

One New Book for the Preacher

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Tom Schwanda, *Soul Recreation—The Contemplative-Mystical Piety of Puritanism* (Eugene OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 292 pages.

“The day of the ‘event church’ is over,” said the conference speaker. A church architect, he said that his clients now ask for worship space that honors the tradition. They want the pulpit, table, and font to be clearly visible, front and center, but they also want flexible space that nurtures community and allows for creativity in worship. They want people to know that they are in sacred space doing something important, but they also want the worshippers to be engaged on more than an intellectual level.

As soon as I heard that, my mind shot to memories of church history classes at seminary and the tragic stories of division in the European Reformed family between those who wanted a scholastic presentation of the faith and those who wanted to experience the faith as a present reality. I hoped that what the architect reported marked a new era in which the gospel is preached and the presence of God is felt.

I have kept on my reading stand for some months *Soul Recreation: The Contemplative-Mystical Piety of Puritanism* by Tom Schwanda. The book sat there untouched because I basically don’t like Puritans. Perhaps it was the taunting I received from schoolmates who criticized my pious youthful lifestyle with the accusation that I was a Puritan, or perhaps it was my study of a few colonial sermons from preachers identified as Puritans that ran too much to the threats of hell fire as a motivation for belief. Whatever it was, perhaps the Providence of God, I picked up the book after the conference and began to read.

Schwanda is a scholar, a professor at Wheaton College, who has spent his career studying “spirituality” in the Reformed Evangelical tradition. His work has taken him to the unlikely community of English Puritans and the cleric Isaac Ambrose. Born in 1604 at Ormskirk, Lancashire, he was ordained by the Church of England in 1627. After the restoration of the monarchy, he joined other nonconformist ministers and schoolteachers in refusing to pray certain portions of the *Book of Common Prayer* and so was ejected from his position. What Schwanda discovers is that in the community that we caricature as a monochrome Puritan culture there was great diversity and a healthy balance between enthusiastic evangelical preaching and the exercise of spiritual practices, some with roots in the ancient Roman Catholic tradition.

Schwanda delves into the concept of “ravishment” and details the practices Ambrose followed—a yearly month-long retreat, for example, that gave him the all-consuming joy he then could share with his parishioners. Dr. Kimberly Bracken Long, Assistant Professor of Worship at Columbia Theological Seminary, discusses a similar phenomenon in her book, *The Eucharistic Theology of the American Holy Fairs* (Westminster John Knox, 2011). In an article in *Journal for Preachers* (Lent 2011), she reprises her research and reminds us of large crowds of Scots-Irish Presbyterians and their American descendants that gathered in the countryside for a week of preaching, worship, and intense self-examination in preparation for Sunday Communion at which the participants reported being joined with Christ as a bride is

joined with a bridegroom.

Schwanda explores what the Puritans called “Spiritual Marriage,” and following the lead of the Puritans uses the Song of Solomon to help us to understand the possibility of a passionate encounter with God. For those participating in contemporary worship, the concept of ravishment and spiritual marriage is no new thing. In fact, some music in the contemporary Christian genre reflects the same theme. Consider the lyrics to “Here I Am to Worship.” “Here I am to worship..., altogether lovely, altogether worthy.” Clearly the singers are communicating their experience of loving and being loved by the Savior. What would it look like if we retrieved from the often misunderstood Puritans important new perspectives on a style of Christian life, worship, and preaching for the contemporary church?

In one particularly interesting section, Schwanda takes on Karl Barth and traces that theologian’s less than flattering understanding of spirituality and shows how Barth’s influence keeps the contemporary church from fully appreciating this important part of our tradition and history. In contrast, he raises up Dutch Reformed scholar, Herman Bavinck, and establishes how this significant theologian was much more open to experience as a confirmation of faith alongside an intellectual assent.

In ten pages that made the book worth the money, Schwanda lays out seven insights for the contemporary church. First recognizing a resistance among Reformed Evangelical people to contemplative-mystical piety, he points out the sources of that resistance and gives thanks for new voices that affirm that faith is more than of the mind, and Christian growth is more than intellectual knowledge. He goes on to call us to look more deeply and more carefully at ancient sources. He reports that the Puritan Isaac Ambrose found rich resources for his life and ministry in the works of Bernard of Clairvaux. I take from this that my reading ought to include more than the current “how-to book” for congregational health.

Second, he asks us to maintain a balance in our ministry and preaching between Word and Spirit. His criticism of those who preach from a limited number of favorite texts and who in essence have but one sermon is implicit in his call for us to engage in disciplines like *Lectio Divina*, which have the potential of moving us to embrace the full sweep of scripture and its concerns for both temporal life and everlasting life.

Third, he tells us that intentionality is needed if we are to enjoy the blessings of ravishment. We will not find joy in the Lord nor be able to share that joy with others if we do not attend to finding ourselves purposefully in God’s presence on a regular basis. He says, “A deepening awareness of intentionality that properly values the fullness of life and dependency upon grace would greatly enhance our relationships with both God and humanity” (p.236).

Fourth, we are called to the regular practice of spiritual disciplines, but personal experience must join communal practice. Schwanda reminds us that in addition to the month-long retreat, Ambrose also models for us the wonderful opportunity of conversation, the possibilities of public fasts, and the joy of the Lord’s Supper.

Fifth, joy is the end of this endeavor. “Clearly, Ambrose’s desire for heaven was not an escape from the many dangers the English nonconformists faced in the seventeenth century. Rather they were motivated by love, since they entered into spiritual marriage with Jesus, they longed for the consummation of what they had already tasted in part on earth.” (p.237)

Sixth, in contrast to our perpetual activity "cultivating a contemplative piety is the biblical integration of contemplation and activity" (p.238). This is a powerful response to those who think that contemplation takes one away from the work of the gospel in the world. Schwanda affirms that "this approach could correct the fragmented division of sacred and secular and assist Christians in recognizing God's presence throughout the day, regardless of their tasks" (p.238).

Last, we are challenged "to discover and develop a language of delight and enjoyment in our experiences of God" (p.239). If the contemporary pulpit needs anything right now, it is more modeling of our delight and enjoyment of the sovereign God.