

Darrell W. Johnson. *The Glory of Preaching: Participating in God's Transformation of the World*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009. 276 pages. \$23.

“Something Always Happens”: this subtitle of Johnson’s prologue communicates something of his enthusiasm for preaching, perhaps even better than the title of this introductory text. He hopes that readers will find this watchword encouraging, even liberating, but it is not presented without support. An extended study of Ezekiel 37 concludes with Jacob Firet’s claim that the preached word is not “just a vibration in the air: it breaks into a situation and creates a new one” (31). A longer study of the parables in Matthew 13 argues that all four soils “hear,” though not all hearers respond with beliefs and actions that “bear fruit.” So Johnson hopes to honor the tensions and disappointments preachers face, adding that for hearers to understand the word, they must be willing to “stand under” its claim on their lives.

His confidence in the power of the word written and preached leads to a preference for expository preaching that does not disparage other approaches. Johnson does hope to turn the common understanding of exposition on its head, though. The congregation does not send the preacher to the word to live in it and return with a message (as in the Marco Polo analogy); instead, the preacher invites the congregation to enter and live in the word together. Preachers do that as they “engender an encounter with the Jesus of the text, in which he speaks news, good news, which causes a shift in worldview, calling for a new step of the obedience of faith (which he himself enables us to take)” (58-59). A review of the biblical words for communicating the faith puts “prophesy,” “confess,” and “witness,” alongside “evangelize,” “herald,” “teach,” and “exhort.”

Speaking of the practice of preaching, Johnson prefers the word “mechanics” to “technique” (and its connotations of manipulation) or “labor” (which adds an unnecessary heaviness). A simple list of four steps offer a clear and memorable description of moving from text to sermon: the *devotional* step seeks an open mind and heart, the *exegetical* looks for the message given to the first audience, the *hermeneutical* discovers the message for today’s historical and cultural setting, and the *homiletical* finds ways to communicate that message in ways that connect with listeners today. The steps can overlap and do not have to come in any set order, but they are equally important. Even so, there is more instruction about the exegetical step with “hints for getting inside” the epistles, Old Testament narratives, prophetic texts, Gospels and apocalyptic texts (what happened to wisdom and Psalms?).

A separate chapter is given to the homiletic step, explaining that we do well to attend to both order and orality. Clearly laid out examples show how the “tried and true” sermon structure can be employed or creatively modified in harmony with the order of the biblical text. The section on orality draws from Walter Ong and Robert Jacks, advising preachers to speak in “breath bites” that are direct and do not shy away from repetition.

Johnson takes a surprising position among evangelicals that preachers are not called to apply the message of the text to everyday life. That work belongs to the “Lord of text... who alone can ‘make it happen’” (159). He then cites Willimon’s warning of a subtext that assumes we the listeners can apply a principle and in so doing save ourselves. Rather preachers point out the implications of a text, “suggesting and showing the necessary, inherent, logical consequences for life which the text is declaring.” (159). Yes, people will ask for application, but Johnson believes that what they want is illustration to aid the understanding and imagination, not simple how-to steps.

Chapters on the person and the life of the preacher point to the self-knowledge and the disciplines of spirituality and study that are required. I'm intrigued by his advocacy for the church year formulated in preaching plans that use *lectio continua*. One follows Luke from Advent to Pentecost, then Galatians and Philippians' up to Christ the King Sunday.

I found a lot to like about this down to earth reformulation of expository preaching. I like a writer who lives in the circles of evangelical theology (especially Fuller seminary) but cites Ebeling. I like a preacher who concludes by speaking of mystery. Johnson's enthusiasm and preference for an oral style of writing leave him saying a bit too much at times, but I'm happy to let him get carried away for a good cause. His book delivers plenty of insights and advice I can use in my own teaching.

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