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A captive voice: the liberation of preaching

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127) but he surely did not “toss mercy to a repentant, dying criminal” (p. 171). But all this only makes him not only excellent but enormously stimulating. We are in a new era; Buttrick helps us think about what shape the gospel and our preaching and theology may take in it.

One curious editorial mishap: the sub-title on the cover and back says, “A Homiletic Reading of the Gospel Traditions”; but the inside title page as well as the Library of Congress data say “A Homiletic Reading of the *Biblical Traditions*”.

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A Captive Voice: The Liberation Of Preaching

David Buttrick

Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994

iv + 164 pp.

If you have ever read a book by David Buttrick you know how engaging, controversial, and critical he can be. His newest book, *A Captive Voice: The Liberation Of Preaching* maintains that Buttrick tradition. Unfortunately, with this work the level of “angst” reaches a new high (or low!).

I counted at least 13 different types of Christians that are sharply criticized in this book. Some of them include: those who view other religions as wrong, those who are right-wing and use the Bible to suit their biases, those who have a past tense view of God in the Bible, those who preach therapeutic and positive-thinking messages, those who promote church-marketing and church-growth strategies. The list even goes on to include Buttrick’s grandmother who reads a Bible verse a day from her “Daily Bread” devotional.

If you can see beyond this disrespectful assault, Buttrick provides some helpful and positive contributions to homiletics. With 164 pages of text, and 317 endnotes, his research is very thorough and he commendably interacts with other disciplines like theology, history, literature, sociology, etc. Though the title of the book isn’t that exciting, it does summarize his thesis. Chapter titles include: 1. Preaching and Bible, 2. Preaching and Church, 3. Preaching and Culture, 4. Preaching and Method, 5. Looking Towards the Future.

Buttrick promotes a very high view of preaching when he says “preachers are the very mouth of God” (p. 28), “the character of the church is shaped by preaching” (p. 42), and “preaching can never be merely one part of the service if it is the voice of God” (p. 45).

He argues well for more evangelical and evangelistic preaching: which “must renew Jesus’ message of ‘the kingdom of God is here’” (p. 49),

“we must engage the culture critically... yet evangelically” (pp. 72–73), “because evangelism is primarily a lay activity... we will have to inaugurate a lay homiletic” (p. 107).

The structure of this book can be divided into: 1. where we have been, 2. where we are, and 3. where we are going. He argues that the Reformers (Luther & Calvin) have left us not only the great heritage of the primacy of preaching Jesus Christ, but that they also are great models to follow today. Barth reclaimed a needed emphasis on the Word of God, but since then our view of Scripture has been simplistic and wrong. Buttrick contends, “We have made biblical noises, but have not preached very well” (p. 3), and “biblical preaching has resulted in a silence on public affairs” (p. 9).

His assessment that we “live between the times” (p. 72) is accurate. Buttrick describes how dramatically language and consciousness have changed in the past 50 years. We are moving out of a rationalistic book-age and into a subjective media-age. The distillation method of making points is out-dated and tedious for listeners. He aptly concludes, “we must find a way to preach in a world that is changing its mind” (p.79).

Chapter 4, entitled “Preaching and Method” is most helpful and practical. It ends with a step by step approach in preaching the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31). I gained new insights into interpreting the passage with details I had not noticed before. Consideration is also given on how to design the structure of the sermon. The only feature lacking is Buttrick’s actual writing of the sermon as he thinks it should be preached. He gives a lot of blueprint instructions, but fails to build the house for all to see.

In the final chapter Buttrick becomes a forward-looking prophet as he predicts what preaching will be like in the 21st century. After showing how the Barthian “Word-of God” and Fosdick’s “Therapeutic” models are inadequate, Buttrick holds up Martin Luther King as an example of what successful preaching should be. If society is becoming more ethnically and religiously diverse, and if the white-Anglo arrogance and power structures are going to crumble, then preaching must be prophetic. It must be sensitive to the oppressed groups, understand the culture, and announce the good news that the reign of God is here, just as Jesus did.

Evangelical, conservative readers may not appreciate how Buttrick oversteps the boundaries of convention. When he argues that “the Spirit may be at work in non-Christian political movements and other religions” (p. 106) he may be accused of not believing exclusively that Jesus is the only way to salvation (John 14:6). By writing “the Bible is not all the Word of God... and is secondary to preaching” (p. 21, 29), does Buttrick deny that all Scripture is inspired of God and is useful for teaching (2 Tim. 3:16)? By condemning those who “oppose abortion, homosexuality and support the military” (p. 1, 31) is he holding himself up as the only true interpreter of Scripture?

Despite these potential problems, *A Captive Voice* deserves to be read by all preachers. Buttrick is very good at causing us to re-think our views

on preaching. While he does call us to re-shape our practice, more demonstrations of what this looks like in actual sermons would help.

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Sexual Character: Beyond Technique to Intimacy

Marva J. Dawn

Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company,
1993

172 pp. \$12.99 U.S.

This is a dangerous book. It is dangerous because there is such a dearth of resource material about sexuality as it pertains to Christianity at a time when many Christians are struggling to integrate their faith and their sexual experience. It highlights all of the old beliefs about sexuality in language that appears to be understanding, tolerant and somehow new.

At first glance this book might appear to be helpful. It espouses a more comprehensive understanding of sexuality than that of the popular media. Some of the author's theories appear to be in keeping with current beliefs about sexuality. Who among us would disagree that sex and sexuality are two different modalities—that the first is a part of the other, and the latter is far more encompassing than the scope of the first?

If we examine the issues, however, we will see that this work is seriously flawed. First, Dawn talks about friendship. What she discusses, however, is what the church does with those of its members who by choice or by chance are not in a couple relationship. She says nothing remarkable about friendship and its role in a sexual ethic but discusses friendship only as opposed to a marriage relationship.

Second, the author discusses homosexuality. This is a brief chapter with frequent references to things "unnatural". While the author says that she does not "join with those who affirm the biblical picture in ways that are hostile to persons of homosexual orientation", her text and conclusions are heterosexist. Her conclusion is that "we... must spend time with (homosexual individuals) gently to encourage their choice of God's will for their sexuality, to stand by them and forgive their rebellion... to resist with them the cultural notion that we are not complete without genital fulfilment".

Divorce is addressed from the perspective of the spouse who is left by an adulterous or alcoholic partner. While she berates the church who taught us that divorce was the "worst sin on the face of the globe", she also admonishes congregations to try to "support couples contemplating second marriages in maintaining friendships" rather than subjecting the children of the original marriages to the ultimate difficulties of blending marriages.