

Cornelius Plantinga Jr. *Reading for Preaching: The Preacher in Conversation with Storytellers, Biographers, Poets, and Journalists*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013. 133 pages. \$12.54.

Cornelius Plantinga, a theologian and past president of Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, writes this book as a result of teaching a summer seminar on “Reading for Preaching” over the previous ten years. The book argues for a disciplined reading program beyond biblical resources.

Chapter One introduces the general reading program Plantinga explores in this book. Chapter Two, entitled “Attentive Illustrations,” speaks to the responsibility of preachers to carefully attend to what is going on in the world around them. Attentiveness is the preacher’s gift and calling (27). Good reading habits are an excellent way to nurture this gift. Plantinga, however, issues a word of caution that reading “just for illustrations is slightly perverse” (22). At the end of Chapter Two he offers a suggested reading plan that involves reading one novel, one biography, and some part of a book of poetry once a year (42).

Chapter Three engages the field of communication describing how the preacher crafts the language of the sermon in order to engage listeners. Preachers can learn skillful sermon writing from reading widely. Plantinga, however, cautions against using extreme styles of language. On the one hand, preachers should avoid “tuxedo formal” language but on the other hand they should also avoid “tank top casual” (49). He advises a “business casual” kind of colloquialism. At the same time, different contexts demand different degrees of formal and informal language.

The last three chapters (half the book) are devoted to the importance of the preacher gaining wisdom. The first half of Chapter Four provides a realistic and sobering description of the complexities involved in the task of preaching. Every week preachers are challenged to bring a fresh message to the same congregation made up of diverse listeners. The challenge is daunting even for the most experienced. Preachers need wisdom to know how to meet the challenge. Therefore a preacher must develop qualities of a sage; a sage who has developed a broad knowledge base out of which to preach and adapt to the diversity of listeners (73). Having a general reading program helps preachers understand a variety of issues, connect specific examples to biblical concepts, and manage the complexities of the task (74).

Chapter Five elaborates further on the theme of wisdom. Good literature and the literary characters that inhabit the pages complicate the issues in life. Preachers, like many people, tend to develop “dogmatic myopia” about individuals, groups, and issues (93). If preachers carry their narrow-minded perspectives into the pulpit, they become irresponsible. “The preacher wants his program of reading to complicate some of his fixed ideas, to impress him with some of the mysteries of life, with its variousness, with its surprises, with the pushes and pulls within it” (95).

Chapter Six, the final chapter, describes the complexities of sin and grace and the wisdom to understand how to appropriately address both. Sin brutalizes its victims. When preachers treat sin lightly then grace is trivialized. Preachers who read widely will discover sin’s power to destroy lives but will also surface ways that God’s grace intercedes in surprising ways.

There are minor concerns I have about some ideas expressed. For example, Plantinga uses the term “middle wisdom” to describe those insights a person gains from reading that are not as profound as say a biblical proverb but neither are they mundane (74–75). Most scholars, however, would describe biblical proverbs as more on the mundane side than the profound. One of the qualities of wisdom is that it is not that interested in making profound statements.

The section on “Things We Should Not Know” was ambiguous (82–85). Is Plantinga saying there are ideas or issues we should not explore? If so how does one know whether or not

one should explore them unless they are first explored? Or is he saying there are ideas or issues or knowledge that preachers should not share from the pulpit? It seems he is saying the former but it is not clear.

In the opening of Chapter One Plantinga asks whether we preach text or gospel (1–2). He raises the issue that some texts like a proverb or a genealogy or Job 38–41 do not contain much gospel. The solution he offers is less than adequate. He maintains that such texts should be paired with another that contains more gospel. This solution depends in part on how one defines gospel. At any rate such a complex issue needs more than the cursory treatment it received or it should not be addressed at all.

Every page in the book is chalked full of specific examples and illustrations from a variety of reading resources. Most of the time these examples are brief. On a few occasions they are longer and more detailed, like the example of Philip Carey in Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage* (109–113). Plantinga appeals to the value of reading broadly as a means of developing the qualities of wisdom and attentiveness. Reading hones a preacher's ability to pay attention to the world around, even the most boring conversations (26). He is quick to emphasize that a reading program is not a magical solution. It will not automatically make one a good preacher (18). Neither does he claim that all terrific preachers are wide readers (20). Preachers who develop a reading discipline, however, strengthen their understanding of human nature, deepen their spiritual lives, and gain wisdom for the task of preaching. For a majority of preachers who are not naturally gifted speakers, he rightly claims that a disciplined reading program will significantly strengthen us personally and professionally (21). Preachers will greatly benefit from Plantinga's work.

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