

# **Geoff New, *Echoes: The Lord's Prayer in the Preacher's Life***

**Reviewed by Jeffrey Pugh**

It is one of the small joys of a modest teaching ministry to find oneself so well instructed by one who was one's own student. Geoff New is an exceptionally reflective pastor, now an internationally appreciated pastoral educator. He does not give us another book about how to preach or, how to reach another distinct demographic, but from where to preach. It is clearly important for him to be transparent before the One before whom nothing is hidden though all phases of the preaching role.

*Echoes* curious structure applies the words of Luke's Gospel and Easter week passages to the work, the thinking, the struggles, temptations and tainted ambitions of the preacher's life. It falls into the same category as works such as the late Calvin Miller's *Spirit, Word and Story* (1996), or Michael Pasquarello's *We Speak Because we have first Been Spoken* (2009). The difference being here that New takes his bearings directly from his meditations upon the Scriptures revelation of Christ's life, his prayer life and teaching which have been marinated in rich pastoral experience.

The work weaves together two strands of ideas. The Lord's prayer itself which is, after all, the clearest indicator of the relational conversation of the Son and the Father that sustains the Son through his earthly life, death and resurrection. These three movements in this unique life find their parallel, surely, in the struggles of those who serve him through the service of feeding his flock through the preached word today. Each brief chapter really is a suggestion for introspection and prayerful conversation with Christ about various challenges arising within a preacher's self-talk, from hubris to humiliation. A careful reading uncovers not a few blind spots and delusions preachers are likely to miss if their workaday routines are not conducted with a mindful sense of the watchful eye of the Master.

While the imposition of the Lord's prayer itself is probably not as necessary exegetically in the three subsections, it does provide some degree of linkage between the three great crises of Christ's life. I found the connections between the prayer and the journey passages in Luke 18 -19 a little strained at points whereas the other sections were able to align stanzas with passages that suited the broad themes of the Lukan version of The Prayer in arresting ways. Nonetheless the exegesis shows scholarly underpinnings while being unobtrusive and economically delivered. His applications of the Gospel texts are penetrating and far from platitudinal. Pilate's tri-lingua inscription on the cross is likened to a witness given too late but still is a 'hallowing of the Name'. The petition of Christ to forgive his executioners, puts pay to reignition of painful memories which anyone legitimately carrying the pastoral mantle will have logical justification to indulge and so forth. The meditative points are the

homiletic points that New has obviously preached to himself. If the book is anything like his preaching, then those who 'sit at his feet' would certainly have been blessed.

The work is replete with original anecdotal material; incidents where the writer has been confronted with the word of God in the role of preacher and pastor sometimes convicting sometimes comforting. These chosen incidents are typical experiences for many preachers even if the characters are unique. He is an able preacher to preachers not because he can impress with a great array of flowery vocabulary or impressive intellectual gymnastics but because of the humble gait of his daily walk. If the multiplicity of well internalised incidents is anything to go by New lives life not so much looking for sermon illustrations 'on the hoof', but he does walk meditatively seeing events and characters he comes across as his divine schoolroom and teachers. New would not espouse an *ex opera operato* theology of preaching but has a more Wesleyan scrupulosity, doing his best to posture himself in such an examined mindset so as not to impede the blessing of the revelation of Christ through his own instrumentality, the preached word. This is not a strict synergistic affair though as there are still many instances where he recounts the surprising sovereignty of grace in pastorate or pulpit.

It is the sort of book more appreciated by those who have experience of the labour of preaching over a couple of ministry appointments, or suitable as pre-reading for a postgraduate homiletics class. *Echoes* is more at home on the same shelf as Augustine's *Confessions* than 'preaching for dummies'. It is therefore best imbibed in small doses rather than in one binge read. This way a reader will find the wisdom and the anecdotes return at critical moments in one's own sermon preparation, rethinking New's thoughts after him. The benefit of the work is that it is difficult to avoid that part of the Lord's prayer which is appropriate as a carrier of confession or confidence. His way of writing and thinking is clearly parabolic. He does not exhaust all possible applications of the stanzas of the Prayer, or the particular Gospel pericope. He leaves room for further discovery if one will pause long enough inside the illustrative theatre props he supplies (while avoiding the temptation to 'rebadge' some of his better stories).

We in the West have enough commentaries and linguistic resources to bring clarity to the author's intention. We also know preaching is hard work. But if it is indeed 'truth encased in personality', the harder work is the attention we need to give to this person of the preacher and what we are becoming. We become that person striving with or against the grace of Christ. This book is about how that grace appears unexpectedly, recognising it when it does, and allowing it to make us adequate servants of the New Covenant. *Echoes* can be summarized in this nutshell.

The sermon content will not always, and every time be a commentary on how we have been living our life. But the spirit in which we preach will be. The way we prepare the sermon and the attitude in our heart at the time will always and every time be a commentary on our life.

