

The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical

Literature. By Sidney Greidanus. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988. 374 pp. Paper, \$19.95. Reviewed by T. Scott Christmas.

Sidney Greidanus, former Professor of Theology at The King's College in Edmonton, Alberta, currently serves as professor of preaching at Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan. Building on his doctoral dissertation of 1970, Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts, Greidanus assembles a much needed work which attempts to bridge the gap between the departments of biblical studies and homiletics. The fruit of that effort, The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature, was selected by the journal Preaching's 1990 book of the year.

The purpose of the book is to bring together the results of recent biblical scholarship as it pertains to preaching, while linking the disciplines of biblical hermeneutics and homiletics. Greidanus seeks to address the recent shift in focus from historical to literary studies and the repercussions this shift has had on homiletical sermon forms. The aim of the book is to set forth a new holistic method of biblical interpretation and preaching. Some of the topics addressed are history, hermeneutics, homiletics, Hebrew narrative, prophecy, the Gospels, and the epistles. By raising the awareness of the homiletical significance of contemporary biblical scholarship, the author seeks to encourage better biblical preaching.

Greidanus bridges the gap between hermeneutics and homiletics in twelve detailed chapters. He explains the disciplines of hermeneutics in Chapters 1-5, and addresses homiletics

in Chapters 6-12. In Chapter 1, he does a wonderful job of detailing the relationship of the modern preacher to the writers and preachers of the ancient text. He also does an excellent job of unfolding the necessity and advantages of expository preaching. Chapter 2 provides a well-stated analysis and appraisal of the historical-critical method of interpretation. Greidanus proposes to replace this flawed method with a more holistic, historical-critical approach. Chapters 3-5 deal specifically with the literary, historical, and theological qualities of a more holistic approach to biblical interpretation. Chapters 6-8 begin Greidanus' explanation of his homiletical method. Topics addressed include text selection, the importance of theme in the text and in the sermon, the form of the sermon itself, and the relevance of the sermon in light of the historical and cultural gaps. Chapters 9-12 propose guidelines for preaching Hebrew narratives, prophetic literature, the Gospels, and the epistles.

The work has several strengths. First, the author seems very strong in his definition of biblical preaching. Greidanus asserts that “for preaching to be biblical, two elements must be involved: (a) the Bible must govern the content of the sermon, and (b) the function of the sermon must be analogous to that of the text” (p. 10). He describes biblical preaching as that which imparts a Bible-shaped word in a Bible-like way (p. 10).

Second, Greidanus is also helpful in the area of selecting a preaching text. He notes that the text must not be a fragment but a literary unit. He even suggests that the biblical authors used literary devices such as repetition, chiasm, and *inclusio* to mark units and subunits in their work. The author reasons that the biblical writers themselves often provide the clues as to what would make for a proper preaching text (p. 63).

Third, not only does the author assist the reader in selecting a text, he also walks the reader through all the major steps of sermon preparation. These include: the awareness of the necessity of expository preaching, the employment of a holistic, historical-critical method, the formulation of theme, the determination of the form, and the relevant type of communication. This reviewer especially appreciated the constant encouragement to keep the main idea and goal of the sermon consistent with the main idea and goal of the biblical text. This is accomplished through a grammatical-historical-contextual analysis of the biblical text. Greidanus quotes Mickelson as noting, “one must understand the meaning of the words and the exact relationship the words have to each other. He should also note the historical background of the prophet and the people to whom the prophet ministers. He should note the context that precedes the passage and the context that follows the passage” (p. 252). Such careful exegesis will assist in maintaining consistency between the ancient text and the modern message. Further, Greidanus’ encouragement to bridge the historical and cultural gap from the past to the present will better equip the preacher to expose the relevancy of the original author’s message to today’s audience.

A minor weakness of this work is that Greidanus’ analysis of a topical sermon tends to be misleading. The author labels topical sermons as non-biblical in a chart on page 12. Later, he states, “although it is possible to preach topical sermons that are biblical, in actual practice they often turn out to be flights of fancy which have little or nothing to do with biblical thought” (p. 15). The writer is correct in assessing much topical preaching as non-biblical. However, the improper use of the topical approach to Scripture does not invalidate the proper use. Topical sermons can be biblical as long as the Scripture used in the sermon is quoted in context and in

accord with the original author's intent. To label all topical messages as non-biblical would erode the legitimacy of biblical and systematic theology. While this reviewer heartily endorses a primary diet of expository preaching in the feeding of God's flock, the exclusion of true biblical topical preaching would leave a void in the necessary communication of the systematic classification of God's Word.

There is a second weakness in Greidanus' work that this reviewer would classify as significant. Although the author seems firmly committed to an uncompromising exposition of the biblical text, Greidanus' overall attitude about the text of Scripture causes concern. At times, it seems as if he does embrace the historicity of the Scriptures. At one point he says, "there are good reasons, therefore, to approach the biblical text not with doubt but with confidence in its historical reliability" (p. 46). At other times however, it seems as if Greidanus does not embrace the inerrancy of Scripture. Although he never denies the historicity of Job or Jonah, the author does ask the question:

"Does the historicity of Job, his family, and his friends make any difference for the interpretation of the book? . . . Thus, in the case of Job, the question of historicity is *hermeneutically* of no consequence. . . . The same point may be made with respect to the book of Jonah. . . . The point of the story is made whether Jonah is a historical figure or not" (p. 195).

Yet why question the historicity of Job or Jonah at all? Ezekiel had no problem assuming the historicity of Job (Ezekiel 14:14, 20) and Jesus believed in the historicity of Jonah (Matthew 12:39-41; 16:4; Luke 11:29-32). Statements such as these by Greidanus seem to unnecessarily expose the possibility of doubt instead of instilling confidence concerning the historical reliability of the text. On another occasion, Greidanus states:

We can claim reliability only in matters the inspired authors *intended* to teach. This statement cuts two ways. On the one hand, one cannot criticize the authors for failing to present the kind of ‘biographical precision’ which ‘they themselves obviously did not intend.’ On the other hand, one should not claim for these narratives greater historical precision than their authors intended to give. The question, therefore, again comes down to the intent of the author (p. 276).

Further, this reviewer found it very troubling that Greidanus provides a caution to the reader:

not to get sidetracked with twentieth-century standards of historical accuracy. The biblical documents need not measure up to *our* standards to be authoritative. Moreover, the biblical message does not stand or fall with historical details. Whether Israel took possession of the promised land in a short time or after a long time, the point of the message stands: *that* God gave them the land of promise—however long it took (p. 91).

Later he writes, “The preacher ought to focus on the author’s prophetic interpretation of the event rather than on the (bare) event” (p. 94). However, this reviewer wonders whether the interpretation of the event can be separated from the event itself? Does not the biblical writer’s prophetic interpretation occur within the historical setting of the “bare event?” It seems that underlying the author’s discussion is the assumption that some of the historical facts of Scripture can be suspect. Such waffling about the historicity of the Scriptures is intolerable from one who makes such a strong demand for expository preaching. Either the Scriptures are inerrant and historically accurate, or they are not. However, if the Scriptures are not inerrant and absolutely historically reliable, then the confidence the expository preacher has in his source has been undermined. How can someone be resolute in his commitment to an uncompromising exposition of a compromised text?

Overall, this volume is helpful to the serious student who wrestles with the process of how to move from the biblical text to the sermon. Although the work is formidable reading and probably not the best choice for an undergraduate student, it does offer insight and direction to the serious student who desires to link recent biblical scholarship with the disciplines of hermeneutics and homiletics.