

Audrey Borschel. *Preaching Prophetically When the News Disturbs: Interpreting the Media*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2009. 192 pages. \$15.59

Truth in advertising: my name is mentioned in the acknowledgements as having introduced the author to “the complex and fascinating world of media literacy.” So maybe I can be accused of lacking total objectivity. But the author has taken what little I had to suggest and put that and a whole lot more to excellent use in urging and preparing preachers to engage the news not only in preaching but as pastors and ministers charged with living out God’s Word and Will in a complicated world. This is a hard-hitting look at what constitutes the news. It is not cynical. Neither does it whitewash the topic. It is not a bag of tricks; neither is it so general as to be of no practical use. It is timely, especially with regard to the upcoming Academy of Homiletics convention themed “Preaching and the News.” Throughout, the author examines contemporary news stories and news issues and unwraps them for a closer, analytical look at how news is created and then how it is reported. Borschel calls the reader to become media literate and also to prepare others to become media literate so that we may all understand the process of “the news.”

The book contains six chapters and six appendices. “Preaching and the News that Disturbs” is an introduction to the topic, defining “news,” and, in particular, news that disturbs, “those events and issues that are violent, unjust, destabilizing, inhumane, uncharitable, and all policies and actions that will harm the environment.” Preachers are called to know the news, to look for the fullest picture of the event and if possible, to look behind the news story itself. Processes such as editorial policy, formal and informal censorship, and commercial interests can influence what news is reported as well as how and when it is reported. She reminds us that while promoting or speaking against a particular candidate is not permissible, speaking on moral and political issues is. She intelligently addresses the complicated matter of civil religion. In this chapter and throughout the book there are sets of questions meant to provoke the reader into reflection and analysis.

In “The News as Commerce,” Borschel examines the relationship of news reporting and the commercial interests of advertisers, as well as the related and relentless need to develop viewership. Deregulation of the media has also had its impact on news reporting. Fewer and fewer corporations control more and more of the media outlets. “Corporate buyouts of media outlets can result in cost efficiency to the detriment of the product.” “Sad but true, when media focus on financials at the expense of content, much television programming is simply filler, the material between the commercials.” (I wonder to what degree the same might be said of our preaching, in so far as it is designed to develop “viewership.”) When does news become propaganda?

Chapter 3 introduces the reader to media literacy, particularly as developed by the Center for Media Literacy. At the heart of the program is a set of five questions that will benefit our engagement with any medium, not just the news. The focus of Chapter 4 is evident in the title, “Preacher as Mediator of the News and the Good News.” She asks the provocative question, “What would happen if we allocated pulpit time for laying a spiritual foundation that might help listeners cope with unpredictable events?” But preaching requires more than knowledge of current events. It requires the preacher to know the context in which the news will be generated, consumed, and examined. Context determines content. Increasingly diverse contexts make preaching difficult. Borschel then encourages us to explore the lectionary texts and the liturgical seasons for occasions to prepare our assemblies for “difficult times.” “We need to connect the

biblical stories with our personal and congregational stories.” Along this line, I find it interesting to look at how psalms are employed in worship, in particular, how they are often edited to exclude some of the most emotional passages, especially those that accuse God of neglect. Psalm 22, is the notable exception. Again, a set of questions or ideas is included to guide the preacher’s preparation.

In the last chapter, the author draws a comparison between the work of the preacher and that of the journalist. Chapter 6 reports back on a workshop the author conducted which included a diverse group of preachers, journalists, and others. The appendices include a several sermons, a “Survey about News,” and a further reflection on “The Roots of Today’s News and the Implications for Preaching,” with reference to several current or ongoing issues. After reading this book, I found myself feeling both empowered and equipped to make better use theological reflection on “news” within the context of preaching.

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