

Preaching in the New Testament: An Exegetical and Biblical-Theological Study. By Jonathan I. Griffiths. New Studies in Biblical Theology 42. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2017, xvi + 152 pp., \$22.00 paper.

“Many reading this book,” begins Jonathan Griffiths, “would share the conviction that the preaching of the word of God is at the heart of God’s plans for the gospel in our age; that it is vital for the health of the church; and that it is the central task of the pastor-teacher. However, many who share those convictions about preaching might struggle to articulate a fully adequate definition of preaching from Scripture” (p. 1).

Griffiths’s book intends to address this important need to ground our theology and thoughts about preaching in the Scriptures. He sets about his task in three parts. Part 1 briefly asserts that God speaks through his word, God acts through his word, and God is encountered in his word. Drawing on the work of Claire Smith, he concludes this section by discussing three verbs that function as semi-technical terms for gospel proclamation: *euangelizomai*, *katangellō*, and *kēryssō*. Part 2, which is the heart of the book, surveys selected texts from the Pauline corpus (2 Timothy 3–4; Romans 10; 1 Corinthians 1–2, 9, 15; 2 Corinthians 2–6; 1 Thessalonians 1–2) and from Hebrews for exegetical insights on preaching. Part 3 summarizes and synthesizes those findings, concluding that preaching is a proclamation of the word of God and is connected to the preaching of Jesus, the apostles, and the OT prophetic tradition. Preaching is a declaration of a God-given message, a divine and human activity that constitutes an encounter with God. As such it has particular significance within the Christian assembly, distinct from other ministries of the word, and requires that preachers be commissioned for their work. To appreciate the value of this book—and it is valuable—it is necessary to understand what it is and what it is not attempting to accomplish. Griffiths himself states, “This volume does not pretend to be a comprehensive study of what the Bible, the New Testament, or even the epistles have to say about preaching” (p. 133). He has intentionally limited the length, scope, and technical details to make the work as accessible as possible. My experience with other volumes in this series conditioned me to expect a more comprehensive treatment of the theme of preaching. However, Griffiths’s work should be evaluated in the spirit of 2 Cor 8:12: “the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have.” The gift that we have been given by Jonathan Griffiths is not an exhaustive biblical-theological study of preaching but something more like a cross between an academic study and a sermon.

By the end of *Preaching in the New Testament*, I did not feel the whole topic had been exhaustively covered, nor were important terms rigorously defined, nor was each point convincingly argued as in a purely academic study. Instead, more like a sermon, the book exposes its readers to important passages on preaching in the NT and consistently draws beneficial observations from each passage, reinvigorating a high view of the centrality and importance of preaching. I found myself confronted with fresh insights from familiar passages and heard myself saying “amen” at multiple times throughout the book, even as I continued to think of additional questions that I would have loved for Griffiths to address.

One such example is Griffiths’s treatment of the difference between preaching and teaching. He chooses not to define the terms up front, but instead slips in a short but useful

discussion of the differences between the two ideas in the chapter on the preacher's charge from 2 Timothy 3–4. He believes that preaching entails teaching but that it goes beyond teaching, because it contains an urgent call to respond. Such a distinction raises a question in my mind that Griffiths does not answer: does God speak through preaching in a way that he does not through teaching and if so, why? Yet his insight as to the role of response in distinguishing the two was excellent.

Of all the chapters in the book, the final two, "Hebrews" and "Summary and Conclusions," are the highlight. Together they are worth the price of the book. It is not unusual that in a study of biblical theology the conclusions would be important. Yet his summary chapter goes beyond just recapping previous findings and instead allows Griffiths to draw in passages from the Gospels and other passages of Scripture that were not part of the earlier exegetical studies. This helps solidify and broaden the base for his conclusions from the limited set of texts studied in part 2.

It is not surprising that the chapter on Hebrews shines so brightly. Griffiths did his doctoral work in this area, and it shows. Whereas the other chapters in the book settle for biblical texts that are expressly about preaching and explicitly applied to post-apostolic situations, this chapter recognizes that there are passages of the NT that are implicitly applicable to the subject of preaching. For example, writing about the form of Hebrews, Griffiths concludes that modern preaching should seek to be an exposition of Scripture in light of Christ, and exegesis and doctrinal teaching should lead to heart-engaging and urgent exhortation. In the discussion of Hebrews 3–4, Griffiths points out that, though the author of Hebrews never explicitly states that his readers are hearing God's voice through his sermon, the quote from Psalm 95 makes evident that "as the writer expounds God's word through his own sermon that the congregation will hear God's voice" (pp. 109–10). This is a sophisticated hermeneutical point: the author of Hebrews recognized that by expounding Psalm 95 in his sermon, God was speaking to the congregation through Psalm 95. Therefore, when modern preachers proclaim Psalm 95, Hebrews 3–4, or any biblical text, God is speaking to the modern congregation and calling for a response as well. This gives the preacher the freedom to recognize that, while a text is written into a particular historical context, it is not intended by God to speak only to that context. Furthermore, because God is addressing his people through the preaching of the word, Griffiths shows from Hebrews 10 and 12 that God is being encountered in the midst of the gathered assembly, recreating what is happening in heaven. For the preacher facing the week-to-week burden of preparing yet another sermon, this is an ennobling and vivifying truth, one that I am so grateful to Griffiths for pointing out.

While I understand and support Griffiths's desire to keep the book short and accessible, the decision to bypass the issue of NT prophecy is, in my opinion, questionable. Griffiths does include an excursus on the biblical-theological connections between NT preaching and OT prophecy, but this begs the question: What about prophecy in the NT? Griffiths may agree with Wayne Grudem (*The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* [2nd ed.; Wheaton: Crossway, 2000]) and others that NT prophecy and preaching are distinct, but this is not universally accepted. Even if it were, showing how preaching is distinct from prophecy would strengthen our understanding of preaching and allow Griffiths the opportunity to discuss the issue of spiritual giftedness as it relates to preaching, another missing component. The missed

opportunity is most keenly felt in the chapter on preaching in 1 Corinthians where 1 Corinthians 14 is not mentioned, even though perhaps no other chapter in the NT is as focused on the communication of truth in the gathered assembly. In the closing chapter Griffiths acknowledges that 1 Corinthians 14 might have some applicability to the subject but concludes that detailed exegesis of that chapter is beyond the scope of the book.

Other readers will find other topics or passages they feel have been overlooked. Such is the case when an author tackles a topic as important and widespread as preaching in the NT but consciously attempts to keep a narrow focus and limited word count. What should not be missed is that Griffiths has provided an encouraging and useful look at preaching in the NT. This work has the potential to help those who study and teach preaching, but it holds special promise for those who are engaged in the work of preaching, confronting them with truths from God's word about their craft. The best feature of this work is that it does something similar to what preaching is supposed to do: it is an explanation of the word of God that enables God's own voice on the subject to be heard, and for that Griffiths is to be commended and we should rejoice.

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