

Frank A. Thomas. *Surviving a Dangerous Sermon*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2020. 162 pages. \$18.

In *Surviving a Dangerous Sermon*, Frank A. Thomas continues a conversation begun in his 2018 book, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, seeking to answer the pressing question: “How do you survive (remain employed) after preaching a dangerous sermon?” (xvii). Thomas defines a dangerous sermon as one “based in the preacher’s moral imagination that upends and challenges the dominant moral hierarchy that operates in the church and/or cultural context of the preaching event” (xvii). Ultimately, his goal is to equip preachers who are “aware of different moral orders and working gospels [and so] ha[ve] the ability to develop messages that invite people beyond accidental and unintentional divisive rhetoric and polarizations by speaking to the heart of the inclusive faith tradition that brings people together by inspiring wonder, mystery, and hope” (68).

In the Introduction, Thomas outlines the book and revisits the concepts of moral imagination, empathy, and the church explored in his previous text. He reminds readers that moral hierarchies are often intermingled with dominance hierarchies and notes the way the church has “participated in establishing a theological dominance hierarchy closely aligned to the [cultural] dominance hierarchy” (xxv–xxvi). These realities require preachers to cultivate a moral imagination necessary to move towards a more inclusive church. In chapter 1, Thomas relies on the work of Andre Resner and Edward Farley to explore the idea of a “working gospel” and a critique of the bridge paradigm. Taken from Resner, Thomas understands a “working gospel” as the “imaginative and theological hermeneutical force” that shapes a preacher’s sermons and serves as a sort of “synopsis” or “encapsulation” of faith (9). Thomas suggests examples of “working gospels” in the American context such as the gospel of American exceptionalism, the gospel of denominationalism, or the social justice gospel. He then moves to discuss and illustrate Farley’s critique of the “bridge paradigm,” the construction of the “preachable ‘X’” or practical life lesson extracted from the text and preached to the detriment of the proclamation of the gospel. This conversation continues in chapter 2, as Thomas explores Paul’s “working gospel,” clarifies Farley’s critique of the bridge paradigm, and offers his own “working gospel.” In chapter 3, Thomas turns to consider the unconscious moral worldviews present in communities and congregations. Utilizing the work of George Lakoff, Thomas explores the dual moral orders in America, specifically the “Strict Father” morality of conservatives and the “Nurturant Parent” morality of progressives.

The final two chapters of the book move towards more concrete examples and practical suggestions. In chapter 4, Thomas considers the Rev. Jasper Williams Jr.’s eulogy of Aretha Franklin, a sermon that caused much debate and division, especially in the Black community. Thomas analyzes the sermon and extreme responses using Lakoff’s dual moral worldviews and Resner’s concept of a working gospel. In the final chapter, Thomas offers a series of practical suggestions on preaching dangerous sermons and then provides two of his own sermons as models for this challenging and important work.

Thomas’ *Surviving a Dangerous Sermon* is a timely, invitational, applicable, and broadly accessible contribution to the field of homiletics and preaching literature. Even as Thomas encourages preachers to offer “dangerous sermons,” he is acutely aware of the divisive state of congregations as well as the urgent questions and concerns of preachers seeking to offer proclamation in the present social and political climate. This book is also deeply invitational even as it is instructive and informative. While Thomas moves through a series of large, complex

concepts including moral hierarchies, working gospels, the bridge paradigm, and dual moral worldviews, he continually invites preachers to consider their own location and convictions by modeling this work. Whether sharing his own working gospel as encapsulated in the Gospel of Luke or offering models of dangerous sermons that embody awareness of competing worldviews and working gospels, Thomas invites preachers towards reflexivity and welcomes them into this difficult but necessary work. While the book is certainly written for preachers and seminarians who are called to preach dangerous sermons amidst divided congregations, Thomas names his hope that lay people will also utilize this book to support and encourage preachers to help congregations “more carefully discern their moral hierarchies” (xx).

Just as Thomas encourages ongoing conversation and reflection for readers, this work opens up a couple of possibilities for further integration and exploration. First, preachers and persons of faith might benefit from a stronger consideration of the connection between one’s unconscious worldview and working gospel. While Thomas briefly suggests this interconnection in his analysis of Williams’s sermon, a further exploration of this intersection could be insightful. Second, this ongoing work might benefit from more substantial consideration of those who do not fit the binary conservative/progressive worldviews as adopted from Lakoff. As Thomas names, preachers will be hard-pressed to reach “hardcore believers” of a differing worldview. Instead, the opportunity for inclusive dialogue is more possible with those who are “bi-conceptuals” or “pragmatic moderates” (44). Therefore, it may be helpful to explore those more moderate or bi-conceptual worldviews and offer examples that disrupt or complicate the conservative/progressive binary.

In the end, Frank Thomas utilizes insightful theoretical and theological concepts to offer an informed invitation to preachers, seminarians, and lay leaders to discern their own moral hierarchies, worldviews, and working gospels towards the goal of preaching messages that move beyond “unintentional divisive rhetoric and polarizations” towards proclamation of an inclusive and hope-filled gospel (xxix).

Kimberly R. Wagner, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago