

PREACHING PAUL, by Brad R. Braxton.
Nashville: Abingdon, 2004. Pp. 192.
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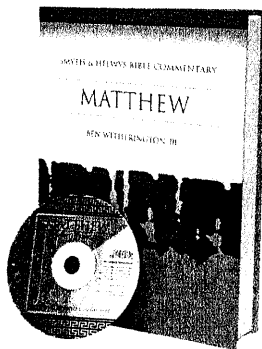
Brad Braxton is Associate Professor of Homiletics and New Testament at Vanderbilt University Divinity School. More than that, Braxton is an ordained Baptist minister and bearer of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In *Preaching Paul*, he combines the rigor of academic study alongside his prayerful pastoral sensibilities to create a work that is most worthy of shelf space in the libraries of ministers, preachers, theologians, and teachers, lay or otherwise. Through his direct, readily accessible writing style, Braxton is able to usher his readers into the profundity of the theological, homiletical, and biblical issues in the Pauline letters in ways that challenge and inspire.

After briefly laying out the overarching structure of the book in his introduction, the “what” and “how” of preaching Paul, Braxton deems it necessary to take what he calls “a twenty-second time-out” to address the “why” question. Namely, why ought we preach from Paul? Braxton is responding to his experience that “many ministers assume Paul is difficult to understand, overly opinionated, and supportive of, if not directly responsible for, various kinds of oppression in the church” (14). As a consequence, preachers often avoid preaching from Pauline texts. During this “time-out,” Braxton, perhaps serving in the role of an inspirational coach, provides three substantial reasons (a pep talk?) as to why Paul must be preached: (1) Paul’s ministry and letters were cross-cultural and created “multiethnic communities that worshiped Christ” (15); (2) Paul was committed to the formation of the community, for the life of Christian witness is lived out in community (16); and (3) Paul’s use of ethical exhortations given to these cross-cultural communities living in Christ is of great importance. That is, “Paul stressed the link between behavior and belief” (17). For Braxton, these three messages are essential to the heart of the gospel and find traction in today’s context in which the gospel is proclaimed.

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While asserting the necessity of preaching from Pauline texts, Braxton is willing to critique and confront some of Paul's positions on certain issues, specifically, issues of slavery, patriarchy, and sexuality. Under the rubric of biblical authority and accountability, Braxton recognizes our relationship to scripture to be dynamic. He writes,

As I—and the communities to which I belong—interpret the Bible, I will respect its history, and I want the Bible to respect my history. Likewise, I acknowledge the real possibility that interaction with the Bible might positively alter my future. However, the Bible must acknowledge the real possibility that my interaction with it might positively alter its future. (23)

Braxton admits that such a bold statement concerning biblical interpretation may appear heretical to some, but he rightly asks us to consider the following question: "Is it not possible that God also expects us to hold the Bible accountable—accountable to being, through our interpretations of it, an ever more genuine witness to the gospel?" (23). Such willingness to seriously engage the Bible relationally both testifies to Braxton's deep faith in the living word of God and gives life and breath to his work.

After the "time-out" has expired, Braxton frames his discussion around four points derived from his title, *Preaching Paul*. First, he spends a significant amount of time defining the task of preaching in the opening chapter entitled, "What Is Preaching? God's News We Can Use." Braxton states, "*Preaching is the faithful, passionate reporting of God's useful news*" (27). Faithful preaching, as espoused by Braxton, is a "cross-shaped" preaching rooted in the theology of the cross whereby "the saving dimensions of the cross are located in its life-altering *revelations* and not its gory details" (29). Two such revelations are offered by Braxton: a theology of the cross both "reveals a mistake of equating appearances with reality" (29), e.g., powerlessness with the cross, and "reveals God's involvement in politics" (31). In naming the theology of the cross as the criterion of faithful preaching, Braxton claims the cross of Christ as the

lens by which we see God's transforming power in the world. Such a claim is one of the great strengths of this book; however, his discussion of the theology of the cross also leaves the reader in want. Braxton fails to mention Martin Luther's seminal contribution to Paul's cross-shaped theology. In doing so, he neglects to name this theology's antithesis rampant in our world—the theology of glory. Adding an in-depth theological and exegetical excursus on the theology of cross would only strengthen Braxton's commitment to faithful preaching.

