

Eric C. Miller and Jonathan J. Edwards, eds. *Rhetoric of the Protestant Sermon in America: Pulpit Discourse at the Turn of the Millennium*. London: Lexington Books, 2020. 181 pages. \$90.

This volume had its inception in 2018 just preceding the National Communication Association Convention in Salt Lake City. Later the papers were revised, edited, and published in this volume. Nine essays make up the volume and look at the preaching of more “notable figures” such as Jerry Falwell, Jimmy Swaggart, T.D. Jakes, Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyer, Jeremiah Wright, Mark Driscoll, Nadia Boltz-Weber, Brandan Robertson, and Otis Moss III. These individuals represent certain genres of sermons such as the opportunistic sermon, the apology sermon, the political sermon, the self-help sermon, the confessional sermon, the “leave taking” sermon, and the “coming out” sermon. The book basically organizes these sermons and preachers in chronological order. The editors call their approach a case study.

Eric Miller argues in the introduction that the American sermon has been marginalized by scholars because they are more interested in rhetorical events that focus on diversity. The Protestant sermon by contrast has been dominated by white males (x). However, Miller makes the case that the American Protestant sermon has wielded tremendous influence on the surrounding culture and on politics as this “sermonic discourse filters out into the Public Square” (xi). He maintains that the sermon demands another look.

The first essay begins with Lauren Lemley looking at Puritan preaching, which she believes served as the foundational blueprint for Protestant preaching in North America. The “Puritan rhetoric inaugurated enduring themes of American identity” (3). She identifies three themes that continue to be fundamental to contemporary Protestant preaching: a desire for simple and practical theology that is based on scripture; the use of the jeremiad, which holds up the flaws of the present-day community against an idealized standard and the importance of reestablishing that ideal; and the complex relationship between politics and religion (6).

Following the opening chapter, Meridith Styer focuses on the opportunistic preaching of Jerry Falwell. Styer reveals how Falwell uses the sermon as an enthymeme for God’s voice and offers listeners a respectable justification for racism and for opposing the civil rights movement. Mark Ward follows in chapter 3 with another evangelical preacher, Jimmy Swaggart, and the apology sermon. Ward analyzes the strategies that ultimately enabled Swaggart to continue to maintain his audience.

In chapter 4, Luke Winslow and Daniel Young provide an overview of the self-help and prosperity gospel preaching of T.D. Jakes, Joel Osteen, and Joyce Meyer. Their assessment finds that self-help and prosperity gospels share basic common themes. One theme is that both are “uniquely individualistic”; the individual is autonomous (70). A second is that both base their strategy on “magical voluntarism” (72), that is, it is all in your mind. When listeners transform their mindset, they can change their reality “through conscious and willful choices made independently of others” (74). A final theme that connects the two is that it is God’s will that you be wealthy but not for your own sake. Rather it is for the sake of demonstrating God’s favor (76).

Jonathan Edwards investigates the political sermonizing of Jeremiah Wright in chapter 5. Edwards identifies the dangers of not considering who the audience is, and the context. In Wright’s case, the media did not understand the audience or the context, and thus maligned Wright. Edwards concludes, “A political sermon, like any other sermon, is most commonly a message for a particular community which carry particular assumptions, doubts, needs, and aspirations” (96).

In the “leave taking” sermon in chapter 6, Robert Reid assesses Mark Driscoll’s sermon in which Driscoll tells the congregation that he is taking a temporary leave of absence because of accusations of abuse leveled against him. What Reid discovers is the clear distinction between a preacher who believes he or she is displaying sincerity and an audience’s perception of a preacher’s authenticity (104). The shift of focus is found between what happens within the preacher to what happens within the listeners (109). Authenticity is something listeners experience when they leave the sermon. Sincerity is related to the way in which the preacher delivers the sermon with passion, conviction, and clarity.

Kelsey Minnick, in chapter 7, engages in a case study of Nadia Bolz-Weber and her use of the confessional sermon. In assessing Bolz-Weber’s sermon, Minnick discovers, among other things, that the longstanding advice to make sure your public confession is about past and not present transgressions is effectively and successfully violated by Bolz-Weber. Minnick concludes that listeners have the responsibility of deciding if the confession is nothing more than self-absorption or if it is authentic.

In chapter 8, the coming out sermon, Cory Geraths studies the sermon of Brandan Robertson, an openly bisexual man, four days after the Obergefell ruling. Geraths identifies how the rhetorical tools of *kairos*, *akairos*, and *metanoia* are instrumental in the effectiveness of his sermon.

In chapter 9, Theon Hill examines Otis Moss III’s style of Black preaching. He shows how “Blue Note preaching” is a paradigm for addressing social injustice. Hill unpacks how the Blues influence preaching and how a “Blues moan” must occur before hope can be offered.

The contributors to this volume are all reputable scholars in the field of rhetoric and communication theory. They uncover underlying rhetorical strategies in sermons preached by well-known pulpiteers in the United States toward the end of the twentieth and first part of the twenty-first centuries. They are to be applauded for their efforts not to discard the sermon as a critical rhetorical form that has profound influence in the public square.

There is, however, at least one glaring omission in their choice of preachers to include. One of the most “notable preachers” of the late twentieth century is Billy Graham and the evangelistic sermon. Graham influenced millions of people and served as spiritual advisor for every U.S. president from Harry Truman to the present. Any study of representative preachers in the United States during that time must of necessity include Graham.

In addition, the title of this book, *Protestant Sermons in America*, is misleading. That is because all the preachers included come exclusively from a specific location in the Americas, the United States. No preachers from South America or a big part of North America (viz., Canada) are included. A more restricted or specific title would be preferable.

Overall, this book should generate more interest in investigating the powerful influence the Protestant sermon has had on religion and politics in both the public and private sphere. As Miller says in the introduction, we want to “revitalize pulpit rhetoric as an object of critical inquiry”; “Perhaps more than any other rhetorical genre, it shapes worldviews, reinforces values, and informs the civic practice of millions of citizens” (xvii–xviii).

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