

Jonathan Hustler. *Making the Words Acceptable: The Shape of the Sermon in Christian History*. London: Epworth, 2009. 256 pages, \$29.95.

How is it that sermon listeners have received sermons through history? With this question, Jonathan Hustler enters the history of preaching with a focus on the history of form in Christian preaching. Hustler commits “to ask[ing] if the techniques in which the homiletic portrait painters of the past were adept have any value for preachers today” (viii). By concentrating on form, Hustler departs from some of the more ambitious, recent histories of preaching. He admits that another grand history of preaching is unnecessary, and yet a history of form might hold insight for contemporary preachers. In doing so, Hustler uses form to drive the homiletic narrative, all the while acknowledging the influences that rhetoric, biblical interpretation, delivery, theology, and context have had on form.

This volume travels a considerable historical distance in just less than 200 pages. The introductory chapter orients readers to the nature and importance of sermon form. Hustler also defines the boundaries of his historical project in order to cover that distance; he takes the sermons from liturgical, post-Constantinian contexts in which preachers “wanted their congregations to move more deeply into a faith which they purported already to believe” (9).

After describing the context of Christian preaching in the first few centuries of the church, Chapter One focuses on the preaching of John Chrysostom. He traces Chrysostom’s line-by-line expository preaching with moral exhortation as well as sermons that follow after the pattern of classical rhetoric. Chapter Two moves to the monastic-style preaching of the Venerable Bede. Bede follows many of the conventions of patristic preaching with the notable difference that he does not quote those patristic sources (41-42). And although it predates Bede, Hustler notes his use of the fourfold sense of Scripture in his sermons. Chapter Three ranges through some of the preaching forms of the Middle Ages patterned after classical rhetoric. After outlining developments in Reformation era preaching, Hustler moves to the form of Puritan preaching in chapter Four. Chapter Five and the rest of the chapters focus on Hustler’s native British context. Chapter Five details Tillotson, Whitefield, Wesley, and ultimately centers on the preaching skeletons of Charles Simeon. The Romantic influence on John Henry Newman is the subject of Chapter Six and the rise of popular preaching in figures like Edwin Sangster centers Chapter Seven. Finally, Chapter Eight sketches the changing landscape of Christianity in Britain and how the North American-based New Homiletic, with its focus on form, might help preachers address contemporary challenges.

Making the Words Acceptable gives a fresh history of preaching through a specific homiletic lens. Despite the New Homiletic’s major focus on sermon form, one charge that might be leveled against the phenomenon is its major figures’ relatively thin attention to the long history of sermon form. Hustler’s history makes clear that form has always been under consideration, even if not the main focus of homiletic reflection. Sermonic form always arises out of a particular context and Hustler points to those theological, social, and political influences. In that respect, Hustler gives a historical sensibility to the contemporary concern for form and widens our collective memory of the development of form.

Hustler also presents a helpful exercise at the end of the chapters. Rather than leaving readers hanging with a historical account of the development of a particular form, he demonstrates how contemporary preachers might make use of that form. By taking insights from contemporary fields of study beyond theology and imagining contexts for preaching, Hustler gives new possibilities for these historical forms. Chapter Three’s combination of mind-mapping with the

medieval *arbor picta* is an especially interesting example. Some of these attempts, however, are less successful.

There are some other difficulties with the text. While Hustler proves to be conversant with a number of contemporary histories of preaching, he relies too heavily on the works of Hughes Oliphant Old and O. C. Edwards, referencing them copiously. Additionally, the book lacks the full texts of the sermons Hustler references and cites those sermons minimally, making the readers' attempts to trace the forms along with Hustler exceedingly difficult. Lamentably, there are no female voices in the text until Chapter eight, and the focus is solely on Western preaching. The prose tends to wander and lose focus, either departing from a developing narrative about form or taking an unnecessarily long time to arrive at the preaching/preacher(s) purported to be the focus of the chapters.

Still, Hustler's book makes for a brief introduction to the history of preaching, with an eye to a particular aspect of the sermon. Hustler's homiletic imagination on how these forms can and do live offers possibilities for contemporary preachers that is worthy of attention.

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