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The Woman in the Pulpit

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The Woman in the Pulpit

Carol M. Norén

Nashville: Abingdon, 1991

175 pages

The right book at the right time doing the right job!

Every once in a while a book that is much needed appears; one receives it with joy, yet one also wonders whether it in fact does the job needing to be done. Well, pull out the trumpets! Norén not only has done the right thing at the right time, she is surely the right one to do the job!

Norén is Assistant Professor of Homiletics at The Divinity School, Duke University, and has spent at least a decade reading literature pertaining to women and the church, listening to women preach and preaching herself, teaching homiletics (Duke, Iliff, and Princeton), and constantly probing—through questionnaires, interviews, conversations, and discussion papers—what is going on when women stand in the pulpit. A United Methodist, she nevertheless brings an ecumenical consciousness to her studies and draws upon the experiences of women preachers from the whole spectrum of denominations and traditions. The bibliography cited in the endnotes is a gold mine of women's research in homiletically related areas.

If she is the right person to discuss the woman in the pulpit, this is surely the right time for a comprehensive discussion. It would have been advantageous to have had this book some years ago, of course, but first the necessary time for research had to elapse so that hypotheses could be tested, concrete data could accumulate, and a sufficient body of studies by women (e.g., in hermeneutics, theology, communication, liturgy, women's history) had been done. A major contribution of Norén's is simply that of assembling the data regarding women preaching, organizing it, and drawing out its implications.

She writes:

My goal is to equip women students and clergy for intentional, effective, and faithful communication of the gospel. Rather than merely presenting sermons and liturgies by women, the chapters that follow describe how they are likely to work or not work in a local church context, and the reasons for this. My purpose is not to present a lone paradigm for women's preaching, but to make women sensitive to underlying issues in their own theology and communication. A secondary goal is to enhance homiletics classes' and churches' awareness of their gender-related expectations of preachers, so that what has operated often unconsciously can be examined, and in some cases, discarded as invalid (11).

Chapter 1, "The Call to Preach", compares contemporary and nineteenth and early twentieth century testimonies regarding vocational convictions, and draws out recurrent themes and theological issues (e.g., to some extent, language about "rights" is replacing language about "call"). Chapter 2, "Role Models and the Woman Preacher", surveys the role models

commonly named by women preachers, examines what they do for women preachers, and what effect the lack of certain role models may have. For example, a significant role model is simply seeing and hearing another woman preach—yet how seldom is there opportunity for this! Chapter 3, “Claiming and Exercising Authority”, reveals that women identify and claim authority “more readily in the ministries of word and sacrament than in the ministry of ‘order’ (parish leadership and administration)” (49). After analyzing why this is so, Norén suggests strategies to help the woman preacher develop competence and confidence in this latter area. Chapter 4, “Self-Disclosure in Women’s Preaching”, examines self-disclosure in the two areas of illustration and biographical reference, and nonverbal communication. The fact of the matter is that communication disturbances in women’s preaching tend to be blamed on her gender, thus reinforcing societal stereotypes. Chapter 5, “Women Preachers and Biblical Interpretation”, demonstrates that features of liberation and/or feminist hermeneutics appear in women’s sermons even when the preacher does not share these perspectives. Chapter 6, “Theology in Metaphor and Grammar”, considers the matters of theological language, “intuitive” versus “directive” language in communication, and the ways in which syntax “reinforces or undermines authority and credibility in the pulpit” (115). Chapter 7, “Women Preachers and Liturgy”, notes that while women leaders of worship generally adopt the worship patterns of their church, their creative “liturgies for women” (normally not designed for main Sunday services) “are vulnerable to faddism, the oppression of individual idiosyncrasy, and unwitting heresy” (163).

I deeply appreciate this book on several counts. It allows me to overhear women speaking about all the tasks and dynamics involved in preaching. I need to listen not only because I teach homiletics, but because when I preach over half of my listeners are listening to me differently from the rest and “reading” me differently from the rest. Secondly, I am impressed by her theological and biblical faithfulness. In speaking about inclusive language, for example, she insists that “trinitarian dogma, christological centrality, and biblical warrant take precedence over gender issues” (124); again, she worries about vague or truncated Christology in women’s liturgies and prayers (161); she is aware that the tendency of women preachers to focus on the dynamics of relationship evidenced in a text can seriously narrow the interpretive spectrum and avoid other or more difficult issues in the text (107, 112–113). Thirdly, Norén does an outstanding job of maintaining a balanced stance. It would be easy to slide into an ideological frame, say that of liberation or feminist theology, or to be overwhelmed by the sense of injustice (well, why shouldn’t a woman preacher put her hand on her hip and sound like mother? After all, men have long been fatherly!). I suppose ardent feminists will find her over-cautious, but she stands firmly in the Christian tradition (*vis-a-vis* so much contemporary individualism), she remains profoundly aware that preaching happens in a community, and (no doubt ruefully at times!) knows that communication is not only difficult at all times but often doubly difficult for women because even though the

presence of a *woman* in the pulpit breaks female stereotypes, what she says and how she says it may in fact reinforce those stereotypes. Fourthly, the book is wonderfully well organized, with appropriate summaries and sub-headings. Each chapter poses the problem, analyzes its several dimensions in practical ways, and draws out implications. (Only in the last chapter did I have difficulty following her, and I'm still not sure why I get *six* characteristics of "liberation feminist liturgies" to her stated *five* nor why they are sometimes called "assumptions".)

Should men read this book? YES! YES! YES! Though the book is intentionally addressed to women preachers, I found myself again and again reflecting on my own call, my own hermeneutics, my use of language, my concepts of authority, my metaphors for God, and, yes, my world of stereotypes of women.

I hope the book gets the widest possible circulation, not only among preachers, but discussion groups and pulpit committees as well. Thank you, Professor Norén!

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Ministry Burnout

John A. Sanford

Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992

XII + 117 pages U.S. \$8.99

This edition of *Ministry Burnout* is a reprint of the book first published in 1982. However, its topic is by no means outdated, and neither is the book. In the foreword to this edition, Morton Kelsey says that "John Sanford gives us tools that enable us to be faithful and yet avoid the disaster of hopelessness and burnout." This is indeed an apt description of what Sanford does in the book. In fact, Sanford himself describes the book as "a kind of cookbook: a list of recipes that have [sic] proved useful to some people" (115).

The format that Sanford uses is easy to grasp and simple to follow. He begins by laying out the "ground rules", as it were, and gives the intended audience of the book as those "whose profession it is to minister to other people through the Church" (1). He then proceeds to point out nine special difficulties that ministering persons face which can contribute to burnout. Each of the succeeding chapters, then, addresses one of these difficulties. The difficulties include having a job that is never done, seeing a lack of tangible results from one's work, and being involved in repetitive work. Dealing with people's expectations, working with the same people year after year, and the drain on one's energy from working with people in need