

William H. Willimon, *Proclamation and Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005)

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Anyone who has read William Willimon knows how engaging a writer he is. He writes about homiletics as though he were preaching about homiletics, which is a rather marvellous way of modelling in the very act of persuading. Recently consecrated a United Methodist bishop, and for many years Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, Bishop Willimon is a prolific author who has written widely in the area of pastoral care, worship, the sacraments, and the ordained ministry. I suppose if we were to insist upon a theological label for him we might settle upon "post-liberal" as he writes from a lifelong involvement in one of America's most liberal denominations and yet has engaged in a career-long polemic against the complacency of a church establishment which often has little interest in or concern for the startling disruptions of classical Christian orthodoxy.

Proclamation and Theology is a book written with the conviction that if there is anything wrong with preaching today, it is theological in nature. Willimon is critical of church marketing specialists such as George Barna who tell us that we must market our message in the most efficient manner possible. This equating of "savvy marketing strategies" with Christian proclamation is a sad selling out of Jesus, the only cure for which is theology. "Theology makes preaching as difficult and as demanding as it ought to be. [It] tests whether or not we preach Christ Jesus and him crucified rather than humanity and it slightly improved" (4-5).

In the first chapter Willimon asserts that God in Christ becomes incarnate through preaching. Creation took place through the speaking of words; word preceded world, so that "reality is linguistically constructed. Words do not arise from things but rather things are evoked by the Word." Just about all Jesus did in inaugurating his kingdom was talk and they crucified him to shut him up. "For three days," says Willimon, "the silence was deafening" (12-12). We might think the idea of reality as linguistically constructed to be drawn from postmodernism, but Willimon grounds the idea instead in the Scriptures, in Calvin, and in the words of Heinrich Bullinger from the Second Helvetic Confession, "The preaching of the word of God is the Word of God" (16).

The second chapter begins with a critique of one of the most memorable and much loved homiletical maxims, Phillips Brooks' "preaching is truth through personality." Willimon begs to differ asserting that "the personalities of us preachers are not that interesting" and recalls as an alternative metaphor Karl Barth's image of the preacher as a person simply standing on a street corner pointing to the sky. It is Luther's "external word" that comes to us, confronts us, and demands to be repeated by us, and not simply the ruminations of our own personalities. We are not to judge preaching by its impact on the hearers. We must preach, says Luther, not for the hearers at all, "but to the glory of our

Lord Jesus Christ ... without worrying whether the world shows much interest in it" (20). This means loving the text more than our congregational context.^[2] Luther believes of course that we may still remain optimistic about preaching because God will always find at least some hearers for God's Word.

One of the most interesting passages of the book is found in this second chapter when Willimon discusses Pentecost as the reversal of Babel and the inauguration of a prophetic community. By virtue of their baptism, all Christians are prophets anointed by the Spirit to speak the truth to power elites. The Spirit has given the world a prophetic community, and created a particular *polis*, a people made up of young, old, men, women, able, and disabled, who speak, think, and act differently from others. They are too big for their britches and they don't mind telling people the truth about things even if it offends. In short, says Willimon, "the Holy Spirit produces uppity speech" (24-27). The real test of an ordained preacher then, is not so much the ability to preach, as to call forth a prophetic community. In making this point, Willimon echoes P. T. Forsyth who, in 1902, wrote that "the one great preacher in history ... is the church. And the first business of the individual preacher is to enable the church to preach ... he must be a sacrament to the church, that with the church he may become a missionary to the world."^[3]

Having affirmed that preaching is a prophetic word, Willimon turns, in chapter three, to a treatment of preaching as a biblical word. When we preach from the Scriptures to a living congregation we are using the Bible in its natural habitat since this is how the text itself emerged, as a living voice to a living people. The way the Bible is handled in college classrooms is often far removed from the questions the Bible itself asks and answers. The standard historical-grammatical questions which are the concern of critical study are not questions with which the Bible itself is in the least concerned. This is where the preacher has an advantage over the biblical scholar, since she or he will see (or perhaps better, *hear*) the homiletical concerns of a passage far more readily.

