

One New Book for the Preacher

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ALL IS FORGIVEN: THE SECULAR MESSAGE IN AMERICAN PROTESTANTISM by Marsha G. Witten. Princeton University Press, 1993. 179 pp.

This is one of the most provocative essays on Protestant preaching I have read in quite some time. By random sample Witten selected one hundred and fifty pastors of Presbyterian (U.S.A.) churches with memberships over eight hundred, and one hundred and fifty pastors of Southern Baptist churches with memberships over one thousand, and asked them for a recent sermon on Luke 15:11-32, the Parable of the Prodigal Son. She received seventy-one sermons of which forty-seven (twenty-six Presbyterian and twenty-one Baptist) were suitable for her purposes.

She then used a form of discourse analysis in order to identify, first, "major patterns of talk" (topics and categories) and, second, structures such as metaphors and similes, symbolic boundaries, arguments, stylistic devices, and rhetorical absences in the sermons.

Witten's purpose in all of this is to examine how two Protestant denominations have responded to the issues raised by modernity and secularism. She selected the Parable of the Prodigal Son because it has been a central text in Protestant preaching, it is a "favorite" text of preachers, and it does not have an obvious interpretation.

In this sample of sermons Witten discovered three strategies for responding to secularism. The first she describes as accommodation, which can take the form of privatization (religion is taken out of the public arena and confined to the private domain), pluralization (religion is increasingly understood to be a "market commodity" with the utilitarian function of making people feel good by means of therapeutic categories), and rationalization (emphasis is given to techniques and the simplification of doctrine). The second strategy is resistance and it may involve resacralization (the reinjection of sacred talk), building cohesion around core claims, or the drawing of symbolic boundaries that separate truth from error. The third strategy Witten describes as reframing. Here the primary function of religious language is not so much to formulate propositions as to provide holistic meaning "to people as individuals, by supplying overarching significance to the whole of life: to people as members of collectives, by orienting them around shared symbols in community" (p. 29). By reframing, Witten appears to have, among others, the work of George Linbeck in mind.

Witten discusses the forty-seven sermons in terms of their dominant images of God, their attitudes toward the world, their interpretations of sin, and their understandings of selfhood and the experience of conversion.

What she discovers is deeply disturbing to this seventeenth-century Calvinist reviewer. The transcendence, holiness, and righteousness of God have been traded in for interpretations of God as daddy, sufferer, and extravagant lover. As Witten puts it, "This is a God whose transcendent qualities have, for the most part, disappeared; a God who, in his immanence and understanding, smiles benevolently on the age of psychology" (p. 132). Furthermore, "The listener always knows how this God will act.

This God is not subject to flashes of anger, unpredictable episodes of vengeance, or actions based on hidden reasons” (p. 135). While the God in these sermons is loving and predictable, one cannot help but wonder how this plausible God can be made compatible with the God of the Bible who, as Jack Miles has recently demonstrated in *God: A Biography*, is anything but simple, rational, predictable, and plausible.

These sermons also indicate that contemporary preachers in the modern, secular world have considerable difficulty with traditional understandings of sin. Any understanding of the reality of original sin seems to have disappeared. Witten identifies a number of devices preachers use to “cushion” or “soften” the notion of sin, including depersonalization, selectivity, deflection, and therapeutic tolerance, in which “sin is translated as errant behavior, explanations for misdeeds are sought in the social context rather than in the individual, and the response of judgment is replaced by that of empathy” (p. 101).

Several questions can and should be raised about Witten’s methodology. For example, is her “sample” of forty-seven sermons large enough to justify her generalizations and conclusions? In an appendix she briefly discusses the histories of the Presbyterian and Southern Baptist churches, but there is not much acknowledgment of the theological differences between Reformed and Anabaptist traditions and how these theological commitments might be reflected in exegesis and proclamation. These theological differences, for example, might explain why Presbyterians are less likely than Baptists to view the world as a pigpen to be avoided by faithful people and why Baptists are more likely than Presbyterians to understand conversion as an act of the will. Witten does point out that one reality of the contemporary secular world is that churches can no longer “rely on adherence as a matter of tradition” (p. 77).

Perhaps even more surprising, given Witten’s sociological perspective, is that she says nothing about the contexts in which these sermons were preached. We are told virtually nothing about the churches, except their size and denominational affiliation, or the larger social setting in which the sermons were preached.

These issues aside, this is an important book all Protestant preachers should read. If Witten’s sample is representative of Protestant preaching, then difficult but important questions have to be asked. Have Presbyterians really sold their theological birthright with its commitment to the sovereignty of God’s grace and the enormity of human sin for a pottage of interpersonal relationships and self-help therapy? Why in the world would anyone want to hear this tripe and why would anyone understand it to be “good news?”