Where chapter one centers on preaching, chapter two, "Who Was Paul? Paul's Convictions and Communities," focuses on Paul. In this chapter, Braxton asks readers to put aside their assumptions about Paul and encourages us to reassess him as a historical person rooted in historical time and place. Through solid biblical interpretation and exegetical work, Braxton shows that Paul, through his belief in the resurrection, reliance on the Holy Spirit, and faithful church planting, "attempted to create a cohesiveness that would keep his congregations together until Christ's return" (68).

Chapter three, "Preaching Paul: Paul as a Messenger of the Gospel," identifies the book's title—*Preaching Paul*—as ambiguous, so that "the word *preaching* is a 'verbal adjective' describing Paul, and Paul is the subject" (9). The task of this chapter is to investigate Paul's own preaching in a way that gives rise to a new word for today. Braxton relies on the spiritual practice of *lectio divina* (sacred reading) to enlist the Holy Spirit's guidance in hearing Paul's preaching in order to "discern how God might speak to us now in ways beyond what Paul might have intended" (72). Such practice takes time, effort, and energy that are all too often consumed by the demands of parish life. Here, Braxton offers his wisdom born from experience to help preachers create the space for such devotional sermonic preparation. If one read this chapter alone, it would be well worth the effort!

Chapters four and five, "Preaching Paul: Interpreting Paul's Letters for Proclamation," and "Preaching Paul: Proclaiming

the News from Paul's Letters," respectively, employ the word "preaching" as a "'verbal noun' specifying an action done to Paul who is now and 'object'" (10). In other words, in these two chapters Braxton offers suggestions concerning how one might preach Paul. Chapter four proposes a step-by-step comprehensive process for sermon preparation using Romans 8:26–30. In chapter five, Braxton provides the sermon that was crafted through the academic work and devotional practices exercised in the previous chapter. He also includes two other sermons on Pauline texts along with solicited written critiques by colleagues, a practice he fully endorses. These chapters serve as a useful window into the mind and heart of a faithful preacher.

Recognizing the limits of his book and the richness of Pauline scholarship, Braxton's final chapter includes a Pauline bibliography as well as an annotated bibliography of twenty influential works on the Apostle Paul—a fine gift to his readers who wish to continue studying Paul for the sake of proclamation. It is Braxton's hope and prayer that, in the end, "this book's investigation of preaching and of Paul will assist God in creating something new in each one of us and, in turn, in our preaching ministries" (23). By the grace of God, it does exactly that.

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CHURCHES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE: REACHING YOUR COMMUNITY WITH GOOD NEWS AND GOOD WORKS, by Ronald J. Sider, Philip N. Olson, and Heidi Rolland Unruh. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002. Pp. 334. \$19.99 (paper).

A significant challenge faced the church throughout the past century and still continues today—how to develop pastoral leaders and congregations that are able to integrate both evangelism and social action into their ministries. This book argues that, unfortunately, the modernist and funda-

mentalist split at the beginning of the twentieth century led many denominations and their congregations to take separate paths in relation to these two themes. To this day, congregations that stress evangelism tend not to be as involved in social concerns, and congregations that stress social action tend not to be as involved in evangelism.

In light of the new emphasis during the past decade on faith-based initiatives (FBOs), the authors intend that this book serve as a stimulus for congregations that stress only one dimension to add the other as well. They take the position that congregations do not need to settle for a dichotomy between these two emphases. Further, they believe that there is a historical "window of opportunity" for congregations to regain a voice in helping to shape public policy through developing holistic ministries (13). Ron Sider is the best known of these authors, and he brings a wealth of credentials to this subject. He is joined by two others who also have strong backgrounds in holistic ministry. Their collective intent is to offer an alternative view to the commonly accepted perspective that congregations need to engage in either evangelism or social action, but not both. They believe that congregations can be passionate about and effective in doing both.

Their methodology is to work from the ground up. Using four extended case studies, they develop a research-based argument that seeks to demonstrate that congregations can, in fact, bring word and deed commitments into a synergistic ministry, what they label as "holistic ministry." The opening section of the book provides an overview that offers sixteen characteristics of holistic ministry, within four categories, in an attempt to make the concept operational (15–19). The four categories are: (a) having a holistic understanding of the church's mission; (b) developing dynamic spirituality; (c) fostering healthy congregational dynamics; and (d) maintaining holistic ministry practices.

Part I of their book, entitled "Understanding Holistic Ministry," sets up the key aspects of the authors' argument. Founda-