

Robert Stephen Reid and Lucy Lind Hogan. *The Six Deadly Sins of Preaching: Becoming Responsible for the Faith We Proclaim*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2012. 122 pages. \$14.99.

This volume challenges preachers to think more intentionally about the best practices of pulpit ethics and etiquette. While acknowledging that preachers do succumb to an occasional misstep, Robert Reid and Lucy Hogan want to bring attention to when those occasional missteps become routine practices. Two theological principles undergird responsible preaching, according to the authors: faithfulness to God and reliability to listeners. In addition to these principles, the authors identify the three key features of classical rhetoric: ethos, logos, and pathos. Together, these theological and rhetorical commitments align to form a grid on which the authors can identify responsible and irresponsible preaching.

It is on this grid that Reid and Hogan locate their Six Deadly Sins of preaching. They acknowledge a number of other vices in the final chapter but the core of the book devotes a chapter to each of the six sins. These include the pretender, the egoist, the manipulator, the panderer, the demagogue, and the despot. Each chapter concludes with a brief section devoted to the counter qualities of these vices, which include authenticity, carefulness, courteousness, humility, passion, and “namer of God” (87). Some confusion, however, might arise on the part of the reader because the vices are described in terms of particular human types or caricatures (sinners rather than sins) while the virtues are described as particular ethical qualities. The tone Reid and Hogan use is not one of reprimand or rebuke but one that encourages self-awareness and critique. They are careful not to draw hard-and-fast ethical lines with these virtues and vices. For example, with the issue of plagiarism, addressed in the chapter on “The Pretender,” no rigid rule is made to identify when a preacher has become irresponsible. They do, however, speak of the problem of engaging in “heavy lifting” of material from other sources (20).

One of the limitations of the book is that the authors spend more time describing and illustrating the vice and less time with the counter virtue. When the virtues are addressed, some do not always seem to naturally align with their negative counterpart. For example, in the chapter on “The Panderer,” the emphasis is on the temptation to be trendy and entertaining in order to win the favor of the audience. They identify the counter virtue as honesty. While honesty does counter the malady, it still does not quite fit the scenario. It seems their quote from Willimon, earlier in the chapter, would serve as a better starting place to develop a counter virtue: “The gospel is not simply about meeting people’s needs. The gospel is also a critique of our needs, an attempt to give us needs worth having” (60).

As each vice is described, the authors tend to use extreme cases of that particular sin, which can result in preachers concluding that this sin is not applicable to them. They use political figures like Bill Clinton who have violated the ethical norm. Well-known preachers like Billy Sunday, Joel Osteen, W. A. Criswell, and Jimmy Swaggart are used to illustrate the ethical violations. While a few common examples are sprinkled along the way, more of the little everyday violations would enable preachers to identify more readily with them and assess their own practices.

Each chapter invites spirited dialogue, a fact that proves to be one of the work’s greatest strengths. In a small discussion forum I am a part of in Memphis, each of these chapters has generated lively and thought provoking conversation. For example, the chapter on “The Manipulator” addresses the use of emotionally laden stories to manipulate listeners into responding a certain way (42-43). One preacher, however, brought up Scripture’s use of

emotion-filled language on occasion to communicate its message (for example, Isa 66:24 or the imprecatory psalms). Can one preach those without manipulating?

This book stirs up lively interaction among both preachers and students about a neglected subject. The authors have left enough ambiguity surrounding the vices and virtues to enable readers to explore different ways irresponsible preaching is manifested. It equips preachers and seminary students to think seriously and intentionally about their pulpit practices. Reid and Hogan make an important contribution to the field of homiletics and the practice of preaching by filling an often ignored gap, not in the ethics preachers preach, but in the pulpit ethics preachers practice.

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