

He Is Not Silent: Preaching in a Postmodern World

R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

2008

Chicago: Moody Publishers

ISBN-13: 978-0-8024-5489-8

To a Lutheran preacher, Mohler's book is a study in stark contrasts. Seldom have I found a book that has so regularly enthralled me and repeatedly frustrated me between the same front and back covers.

There are at least two chapters of this book that I would love to give as a gift to every Lutheran preacher (despite some rather evident Calvinistic "sovereignty speak") and encourage him to read them at any time when he is growing discouraged in his task. Reading chapter 9 (The Urgency of Preaching: An Exhortation to Preachers) and chapter 10 (On Preaching to Dry Bones: An Encouragement to Preachers) had me wishing (late on a Friday afternoon no less!) that a pulpit was waiting for me to preach at that very moment.

But there were several chapters earlier where a Calvinistic legalism spoiled the broth to such an extent that I almost put the book down (though I am very glad that I did not!). In one place he quotes John MacArthur with approval when stating the end result of preaching, "I want people who listen to me to understand exactly what God's Word demands of them when I am through" (69).

Another obstacle for the Lutheran preacher would be a very narrow definition of what it means to be an expository preacher. The first main emphasis of Mohler's book is to define expositional preaching. When Mohler first lays out his definition, I have no trouble finding my preaching as located within what he calls his formal definition (65):

Expository preaching is that mode of Christian preaching that takes as its central purpose the presentation and application of the text of the Bible. All other issues and concerns are subordinated to the central task of presenting the biblical text. As the Word of God, the text of Scripture has the right to establish both the substance and the structure of the sermon. Genuine exposition takes place when the preacher sets forth the meaning and message of the biblical text and makes clear how the Word of God establishes the identity and worldview of the church as the people of God.

No Lutheran need have any quarrel with Mohler up to this point. However as he further defines particular phrases of his definition, what became clear to this reader is that Mohler prescribes as the only biblically authorized method of preaching a method that is far more restrictive than Scripture itself follows. He seems to enthrone what may bear more of the mark of the rationalism of modernism than the firm imprimatur of Scripture. He argues for an almost argumentative and highly cognitive deductive (state your propositions up front and then explain) path of preaching that does not seem to leave room for the rich variety of ways Scripture itself knows to get its message across.

While I tried to understand that the burden of the book comes from a careful expositional preacher in the Evangelical world who has watched far, far too many others in Evangelical pulpits exchange thorough exposition for the equivalent of pop psychology. Yet even reading with that perspective, it seemed he was seeking to corral others into an area that is tighter than can truly be defended from Scripture.

For example, he holds before us the specter of Harry Emerson Fosdick to make the point that a true expositor of Scripture must always begin with Scripture.

This simple starting point is a major issue of division in contemporary homiletics, for many preachers - from Harry Emerson Fosdick onward - assume that they must begin with a human problem or question and then work backward to the biblical text. On the contrary, expository preaching begins with the text and works from the text to apply its truth to the lives of the hearers. If this determination and commitment are not clear at the outset, something other than expository preaching will result. (66)

If Mohler is talking about the heart of sermon preparation, I have no quarrel with him. However, if he is talking about how a sermon must be structured – and there are statements to that effect (58)– then he is in danger of losing the wonderful variety of ways sermons can be structured and still thoroughly expound a text. Even when the sermon structurally begins in the lives of hearers, that sermon can still have both feet firmly planted in the text.

To be fair, later in the book Mohler seems to allow that genuinely biblical preaching can begin where the hearers are and take them to where Scripture shows they need to be.

Paul never allowed this ignorance to become an excuse, but there can be no doubt that it is a reality. Americans, too, are feeding on a false diet of superstition and myths. The hunger is a place to start. Our challenge is to preach Christ as the only answer to that hunger. (128)

Elsewhere, towards the end of the book he uses the “unconventional methods” of Ezekiel to make the point that unconventional times may make unconventional methods very fitting – certainly as long as the Scripture text and its message of Christ remains central.

Ezekiel [was] a pulpit committee's nightmare, but a prophet of God nonetheless. Ezekiel used unconventional methods in his ministry. He received unconventional visions, used unconventional language, and combined it all in an unconventional style. But then he was living in an unconventional age - and so are we. (151)

In one other place Mohler speaks quite eloquently about the variety of ways Scripture knows to bring across its message:

God has spoken through the inspired human authors of Scripture, and each different genre of biblical literature – historical narrative, direct discourse, and apocalyptic symbolism, among others – demands that the preacher give careful attention to the structure of the text and allow

it to shape the sermon. Far too many preachers come to the text with a sermonic shape in mind and a limited set of tools in hand. To be sure, the shape of the sermon may differ from preacher to preacher and should differ from text to text. But genuine exposition demands that the text establish the shape as well as the substance of the sermon. (67)

While some earlier statements seemed to have taken some “tools” away from us, here Mohler puts some biblically defensible homiletical tools back into our hands.

Seeing the book as a whole, it seems the author sees such a crying need to encourage Evangelical preachers to return to a strong textual foundation that he is willing to risk a hyperbole or two along the way.

Of the three books on preaching to postmoderns reviewed for this key issue, this book offers the least detailed advice for how to structure our sermons to communicate with the culture around us. But of those three books, it is Mohler’s that provides the most eloquent encouragement not to lose confidence in the power of the Word to reach the hearts of our hearers. For that reason alone, this book is worth the read!