

O. Wesley Allen Jr. *Preaching and the Human Condition: Loving God, Self, and Others*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2016. 118 pages. \$25.

O. Wesley Allen Jr., one of the leading conversational homileticians in North America, presents this book as a sequel to his previous volume, *The Homiletic of All Believers: A Conversational Approach*. In this book, he specifically focuses on the human condition, lamenting what we preachers often lack in our critical, existential encounter with and analysis of that condition and thus fail to bring about the transformation of the lives of congregants (2). So, what is the human condition? Allen uses this term to depict “the underlying, structural, existential problems inherent in being and living as human being,” that is, the various threats and damage done to/by individuals and communities, which is theologically understood as having two sides of *sin* and *suffering* (6).

What is unique in his suggestion is that he applies his notion of a *cumulative* approach of his conversational homiletic to the human condition, hoping that it will enable preachers to gradually address it with true depth. In other words, he desires to shape “the congregation’s process of making meaning of and responding to sin and suffering *over time*” (9). Moreover, Allen, using the greatest commandment as a heuristic lens, suggests his three-dimensional model as a theoretical framework for his cumulative approach to the human condition: loving God, loving self, and loving others. By pairing sin and suffering with three-vertical, horizontal, and inner-dimensions, he makes proposals for a cumulative homiletic appropriate across the theological spectrum.

Then, how can his approach to the human condition attain its applicability beyond the uniqueness of each theological position? Allen argues that in reality, the three dimensions in any theological camp co-exist with a varying degree of emphasis on one particular dimension as the theological starting point for sin and suffering (14). However, since these three dimensions of vertical, horizontal, and inner, are inseparable and mutually interpenetrate one another, preachers should engage with the three dimensions together in order to bring greater depth concerning the human condition, the whole of the problem(s) facing the whole of humanity (17).

Allen presents three overarching suggestions for a cumulative approach to the human condition as follows (18–26): First, preachers should establish *analogies* between the text and our context by focusing on the similarity between the deep structures of the human condition in the situation in or behind the text and the same structures in different contemporary situations. Second, *language and imagery* should be tailored to invite hearers reflect on their lives and world. Third, revising Wilson’s trouble/grace model and expanding Lowry’s narrative movement from an itch to a scratch, he suggests creating *the accumulation of sermonic itches* “to set up a word of depth concerning God’s grace and calling on our lives and the world” (25).

For the next three chapters, Allen deals with the three dimensions respectively. He begins with the theological and biblical descriptions of sin and suffering in each dimension, followed by many useful homiletical prescriptions in terms of how to deal strategically with biblical passages, analogies, language and imagery and sermon structures. In addition to this, Allen provides a sample sermon for each sub-section, which is greatly helpful for readers wondering how to weave all these elements into a single sermon.

Among many, I would like to name three unique contributions of this book: First, the author expands conversational homiletics by re-focusing on his own cumulative approach to a specific issue of the human condition. Allen rightly asserts that while the human condition is commonly shared across the theological spectrum, preachers should approach it from the vertical,

horizontal, or inner dimension that is the most appropriate for their own contexts, in order to address its depth more fully. Second, the author's cumulative approach not only illuminates the depth of the human condition but also acknowledges preachers' humble task of conversationally and cumulatively providing a provisional and theological understanding of it. Last but not least, Allen's detailed suggestions for each dimension of sin and suffering are markedly beneficial for many preachers who find themselves at any point on the theological spectrum. Personally, I find Allen's careful dealing with the issue of theodicy in the vertical dimension and his sound advice on the issue of ethics toward others in the horizontal dimension most worthwhile.

However, there are also a couple of critical questions to be raised. First, as Allen indicates, his three-dimensional model may be too artificial for many congregations, especially those in urban areas which tend more or less to struggle with denominational change and a diverse makeup of congregants from (theologically or existentially) different backgrounds. I wish he could have been more explicit about how to address cumulatively the human condition for a more complex congregation, even while attending to the two other dimensions. In relation to the first point, some contextual homileticians may resist Allen's vision of a cumulative effect of preaching because it sounds too optimistic to hope that preachers are able to fit together neatly the three dimensions of the human condition. Still, there are some contexts where these dimensions cannot be easily reconciled but rather conflict with one another, especially in congregations comprised of different races, genders, cultures, and languages.

Despite these questions, I highly recommend this book to any homileticians, preachers, and students who are interested in practices of preaching in light of its specific focus on the human condition and its broad applicability to any congregation. This book is deeply theological and practical and deals profoundly with the existential issue of sin and suffering in our broken world.

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