

James R. Nieman. *Knowing the Context: Frames, Tools, and Signs for Preaching*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008. 93 pages. \$15.00.

In the last forty years, following a shift from monological to dialogical modes of preaching, homileticians have focused increasing attention on interpreting the congregational contexts of preaching. James Nieman makes a thoughtful contribution to this conversation in *Knowing the Context*, a volume in Fortress Press's "Elements of Preaching" Series. Nieman argues that while context has always been important for preaching, preachers studying context now have tools for "disciplined inquiry" that previous generations lacked. These tools are largely drawn from social and cultural research, including ethnography and the study of organizations. The purpose of Nieman's book is to introduce preachers to these methods of inquiry and to offer guidance in how to use them.

Nieman argues that preachers need to embark on systematic and disciplined study of their preaching contexts, much as ethnographic researchers study communities. He outlines a procedure for studying congregational contexts which moves through three categories of inquiry: frames, tools, and signs. By "frames" Nieman refers to ways of focusing the research question guiding the preacher's inquiry. The "tools" are particular means of studying the local setting, such as participant observation, interviews, and study of the congregation's artifacts. After framing the inquiry, and using these tools to gather information about the context, the pastor will discover certain "signs," which are those aspects of the congregation's life that most fully reveal its values and ethos. These signs can help the pastor understand the congregation on a deep level, and thus preach to it fittingly. Throughout the book, Nieman uses a case study approach to illustrate his method, describing how one pastor used the procedures for congregational study described in the book to study his congregational context. In the final chapter, Nieman includes excerpts from this pastor's sermons to demonstrate how the pastor used the results of his research to better understand certain issues the congregation faced, and to preach skillfully so as to move the community toward transformation.

In addition to offering a useful method for congregational study, the book contains a wealth of valuable insights at particular stages in the process. In discussing "tools" for study, Nieman offers the necessary reminder that the practices of congregations, such as their meetings, community events, and rituals, disclose their values and identity at least as much as do their products, such as documents. In addition, his directions to preachers concerning how to study these practices and products are sensitive, such as his guidance in how to be a participant-observer. Nieman's discussion of a community's "strong signs" provides a nuanced discussion of how certain practices and objects function to reveal a congregation's ethos and worldview.

Given the thoroughness of Nieman's method, however, certain questions commonly considered in ethnographic analysis are surprisingly absent. For instance, Nieman does not take into consideration the preacher's own cultural particularity and prejudices, seeming thereby to assume that the preacher is a neutral observer of the context, rather than bringing her own distinctive and perhaps distorting perspective to her study of the congregation. In addition, there is little reflection on the theological claims underlying the project as a whole, that is, how an insistence on the centrality of congregational analysis for preaching implies a particular understanding of how God makes Godself known to us, what the church is, or how the authority of scripture relates to the authority of human experience.

The most important overall contribution Nieman's carefully developed approach to congregational analysis makes is to remind preachers that they need to not only care deeply

about their congregations, but to adopt well thought-out methods of study of these contexts in order to gain the kind of knowledge of them that will lead to fruitful preaching. This strength of the book is also its potential weakness: the very thoroughness of Nieman's method may strike preachers as too taxing to carry out. Nieman is aware of this potential criticism, but he maintains that the process he proposes does not involve more work than the pastor is already doing, but simply a different way of viewing what she already knows about a congregation. Considering the careful information-gathering and analysis Nieman is encouraging pastors to undertake, it seems to me that it would be more accurate to argue instead that the method of congregational study he proposes *is* more work than pastors currently do, but that it is worth the effort. I see no reason why Nieman could not claim this boldly. Having demonstrated persuasively that a superficial grasp of congregational context is damaging for preaching, while a deep understanding is correspondingly valuable, Nieman has earned the right to insist that embarking on the rigorous process of congregational research he describes in this book will more than repay the time that preachers spend on it.

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