

David C. Norrington. *To Preach or Not to Preach? The Church's Urgent Question*. Omaha, NE: Ecclesia, 2013. 214 pages. \$15.95.

"I've preached my last sermon"; with tears in his eyes, a long-time preacher told me he was giving up on preaching. Recently, he and his peers were convinced that preaching was an ineffective means of ministering. And though he loved her, preaching had become a mistress whom he was forced to leave.

David Norrington feels similarly. Norrington, an author and religious leader in England, argues that it is time for us all to give up on preaching. The weekly sermon, he warns, is "unbiblical" and "injurious to the life of the Christian community" (xi). Norrington builds this claim upon two bedrocks. First, regular preaching within Christian gatherings was not common until the third century (and therefore is "unbiblical"). Second, preaching harms rather than helps spiritual growth (and is thus "injurious").

Norrington admits there are speeches and teachings given in sermon-like form in the Old Testament. There is no evidence, however, of a regular sermon given at the temple or other shrines (21). This conclusion may be true. It does not, however, lead to the conclusion that weekly preaching is unwarranted. Further, it has no connection to his supposition that regular preaching is destructive. Norrington is too quick to dismiss the role that preaching played in the ministries of people like Moses (e.g., consider the "sermon" of Deuteronomy) and Isaiah (much of Jesus' preaching grew out of Isaiah's preaching).

Norrington grants that sermons played a consistent part of synagogue activities. But these speeches were presented by a number of different individuals, including "lay people," and involved interruptions and "a good deal of discussion" (23). Therefore, he posits, they have little in common with the sermons of today. No doubt, some synagogue preaching differed from contemporary homiletics. But if the synagogue sermons of Paul (Acts 13) and Jesus (Luke 4) are any indication, preaching still played a prominent role in those gatherings.

Finally, Norrington surveys early Christianity. He acknowledges that Jesus "made extensive use of . . . the sermon as a platform for announcing the arrival of the kingdom of God" (22). But, Norrington argues, Jesus preferred conversation over preaching because "one-way communication was inadequate" (25). While it is true that Jesus utilized various means in addition to preaching for maturing believers, preaching was still utilized.

Norrington dismisses the sermons in Acts and the epistles because they were speeches addressed "to non-Christians, specific problems in the life of the church, farewell addresses and greetings to previously unknown brethren" and that there was nothing "to indicate regular sermons in the context of Christian gatherings" (33). These reasons seem hardly adequate to disparage New Testament sermons. Ideally, sermons today also address "specific problems in the life of the church" and may target various listeners, including non-Christians.

Regular sermons in Christian gatherings became the norm by the third century. Norrington suggests this arose not as a strategic means for discipleship but as something that coincided with the unhealthy advent of church buildings and an unbiblical focus on clergy (44–72). Despite the growth of preaching, spiritual growth happened through other means: small groups, mentoring, one-another ministries, and the development of spiritual gifts (80–100). Sermons actually hindered spiritual formation in the following ways: 1) they failed to foster fellowship (114); 2) they created an unhealthy dependence upon the preacher (121); 3) they could not address the various needs within a large group (123); and 4) they acted as a "deskilling agent" in that they utilized passive listening rather than active engagement (124).

Norrington fails to make a compelling case that regular preaching is "unbiblical." Works like John Stott's *Between Two Worlds* (1982) and *A History of Preaching* (2004) by O. C. Edwards Jr. demonstrate that preaching played a substantial role in biblical times. He

also fails to demonstrate convincingly that preaching is “injurious” to spiritual growth. There are biblical and contemporary examples of vital growth occurring as the result of preaching.

Norrington succeeds on two fronts. First, he reminds us of the limitations of preaching. Preaching is generally one-way communication. It can struggle to address the many different spiritual states present in a large audience. And it often represents the perspective of one (flawed) person. Works like *The Six Deadly Sins of Preaching* (2012) by Lucy Lind Hogan and Robert Reid reveal how preachers may address these limitations.

Second, Norrington points to a need for preaching to be part of a larger strategy for spiritual formation. *Move* (2011), by Greg Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, reveals that preaching plays a notable part in early stages of faith formation. But other activities such as small group conversations, ministry opportunities, and personal spiritual practices aid later faith formation. While readers may not wish to abandon preaching as Norrington urges, they may wish to consider what additional tools are in place to aid the growth of those to whom they do preach.

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