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Preaching in and out of season

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truth—God reveals truth to humankind in millions of different ways. What Christians really needed was a strong dose of humility and to continue their philanthropic work without converting non-Christians. According to Gandhi, this makes a Hindu a better Hindu; a Muslim a better Muslim; a Christian a better Christian.

Harvard professor, Diana Eck, opens Part Two, “Christian Response”, by constructing an academic systematization of Gandhi’s thought and life. According to Eck, Gandhi’s dictum that all faiths are true and equal is currently instructive for all who live in pluralistic religious societies. Eck sees in Gandhi’s ashrams model communities of inclusivity for today’s religiously plural world. The ashrams include people from every faith, age, and walk of life.

For Indian Jesuit Ignatius Jesudasan, Gandhi’s Hindu faith and practice may be described by employing Karl Rahner’s term, “anonymous Christianity”. Jesudasan suggests that Christology is either “descriptive”, i.e., involving worship and dogma, or “prescriptive”, i.e., involving the imitation of Christ “as manifesting the underlying truth of the spiritual unity of all humankind” (p. 92). Gandhi epitomized the latter.

For James W. Douglass, Jesus’ voluntary suffering love unites the faithful of every religion. This is one explanation why Gandhi discovered so much meaning and inspiration in the crucifixion of Jesus.

Bob McCahill, a missionary in Bangladesh for many years, was convinced by Gandhi that non-Christians love and value their faith as much as he loves his Christian faith. He was most influenced by Gandhi’s teaching and lifestyle of loving service. As a Christian, he attempts to do the same—without the motivation of converting Muslims and Hindus to Christianity.

Part One of this thin tome deserves to be read by a wide audience. Editor Robert Ellsberg has given us a veritable treasure-trove of Gandhian spirituality. Recommended reading for seminarians, professors, pastors and laity.

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Preaching In and Out of Season

Thomas G. Long and Neely Dixon McCarter, Editors
Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990
129 pp.

The purpose of the book is to be helpful to preachers by providing background articles for sermons on special occasions.

The contention of the editors is that there are three calendars for the preacher. The first is the lectionary. The other two calendars are those

“occasions generated by the recurring program emphases of the church and by the holidays observed in our general culture” (p. 9).

Each calendar is important to the parish. First, “the sequence of seasons and festivals, each with its particular themes and special issues, serves as a comprehensive menu for the diet of preaching” (p. 14). Secondly, “Preaching that seeks to engage the world in which we live must address the real forces at work on people’s lives [e.g., Labour Day, Thanksgiving Day] or risk abstraction and irrelevance” (p. 14). And thirdly, “The program calendar of the church is composed of those occasions and themes of ongoing importance to a local church. . . [S]uch programmatic emphases always risk turning worship into a utilitarian event, a support for a series of good and noble causes, but in the best sense such occasions bring the commitments of the Christian community into sharper focus” (p. 14–15).

This concept of three calendars is argued briefly and effectively in a short introduction. The remainder of the book is a series of articles on themes from the “cultural calendar” (Preaching about Giving Thanks, Preaching About the Family, Preaching about Church and Nation, Preaching about Race Relations, Preaching About Work), and the “denominational calendar” (Preaching about the Global Witness of the Church, Preaching About Evangelism, Preaching About the Ecumenical Church, and Preaching About Stewardship).

The introduction is a thoughtful summation of the why and what of preaching—with a challenge that preaching the fullness of the Gospel demands planning. This means a preaching plan that offers opportunity for a variety of sermon themes. It is in planning that the preacher is able to take into consideration all three calendars.

The articles are of different quality. Each of them gives information and background. But some give provocative and stimulating insights that are different from the usual perspectives.

For example, the article on Stewardship argues there are many limitations (e.g., work righteousness) to the traditional view of the steward as an underling to God responsible for persons, goods, land and business and who is in danger of punishment. Instead, R. J. Allen argues for a concept of “Koinonia” in which Christians are partners with Christ and each other in providing what is “theirs” to offer, in building up the church. Again, the article on “Preaching About Work” is unusual for it focuses on “Work” as “work righteousness” in terms of narcissism and co-dependency. It calls for “preaching under a comfortable yoke” as Jesus promised.

Preaching In and Out of Season is a useful resource book that provides background articles for preaching on themes from the denominational and cultural calendars. The thesis of the book is a stimulating encouragement to plan preaching over a lengthy period in which preaching and liturgy take into account all three calendars in proclaiming the fullness of the Gospel.