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Divine Voice: Christian Proclamation and the Theology of Sound (Book Review)

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Webb, Stephen H. *The Divine Voice: Christian Proclamation and the Theology of Sound*. Grand Rapids, Michigan, Brazos Press, 2004. 244 pages. ISBN 9781587430787. Reviewed by Teresa TerHaar, Associate Professor of Theatre Arts, Dordt College.

What do sound, preaching, theatre, listening, stage fright, and silence all have to do with each other? Many things, according to Stephen H. Webb in his book *The Divine Voice: Christian Proclamation and the Theology of Sound*. Webb's engaging and sometimes chaotic book attempts to recapture the "sound" of worship in our lives today. He argues that we have lost touch with how God speaks to us. Often we fill our lives and worship with mere noise. It is only when we stop and listen carefully to the many sounds of God's voice that we can then begin to speak of Him (and make our own sounds). Along the way, *The Divine Voice* creates a provocative "noise" of ideas in the reader's head. I found myself struggling to make sense of the many threads Webb weaves together in the course of his argument. Yet, upon finishing the book, I decided this struggle was well worth my time.

A varied audience will find this book engaging. Anyone interested in the ideas of sound, speaking, voice, listening, and how they connect with theology, church history, and worship should read this book. In particular, those working in the areas of communication, music, speech pathology, theatre, and theology would find much to reinvigorate their thinking in these areas. *The Divine Voice* is a rare book in that it provides explicit links among these disciplines. Webb, a professor of religion and philosophy at Wabash College, moves seamlessly among discussions of a theology of sound, of rhetorical skill in communication, and contemporary vocal training for actors. The Religious Communication Association recognized Webb's work when they awarded *The Divine Voice* their Book of the Year award in 2005.

Webb structures the book in three parts: the first surveys the biblical tradition of the voice as medium of God's revelation in the Bible, the second explores the Protestant Reformation as a revival of that tradition, and the third discusses how that tradition has been transformed by contemporary culture. At the core of the book are Webb's reflections on the "acoustemology of the church." He wants to interrogate the "proper relationship of the sound of worship to the voice of the sermon" (27). Webb calls this a "theo-acoustics," or a theology of sound. In part, he traces the ever-changing history of the sermon and how differing perspectives on the sermon can actually affect Christian doctrine. Along the way he continually challenges the reader to consider the hypothesis that listening carefully is more important than the sounds we make. This argument is an interesting one when read in the light of the traditional centrality of both the Word and words in the Protestant tradition. Webb also discusses the role of deafness in Christian history and various theological debates over the question of how God created the world

through sound.

Two chapters deserve special mention. The first is Webb's analysis of a "theo-acoustics." He uses the work of Walter Ong, Jesuit historian and cultural critic, as a touchstone. Although Webb does point out some limitations to Ong's arguments about sound and listening, Webb finds them useful as a starting point towards understanding the idea of God's "divine voice" and our call to listen through faith. Ong is acutely interested in the importance of hearing and listening. Webb summarizes some of Ong's key ideas, writing "The idea that we are most present to each other in sound is also true about God's relationship to us. Only the sense of hearing can do justice to the way God is simultaneously with us and beyond us" (39). Hearing puts us in touch with another person in an intimate way at the same time that, paradoxically, it preserves some distance between us. Our relationship with God is somewhat similar. We hear God's voice, and it affects us powerfully, but we do not have access to His physical presence. As a result, the spoken word is enhanced into something more deeply spiritual, Ong argues. This chapter provides a good foundation for the remainder of the book.

The other significant chapter is titled "Freeing the Christian Voice." In it, Webb uses the work of well-known vocal coach Kristin Linklater. Linklater has developed one of the best-known systems for teaching voice for the actor. Her book, *Freeing the Natural Voice*, details her perspective that the voice embodies the body—one cannot only train the voice but must work with the whole human body. Webb's analysis of Linklater's ideas is remarkable. He reconceptualizes her work as almost theological at its basis: speaking is the ultimate act of embodiment, or the Word made flesh. He then traces the ideas of voice, word, and gender, using the stories of Mary and the women at the tomb. It is wonderfully ironic that God used the women at the tomb to reveal the truth of Christ's resurrection. They heard the angel speak the truth before they saw the truth. Then, the women, whose voices at the time were deemed unimportant by the men, spoke the good news to the disciples. Finally, Webb outlines what the "natural voice" of God might sound like. Interestingly, he argues that Jesus is the natural voice of God. Webb's use of Linklater's work in this way opens up new ways of thinking about and using her work for theatre practitioners of faith.

At the heart of my struggle while reading *The Divine Voice* is the eclectic nature of this book. This is both its greatest strength and greatest challenge. It is as if the book does not quite know what it wants to be—a contemporary theological treatise or a historical overview of Christian speaking or even a manual on Christian speaking and

listening. It is all of these things and more. Webb winds together threads from many disciplines, jumping from theology to history to actor training to Moses to the church fathers to contemporary theologians to his own story. At times dizzying and always thought-provoking, Webb's grasp of all of these disciplines and ideas is impressive. His use of personal examples appears like a breath of fresh air or, more appropriately, like a pause in the middle of a complicated speech. Stylistically, Webb's work is almost creative writing rather than scholarly writing. Although some may be bothered by his more lyrical passages, I enjoyed how they engaged my senses in multiple ways. He writes,

We do not speak first and then think about God as speaking too. On the contrary, we can speak only because God created us to be hearers of God's Word. We are created in God's image, but that image is more like an echo than a mirror. God spoke us into being so that we too might have the joy of sharing in the spoken Word (15).

Webb's use of language is evocative. The sound of his language is part of the pleasure in reading this book.

Ultimately, Webb challenges us to reconsider how we live in a noisy world. Most significantly, he argues that the contemporary church must conceive of the Bible as an oral book. We need to develop our auditory imaginations by hearing the scripture in a new way. We must read scripture out loud to discover the "voice" of the text. This means using all the skills of the art of rhetoric. God authorized scripture to be written, and in the same way He authorizes readers to sound it according to his will. This should change our worship as a result. Silence, music, and the voice no longer sound quite the same after reading *The Divine Voice*. Fittingly, the last pages of the book offer a glimpse of what sound will be like in heaven: "In heaven, our voices will no longer be carried along by vibrations but instead will travel at the speed of grace, and the divine voice will sound amazingly sweet" (239). This is a soundscape to long for.

Erratum

In the March issue, Jim Schaap's article, "Reverence, Mystery, and Christian Education," states the following: "One quick story: Many here remember Rev. Tony Van Zanten, who ministered faithfully at Roseland, suburban Chicago, before he was called home" (38). Dr. Schaap and the editor of *Pro Rege* deeply regret the error. Rev. Tony Van Zanten lives in the Chicago area.