

One New Book for the Preacher

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THE WORD BEFORE THE POWERS: AN ETHIC OF PREACHING by Charles L. Campbell. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002. 206 pp.

Like most weekly preachers, I gravitate toward reading material that is likely to inform, inspire, or provide a great story, illustration, or quote that will help in the process of constructing a sermon. There are many sources a preacher may regularly choose: newspapers, news magazines, religious periodicals, novels, poetry, and anything written by Barbara Brown Taylor, Frederick Buechner, Anne Lamott, Walter Brueggemann, and Kathleen Norris, to name only a few. Many preachers, I suspect, are not as apt to dig into a book *about* preaching. Charles L. Campbell's new book, *The Word before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching*, is not always easy reading, but it is certainly worth digging into for the truths and challenges it uncovers.

In a time when some of our churches are excising the Prayer of Confession ("too negative!") and eschewing towering hymns like "A Mighty Fortress is our God" ("too archaic!") for sunnier songs like "Happy in Jesus," Campbell offers a reality check. Combining academic and personal passion, Campbell urges preachers to take seriously our responsibility for confronting the powers and principalities at work in the world, including the church.

We learn in seminary that the three primary participants involved in the preaching act are God/the Word of God, the preacher, and the congregation. Campbell urges us to take into account a fourth participant in preaching: the powers and principalities that are at work in human life to capture and destroy us and the promises and purposes of God. The powers with which we must contend are legion. Campbell focuses on "the powers as they are spiritually at work in and through concrete, material institutions, structures, and systems in the world"(15). The "institutions, structures and systems" he has in mind are the church, national governments, and economic systems. Lest that seem too big to get hold of (and the powers are certainly too big for us alone), Campbell goes on later to get specific enough. The powers' hold on us can be seen in everything from financial aid given to seminary students to church endowments; from majority rule votes in the church to urban churches that have hired security guards.

Campbell helpfully brings together many resources and references to teach us more about a subject that can seem nebulous and overwhelming and to equip us for our spiritual struggle against these cosmic powers in their earthly forms. The writings and resistance efforts of others who have influenced his own understanding and ethics include, in part, William Stringfellow, Walter Wink, and Stanley Hauerwas. Campbell urges us through our preaching and our own practice of the faith to expose the insidious hold these powers and principalities have on us and to help form communities of resistance against these powers. Our resistance efforts are possible because we are rooted in the greater power of God.

This book offers several helpful sermon excerpts as creative examples of the kind of preaching Campbell has in mind. He also provides preaching insights for biblical texts such as the temptation story, the Beatitudes, Jesus' "table ministry," the

hemorrhaging woman, the entry into Jerusalem, the crucifixion and resurrection, and some of Paul's teachings. For Campbell, the interpretive lens through which to examine these texts is clear: "The activity of the principalities and powers provides the context for Jesus' ministry, including his preaching, and offers an essential lens through which to understand his crucifixion and resurrection. As Walter Wink has noted, Jesus' entire ministry challenges the powers, and the gospel itself is 'a context-specific remedy for the evils of the Domination system'"(44). For many of us, no doubt, it is the gracious activity of Jesus' ministry that most often provides the essential lens through which we understand and interpret biblical texts. To make the activity of the principalities and powers the essential lens through which we see the gospel week in and week out would exhaust both preacher and congregation. However, Campbell rightly suspects that few of us are exhaustively challenging the powers or our congregations regularly enough.

Along with exposing the powers and envisioning the new creation God intends, Campbell explores the importance of communal practices among a specific group of people as they embody an alternative to the ways of death in the world. The church itself "preaches to the powers (Eph. 3:10), not simply through words but also through the practices that the church embodies in the world, practices that offer an alternative to the ways of domination and death"(134). Campbell encourages a particular practice among preachers and congregations: "the practice of dislocation." The church is called "intentionally and habitually" to move out of places of comfort and security into those 'unclean' places where Jesus suffers. It has been among people who are homeless in Atlanta that Campbell has deeply engaged in this practice of dislocation in his own life and preaching, and the effect on him has been profound. Campbell believes it is the work of the powers to keep comfortable, privileged people isolated from those who suffer on the margins so that we will not be changed nor will we attempt to change the status quo.

Perhaps you can see by now that this is one book for the preacher that is not necessarily easy reading for the preacher. At times I found myself wishing that Campbell showed deeper appreciation for the (albeit falteringly) faithful practices and efforts preachers and the church are undertaking—even those of us who are "privileged" preachers and serve "privileged" congregations. Sharing daily life with members of a congregation over the years gives any preacher plenty of opportunities to witness the ordinary yet deeply courageous ways in which people of every kind do indeed stand up to the powers, bear witness against the powers, or sometimes just faithfully struggle on when the powers have dealt deathly blows in a person's or a family's or a congregation's life. Through our preaching, we are helping to shape communities of resistance. And yet we also want to help shape communities that know how to embrace.

Having said that, this is still one new book I recommend for preachers. It is instructive and challenging. *The Word before the Powers* has been published in the midst of war and rumors of war, the escalated threat of terrorism and uncertain economic systems. This book calls us to preach truthfully and boldly in our time. This we can do because in the church and in the world it is Easter time.