

One New Book for the Preacher

F. Harry Daniel

Decatur Presbyterian Church, Decatur, Georgia

PREACHING THE LECTIONARY—A WORKBOOK FOR YEAR A,
by Perry H. Biddle, Jr. Louisville: Westminster Press, 1989

A standard criticism of lectionaries is that they are highly selective and atomistic. That is a truism. Nevertheless commentaries on lectionaries, workbooks or other forms, are vulnerable to similar criticism: they are little more than random thoughts about a text.

The difficulties of achieving a successful outcome are complicated by the two components of the hermeneutical processes. First, the text has to be understood in its original contexts: historical-social (the world out of which the text comes) and the literary (the world of the text). Our tools are scientific, exegetical, and literary. We are establishing the stability of the text. Second, the text must be translated into a contemporary context if the integrity of the text is to be honored and preserved. At this point our tools are creative imagination, analogy, knowledge of the world in which we live, plus experience, our own and that of our congregated people to whom we speak. Any text is about ourselves. It speaks because it rings true to human life and captures our hearts and imaginations. In this aspect we are exploring the adaptability of the text.

Perry Biddle is clearly aware of the magnitude of the task. He does as well as any, and better than most. He is called upon to provide a meditation on the texts, commentary, theological reflection, children's message, hymn selections, introduction, liturgical background, and bibliography.

The meditations are by far the best and show remarkable sensitivity. The commentary has moments of great insight, one could almost say brilliant, but there are occasions when the reader is invited to accept a bundle of generalizations that simply won't stand up to critical analysis. There has been an explosion of knowledge in this area that has yet to filter into the preaching ministry of the church. On occasion one longs for incisive definition of some major terms such as "myth" in the commentary on 2 Peter 1:16-19 (p. 106). A more nuanced reading would have been beneficial.

There is more to theological reflection than simply repeating the content of a text. This component is weak and most often underdeveloped. On page 92 one wants to ask: What is the meaning of righteousness? What does Jesus share in common with the scribes and Pharisees? How does he move beyond their conception? Does he agree with them more than he disagrees?

Children's sermons are, as a rough generalization, moralistic. The preaching ministry needs to recover a healthy conception of the power of stories. Dr. Biddle moves in that direction but takes only a first step.

This book will help you in lectionary preaching. It is a good place to start.

Begin there, but do not end there. As Dr. Biddle says, “The usefulness of the workbook will depend to a large degree on the work that you, the preacher, put into sermon preparation each week.”