Every preacher, in turning toward Scripture as a source for a sermon, is turning toward a living, speaking personality in documentary form that opens its arms toward us and rushes out to meet us in order to speak to us, through us, so that the church might be lifted up and transported to where God is (35).

Preachers are usually thought of as great speakers but Willimon recalls Bonhoeffer's insistence that they must first be great listeners and then asserts what he calls "the biblical preacher's great hermeneutical principle" that "scripture always and everywhere tends to speak primarily about God and then only secondarily or derivatively about us" (43).

In his 1992 book *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized*, Willimon took issue with Fred Craddock's inductive preaching approach, by taking aim at the latter's 1971 book, *As One Without Authority: Essays in Inductive Preaching*, considered by some to be the most influential book on preaching in our time.^[4] Craddock's "inductive method" of preaching "corresponds to the way people ordinarily experience reality and to the way life's problem-solving activity goes on naturally and casually ... [It] respects rather than insults the hearer and ... leaves the freedom and hence the obligation to respond."^[5]

Inductive preaching focuses on audience response and demands. Preachers must speak, argued Craddock, as human beings and from the human situation not as those with a bestowed ecclesiastical and moral authority. The power of words has been lessened in the present age. "Churchy" words certainly do not have the power and resonance they once possessed. The pulpit no longer has *ex officio* authority in society. Preachers today do not

address a Christian world but a pluralistic world of multiple viewpoints. There is still great power and appeal in oral discourse, but preachers must adjust their discourse, moving from a principle of monologue to one of dialogue.

The title of Craddock's book (*As One Without Authority*) is drawn from his concept that the preacher can "no longer ... presuppose the general recognition of his authority as a clergyman, or the authority of his institution, or the authority of Scripture."^[6] His evidence in proof of this is exclusively cultural, rather than theological, when he says, "The inductive method is fundamental to the American way of life."^[7] So, for Craddock, according to Willimon, "the beginning and end of preaching is the cultural situation of its recipients."^[8] But does culture really determine the boundaries of the church's speech? Is it really true that preaching can be understood as an individual "reflecting his or her experiences in an open-ended, detached way to a group of individuals who are invited to draw their own conclusions based upon their own experiences"?^[9]

In *Peculiar Speech*, Willimon rigorously disputed this point of view, insisting that the church does not speak to the general human condition but to a particular audience with a particular language of its own, and stressed the "baptismal, liturgical quality of our speech."^[10] Christian preaching, then is a distinctive discourse. To preach among the baptized ... is to operate within [the] domain of [that] discourse.^[11] "Conversation among the baptized is ecclesial in nature, political. A particular *polis* is being formed here, a family, a holy nation."^[12] There is "politics in our preaching." Too often we speak of preaching "as if nothing political were at stake in the mode of our communication, as if no particular people were congregating due to our speaking, as if being Christian were synonymous with being a good human being. No matter our style of preaching, there is no way for us preachers to weasel out of the baptismal truth that we preach within a distinctive universe of discourse. We talk funny."^[13]

Too much preaching theory, says Willimon, is in the translation mode. "Take this biblical image and translate it into something more palatable to people ... The modern church has been willing to use every language but its own ... Unable to preach Christ and Him crucified we preach humanity and it improved ... When the preacher is uncertain about speech ... nothing will be said that would require conversion in order to be understood ... By the time most of us finish qualifying the scandal of Christian speech, very little can be said by the preacher that can't be heard elsewhere."^[14]

In *Proclamation and Theology*, he continues this earlier polemic to some extent, asserting that since "the Bible's peculiar speech is not easily translated into terms that are readily available to the average contemporary audience ... one of the tasks of preaching is the teaching of a new vocabulary and a new grammar whereby Christians are enabled truthfully to describe themselves and the world. Understanding of a sermon therefore requires conversion, formation, and indoctrination" (48).

