

Annette Brownlee. *Preaching Jesus Christ Today: Six Questions for Moving from Scripture to Sermon*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018. 185 pages. \$22.99.

Annette Brownlee is chaplain, professor of pastoral theology, and director of field education at Wycliffe College, University of Toronto. She has extensive experience in parish work, as well. It is out of these shared experiences that she writes this current volume. Brownlee views preaching Jesus Christ as a “theological practice” (x). She organizes her work around six questions involved in developing the sermon, which are designed to help the preacher “look attentively at Scripture and understand how to interpret the text and preach what she sees” (7).

The first question, “What do I see?” calls the preacher to a purposeful, thoughtful reading of the text. This attentive reading of the Scripture looks at the details that the text offers to understand what they mean for the preacher. Brownlee encourages the minister to study difficult texts because “The art of attentive reading the strange, sometime difficult words of Scripture is similar to the ability to love our neighbor across the chasm of difference and offense” (22).

The second question, “Whom do I see?” urges the preacher to find where Jesus Christ is in the text. The preacher moves from witnessing the text to testifying to what has been seen. Brownlee emphasizes that while not every sermon is to be about Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ is the revealed Word of God and the preacher seeks how that Word applies to the church. This reading of Scripture theologically requires reading the text with a disciplined imagination, which is a developed skill (46).

The third question, “What is Christ’s word to me?” seeks God’s word for one’s self. Brownlee notes how the monotony of weekly sermon preparation, among the other duties of ministry, can lead one not to be attentive to the text. The attentive reading of the text requires the reader to see what the text is doing in her life and how it offers both grace and judgement. This positions the preacher as confessor.

The fourth question, “What is Christ’s word to us?” addresses the church in a particular context. It moves the preacher from confessor to theologian as it asks what Christ is saying to the congregation. The dual action of grace in judgment moves from “me” to a corporate “us.” Brownlee call this a “communal hermeneutic” in which “we listen, interpret, and respond together” (75).

The fifth question, “What is Christ’s word about us?” asks how the text addresses the brokenness of the church’s life. Just as the text affects the preacher’s life, it also has effects on the lives of those in the congregation. Brownlee sees this as a shared identity that is not to be coercive or manipulative. Christ’s word to us, she says, is “a reminder that preaching is about discerning the body—our own mortality, our ungodliness, Christ’s marred and glorious body, and our shared yet difficult life in just this body” (100).

The final question, “What does it look like?” speaks to the development of the sermon for delivery. She addresses the use of stories in the sermon, emphasizing their need to be connected to the sermon: “Stories can witness to the Christ revealed in Scripture, as recognized and responded to by the people in the story” (122).

Brownlee includes a chapter that guides the reader through these six questions in actual sermon preparation. She concludes her book by emphasizing that love is the “hermeneutical criterion” for developing the sermon, the love ultimately found in Jesus Christ.

Brownlee offers a well-written guide to the preparation of a sermon. She provides ample examples and illustrations on this journey. On one level some may think that this work is just another take on sermon preparation. However, what the author offers is a renewed call to being

attentive to scripture in the research and development of the sermon. This in and of itself merits its importance for both the student and the seasoned minister.

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