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Book Review: A Vision for Preaching

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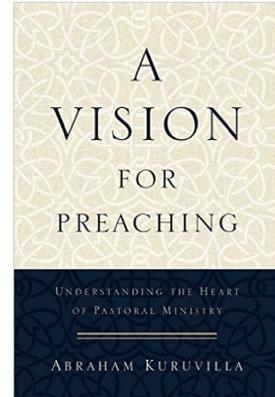
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Abraham Kuruvilla. *A Vision for Preaching: Understanding the Heart of Pastoral Ministry*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015. 224 pp. \$17.99.

Preaching throughout history has held pride of place as it relates to the components of a gathering of Christians for corporate worship. In the last several decades, however, certain publications and movements have seemingly called into question the importance and validity of proclaiming the Word of God to a gathered people. Anti-authoritarian attitudes and the pining after emphasizing other—often good—things, can result in a desire to leave preaching behind as an outmoded vestige that belongs in the past. And yet, there has also concurrently been a championing of textual preaching in certain circles, and this is certainly the case in *A Vision for Preaching* by Abraham Kuruvilla.



Kuruvilla, Professor of Pastoral Ministries at Dallas Theological Seminary, has written several other books on the task of preaching, including *Text to Praxis* and *Privilege the Text*. In the present work the author aims to give an integrated vision, connecting preaching to the entirety of pastoral ministry. He also seeks to fill a specific lacuna in the academic discipline of preaching, namely, “a lack of clarity about how to derive valid application for a modern audience from a specific passage in the ancient text. A robust hermeneutic for making this move from text to audience, which places preaching and application within the larger scheme of the spiritual formation and discipleship of God’s people, has been sorely wanting” (p. 6). Kuruvilla thus sets out to make a case for thorough exegesis, theological hermeneutics, and specific application as essential for the task of faithful proclamation.

The way in which the author defines the task of preaching functions as his primary thesis and the framework for the entire book. He asserts:

Biblical preaching, by a leader of the church, in a gathering of Christians for worship, is the communication of the thrust of a pericope of Scripture discerned by theological exegesis, and of its application to that specific body of believers, that they may be conformed to the image of Christ, for the glory of God—all in the power of the Holy Spirit. (p. 1)

In keeping with this definition, the subsequent contents of the work give detail regarding the distinct realities and function of preaching. Preaching must be exclusively focused on the words God spoke so that the congregation can hear the voice of God. In this way, preaching is *biblical* (chapter 1). Preaching likewise forms the basis of spiritual formation in the corporate worship of the body of Christ, and is rendered by qualified leaders of the church. As such, preaching is *pastoral* (chapter 2) and *ecclesial* (chapter 3).

Kuruvilla continues in this vein and argues that the formative influence of preaching upon believers is conveyed by the communication of the thrust of the text of Scripture utilized for that sermon, what the author refers to as the pericope. The thrust of the pericope, which projects facets of God’s ideal world (i.e., the world in front of the text), is the theology of the text. Thus, preaching is *communicational* (chapter 4) and *theological* (chapter 5). This work is done so that the God’s people might rightly understand and inhabit God’s ideal world. This occurs incrementally as Scripture is preached week by week, pericope by pericope, and thus preaching is *applicational* (chapter 6). The author then notes the only one to perfectly inhabit this ideal world is Jesus Christ, and, therefore, the theology of each

pericope contains a facet of Christlikeness (i.e., *christiconic*). Preaching is *conformational* (chapter 7) in that the text of Scripture is seeking to mold us into the image of Christ. This conforming work is done, ultimately, for the glory of God, and can only be accomplished in the power of the Holy Spirit. As such, preaching is *doxological* (chapter 8) and *spiritual* (chapter 9).

This book by Kuruvilla is certainly a worthy addition to the field of homiletics. He is working to develop a particular approach to Scripture, clearly seen in his aforementioned works, as well as the sermonic commentaries he written recently. Specifically, his focus has been on theological hermeneutics, or, stated differently, getting from text to theology to application. Oftentimes the way in which this process goes forward can be somewhat convoluted in preaching textbooks, but Kuruvilla makes fairly plain both the need and the way in which the preacher can successfully walk through this process. (I say fairly plain as the process is made exceedingly plain if one delves into *Privilege the Text*, where more detail is offered.)

The definition the author gives for preaching is comprehensive and well thought out. He teases out this definition in a logical fashion, rightly calling the preacher to ground their task in ecclesial and Trinitarian realities. In the midst of this excellent outworking of the various components of the homiletical task, however, several questions do emerge. For the sake of space, this review will highlight two of the most pertinent issues.

