but the Word that *is* Christ, present to us and to the hearers of the Gospel.

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Imagination Shaped: Old Testament Preaching in the Anglican Tradition

Ellen F. Davis

Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1995
xiii + 289 pp. (including 19 pp. of endnotes)

This book, by an Old Testament scholar rather than a homiletician, presents selected sermons by five Anglican preachers, all of them English,