

One New Book for the Preacher

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THE WITNESS OF PREACHING, by Thomas G. Long, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989. 216 pages, \$13.95.

Foundational works in homiletics normally stir interest only within seminary classrooms, without having much impact at all on preachers already in the parish who face the relentlessness of Sundays and who are perhaps most in need of new light and new possibilities. Such an assumption on my part was reinforced during a conversation last summer with a dozen ministerial colleagues of various denominational backgrounds. We were talking about what we had been reading recently; some excellent novels were mentioned, and some important titles in the areas of biblical studies and pastoral theology. But when I asked specifically about books in the field of homiletical theory and practice, there was silence. As it turned out, only two of us had read anything in the field in years. And yet, in the years since most of us graduated from seminary, the whole realm of homiletics has undergone a quantum shift in emphasis, leaving these other colleagues and their three-point outlines behind. It is a deep sense of loss for the preaching ministry of the church rather than any professional self-righteousness that leads me to bemoan the homiletical illiteracy of some of my colleagues.

Although there have been a number of significant works in recent years redefining the ministry of preaching, three stand out in my mind as especially important; Fred Craddock's *Preaching* (Abingdon, 1985), David Buttrick's *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Fortress Press, 1987), and more recently Thomas G. Long's *The Witness of Preaching* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989). I would urge a careful reading of all three as a way of freeing the preacher from bondage to old models and offering some helpful, new ways to approach text and congregation alike. However, since this journal seeks to recommend just "one new book," I want to give particular emphasis to Long's *The Witness of Preaching*. As the most recent of the three, this volume affords the reader a critical perspective on the development of thought in both Craddock's and Buttrick's approaches, along with Long's own persuasive suggestions. Long's critiques of his colleagues are appreciative and sensitive, enabling him to build on the substantial contributions they have made, while clearly moving out in a different direction from both.

The Witness of Preaching is a basic text, offering student preachers a helpful outline of an approach to exegesis and sermon development, including tools for reading both the text and the congregation. The suggestions, however, are fresh and reasonable enough to provide stimulus for any preacher, from the most skillful exegete to those who have long since settled into the comfortable routine of commentary-generated sermon outlines. To say that Long offers an eleven-step exegetical method is probably enough to scare away those who

already cram their sermon preparation into an already hectic schedule; but even a few of the suggestions, taken to heart, will afford some productive reflections on the biblical text.

Beyond the how-to sections, however, Long offers significant and substantial contributions in two specific areas, which merit the careful reading of all who stand regularly before congregations to preach. The first contribution is Long's understanding of what it means to preach, which he addresses in the very first, foundational pages of the book. Reflecting on the seemingly mundane logistical matter of the variety of ways worship leaders enter a chancel, he argues that, theologically speaking, they always come "from *within* the community of faith and not *to* it from outside" (p. 10). It is an important distinction:

What is at stake here is not a liturgical quarrel over the mechanics of how worship leaders get into place. Local circumstances and traditions will always dictate different patterns for that. What is at stake is the more urgent matter of how worship leaders, including preachers, understand themselves and their leadership roles in relationship to the community of faith. . . . Preachers come to the pulpit from *somewhere*, and unless we can name that place, we risk misunderstanding who we are and what we are supposed to be doing in the pulpit. When we who preach open the sanctuary door on Sunday morning and find a congregation waiting there for us, it is easy to forget that we come *from* these people, not *to* them from outside (p. 11).

This fundamental assumption undergirds the way Long deals with the prevailing images of the preacher; the herald, the pastor, and the storyteller. It also prepares the way for his own suggestion of a new image: that of *witness*. Long employs the language of the court trial, as he describes the witness as one who comes from among the people to be placed on the stand because of two basic credentials: he/she has seen something, and is willing to tell the truth about it (p. 43).

The something the preacher has seen, of course, is the claim of the Gospel. Long stresses the normative place of the Bible in preaching; biblical preaching, he says, should be the rule and not the exception (p. 49). But once again, the congregation is also important:

The picture of the preacher sitting alone in the study, working with a biblical text in preparation for the sermon, is misleading. It is not the preacher who goes to the scripture; it is the church that goes to the scripture by means of the preacher (p. 43).

The second area of significant contribution is Long's treatment of the "form" of the sermon in chapters 5 and 6. These chapters rehearse and evaluate the traditional approach of sermon outlining, along with the more recent contributions of Craddock's inductive approach, Eugene Lowry's narrative form, and Buttrick's series of moves from idea to idea in "snapshot" form. Long helpfully cautions that "no one form is adequate to display the fullness of the gospel," (p. 105) and then offers some hints for finding a suitable sermon

form for a given sermon. He had previously offered some help in this area in another volume, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Fortress Press, 1989).

One final word: Long does not deal with preaching as an isolated activity, but places it rightly within the context of worship, and worship within the whole activity of the life of the church. His passion for the church and for the integrity of its preaching is evident on every page. Such passion serves him well, and offers much promise for those who give *The Witness of Preaching* a serious reading.