

One New Book for the Preacher

PREACHING THE GOSPEL OF JOHN: PROCLAIMING THE LIVING WORD
by Lamar Williamson, Jr. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004. 342 pages.

Rush Otey

Selwyn Avenue Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, North Carolina

In my library and our church library, there are fifteen commentaries on the Gospel of John. Were I to choose one of them for use in preaching and teaching in a parish setting, this new volume by Lamar Williamson, Jr., would be the one selected. Dr. Williamson, Professor Emeritus of Biblical Studies at Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond, has provided material which is full of excellent scholarship and serves as a review of major interpretive issues on most texts. Above all, this work is “user friendly” and accessible to those who do not have technical or linguistic backgrounds, yet it makes use of the insights of major Johannine commentators in recent Christian tradition (Raymond Brown, Rudolf Bultmann, C. H. Dodd, Lesslie Newbigin, Gail O’Day, and numerous others). The language is clear throughout, and the style is thoroughly engaging.

As the subtitle “Proclaiming the Living Word” might suggest, Williamson organizes his treatment of the Gospel with the basic theological assumption and commitment that Jesus Christ is the Living Word. Jesus is not a dead hero or simply a great teacher, but the incarnate Word who was, is, and shall be alive. Following a concise treatment of the Prologue (1:1-18) where Williamson starts with a typically fruitful sentence—“The good news with which the Fourth Gospel begins is that human beings are neither first in the world nor alone in the world. The *Word* is first, and God has come to us.” (1)—the first section is entitled “Meeting the Living Word.” Here Williamson covers the first twelve chapters of John and provides illustrations of the many ways people responded to Jesus (and still respond to Jesus).

The second section, “Words To Live By,” includes chapters 13-17 (Last Supper, Farewell Discourse, Great Prayer); the final section, “The Word That Does Not Die,” includes chapters 18 through 21 and is concerned with the Passion Narrative, Resurrection Narratives and Appearances, and the First Ending (20:30-31) and Epilogue.

Additional and noteworthy aspects of the book are copious and suggestive footnotes, and a glossary that treats the major theme words in John such as Believe, Father, Glory, the seven “I Am” sayings, Know, Life, Light/Darkness, Love, Truth, Word, World (there’s a sermon series, or a study for Advent or Lent). For the harried pastor, Williamson provides after each reading in the book a set of reflections on “Preaching and Teaching the Word” which will be mined widely and one hopes, deeply.

The tone of Williamson’s commentary is evangelical, warm, invitational. He calls preachers to aim for and elicit decisions from the hearers—“(John) says to every reader or hearer, ‘Get a life!’ The hearer may be unmoved by the call, but God is not unmoved by the decision. Every decision not to decide weakens the next call to an encounter with Christ, and the evangelist (John) says that to walk in darkness

without Christ is to endure the self-imposed judgment of God”(45). On many occasions Williamson’s wry humor shines out toward and upon the preacher, as in, “When the message concerns the discovery of a life of light, joy, and peace, you would hardly expect the messenger to deliver it with the detachment of an electronic voice announcing the next stop on the subway”(290).

The commentary also fosters and exhibits the inclusivity of the Gospel. In the Afterword, which would in itself justify the price of the book, Williamson addresses the anti-Semitism of Christian history and the often controversial passage of John 14, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father but by me.” While providing various approaches to these issues, Williamson himself concludes, no doubt under the tutelage of Barth and from the experiences Williamson and his family had on the international mission field, that

... at no point does Jesus invite his disciples to judge. *No interpreter is authorized to preach the exclusive claims of Jesus in such a way as to judge the faith of anyone else.* That is the exclusive prerogative of the *Father* and the Son and, on the last day, of the word that Jesus has spoken. I am called to present that word with conviction and urgency but also with humility. I do not know, nor do I need to know, how God deals now or will deal with people of other faiths. (312)

One minor quibble with the book is that some of the cultural illustrations of the “Preaching and Teaching the Word” sections are dated and would not be familiar even to many pastors under fifty. Although I personally love their music dearly, it has been quite some time since the folk singers Peter, Paul, and Mary were daily influencing the mood of the nation (but on second thought, it may be to Williamson’s spiritual advantage that he has not delved too much into MTV or BET or other postmodern genres!). There are also a few places wherein there is a vagueness and generalization regarding the preaching and teaching of a passage. But these are minor issues indeed compared with the benefits of hearing anew from saints such as Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Barbara Brown Taylor, who are included in Williamson’s references.

One does not have to search far and wide to discover pastors and preachers and teachers who are discouraged and depressed. One of the latent messages of Lamar Williamson is the reminder that often those conditions may reveal a simple lack of faith/trust, and an inattention to the transcendent good news of Jesus, the Living Word. By extension the remarks on John 5:1-9 may encourage the fainthearted during these traumatic days:

The paralytic provides a mirror for people to whom life has dealt a hand that is far from satisfactory and who have given up on ever being whole. They may fall into apathy. Some tend to ask for pity. Their blaming others (v. 7) may thinly veil an urge to blame God. When Jesus comes into the paralytic’s life, refuses to play the self-pity game, ignores the question of who is to blame, and tells him to get up and

walk, this weak person is suddenly flooded with strength and acts without hesitation upon Jesus' command. It's a miracle! (60)

This entire commentary, too, is something of a miracle, offered out of the wisdom of a teacher-scholar, a preacher, a missionary, a pastor, a husband, father, grandfather, a friend –but one who would be none of these so well had he not long ago heard the Living Word, and followed. In Williamson's work, the Living Word is a Loving Word, and maybe that is what proclamation should embody at every opportunity during Advent and always. If you are looking for a book that may well change for the better your preaching, teaching, ecclesiology, and personal bearing and actions, here it is.