

J. Ellsworth Kalas. *Preaching in an Age of Distraction*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2010. 167 pages. \$16.

A while back a few churches made news by building domes of impenetrability around their sanctuaries such that worshippers could not access the internet on their devices. This movement did not catch on; today most of us who preach have thrown up our hands and feebly hope that our listeners are at least accessing Scripture, taking notes, or doing something else remotely related to the sermon as they stare at their phones while we vie for their attention. But we suspect that in between those worthy endeavors, they are texting, updating their Facebook status, or checking the scores of a game. Distraction is not going away. It is a big, ugly rock in the road that we shall just have to steer around. Or is it? Could it be a diamond in the rough? Ellsworth Kalas, senior professor of homiletics at Asbury Theological Seminary, puts on a jeweler's loupe and peers at distraction's every facet, considering its every imperfection, but also pondering where the right cut could turn a blemish into an asset. Kalas wants preachers to be challenged but ultimately undaunted by distraction; he remains deeply confident that excellent preaching will continue to hold its own even in a crowded marketplace of competing voices—and apps.

He begins by admitting that his teenaged self was a distraction to his preacher, as was a bat flying through the sanctuary of his youth. Distraction takes many forms, and it is not a new phenomenon. While the main theme of the book is the challenge for preachers of the distracted nature of our listeners today (Chapters One and Two name those distractions in detail), Kalas wisely notes in Chapter Three that we as preachers are a distractible bunch as well. We get pulled off task during our own preparation, and even during our sermons themselves. Chapter Four returns to the problem of distracted listeners; it culminates in a poignant call to love those to whom we preach, extending them heaping helpings of patience and grace. This pastoral heart pervades Kalas' writing. One of the most challenging and surprising pieces of advice here comes out of Kalas' conviction that we must never view those we serve as distractions from our task. As a pastor, he did not even screen calls during his sermon prep time, and never regretted that choice. This runs counter to common wisdom in most homiletics courses, but I was challenged by the call to sacrificial love reflected in Kalas' practice.

Kalas' freshest thinking comes when he flips upside down the concept of distraction, in Chapters Five and Six. He notes that the most creative thinkers admit to being easily distracted people. They are capable of being fascinated by ideas, artwork, and experiences not directly related to their highly specialized careers. They are susceptible to distraction precisely because they are innately curious people, always exploring and growing. In one of many delightful glosses on Scripture, he notes that Moses "turned aside to look" at the burning bush, and that God's call to Moses came after the Lord saw that he did so (Exodus 3:3-4). This leads to a call to pastors to attend well to the beauty and ugliness on our own streets, to read broadly, and to live interesting lives. He flips the concept again when he urges that, rather than steeling ourselves by sheer force to be immune to distraction as sermon writers, pastors seek to be people who are distracted by the Word and by the mysterious presence of God—our attention is captured by it; we are driven off course by it; its power grips and holds us. I particularly appreciated his challenge that every sermon must be marked by a sense of wonder and awe at a fresh discovery and insight gained by the preacher that week.

The final chapters offer solid homiletical wisdom for any age: the tie-in to distraction seemed unnecessary at times, since his advice for crafting and delivering strong, interesting sermons would hold true whether or not listeners have Viber, Twitter, and WhatsApp churning away near their itchy fingertips. But the content is strong, for Kalas knows his stuff. He is truly one of the scribes Jesus urged his disciples to become, able to bring forth treasures old and new. He draws upon years of faithfully preaching and teaching the craft. I also appreciated the practical reflections in the sidebars from fellow pastors. I dare you: set down your phone, close your laptop, and focus intently on the wisdom found here.

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