

Kate Bruce and James Harrison. *Wrestling with the Word: Preaching Tricky Texts*. London: SPCK, 2016. 160 pages. \$18.00.

In this volume, edited and written “for those who preach and those who hear preachers,” Kate Bruce and Jamie Harrison offer “advice on the shape and structure of sermons, and how to navigate the stormy waters of tricky texts” (xv-xvi). Working inductively, the authors provide a series of sermons on “tricky” texts and then mine them for strategies for dealing with such texts. This book endeavors to serve as a resource for those preachers unsure what to do with the many difficult passages within Scripture.

The first part of the book offers its theological foundations. Chapter 1 considers objections to the importance of preaching: issues of authoritarianism in the pulpit, pastoral ineffectiveness, preaching is a poor means of teaching, etc. In addressing these issues, the author provides a rationale as to why something like the contemporary sermon should continue to exist. Chapter 2 turns from addressing preaching’s critics to providing a theological foundation for the practice itself. According to the author, preaching is an incarnational and context-sensitive act of proclamation in which God continues God’s activity of speaking. Furthermore, such preaching takes place in a “dynamic interaction with the scriptural texts, allowing the Bible to challenge and reshape our agenda” (19). This gives Scripture a “normative and essential role in preaching,” thereby establishing the need to consider what the preacher should do with “difficult” passages given Scripture’s normative, “over-against” role.

With this theology of preaching in hand, the remainder of the book explores various categories of “tricky” texts: texts that depict events beyond human experience, recount human violence, illustrate misused power, seem strange to the modern reader, and challenge our assumptions and perspectives. With each of these categories, the authors provide a series of sermons based on such a text. At the conclusion of the section, the authors identify the various homiletical strategies the preachers use and offer them as guides for how one might wrestle with similar passages in their own preaching. The various “homiletical strategies” at the end of each section range from using humor and references to popular culture in the sermon to how one might move between the biblical text and contemporary experience. The insights gleaned from the various sermons contain practical and suggestions for how to weave the text into the sermon.

The volume concludes with two more sermons and an essay by David Day in which he explores the debate over “the application emphasis.” While he desires to avoid debates over hermeneutics, Day still argues preaching that seeks to change the lives of its hearers will maintain an emphasis on “application” that results in the sermon preaching a present-tense word that speaks relevantly to lived experience, instead of merely a history lesson. This ensures “the thrust of the sermon is carried forward into action” (144).

Reading this book, I was struck most by what it did not do. The authors state their view of Scripture as one in which the biblical text is a normative witness that stands “over and against” human experience. After this, they never seriously raise the “hermeneutical question” for the remainder of the book. Yet it is this hermeneutical question (and its theological and pastoral implications) that lies at the center of how one should preach these texts—the texts are “tricky” precisely because of the hermeneutical and theological questions they raise. While one can appreciate the suggestions at the end of each section, one is right to ask if they are truly able to address the unique theological and hermeneutical challenges these texts pose—is “using humor” really sufficient for troubling texts? This results in perhaps the most “tricky” category of biblical texts being left unexamined—passages in which God is the one who perpetrates and

sanctions violence. One wonders if this category is left out because the authors did not have room to include it, or if their approach could not provide a way to speak about them without calling their hermeneutical stance into question. Simply put, because the authors only speak to sermon shape and structure, too much of the book stays at the level of tips and tricks while avoiding the hermeneutical and theological issues involved in dealing with these kinds of texts—how we read them, what we do with their theological claims, and whether we still affirm them as Scripture. Because the authors avoid these questions and their homiletical implications, one wonders how helpful this book actually is for preaching these difficult texts.

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