Book Review

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PREACHING JESUS: NEW DIRECTIONS FOR HOMILETICS IN HANS FREI'S POSTLIBERAL THEOLOGY by Charles L. Campbell. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997.

Charles Campbell has provided a timely and significant application of the principles of postliberalism to the task of preaching. He challenges preachers to jettison the liberal belief that Christian faith can be grounded in universal and prereflective core experiences. He encourages preachers to rethink Christianity as a comprehensive and communal set of regulative principles and practices that, in turn, structure beliefs and experiences. These principles and practices are rooted in the unique identity of Jesus of Nazareth as it is rendered in the Christian narrative.

The first half of the book summarizes Hans Frei's thought and the later postliberal extension of that thought by George A. Lindbeck. Campbell shows how Frei turned away from the liberal critical assumption that the meaning of the biblical text resides in an experiential referent outside the text itself. Frei instituted a "non-referential" exegetical practice in which the meaning of biblical texts remains internal to the logic and language of the texts themselves. Texts do not refer to anything outside of the world that they construe. The world that the text construes is the Christian community itself which, in turn, plays a vital role in the interpretation of the text. The text, therefore, is not autonomous, rather it is enmeshed in the context of the rules and conventions of the community of faith and practice. Campbell underscores the liturgical, proclamatory, and open-ended nature of this context of communal interpretation.

In the second part of the book, Campbell sets forth a critique of contemporary homiletics and outlines a postliberal alternative. According to Campbell, story and inductive preaching are part of the liberal tradition which, by seeking to correlate the Christian message with human experience, manage to absorb Jesus into human experience in such a way that Jesus loses his unique identity. Campbell rejects Fred Craddock's inductive method because it encourages the subordination of Christ to a liberal theology of human experience. Likewise, story and narrative preachers such as Edmund Steimle and Eugene Lowry tend to give the story of the world priority over the story of the Bible.

The option Campbell presents is a new kind of narrative preaching that takes as its primary function the task of rendering fully the unique character of Jesus of Nazareth. Campbell urges a shift of emphasis from plot to character in how narrative preaching is conceptualized. In essence, the preacher's task is to observe how character and incident interact in the biblical texts in such a way as to bring to life Jesus "as a unique, unsubstitutable person"(191).

According to Campbell, preachers should become wary of beginning sermons with human experience. Better to start with the particulars of the biblical story so that sermons are more likely to incorporate the "ascriptive logic at the heart of the gospels" (193). This logic is the very grammar of Christian faith, a grammar that must be learned

if we are to know and understand who Jesus is. Once this logic has been honored, and Jesus' identity has been faithfully rendered, then preachers can turn to the business of locating and proclaiming appropriate "counter-imagry" and "counter-speech" (219) which will shape the community of faith in the contemporary world.

Those who agree with Karl Barth that there is no "point of contact" for God's revelation in human experience, will welcome this book as a methodologically sophisticated homiletical advance. Liberal and liberal-revisionist preachers will probably go on the attack. For others, however, one question lingers.

Is the polarity between the biblical text and experience overstated? Campbell shares with postliberals a vehement certainty that there must be a polarity between text and experience. Ironically, this polarity is mirrored by many within the liberal tradition, who simply reverse the polarity by making experience prior and text secondary. What is lost, in this chicken-egg epistemological warfare, it would seem, are the many ways that text and experience are interwoven.

When the interrelatedness of text and experience is denied, aspects of the illuminative work of the Holy Spirit in preaching are potentially thwarted. In Campbell's book, the *verbum externum* is given the more active and creative role in preaching. The *verbum internum* is narrowed to a relatively passive capacity to receive and learn the grammar of the external word and to incorporate extratextual reality into the world of the biblical text. The Holy Spirit borne witness to *in the biblical text*, however, is active and responsive, always challenging and transforming the textual narrative itself. Without this sense of the Spirit who lives beyond, within, and through the text, it is likely that "preaching Jesus" will mean "preaching the textuality of Jesus" or the "text-Jesus" and not "preaching the living Christ."

Is it not possible to understand the Christian faith as *both* textualized experience *and* experienced text? A sense of the interwovenness of text and experience would encourage generosity toward at least one aspect of story and inductive preaching: the focus on the play of various forms of *imagination* as that which both differentiates and conjoins text and experience in homiletical practice.

In the first place, the Spirit both reveals and protests the tension between experience and the eschatological world of the biblical text. The Spirit in preaching urges the preacher to textualize experience, to *persuade experience to meet the text.* Campbell underscores this aspect of the Spirit's illuminative work in preaching with his view of preaching as ultimately "figural imagination," "counter-speech" and "resistance." Indeed, *Preaching Jesus* is a brilliant apologetic and primer for the homiletical task of textualizing experience.

In the second place, however, the Spirit both reveals and protests the tension between the text and present eschatological experiences of the Spirit in society and history (historical examples include the abolitionist movement, the civil rights movement, the women's movement, and anti-apartheid movements). Through and beyond the text, the Spirit is creating new correspondences (signs and wonders) which substantiate God's providential care and the inauguration of the messianic age. This aspect of the Spirit's illuminative work urges the preacher to "experientialize" the text, to *persuade the text to meet experience.* In the biblical witness, and throughout the history of preaching, this has been largely (if somewhat ineptly) accomplished through allegorical, analogical, and metaphorical forms of imagination, as well as through conceptual and contextual forms of hermeneutics. Campbell's theological method,

however, precludes most, if not all of these synthetic and dialectical functions of the Spirit and imagination in preaching.

Through both of these "persuasions" (of experience by text and text by experience) something of either experience or text is potentially lost, overlooked, betrayed, or distorted. And yet, if the Spirit is both inside, outside, and through both text and experience, then preachers must allow both text and experience to persuade each other in the homiletical task. In this sense, perhaps the fundamental "grammar" of the Christian faith is this interactive and persuasive grammar of the Spirit, which includes, is bound by, but is not limited to, the ascriptive grammar of the biblical text.

Preaching Jesus is the sort of book that is needed today in homiletics. It demonstrates a clear understanding of the biblical, social, ecclesial, and theological issues surrounding contemporary preaching and goes a long way toward developing a homiletic that will meet this context with integrity and transforming power. Charles Campbell's next task is to continue this journey and establish ways to creatively and constructively practice postliberal preaching on a week to week basis. Meanwhile, his passion for canon and community, his deep commitment to preaching Jesus with integrity, and his awareness that preaching must be rooted in practices of faithful living and ministry are challenging and inspiring.