First, Kuruvilla's emphasis on preaching as sacramental appears to be misplaced (pp. 58–66). The author uses a general definition of “sacrament” and seeks especially to compare preaching with the Lord's Supper as conveying God's grace to a people. There is, however, little evidence to support this claim. Connecting the word “proclaim” in 1 Corinthians 11:26 and Colossians 1:28, and noting the connection of God's word and the sacrifices (which is now replaced by the Lord's Supper) in Exodus 24, does not establish a strong case for such a claim. It seems that this chapter on preaching as ecclesial might be strengthened by focusing more on pastoral ministry and preaching in terms of stewardship (1 Cor 4:1–2; 9:17; Eph 3:2; Col 1:25; 1 Tim 3:15; Titus 1:7). In other words, preaching is ecclesial in as far as the preacher faithfully shepherds the people of God and expounds the Scripture, as he is a steward of both these things.

Second, while seeking to correct some of the misplaced zeal that can be found in a Christocentric hermeneutic, the author seemingly goes a bit too far in arguing for his “christiconic” interpretive grid. It would be helpful if Kuruvilla allowed proponents of a Christocentric hermeneutic to actually define what they mean by the term, as his assertion of their “finding Christ *explicitly* in every passage” (p. 138, emphasis original) may be considered a caricature. His understanding of Luke 24 is understandable (Christ is shown in specific texts from the Law, Prophets, and Writings), but in only naming off certain texts as being “clearly” about the Messiah, Kuruvilla seemingly overlooks typology, a litany of prophetic utterances, and patterns that portray the OT as a Messianic document declaring a Messianic hope. As such, nothing that he says is wrong—we should see the preached Word conforming us to the image of Christ sermon by sermon, and seek to be responsible in christological interpretation—but it is hermeneutically constrained to the point that we may miss much in the OT concerning the Messiah.

These issues aside, Kuruvilla's work helps readers tie together the worlds of hermeneutics, growth in the Christian life, Trinitarianism, ecclesiology, and homiletics. This is an ideal work for scholars in the field of homiletics, but even more so for current and aspiring pastors. It is a pleasure to note that while Kuruvilla has published several works on preaching he is not merely remaining in the realm of the theoretical. Having already produced several sermonic commentaries on Genesis, Mark, and

Ephesians, one can hope he can continue down this path so as to continue to show his readers how preachers can move from text to theology to application.

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Jen Pollock Michel. *Teach Us to Want: Longing, Ambition and the Life of Faith*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. 215 pp. \$16.00.

Teach Us to Want is an engaging exploration of the role of desire in the Christian life. Michel seeks to make “a biblical case for wanting, and wanting well” (p. 200). The key question is this: Is there a nuanced alternative to uncritically embracing of all our desires on the one hand, and fearfully rejecting them on the other? Michel argues yes. Yet this is not a systematic treatise. It is part personal narrative, part biblical reflection, and part general rumination on the topic of desire in the Christian life.

Michel lays the book’s theological foundation in the first three chapters. Chapter 1 addresses our hesitations about desire by arguing that desire, as a category, is good. Yet as chapter 2 argues, the doctrine of sin reminds us that our desires can be corrupted. Chapter 3 demonstrates God’s commitment to renewing our desires by transforming our hearts. The logic of these first three chapters implicitly follows the biblical story line of creation, fall, and redemption. In other words, desire is good, desire can be bad, and God transforms our desires.

It is here that the book’s agenda opens up. Michel introduces the role the Lord’s Prayer serves in transforming our desires. By immersing ourselves in the Lord’s Prayer, “we learn to love what God loves and to make his desires our own. Teach us to pray, Jesus’ disciples asked. *And teach me to want*” (p. 63). Here we see the title’s connection between desire and the Lord’s Prayer. Chapters 4–10 then take various topics related to the Lord’s Prayer as starting points for reflections, including Scripture, prayer, confession, and community.

I offer several observations about Michel’s excellent book, highlighting three enjoyable strengths and one potential weakness.

First, this is an engaging book. The prose is masterful and beautiful and, as a result, enjoyable at every turn. For example, there are several examples in stories from her role as a mother. Recalling an attempt at gaining a confession from her children with sternness, she admits, “My owl eyes coerce no confessions” (p. 33). Regarding another challenge of bringing her son to confession, she observes, “Truth is a big fish. A mother must be strong at the reel” (p. 147).

Second, this is an insightful book. Michel demonstrates throughout that the best way forward is a nuanced “both-and,” rather than a simplistic “either-or” mindset. Should we choose happiness or holiness (pp. 26–28)? Should we focus on personal salvation or earthy engagement (pp. 76–77)? Should we devote ourselves to proclaiming the gospel or blessing the world in everyday ways (p. 88)? And, most pertinently, should we reject desire or embrace it (p. 42)? “Is it possible to be fully alive to the world