Too much contemporary preaching appears to have [adopted] essentially anthropological concerns. These sermons usually begin with the preacher's amateurish assessment of the contemporary human condition – we are depressed, we are searching for meaning in life, or we are frightened about the future – then the preacher rummages about in the Bible and finds there some principle or insight that can be applied to the contemporary human condition, usually something that the congregation is to think or do to set themselves right (48).

"It is absurd trivialization of the gospel," says Willimon, "to think that Jesus told the parable of the prodigal son in order to foster happier families." The Bible has no interest in speaking into our world. It wants instead to "rock, transform, dismantle and recreate our world ... A vision of God, rather than helpful hints for everyday living is what Scripture seeks" (45-46).

In chapter four, Willimon discusses preaching as incarnational. It is the Word become flesh in human discourse. Preaching not only speaks of miraculous things, but is itself miraculous. A voice comes to us from the beyond. It is not merely talk about God but God talking. At the very same time it is "an utterly human, mundane, carnal and fleshly thing" (56). Fully divine, fully human – incarnational words indeed. Without recognising the "two natures" of preaching, we preachers make one of two errors. We either undermine preaching's authority with an "aw shucks" false humility and apologise that we are after all only fallen human beings, so anything we say is no more important than anything our hearers might say on the same subject. Or we make the opposite mistake and act as though we have received God's Word in an unmediated way, as if all the faithful have to do is receive it from us as pure prophetic speech, all treasure and no earthen vessel.

We preachers are not free to speak without a note of tension in our voices – in polished and perfected oratory free of awkward gaps and pauses, dangling modifiers and ragged conclusions – as if we have been given the last word on God ... Like John the Baptist, we are only human beings sent from God to speak. Our voices fail, become overwhelmed, crack under the strain, and fade away; but the Word of the Lord endures forever (62).

In the final section of chapter four, Willimon discusses "Trinitarian Preaching" and points out how our reliance on Scripture as a printed, rather than a spoken word, has negatively affected our preaching. We focus upon fixed, static words in print, analysing them and dissecting them and forgetting that these words were spoken before they were ever written. Our almost exclusive focus on the written text, he says, would make us better Moslems than Christians! On the other hand "talking about a moving, dynamic, Trinitarian God requires a supple, resourceful, well-modulated, and wide-ranging voice that is best reached in the spoken, rather than the written word" (64). I agree with Willimon's suggestion, and in fact have practised it for some time, encouraging people not to have their noses buried in their Bibles (or to gaze glassy-eyed at words on a power point slide) but instead to look up to the human reader and hear the voice of God in the reading of Scripture. In this way we hear God's Word as something proclaimed, something that comes to us rather than something that we subject to our own analysis. After all, God does not inhabit the footnotes of the NIV Study Bible but the act of proclamation.

Preaching must not only be Trinitarian but also "cruciform." In chapter five, "Cross and Resurrection in Preaching," Willimon draws on Luther's "theology of the cross" and lists six "homiletical implications of a crucified God."

- I. The theology of glory preaches the cross as a technique for us to get what we want, whereas the theology of the cross is God's means of getting what God wants.
- II. There is no rhetorical eloquence that can bring us to God.
- III. Preaching is a truthful mirror in which we see ourselves and our sins.
- IV. Preaching is a perilous vocation that can lead to martyrdom.

- V. Preaching is hard work requiring skill and discipline. "The roots of clerical sloth are theological rather than ... psychological. We become lazy and slovenly in our work because we have lost the theological rationale for our work" (72).
- VI. Yet for all this, preaching is a great and rewarding adventure so much more interesting and satisfying than worldly pursuits.

