

O. Wesley Allen, Jr. and Carrie La Ferle. *Preaching and the Thirty-Second Commercial: Lessons from Advertising for the Pulpit*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021. 145 pages. \$21.37.

This book is one of the Perkins Center for Preaching Excellence projects. These projects bring non-theological disciplines into dialogue with homiletical scholarship, aiming to offer new insights for homiletical practitioners. At first glance, the book's title appears strange, as it suggests that commercials have a lesson to offer preachers. The purposes of preaching and advertising seem radically different. The former proclaims Christ, who told the rich man to abandon all his possessions before following him. The latter seeks to increase wealth and promotes materialism.

O. Wesley Allen Jr. is a scholar of homiletics and Carrie La Ferle is a scholar of advertising. Despite the apparent incompatibility of these two practices, the authors offer an intriguing argument in this interdisciplinary study. They state that preaching and commercials are both "communicative endeavors aimed at persuading the audience to consider new options for their lives" (1). Advertising influences people's desires, needs, and communication. Preachers could study commercials for the purpose of communicating their sermons more pertinently to the contemporary minds and hearts.

The six chapters in this book bring context, stories, and wisdom from the advertising industry into dialogue with homiletical theories. Some chapters end with one of Allen's sermons as a useful example. The first chapter, "The Problem," considers the context of the modern audience. This context is characterized as an immersion in multimedia noise, postmodernism, and pluralism, where truth is considered relative and intersecting cultures complicate individual identities. The authors believe that advertising's strategy of analyzing how people communicate could be helpful in shaping preaching as communication.

The second chapter, "How Communication Has Changed," describes the change in modes of communication from linear to multidirectional. In the traditional model of advertising, the sender encodes a message in words or images and sends it to the receiver, who decodes it. However, the contemporary model recognizes a more participatory role for the receiver, who now returns their feedback to the sender to allow for more meaning-making. Such a change in communication trends is also visible in the homiletic field, as seen in Fred Craddock's inductive preaching or the collaborative-conversational school of homiletics.

In the third chapter, "Understanding the Hearer," the authors illustrate how the advertising industry has grown to focus on the local needs of their consumers by utilizing geographic, demographic, behavioristic, and psychographic segmentation. In a similar fashion, a growing number of homileticians have emphasized the importance of understanding the congregational context to make preaching more effective. Therefore, Allen and La Ferle propose that as preachers prepare their sermons, they imagine talking with a group of diverse people who form their "imaginary focus group."

The fourth chapter, "Advertising and Sermonic Forms," introduces a popular method that advertisers use to develop their message: attention, interest, desire, and action (AIDA) (63). The authors compare the narrative nature of AIDA with the traditional African American sermon and Eugene Lowry's homiletical plot, because they emphasize the experiential dimension of the good news that is maximized by building tension. The desired outcome of a commercial is the purchase of a product, but the authors clarify that the action in a sermon is taken by God, not human beings, and therefore, they try to discourage works-righteousness.

The fifth chapter, “Sermonic Imagery and Narrative Advertising,” discusses how the advertising industry has used storytelling to create experiences that inspire consumers to act rather than simply giving information about a product. While they are economical with words, due to their short length, these “sticky” stories in commercials tend to be “simple, unexpected, concrete, credible, and emotional” (88). In applying these principles to homiletics, Allen and La Ferle advise preachers to present a story featuring a protagonist with whom the listeners can easily identify, based on their shared struggles, experiences, and celebrations.

In the final chapter, “Advertising Campaigns and Cumulative Preaching,” the authors point out that advertising campaigns are implemented through various mediums over a period of time to increase brand awareness and sales and produce more loyal customers. While being consistent in its message, the campaign needs to use fresh words, images, or stories to connect with customers. Similarly, preachers need to reflect on their theology to improve the consistency of their message and discern how frequently they need to communicate the same message so that it can be received more effectively.

TV is no longer the dominant platform for advertising. Instead, people encounter commercials on portable devices, such as smartphones and tablets, looking at YouTube, Facebook, or Instagram. These media outlets value convenience and speed and require commercials to be provocative and experiential. The authors of this book discuss what preachers can learn from “the best of advertisers.” However, designing a sermon inspired by contemporary commercials is bound to be highly expressive, trendy, and emotive, leading to the question: What message would be communicated by such a homiletic method?

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