

Stephen Seamands. *Give them Christ: Preaching his Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension and Return*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2012. 192 pages. \$15.

Stephen Seamands, professor of Christian doctrine at Asbury Theological Seminary, has gone searching for something that he believes is missing in American preaching; namely Christ. Sermons today, he observes, are not centered around the powerful, life changing, image of God, “the firstborn of all creation, the head over all things, and the head of the church” (12). Instead, Christians today are meeting a Jesus who is a “pop culture superstar” (15) or national “mascot” (17). Sermons, he argues, present Jesus as someone “who wants to do good things for us” (16) and is always at our beck and call. We do not meet the “word made flesh,” or the “alpha and omega,” but rather, a tame, domesticated, “sweet little baby Jesus,” to quote Ricky Bobby in *Talladega Nights* (16). What is needed according to Seamands, and what he hopes this book will assist, is a “restoration of [Jesus’] supremacy and sovereignty” (18).

What has happened? Why has Jesus been relegated to “a footnote” (18) in much of today’s preaching? Why do sermons today sound less like a sermon and more like a “talk at the Rotary club” (20)? Seamands suggests two principal reasons. First, we do not actually trust Christ. Preachers do not believe in the “sufficiency and the supremacy of Christ” (20). In fact, he argues, “we’re *afraid* to give them Christ” (20). The preaching calendars in many churches today do not follow the Christian calendar preferring sermon series that explore marriage, child rearing, and how to lead simpler, less stressful lives. Preachers argue they must address “felt needs” and present topics relevant to people’s everyday lives. If they do not, they believe, the people will go elsewhere.

The second reason, and it is here that Seamands believes he can make a difference, is that preachers do not know and have not learned how to place Christ at the center of their preaching. Preachers took homiletics courses and theology courses in seminary, “but never the twain shall meet.” They are more comfortable in their role as biblical scholars than they are as theologians. The goal, therefore, of the book is to help preachers not only place Christ at the center of their preaching, but also to encourage them to communicate the Christological doctrines that are the center of our faith in “an engaging, compelling way” (24). Concentrating on the work, rather than the person, of Christ, he examines “*What* you should preach about Christ—incarnate, crucified, risen, ascended and returning—in a way that helps individuals and congregations grasp the profound relevance and understand the far-reaching implications for their worship, life together and mission in the world” (25).

The chapters of the book then break open these “works” that are central to our faith: the incarnation, the crucifixion, the resurrection, the ascension, and the second coming. In each chapter he explores the meaning of each doctrine, the implication of that doctrine for our faith, and how it can and must shape our lives as Christians.

In the chapter on the incarnation, Seamands discusses the “nature, mystery and uniqueness” of the claim that the “word became flesh”; that a baby born in Bethlehem is “none other than the second person of the triune God” (30). However, for preachers the challenge is not to describe and to discuss the nature of the incarnation, but rather to explore the significance of this for our lives. “Why does it matter? What difference does it make in our personal and communal lives” (32)? It matters because “God became a particular human being in order to fully experience and fully identify with the human condition” (33). Whatever we do, whatever we think, whatever we feel, God has felt, experienced, and done.

Seamands devotes two chapters to exploring the importance of the crucifixion. The first of the two chapters explores the significance of the scandal of the cross, atonement, and the suffering and love of Christ for us. The second chapter examines social evil, the victory of the cross, and what it means to die with Christ. “The cross,” he argues, “is to be proclaimed not simply as a past event in the life of our Lord, but as a present reality in the life of every believer” (97).

Likewise, the resurrection, ascension, and second coming are to be understood as realities in the lives of the people to whom we preach. They are not just historical events. They are not abstract theological doctrines. They are central to our lives as Christians. They shape who we are and how we are to live our lives every day.

As I was reviewing this book my husband asked me what I was doing. I told him the focus and goal of Seamands’ project. “Bravo,” said my husband. “That is the preaching we need to hear.” Seamands provides preachers with a fresh and practical look at issues that need to be at the center of the preaching of the church.

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