In the final chapter, Willimon deals with preaching as political. "All faithful sermons are inescapably 'political'," he writes, "in that they are always a claim about who is really in charge and therefore, by implication, part of the formation of a *polis*, a people who act and talk differently from the world." This political activity is not without its hazards for both preachers and congregations. The author recalls Kierkegaard who noted that the world was full of labour saving devices designed to make life easier for people. He decided that he was called to tell the truth and thus make life harder for people, so he became a preacher. [\[15\]](#)

Willimon's treatment of Acts 17 (Paul's encounter with the Athenians on Mars Hill) is very insightful and challenges the usual approach to this text. This passage is usually read as though Paul were commending the Athenians for their religiosity, "I see you are a very religious people"), identifying with their culture and then taking them from what they did know to what they did not yet know – the message of the Gospel. Whilst conceding that this *might* be what is happening, Willimon suggests a different reading, one in which Paul comes off a lot more rude and pushy. "I've seen a lot of idolatry in my time but you guys take the cake with this 'unknown God' caper. You don't even have a name for the thing and yet you're ready to fall down and worship it!"

Luke depicts Paul "as a great classical speaker" and this sermon, unlike others in the New Testament, is "one of the most perfectly formed of classical orations, conforming perfectly to Aristotle's concepts of a good speech" (96). Yet for a sermon so beautifully constructed and following all the best models of rhetorical speech, there wasn't much of a result. The people scoffed at this lunacy about resurrection and only a few (Dionysius and Damarus) were converted (Acts 17:32-34).

This meagre response is proof that Christian communicators like Paul have a problem. They may try to build upon people's common experiences of the world and nature. They may establish links with their culture. Yet at some point, the faithful Christian communicator must cite revelation, must put forth that knowledge that does not arise from human experience, but rather as a gift, must risk conflict, dissension, misunderstanding and rejection (97).

In *Proclamation and Theology*, Willimon has crammed a lot into a hundred pages and six short chapters. Preaching is God's Word spoken, it is prophetic, biblical, incarnate, cruciform, and political. Perhaps too advanced for an introductory preaching class, I have found it an excellent text for upper level classes. Like many prolific writers there is a tendency in Willimon to repeat concepts from earlier works and rehash older ideas in new forms. Yet because these ideas are so confronting, tantalizing, and at times prophetic, the regular reader of Willimon forgives the repetition. In one sense his message about the independence of God and the freedom of God's Word from the manipulation of human authority is classically Barthian and thus not anything altogether new. But after all, novelty is always the besetting sin of theology. In an era in which the church has become obsessive about "targeting" cultures and "marketing" its message successfully, and in which

preachers are uncertain about their function and identity, this little book is a much needed corrective.

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- [1] This review was originally presented at the Conference of the Australasian Academy of Homiletics held at Canisius College, Sydney, 13 June 2007.
- [2] Willimon, *Proclamation and Theology*, 20.
- [3] P. T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* (New York: A. C. Armstrong, 1907), 71, cited in Willimon, *Proclamation and Theology*, 31.
- [4] William H. Willimon, *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992); Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority: Essays in Inductive Preaching* (Enid, Oklahoma: Philips University Press, 1971; revised edition with new sermons: St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001). Note that the footnote references here are to the page numbers in the 1971 edition, not the revised edition. See also William Willimon, *Intrusive Speech: Preaching to the Unbaptised* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) as proof that Willimon recognises the difference between the two audiences.
- [5] Willimon, *Peculiar Speech*, 48.
- [6] Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 14-15.
- [7] Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 58.
- [8] Willimon, *Peculiar Speech*, 50.
- [9] Willimon, *Peculiar Speech*, 50. It should be noted here that Craddock's later books moderated his earlier views somewhat. His inductive approach was so radical because, as all radical theories, it overstated its case. In his 1985 book, *Preaching*, he makes the vital distinction between a sermon given to a Christian congregation and one given to a general audience, a distinction which seems to take the particularity of Christian discourse more seriously; Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 41-47, 84-98.
- [10] Willimon, *Peculiar Speech*, 3.
- [11] Willimon, *Peculiar Speech*, 6.
- [12] Willimon, *Peculiar Speech*, 4.
- [13] Willimon, *Peculiar Speech*, 6.
- [14] Willimon, *Peculiar Speech*, 9.
- [15] Charles E. Moore, ed., *Provocations: Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard* (Farmington, Penn: Plough Publishing House, 1999), 35 cited in Willimon, *Proclamation and Theology*, 95.

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