

David Schnasa Jacobsen, ed. *Theologies of the Gospel in Context: The Crux of Homiletical Theology*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017. 176 pages. \$23.

If the gospel does not exist in a vacuum, but is always the gospel *to* someone or *in* a particular context, how might this inform the theological task of preaching? This is the question at the heart of this most recent collection of essays from the third consultation of the Homiletical Theology Project. In this volume, a collection of diverse homileticians address this question and others as they articulate visions of preaching that “names gospel” while “honoring the otherness of texts, the uniqueness of situations, and the particularities of context” (1). Written with both preachers and homileticians in mind, these essays endeavor to take seriously the notion that “the gospel emerges differently in contexts over time and cannot be reduced to a fixed formula” (2).

An introductory essay by David Schnasa Jacobsen supplies the reader with a framework for understanding the aims of the collection, defining key terms, and making important distinctions between contexts and situations. The rest of the essays take on the collection’s governing question, thinking through what the gospel is and how one might proclaim it within a particular context or situation. In chapter 1, André Resner demonstrates how homiletical theology is the conversation that arises between the preacher’s “working gospel” and their context. In chapter 2, Debra Mumford explores the prosperity gospel as it has operated in American history and the rise of the Black middle class. In doing so, Mumford asks preachers to consider how they might proclaim hope within the complexity that is our current capitalist system. In chapter 3, Sarah Travis considers how the gospel of reconciliation might arise in a postcolonial context as quite different parties attempt to relate to one another. Chapter 4 follows a similar theme, as Yohan Go considers what the gospel might mean in light of a Korean context, one with a history of colonization and political turmoil. Chapter 5 turns to questions of trauma, as Joni Sancken reflects on the potential of Holy Saturday as a means for preaching in the context of trauma and human suffering. In the concluding chapter, Jacobsen reflects on how the gospel, understood as promise, might speak a word to the context of the now-disestablished white mainline church.

It would be unfair to the individual essays to try evaluating them in such a short review. Yet there are themes that stretch across the individual works that deserve mention. Primarily, one finds excellent examples of how one might think through a context and situation theologically. These authors do not merely affirm whatever is present in the culture as “gospel,” but also do the hard work of naming where the gospel might “speak against” certain features of a context. This may alleviate the fear of those who often see such calls for “interactions” between gospel and culture as thinly veiled attempts to baptize whatever the culture is already doing. As a result, one finds here works of practical theology in the best sense. This collection also has implications for the working preacher. These essays call for proclamation of the gospel with specificity into the “nitty-gritty” particulars of context. Preachers who take this seriously can no longer leave their “gospel speech” at the level of abstract categories or theological jargon, but will press at every turn to become more specific and concrete about the appearance of gospel in their midst. Were preachers to heed these words, the sermons I routinely hear would dramatically improve.

However, I was also left with questions. One notices a “slippage” with how terms are used across this work as a whole, with the term “gospel” a prime example. The introduction provides an explanation of the term, but reading through the essays revealed a “working disagreement” as to how one should define “gospel.” For example, in one essay the term “gospel” becomes a stand-in for “working theology.” Another essay takes a more traditional

approach and defines “gospel” as the content of Christian preaching, including the death and resurrection of Jesus. These differences raise the question of what the gospel actually is, how we understand it, and whether “articulating” it in context is an act of creation or discovery. However, this is a sign of the beginning of an important conversation within homiletical theology, rather than its end.

Mason Lee, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