

Leonard Sweet. *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013. 368 pages. \$22.99.

Calling for a “vital fire” that is “mingled with blood,” Leonard Sweet builds on this metaphor from John Wesley for his treatise on preaching (13). Part history, part polemic, and part instruction, *Giving Blood* offers a myriad of quotes, ideas, methods, and musings about the homiletical endeavor.

In this book, Sweet demonstrates a strong penchant for blood. He mentions vampires, Socialist hymns, and the Mithras cult, among other topics, as a means of connecting preaching through blood to our basic humanity. Reminding us that the “centerpiece of Christianity is a divine-human exchange” (279), he grounds his work in the Christian life and Scriptures.

“Whatever you do, always end by lifting up Christ,” he writes (264).

At the same time, Sweet calls for experiences that “move from knowing God with our left brain to knowing God with our whole brain” (131). To accomplish this, he recommends the liberal use of metaphor, riddles, irony, paradox, puns, storytelling, and other techniques.

“‘Points’ no longer make points,” he says, and so preachers need to make the familiar strange, cultivate imagery, and otherwise engage in what he calls “narraphor”—an amalgam of narrative and metaphor.

The book’s twenty-nine chapters—some as short as three pages, some thirty or more—almost all have titles that begin with the word “blood,” a contrivance that feels more forced than narraphoric to this reviewer. Nevertheless, they are packed full of helpful advice, persuasive rhetoric, and interesting anecdotes. Sweet defends his blood fixation thus: “to be squeamish about blood is to develop an aversion to our own life source” (24).

His method includes a number of acronyms. His call for more semiotic preaching, for instance, he refers to as EPIC style—“an experimental medium (E) that allows for participatory engagement (P) with biblical images and stories (I) that connect the congregation with what Christ is already doing in their midst (C)” (23). How helpful or easy-to-remember these are can be debated, although referring to preaching and the church as missional, relational, and incarnational fits very nicely into the medically derived acronym MRI.

Sweet’s basic tenet is that traditional methods of preaching no longer work. In this age of social media connectiveness, concepts like topical, textual, or expository preaching no longer appeal to many Christians, he holds. His book gives some explanation of these methods, plus a delineation of what was once considered good style for a rhetorical sermon. Instead of these tired methods, he promotes the idea of semiotic preaching, which “reads the signs of what God is up to in the world, connects those signs in people’s lives with the Jesus story, and then communicates the gospel by connecting people in relationship to Jesus through stories, images, and gestures” (22).

Asserting the “chaos and paradox are the defining features of life in the twenty-first century” (248), Sweet challenges his readers—presumably seminarians—to let passion rule, push limits, take risks, expect to fail, and “never turn your back on the ocean” (250-253). He decries preachers who are “skulls,” and therefore cease being learners instead of continually becoming more learned; in turn, he challenges us to become “lobsters,” shedding the shell that may keep you safe but will not let you grow (254).

Sweet concludes many of the chapters with “Interactives” or a “Lab Practicum,” some of which are as long as fifteen pages. He also devotes a chapter to “Blood Poisoning,” in which he describes and gives advice about how to deal with heresies, which he describes as “viral.” These

include Christianity without a Messiah; Christianity as solely an individual experience; worshipping idols such as money, buildings, and bibles; and finger-pointing, as well as a few traditional heresies (Gnosticism, Baalism, and Pharisaism).

Sweet even offers some advice for the question, “What do you do with bad sermons?” When a sermon drizzles and fizzles instead of “streaming a spray of grace with fire in the blood” (297), he recommends three correctives: 1. Don’t multiply when you should subtract; 2. Get creative; and 3. Let Jesus do the talking. To this last admonition, let the people say, “Amen.”

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