

J. Ellsworth Kalas. *Preaching in an Age of Distraction*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2014. 165 pages. \$17.29.

One of the most salient features of our society is ubiquitous distraction. Teachers, preachers and writers know this reality well. We find ourselves in contexts so replete with distractions that focus and discipline seem elusive concepts rarely to be engaged. In his latest book, J. Ellsworth Kalas acknowledges that distraction in our time has reached fever pitch. Even so, he cautions against claiming ours as the most distracted generation in history. He frames distractedness as an innately human experience as old as the creation story itself. Through an exploration of distractions past and present, Kalas reminds the reader that a romantic time of undistracted engagement never existed. He instills hope in even the most distracted person by offering creative possibilities for overcoming and engaging distracting temptations. Kalas encourages preachers to see not just the frustrating qualities of distraction, but also distraction's fruitful possibilities. *Preaching in an Age of Distraction* contains useful analysis of the role distraction plays in the lives of congregants as well as preachers. It places distraction in the broader context of spiritual need and hunger. Preachers are encouraged to embrace their role in providing focus for those adrift in a sea of distractions—even as they struggle in that same sea. “We need to remember that the longing for God is older than the longing for more and that the sensation the secular world sells cannot be fully satisfied short of God” (61).

How does the distracted preacher invite distracted listeners into a safe harbor in the midst of rough seas? Kalas offers useful focus questions that will resonate with preachers hoping to cut through the wind and waves: “Will this ‘distraction’ lead to more life or to less? Will it bless me so that I will bless others or will it diminish me so that I will enjoy diminishing others?” (77) In addition to encouraging a discerned engagement with distractions in order to harness their power for good, Kalas makes a case for excellence in preaching as a counterforce to distraction. He argues that excellent preaching can overcome given distraction by being more interesting, accessible, and compelling than the alternatives. “We must give our generation a call to the excellence that is the essence of life in Jesus Christ. And we must do so with an excellence of thought and delivery worthy of the subject that is our trust” (93).

The challenges facing the every-Sunday preacher receive special attention in this book. In a chapter dedicated to creativity and distraction, Kalas artfully discusses the unique circumstances of preaching in the same pulpit week after week. He lays out possibilities for maximizing creative potential in the sermon writing process by engaging in deep listening and spiritual renewal. Practical considerations to minimize distractions during the preaching moment itself are also shared. This is done with sophistication and candor offering advice and strategies that are significant and timely, not faddish. In his discussion of sermon content in our distracted age, Kalas covers a range of topics from scripture to current events to doctrine. Throughout, he reminds readers that good sermonic content must be matched with a sensitivity to the way our congregations listen and hear today. “I wish that all of us preachers... would remember a basic rule: what matters is not how long we preach but how long the hearer listens, not how much we say but how much people comprehend and apply to their lives” (133).

Each chapter in the book is punctuated by narrative offerings from preachers in the field. These reflections are diverse and edifying. They offer perspective, witness, and additional strategies for dealing with distraction dilemmas. Perhaps the most challenging and prophetic questions come in the final chapter. On the topic of preaching in a context of distraction that leads to emotional over-saturation, Kalas asks, “Is there a limit to our sensory equipment so that

having passed the limit we drop into an abyss of boredom? . . . In a world of distraction, ennui may be the coming plague” (146). If this prediction is true, then his book is all the more important. Kalas comprehensively engages the seductive and productive powers of distraction with incision, wisdom, and whimsy. Preachers, teachers, and writers alike will find useful and accessible engagement with a topic that is unavoidable in any discipline.

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