

## Consensus

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Volume 18  
Issue 1 *Issues in Church Life*

Article 25

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5-1-1992

# Imagination of the Heart: New Understandings in Preaching

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### Recommended Citation

Nevile, Donald C. (1992) "Imagination of the Heart: New Understandings in Preaching," *Consensus*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 1 , Article 25.  
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol18/iss1/25>

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This is a worthy book. A fine introduction to major church "fathers", it allows one to compare them, e.g., the ethereal and dense Athanasius and the refreshing Gregory of Nazianzus who is not afraid to reveal himself—even his angers and hurts. The homilies themselves provide glimpses into the times and the opportunity to observe Christianity engaged in apologetic, polemical, and definitive struggles. Perhaps most of all, we see here the roots of our own preaching and preaching traditions, and revel in the great company of the divine Word.

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### **Imagination of the Heart: New Understandings in Preaching**

Paul Scott Wilson  
Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988  
265 pp. \$20.25

There are any number of books in print that tell you to be more creative homiletically. This is the first one that actually attempts to teach you how! Paul Wilson, Associate Professor of homiletics at Toronto's Emmanuel College, a seminary of the United Church of Canada, is also a novelist, a fact which brings an added dimension to his writing.

His book has a twofold purpose: "to develop a method for biblical preaching that incorporates recent learnings from a variety of disciplines including homiletics", and "to help preachers who share my ongoing struggle to spread the wings of imagination when exploring the Bible" (12). An additional purpose given is "to develop some guidelines for preaching that will assist those exploring current homiletical developments" (25).

Wilson acknowledges his indebtedness to David Tracy, Gerhard Ebeling, George and David Buttrick, John Dominic Crossan, Sallie McFague, and a number of other lesser modern scholars. In pragmatic terms, Wilson promises that his method "can help reduce the time needed to prepare for preaching, improve the quality of preaching, and can easily be adapted by those doing simpler forms of preaching" (18). What is the method and imaginative force behind these amazing claims?

Wilson explains the key to his title in this way: imagination is "the bringing together of two ideas that might not otherwise be connected, and developing the creative energy they create" (32). This, he claims, is his unique contribution. Imagination, then, has to do with the insight generated between polarities in language, experience, and thought. And the spark of imagination occurs when ideas that are "poles apart" and entirely distinct, "spark" to create a new connection. Like our successful personal

relationships, imagination is the result of two ideas or opposites brought into relationship. This concept is of course related to the idea of metaphor, and Wilson acknowledges his debt to those who put him onto the significance of metaphor for thought, Ong, Ricoeur, and Teselle.

Imagination, so conceived, Wilson says, can revitalize old Christian words and ideas which are worn out and no longer have currency among most Christians. By creating new juxtapositions and relationships, words like *salvation*, *redemption*, *cross*, etc. can come alive again in preaching. Formally speaking, he suggests four polarities that will have broad implications for such imaginative preaching, and which can act as spark-points for imagination: (a) The biblical text and our situation; (b) Law and Gospel; (c) Story and doctrine; (d) Pastor and prophet.

The structure of his book parallels the seven days of the week, thus following the weekly process of sermon preparation. SUNDAY is the day of theoretical meditation and preparation. MONDAY is the day to consider the biblical text and our human situation. Here we meet now-familiar polarity between "the concerns of the text and the concerns of the sermon", and one is encouraged to use imagination in looking for flash-points between the two.

TUESDAY one considers the tension between Law and Gospel. Drawing freely from Herman Steumpfle's *Preaching Law and Gospel*, Wilson does a good job of illustrating the age-old distinction (and confusion) between these two terms. He suggests a very traditional and simple homiletical movement from Law to Gospel, but with a distinctive feature: the movement should contain a "reversal point", where Gospel imaginatively transcends and takes over from Law.

WEDNESDAY is the day for story and doctrine, when imagination helps doctrine to become experience. Wilson insists that these two must inform one another to achieve homiletical balance, and thus shifts the sermon's focus away from *teaching* toward *invitation to faith* and *response*. Suggesting that the form of a sermon is more aptly compared to music or flowing water than to static forms like sculpture and architecture, he recommends the pre-sermonic discipline of charting the flow and loops and spirals of the homily as a way of planning its imaginative movement.

THURSDAY, FRIDAY, and SATURDAY are days to consider the dialectic between pastor and prophet, and to deal with this point of tension and spark. This is of greatest importance, and balance is needed to avoid the dangers of narrowness (being too pastoral) and bitterness (being too prophetic). His solution is to expand one's doctrine of time, space, evil, and prophecy, beyond confrontation and criticism to include dreaming and imagining, by raising sensitive issues not through *facts* but through *story* and *experience*. A story, which can be found or created (by identifying the human struggle behind an issue, and then telling a parable about a different issue but the same struggle), must stand on its own, with a minimum of reflection and application.

SUNDAY provides a brief conclusion, and a sermon from Wilson himself, based on Luke 20:27-38, prepared for a Remembrance Day occasion.

The book is challenging, especially to those with little innate imaginative capability: one is compelled to follow the thoughts of a preacher who also has a natural talent for imaginative creation. There are many structural helps throughout, all of which illustrate that the imaginative process which Wilson describes is not simply some innate, God-given talent, but is 90% perspiration. His seven-day structure of chapters appears to be imaginative as well, and not to be taken literally or practically as a normal weekly routine. Nevertheless, his emphasis on the imaginative side of preaching comes as a welcome course adjustment to our preaching pilgrimage. There is theological foundation here: imagination and story are not proposed at the price of exegesis or doctrine, but seen as a fulfillment of these in the communicative process.

The fact that this reviewer has found Wilson's theory difficult to put into practise should not be seen as a criticism of his method: it is more likely an indication of its depth and eventual usefulness. Read the book, and use it: but be aware that imaginative preaching will be preceded by blood, sweat, and tears!

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