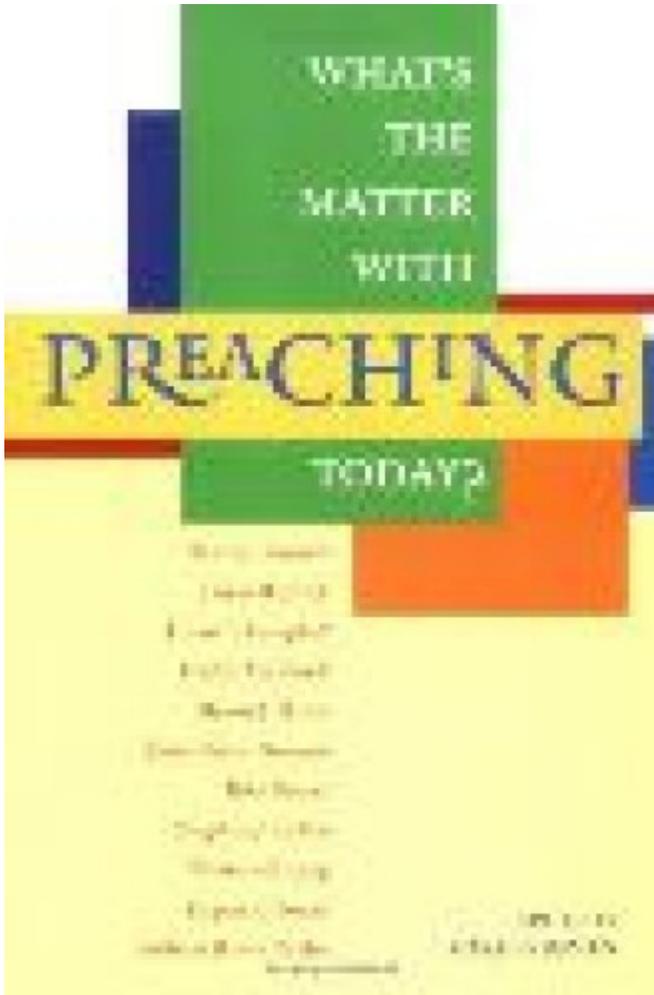


A few good preachers

By [Eugene H. Winkler](#) in the [January 25, 2005](#) issue

In Review



What's the Matter with Preaching Today?

Mike Graves, ed.

Westminster John Knox

It has always been easy to romanticize a “golden age” of preaching. Clyde Fant contends that it’s always three generations ago. He reminds us that near the end of

the 19th century, when preachers like Theodore Parker, Henry Ward Beecher and Phillips Brooks were at the height of their careers, numerous articles were published with titles such as “The Decay of Modern Preaching,” “Dull Sermons” and “Is the Modern Pulpit a Failure?”

“What’s the matter with preaching?” was the title of an article Harry Emerson Fosdick published in a 1928 issue of *Harper’s Magazine*. Fosdick, the great preacher at New York’s Riverside Church, attracted such crowds that people began to line up early on a Sunday morning to get a place in the magnificent Gothic sanctuary. His assessment of the then-current status of preaching seems remarkably relevant some 75 years later. Good preachers are still few and far between, and questions about the health of preaching are more common than ever.

Preachers may no longer labor under the illusion “that folk come to church desperately anxious to discover what happened to the Jebusites,” an illusion Fosdick wittily accused preachers of his time of harboring. But the postmodern folks who file into church do wonder why seminaries aren’t producing better preachers and more of them. Some preachers wonder, too. They worry about their own preaching and about what they can do to improve it.

Mike Graves, professor of preaching and worship at Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Kansas, has assembled 11 contemporary homileticians who not only address Fosdick’s timeless question but also provide some amazing insights and suggestions for clergy who preach and laity who support, listen and hope. He has “rounded up some of the usual suspects,” e.g., Fred Craddock, Barbara Brown Taylor and Ernest Campbell. But he has also called on Marva Dawn, Anna Carter Florence and Cleophus J. Larue (who offers some trenchant comments on black preaching).

That master of inductive preaching, Fred Craddock, who has probably done more to change our approach to the sermon than any other homiletician, declares that “preaching is an ongoing conversation between the listeners and the Scriptures.” One of the preacher’s primary tasks is to draw upon the “deep resonances” from both the Bible and the memory of the congregation. Memory is not, however, simply a transaction of deposit and retrieval. “John Donne was closer to the current thinking about memory when he said that not the mind and not the will but the memory is the shortest and surest way to God,” Craddock claims.

Each of the essayists asks preachers to move beyond viewing sermons as subjects and listeners as objects. “Preaching is . . . very much a matter of writing checks on what is already there in the minds and hearts of the congregation,” Craddock says. Similarly, Taylor decries the homiletical habit that makes “preachers and their listeners . . . think of the sermon as a solo performance piece that is brought to the congregation from beyond them somewhere—from the biblical, theological, and homiletical experts—instead of from the God in their midst who gives them their lives.”

Taylor considers Fosdick’s admonition that “preaching is wrestling with individuals over questions of life and death, and until that idea of it commands a preacher’s mind and method, eloquence will avail him little and theology not at all.” Not brilliance but bravery is called for as preachers publicly wrestle with the overwhelming questions listeners face alone at night.

Florence’s struggle to get her students to put away their homiletical swords as they search for “what the text really means” is the subject of one of the book’s most compelling essays. Like preachers of all ages, the students go “about solving the problem that is the text. They cannot see it, hear it, feel it, or even wonder about it; they are too worried about solving it.” All they want to do is “tie the [sermon] to a chair with rope and torture a confession out of it.” She goes on to say that “Let me tell you what this text means for us” is a phrase preachers must eliminate from their repertoire. “God may be great and God may be good,” Florence declares, “but God does not always behave that way. God is not known for staying in character for the duration of the scene. God does not always act in the face of injustice; God does not always save.”

Most of us remember the sermons we preached or heard on the Sunday after 9/11, not only because the Word had never seemed more important, but also because our crowded churches included folks who had never stepped foot inside a church before. We needed then—and still need—to deal with the question of how a good God could allow such a terrible thing to happen. But, as Taylor reminds us, we also have to ask to questions “that remain fundamental to anyone who still bothers to go to church: 1) What, if anything, makes a Christian different from anyone else? and 2) How are Christians called to live with everyone else, including those who may wish them dead?”

Graves notes that “various anthropological models creep into our sermons and, like the bass notes of a well-known tune, often go unnoticed but have nonetheless a bone-rattling influence.” The postmodern preacher must look at her presuppositions and ask, “What am I saying about human nature in this sermon?” While few clergy are intellectuals, Albert Camus’s definition of intellectuals applies to all who prepare sermons: an intellectual considers the biology, sociology and philosophy that undergirds what is being said or written.

What is the matter with preaching today? The problem is not simply “secularism,” the phantom against which many of us love to tilt our homiletical swords. The problem may be that the questions we wrestle with are too small. “While we fuss over our church budgets and the salvation of our own souls,” Taylor declares, “God is in the labor and delivery room with a world in travail, wondering where all the help has gone.” If the preacher ducks the rocks that will inevitably be thrown after a controversial sermon, then he or she is not only forsaking the call of God but is also acting as nothing more than a chaplain to the status quo.