

One New Book for the Preacher

Dave Bland

Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis, Tennessee

PREACHING BIBLICAL WISDOM IN A SELF-HELP SOCIETY by Alyce McKenzie. Nashville: Abingdon, 2002. 255 pages.

HEAR AND BE WISE: BECOMING A PREACHER AND TEACHER OF WISDOM by Alyce McKenzie. Nashville: Abingdon, 2004. 208 pages.

While contemporary scholarship over the past two decades has made tremendous strides in mainstreaming wisdom literature, it is still marginalized in lectionaries and in pulpits across the country. For preachers, wisdom literature is the resident alien of Scripture. For some, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes appear to be like a deserted stretch of highway in a lonely desert. One preacher I heard of compared reading Proverbs to taking a long road trip with his mother: it's just one mundane piece of advice after another. Among preachers, wisdom literature doesn't get good press. It continues to struggle to find its place in the pulpit. Contrast that, however, with the popularity of wisdom as it is found in contemporary self-help material. While our culture craves wisdom, the pulpit goes starving. These recent volumes by Alyce McKenzie offer the preacher a thoughtful perspective for overcoming the dilemma. Both books expose the tremendous value wisdom literature holds for the preacher, pastor, and teacher.

Wisdom is an all-terrain vehicle. It adapts to all situations of life, whether good times or hard times. During the good times, wisdom serves as a resource for maintaining order and preparing its tenants for success (e.g., Proverbs). McKenzie refers to this as wisdom for the harbor of life. But wisdom is also for the storms of life (*Preaching Biblical Wisdom*, 27). Referring to Harry Emerson Fosdick, McKenzie observes that in times of crises we are like trees in a storm. We think our concern is the high winds, when in fact, it is our rootage. The wisdom literature of both Testaments offers a deep rootage in times of temptation, crisis, and sorrow (e.g., Job, Ecclesiastes, and Jesus). Wisdom can create and maintain order, provide perspective in times of crises, and when necessary, subvert the status quo when the status quo acts with callousness toward those marginalized by life. Wisdom provides spiritual resources for all seasons of life.

In these two books, McKenzie enables preachers to enter the world of wisdom and more deeply appreciate its value for leading and guiding individuals through various phases of life. Wisdom also prepares one to critique culture's values. McKenzie puts it this way: wisdom is the art of steering, of "learning the ropes of life" (*Preaching Biblical Wisdom*, 21). That is, wisdom enables one to develop expertise in managing life's messes. What is most impressive about these two volumes is their ability to dialogue with contemporary wisdom resources. McKenzie immerses herself in both the biblical world and the contemporary cultural world of wisdom and carries on an engaging conversation between the two, allowing preachers to benefit from the synergism that results.

In both volumes she critiques cultural wisdom to discover its value as well as its shortcomings. In *Preaching Biblical Wisdom*, McKenzie spends chapters 2-4 critiqu-

ing contemporary cultural wisdom in the form of the Character Counts! movement and New Age philosophy. In chapters 5-9 she explores biblical wisdom as found in the Old Testament (Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes) and the New Testament (the Gospels of Matthew and John). Based on Don Browning's theological scheme in his book, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, she methodically and fairly critiques the strengths and weakness of cultural wisdom. McKenzie maintains consistency in using this model all through the volume in order to assess both secular and biblical wisdom. As a result, her critique is intentional and thoughtful, providing a valuable model for preachers both in *what* she critiques about the content of contemporary wisdom as it is found in the self-help movement and *how* she critiques it.

Whereas *Preaching Biblical Wisdom* is organized around contemporary bodies of wisdom material and biblical books, *Hear and Be Wise* is organized around four key theological themes or virtues of wisdom. These include the fear of the Lord, the listening heart, the cool spirit, and the subversive voice. Among other things, this book highlights the contemporary value of wisdom as it is expressed by preachers and pastors across the country whom McKenzie interviewed. With each of the four pillar virtues, McKenzie integrates the perspective of biblical wisdom as it is expressed in Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the synoptic Jesus as well as the wisdom gleaned from the pastors interviewed.

True to the spirit of wisdom, and "the listening heart" that is attentive to the world around (*Hear and Be Wise*, 61ff), she listens to the whole spectrum of voices, including religious leaders, poets, and secular writers. Both volumes model how wisdom operates in the world. That is, they use wisdom as a procedure for investigating life to discover its rich insights as well as to surface faulty perspectives in contemporary bodies of wisdom. In both volumes McKenzie offers numerous suggestions for preaching from wisdom literature. Her suggestions are specific and sometimes offer ideas for preaching a particular text or a series of sermons on a particular book. Sometimes her suggestions are more fully developed reflections on a particular wisdom virtue. Always they are thought provoking and always they enable the preacher to generate new ideas.

McKenzie persuasively argues that our task as preachers is to help our people discern the spiritual food they eat. Our culture and our congregations pick and choose their belief systems. McKenzie says that our culture feeds "on fragments of philosophies, isolated from the larger systems of moral thought and life to which they originally belonged" (*Preaching Biblical Wisdom*, 40). The seductive packaging of secular wisdom deceives us. As a tool, biblical wisdom helps Christians read the label on the side of the container before they indiscreetly consume.

These volumes urge preachers to reclaim their rightful identity as sages in the church. We live in a culture that demands from preachers a variety of roles including counselor, therapist, church growth consultant, administrator, visionary, and CEO. But seldom does our culture or the church look to the preacher as sage. McKenzie challenges preachers and pastors to recast their identity as wisdom teachers. In a culture that is spiritually malnourished and underfed, preachers must take responsibility to feed their congregations a balanced diet of biblical wisdom and equip them to critique the cultural wisdom of the day. These volumes are indispensable resources for preachers concerned with such a task.