

Ronald J. Allen and O. Wesley Allen Jr. *The Sermon without End: A Conversational Approach to Preaching*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2015. 155 pages. \$29.99.

Postmodernity is mostly characterized as the *end* of modernity and homogeneity. What preachers in postmodernity may find even more difficult is that the previously taken-for-granted understanding of truth, practice and experience, and the ethical values of Christianity are being vastly challenged, relativized and/or multiplied. In light of this postmodern context, Ronald J. Allen and O. Wesley Allen Jr. present their breath-taking book *The Sermon without End*. Viewed in its entirety, the book is structured based on this guiding question: “How shall the church and its preachers respond to the changing cultural contexts of postmodernity?” (12)

While acknowledging that the underlying question is the dialectical tension between church(es) and culture(s), the authors reintroduce the historically important, but almost forgotten notion of *apologetics* in homiletical discourse to describe how the church engages culture. For the postmodern context, they propose a *postapologetic* homiletical approach, “seeking critical reciprocity between the many and varied voices in, around, and outside of the church” (xiii).

Chapter one deals with the three broad approaches to apologetics that have dominated modernity: evangelicalism, liberalism, and postliberalism. The authors argue that, though they seem to be sharply differentiated from each other, they still can be brought under the umbrella notion of apologetics in that they are in inseparable relation to it either by accepting or rejecting it. Thus, each section comprises of description of the characteristics of each neighborhood, followed by description and critical reflection on apologetics in each pulpit in modernity.

Chapter two develops the understanding that the modernistic apologetic approach is gradually losing its contextuality. Thus, it is necessary to be substituted with something that reflects postmodern reality, namely a postapologetic, conversational approach to theology and preaching. While granting that each neighborhood is moving in the same direction, Ron Allen and Wes Allen assert that they all stop short of a fully conversational approach. Indeed, theirs is a deeply theological and homiletical endeavor to bring about *reciprocal conversation* of commendation and critique of Christian faith and postmodern pluralism by engaging the categories of and sources for making meaning.

Chapter three brings postapologetic preaching as conversation into closer focus. Exploring the qualities of authentic postapologetic conversation, the authors name the qualities of authentic conversational preaching in terms of its purposes and ethics. Conversational sermons must “contribute to postmodern individuals’ and communities’ approaches to *making meaning* in a pluralistic setting by offering a *tentative* interpretation of, experience of, and response to God’s character, purposes, and good news” (102). The authors also suggest that conversational preachers must be attentive to valuing the *reciprocity* and *asymmetry* inherent in the conversational sermonic act (104).

The last chapter of this book offers practical advice for preparing and embodying a conversational sermon along with a case study. The authors do not provide a completely new method of sermon preparation. Rather, they name *listening* for mutual conversation and transformation as the most important qualities of a preacher. Still, there are two main differences in the preparation of a conversational sermon. First, the preacher does not assume that a biblical text (or texts) will control the sermon. Second, the preacher should be open to other voices than scripture and tradition, which challenge and expand our making meaning of God, world and self.

This book deserves to be widely applauded. It provides a post-apologetic lens to illuminate the history of various modern homiletical discourses even as it envisions a

postmodern one. A conversational homiletic based on mutually critical, correlational models of theological method in the tradition of Tracy and Williamson is extremely appealing to homileticians and preachers who find themselves swimming in the sea of postmodernity. The authors' writing style is easy to read and understand. Their bibliography on the conversational school in chapter three will enable those who learn more about conversational preaching to pursue their own study.

Of course, there are a couple critical questions to be raised. First, postliberal homileticians probably question whether the postapologetic lens can even be applicable to them. As Schleiermacher indicates in his *Brief Outline of Theology as a Field of Study*, there are two different type of church directions (including discourses), which are apologetic-outward and polemic-inward. Taking this understanding seriously, postliberals may rebut the conversational approach as it is too much focused on apologetic-outward move, lacking in a polemic-inward move and thus weakening the identity of church. Second, some people may resist the authors' optimistic view of conversation, which can sometimes happen on many *radically* different levels, angles, and ways in a certain context. Though this model takes subjectivity, particularity, and diversity seriously, the question of whether they can be fully and contextually considered remains.

Despite these questions, I strongly recommend this book for homileticians, preachers, and lay people alike. Numerous insightful suggestions for conversational preaching will benefit those both in academy and parish to engage in mutual conversation and transformation beyond their own boundaries in this postmodern era. Teachers of preaching will also find this book's breadth and depth extremely valuable to help students understand three different, but sometimes overlapping neighborhoods, and thus motivate them to develop their own contextual theology of preaching.

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