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A New Hearing: Living Options in Homiletic Method

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A mixed blessing of the book, and others like it on preaching, is that the sermons included are top-notch—hardly an encouragement to the average preacher who struggles weekly with limited imagination and scholarly resources! This reviewer especially found the sermon by Dennis Willis an astonishing tour-de-force: “Noah was a Good Man” (Genesis 7–8–9). Buy the book for this sermon alone!

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A New Hearing: Living Options in Homiletic Method

Richard L. Eslinger

Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987

191 pp. \$14.80

Richard Eslinger, who teaches homiletics at Duke University Divinity School, places himself clearly in the camp of those who believe “. . . that the old topical/conceptual approach to preaching is critically, if not terminally, ill” (11). The “propositions and illustrations” style of preaching is over the hill, he says, being routinely met with “blank stares and congregational inattention” (11). Its ideas and illustrations, he claims, rarely connect, and little of its form or substance finds its way into the consciousness, faith, or life of its listeners.

There is no lack of alternate theories for the concerned preacher today. The problem is to make sense of the plethora of contemporary styles. Eslinger, rather than providing an exhaustive survey of the whole homiletic terrain, observes that there are three newer basic styles of preaching emerging from the old orthodoxy: an inductive approach, a narrative or story form, and a method based on the movement and structure of the biblical text.

In this book, Eslinger looks at the methods of five major contemporary homileticians who represent these three trends: Charles Rice (storytelling), Henry Mitchell (black narrative preaching), Fred Craddock (inductive preaching), Eugene Lowry (narrative and inductive forms), and David Buttrick (structure and form within the text). After giving an explication of the method of each of these and an evaluation of their method, Eslinger includes a sermon by each person, representing his style.

The idea behind this book is a good one. To acquire, read, and absorb the homiletical texts written by these five scholars, much less to put the theory into homiletical practise, would be a formidable task. Eslinger provides us with enough explanation and detail to understand what each individual is trying to communicate homiletically, and to try it out for ourselves. At

any rate, this reviewer found it possible to create flexible homiletic worksheets that reflect the theories of Rice, Craddock, and Lowry from Eslinger's descriptions: these have served as practical entries into the homiletic styles of these three teachers.

Several criticisms of the book are in order. The chapter on Henry Mitchell's "Narrative in the Black Tradition", will unfortunately, not be perceived as particularly useful to most Canadian Lutheran preachers! And the chapter on David Buttrick's phenomenological method does not give one an adequate coverage or grasp of his theory. Eslinger acknowledges the total uniqueness of Buttrick's style, and, given the sheer size of Buttrick's recent publication on *Homiletic*, it is perhaps not surprising that Eslinger is unable to summarize it adequately in one chapter!

Finally, one cannot help but wonder if these "new homileticians" have been over-zealous and hasty in passing a death sentence on the so-called "old homiletics". Despite the rise of newer styles of proclamation, the Word of God is still offered in the traditional discursive style week after week in most churches of our tradition around the world. Millions of Lutherans avoid falling asleep, and still attest that for them this is the high point of their worship experience, the place where they encounter and wrestle with the Word of God. Why and how do these new homileticians claim that "The old rational homiletics is obsolete" (133)? By all means, let us give these living options a hearing. But to claim that all past styles are dead is inaccurate and unfair.

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Sin As Addiction

Patrick McCormick

New York: Paulist Press, 1989

200 pp.

Patrick McCormick, who is a professor of moral theology at Mary Immaculate Seminary in Northampton, Pennsylvania, has written a book on *sin* to be considered supplemental to and with others like Karl Menninger's *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1973) or M. Scott Peck's *People of the Lie* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983).

In the first chapter "The Mystery of Sin: A Crisis", McCormick contends that "we are in the midst of a storm over sin. In a place where there used to be clear and evident terms, precise definitions and rather universal consensus we now find ourselves confronted with confusion, ambivalence and, often enough, a puzzling silence" (1). He is as concerned about the "puzzling silence" as he is about what is happening to the whole "sense of