

One New Book for the Preacher

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THE FOUR CODES OF PREACHING: RHETORICAL STRATEGIES, by John S. McClure. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991. 201 pages.

John McClure writes for the pastor who has done her exegesis and knows pretty much what she wants to say, but wonders how to make a sermon out of it. For the preacher in this situation, McClure develops, not a single, normative approach to preaching, but rather a general rhetorical schema for organizing the verbal components of the sermon within a variety of theological positions, homiletical styles, and congregational contexts. His goal is to enable preachers with diverse “homiletical profiles” to communicate as clearly and intentionally as possible within their particular local churches. As readers of this review will soon see, McClure’s concepts and terminology are often difficult, but his book is important; those willing to persevere will find it a valuable resource for their preaching.

McClure develops his rhetorical schema or grid by examining in detail what he calls the four “codes” of preaching, the four levels of verbal interaction at work in the sermon: the scriptural code, the semantic code (meaning), the theosymbolic code (the larger theological structure within which given meanings are located), and the cultural code. Each of these codes not only presents a specific content, but also sponsors a particular “intertext” or “language shaped reality.” The scriptural code sponsors an intertext of anamnesis, the semantic code an intertext of truth, the theosymbolic code an intertext of worldview, and the cultural code an intertext of experience.

In addition to content and intertext, McClure further analyzes each code in terms of style. Different styles account for the various ways in which each code can sponsor its particular intertext. Here McClure’s grid becomes fairly complex. For example, the scriptural code can sponsor five different kinds of anamnesis through five different styles of encoding scripture in the sermon. A translational style, which focuses on the biblical text itself, sponsors a mimetic form of anamnesis; a transitional style, which focuses historically-critically on material “behind” the text, sponsors a historical form of anamnesis. Transpositional, transformational, and trajectional styles, each of which is carefully described, sponsor still other kinds of anamnesis. McClure thus highlights a variety of ways in which scripture can be used in the sermon. In a similar way, McClure details various styles within the semantic, theosymbolic, and cultural codes. The final result, when all four codes have been developed with reference to content, intertext, and style, is an intricate rhetorical grid which preachers may use to analyze past sermons and prepare future ones.

If McClure’s approach sounds rather complicated and arcane, that’s because, at first, it is. McClure admits to an “almost cultic” interest in semiotics and structuralism, and the book reflects this interest; it is an attempt to bring these disciplines to bear on the rhetoric of preaching. The result is a terminology and conceptuality that will be foreign to persons who are not familiar with these rather specialized disciplines. The first chapter alone may discourage some readers; its lengthy series of definitions, though necessary and helpful, becomes almost overwhelming.

Nevertheless, McClure’s book is one that repays the effort to work through the

complexities of the terminology. Ultimately, *The Four Codes of Preaching* is not simply about rhetoric in any narrow sense. Rather, McClure is interested in the dynamic relationship among biblical interpretation, theological perspectives, congregational contexts, and rhetorical strategies. He challenges preachers to engage in substantive reflection in each of these areas. And he provides a sophisticated analytical tool to aid in this reflection.

As one moves through the book, McClure's purpose becomes increasingly clear. The concreteness with which McClure explores each of the four codes enables the reader gradually to get past the difficult terminology. For example, McClure discusses the implications of each aspect of his rhetorical schema in relation to an actual or possible sermon based on the story of Mary and Martha. In the concluding chapter he employs his completed grid in a fruitful analysis of a sermon by Edmund Steimle on this same story. McClure's consistent use of this single text is a helpful device for clarifying the details and emphases, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of various rhetorical strategies. In addition, in each chapter McClure provides concrete steps for using his grid to analyze and prepare sermons within different local churches. By the end of the book, McClure's method of rhetorical analysis has not only engaged the reader in serious biblical and theological reflection (something sorely needed in homiletics today), but has also provided a rich schema that can in fact be helpful in sermon analysis and preparation.

As with any book of this kind, crucial issues revolve around the choice and distinction of the various categories of analysis. Some of McClure's categories seem to be too simplistically distinguished. For example, certain literary approaches to scripture, which take seriously the "implied reader," blur the distinction that McClure makes between the translational and transitional styles of scriptural encoding. In addition, I had trouble locating my own theosymbolic code in any one of his specific categories. Preachers may find it difficult to heed McClure's advice and consistently use only one style from each code. More variety may be necessary than McClure suggests.

In the chapter on the cultural code, there are more serious problems with McClure's categories. His uncritical reliance on H. Richard Niebuhr's fivefold typology in *Christ and Culture* is problematic. Although Niebuhr's book has become a classic, Christian ethicists have recently criticized the work for its monolithic understanding of culture, its inadequate interpretation of the Trinity, its poor discussion of the "against" type, and its implicit argument in favor of the "transformation" model. Dependent on Niebuhr's categories, McClure not surprisingly argues that the dialectical style of cultural encoding (which includes Niebuhr's transformation type) sponsors a "profound" intertext of experience, while other styles sponsor much less flattering experiential intertexts. Indeed, McClure's labeling of the "against" style as "sectarian" burdens this category with negative baggage from the beginning. McClure himself recognizes that his categories are not neutral, and preachers need to reflect seriously on their limitations.

The response of local pastors to McClure's book will be important. Although written with the working preacher in mind, *The Four Codes of Preaching* foreshadows the increasingly scholarly approach to homiletics that we may expect in coming years as the field asserts itself as a distinctive academic discipline. McClure's book represents a level of scholarly sophistication that is relatively new and exciting in the field, his extensive footnotes reflect a wealth of reading and reflection. However, McClure's book also raises an important question. Will this more technical scholar-

ship result in works that are somehow out of touch with the average local pastor? Although many pastors will appreciate being challenged by a new level of homiletical reflection, and even by some new terminology, it remains to be seen how many will have patience with a discussion of preaching that explores styles of theosymbolic encoding which sponsor intertexts with equilibrational and permutational forms of worldview. The discipline of homiletics in the United States is at a turning point, and McClure's book suggests some of the possibilities and pitfalls that lie ahead.

The *Four Codes of Preaching* is a unique and important contribution to the current homiletical literature. The book can be a stimulating and helpful resource for preachers if they will have some initial patience with the terminology and give the work the serious reading it deserves. John McClure has written a challenging and sophisticated book. I hope it will be widely read, seriously discussed, and fruitfully used.