

One New Book for the Preacher

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Brian K. Blount and Gary W. Charles, *Preaching Mark in Two Voices*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002. 273 pages.

“Practice what you preach” is an exhortation which makes me a bit uncomfortable. Don’t get me wrong, I want there to be consistency between the words I preach and how I live, but it is not always an easy task, as those who read the Journal for Preachers know.

We talk these days a lot about the need to be in conversation with those who are different from us. It is a major theme of the recent Report on the Peace and Unity of the Church adopted by the Presbyterian Church, USA. It is an important commitment if we are going to move towards the unity in Christ which the Bible suggests is God’s vision for the church. However, it takes time and energy, so we continue to talk to ourselves and those just like us.

In this book, Brian Blount and Gary Charles seek to practice what they preach by carrying on a conversation about the Gospel of Mark. They are both ordained Presbyterian pastors; one has a career as a scholar and teacher of the New Testament, and the other as a pastor-theologian. One is African American and the other is white. Since they wrote the book, both of them have accepted new calls, Brian Blount to be the president of Union/PSCE, and Gary Charles is pastor of Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia. They share a long and rich friendship.

There are differences of race and life-experiences along with much that they have in common. I simply want to applaud the effort this book represents in working in conversation with a colleague. The book is not your usual commentary with verse by verse examination of the texts. It does offer extensive exegetical perceptions into the material and the theological perspective of Mark. The commentary is enriched by sermons that were preached by the two authors. This approach leads to a beneficial dialogue and fulfills the promise of the title: “Preaching Mark in Two Voices.”

The commentary by both authors is full of reflection for the writings of biblical scholars from whom they have gleaned helpful observations. I am reminded of the preacher who in his prayers always included the phrase, “Keep us mindful of the needs of others.” Only one day he got confused so he ended the prayer, “Keep us needful of the minds of other.” This book reminds us of how we are enriched in our understanding of the Bible by “the minds of others.”

In addition to my gratitude to the authors for undertaking this innovative approach to the study of Mark, I am grateful for many insights they share. Let me suggest a couple that I hope will encourage you to read the book. There is discussion of the difficult encounter between Jesus and the Syrophaenician woman. It is in their sermons on this text that we get a glimpse into how one’s experience in life influences how you hear a text. Brian Blount provides a moving account of growing up in a desegregated school where he was mistreated as an “outsider” (“Makes Me Wanna Holler” p.127-138). Gary Charles reflects on the challenge of “insiders” to be open to the

presence of “those people” who come into our midst (“Take Time to Be Holy,” p.138-143). Not only do they raise our awareness of how our context and background influence us, but also how important it is to listen to other voices who have experiences different from our own.

As we approach Easter, I found the discussion and sermons on “the shorter ending” of the Gospel to be provocative and useful (Chapter 12). The reasons the authors support the shorter ending (v.8) are not only from the nature of the material; they also explore the literary themes in Mark which are reinforced by the shorter ending. The theme of discipleship, which they point out as central, for Mark is the challenge in facing the empty tomb. The invitation to go to Galilee is a call to discipleship. The Gospel narrative invites the reader into the story and then solicits our response. I find this literary emphasis extremely relevant to our current situation in life as we are called upon to finish the story by following the Risen Christ. Gary Charles emphasizes this when he uses that classic quote from Albert Schweitzer, “He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is” (p.272).

The book offers many other gems which I found valuable for preaching. Let me also offer a word of encouragement for us to practice what they preach.