

Phil Snider. *Preaching After God: Derrida, Caputo, and the Language of Postmodern Homiletics*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012. 227 pages. \$26.

In *Preaching After God: Derrida, Caputo, and the Language of Postmodern Homiletics*, Phil Snider offers a well-written and highly accessible account of a particular strand of postmodern thought vis-à-vis homiletics. The book is aimed primarily at pastors, especially liberal Protestant pastors of the “Tillichian” stripe. The book is motivated by what Snider identifies as a “homiletical crisis,” wherein theology has been supplanted by anthropology and Christian proclamation has devolved into “grand ethical exhortations” (11). Snider’s thesis is that “the postmodern return of religion” presents a viable way around the anthropological aporia structured by liberal Protestant preaching. Rather than leading the contemporary preacher into a mirrored labyrinth or toward a nihilistic theology, Snider is right to identify a “deeply affirmative” mode of thought in certain strands of Jacques Derrida’s oeuvre.

The book is divided into two parts. In Part I, Snider articulates the pastoral, theological, and philosophical aspects of the “modern homiletical crisis,” arguing that deconstruction might come to be viewed as a homiletical resource, rather than an approach inciting fear or vitriol. In Part II, which is the highlight of the book, Snider presents six sermons with accompanying commentary that reveal the true motivation behind the book. Through his preaching one finds a pastor seeking a means of drawing the gospel of Jesus Christ into conversation with the lived realities of his congregants. His sermons are timely, passionate, funny, and empathic.

In spite of its benefits, the book suffers from several glaring problems. First, Snider leaves the reader curious as to why one must embrace postmodern philosophy to deliver preaching from the “modern homiletical crisis” when alternative paths to salvation already exist. I contend that Christian theologians like Hans Urs von Balthasar and Karl Barth offer such an approach, which Derrida himself acknowledges. Second, even as Snider attempts to deconstruct the binary logic of Western metaphysics, he ends up re-inscribing certain dualities in his own work. For instance, Snider sets up a false choice between God’s agency and human agency. Many mainline and evangelical preachers will reject the choice between “grand ethical exhortation,” or “superstitious” speech. Scripture itself militates against such bifurcation. Third, Snider’s engagement with the guild of homiletics is peculiar. One gets the sense that he is equivocating when he (proudly) employs the label “liberal Protestant homiletics.” However, it is unclear what Snider means precisely by this move since he frequently cites theologians and homileticians who do not share his theological presuppositions. Fourth, Snider’s engagement with the major philosophical minds of the nineteenth and twentieth century is almost always filtered through a secondary source. A telling example is found when Snider cites a story told by Žižek about a man who believed he was a chicken. It appears that Snider may not have read this account from Žižek himself, but from Rollins.¹ My primary concern with the book is that I would like to have seen more direct engagement with Derrida unfiltered by Caputo. Moreover, since deconstruction is such a central aspect of Snider’s book, it would have been helpful to witness how deconstruction not only aids but threatens aspects of language, speech, and ultimately preaching.

¹ Cf. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 35 where he uses the word *hen*, and Peter Rollins, *Insurrection: To Believe is Human, To Doubt Divine* (New York: Howard Books, 2011), 45, who uses the word *chicken*. Snider cites Žižek’s text, but his use of the word *chicken* suggests that Snider is reliant on the story from Rollins.

In spite of these critiques, Snider's intention is to be commended. His search for a mode of Christian proclamation for "those who believe in God some of the time, or none of the time, or all of the time" (170) is a good one. The path he takes in search of this homiletic makes me wonder, however, whether Snider views his own liberal Protestant theology as beyond deconstruction. One could make the case that such a strand of theological thinking has hardened into a predetermining ideology of sorts and Snider's efforts to deconstruct homiletics, while portending to be a quest for the wholly other, ends up merely a return to the same. And this sameness is precisely what the biblical witness deconstructs—it is not Derridean deconstruction but the foolishness of the cross that destroys (read: deconstructs) the wisdom of the wise and it is God who frustrates the intelligence of the intelligent (1 Cor 1:19).

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