

Paul Scott Wilson. *Setting Words on Fire: Putting God at the Center of the Sermon*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008. 288 pages, \$27.00.

As a teacher, Paul Scott Wilson of Emmanuel College at the University of Toronto, observes that he approaches each student sermon with the silent thought (or perhaps prayer), "Please give me a good reason in faith to believe what you say" (Paul Scott Wilson, 8). In *Setting Words on Fire*, Wilson continues his passionate effort to aid, assist, and challenge preachers to become, as Jean-Pierre Camus prays in the book's epigram, "torch-bearer[s] bringing light to others" (Wilson, 4). Wilson would like to educate preachers who give their listeners a "good reason . . . to believe."

Preachers, he argues, often "fail to focus on God in significant ways" (Wilson, 11). They, therefore, fall far short of their torch-bearer status. Instead, as he observes, he listens to far too many sermons that are academically rigorous in their exegesis, and tell engaging stories, something is missing. That something, Wilson recognizes, is God. In those sermons he does not meet, nor is challenged by the living God. The purpose of this book is therefore clear and succinct: to help preachers find the ways to put God at the center of their sermons. In the early life of the church, Augustine urged preachers to develop sermons that teach, delight, and move. Wilson argues that we put God at the center of our preaching by developing sermons that do two things: teach and proclaim.

The first part of the book is devoted to helping preachers become better teachers. He argues that we have seen a decline in the teaching dimension of preaching because of the effects of the New Homiletic. That homiletical school shifted the focus away from propositional preaching or sermon "points," i.e. a more logical, reasoned, argumentative approach to preaching; to a focus on form and narrative that called for preaching to emphasize experience over teaching.

Wilson argues that we must approach teaching with a both/and understanding. It does not have to be the teaching/propositional, logical approach of the past or the emotional, spiritual approach of more recent homiletical approaches. Rather, "Today we tend to have a holistic understanding of teaching. People learn in various ways" (Wilson 23). He believes that our preaching will be enlivened and enriched by drawing on these new, more expansive understandings of the teaching dimension.

Wilson first explores the content of preacher's teaching. They are to: teach the Bible, teach theology, teach social justice. Second, he explores ways that preachers might teach in their sermons: comparison/contrast, paradox, trouble and grace, and finally, exploring issues of faith.

In the middle section of the book, Wilson offers a brief excurses into the meaning of the gospel in preaching today. Gospel, Wilson argues, "becomes the focus in preaching by being the goal from the beginning of the homiletical process to the end" (Wilson, 53), and preachers must be clear what is meant by gospel. For example, Wilson argues that "What we identify as the Word of God is not necessarily the gospel" (Wilson, 52). The discussion of gospel is important to his project because, as he observes, "Teaching as we frame it here is about the gospel. Proclamation . . . is the offering of the gospel to the people" (Wilson, 56). The final and largest section of the book is therefore dedicated to a renewed understanding of preaching as proclamation.

Teaching and proclamation must be, according to Wilson, the "dual preaching arts" (Wilson, 57). Proclamation, according to Wilson, is "a function of preaching that

leads to God's personal address being received" (Wilson, 68). Proclamation is testimony. It is confessional. Proclamation means that preacher must speak "from one's most deeply held beliefs" (Wilson, 66).

The gift of this book comes in Wilson's extensive exploration of what it means for preaching to be proclamation and how preachers might go about developing this dimension of their preaching. Wilson's familiarity with the great cloud of homiletical witnesses comes to the fore and he draws on the extensive resources available to us today. He includes Phillips Brooks' discussion of "Sermon subforms", Bible genres developed by the New Homiletic, and as already mentioned, Augustine's purposes and styles of preaching.

How are we to set our words on fire? Wilson devotes the closing chapters of the book to discussing the various genres of preaching that is proclamation: condemnation, lament, stern exhortation, and testimony, prayer, exhortation as nurture, proclamatory statements, doxology, and celebration. Throughout each discussion he draws on examples from sermons that show the preacher what this looks/sounds like. This is an important gift to those who preach; it gives the book both a pedagogical as well as spiritual dimension. For this students of the sermon and preaching enterprise will be grateful.

Our homiletical conversations will be enriched and challenged by Dr. Wilson's latest contribution.

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N.B. This review was prepared using a draft manuscript. Therefore, citations will not match the final, published book.