

# Preacher talk

by [Wes D. Avram](#) in the [October 9, 2002](#) issue

*The Company of Preachers: Wisdom on Preaching, Augustine to the Present.* Edited by Richard Lischer. Eerdmans, 496 pp., \$29.00.

What is preaching? Who is a preacher? How do we interpret both the Bible and our theology for preaching? What does preaching have to do with persuasion? Where in homiletics is the Holy Spirit and the church? What role has the hearer?

When Duke Divinity School professor of preaching Richard Lischer published a reader in homiletics 15 years ago, he mined nearly 17 centuries of writing in homiletics to address just these questions. He did preachers and scholars a great service. That volume, *Theories of Preaching*, put under one cover 48 essays on the art and theology of preaching, including both stand-alone pieces and excerpts from longer works. Authors included Augustine, John Chrysostom, George Herbert, John Broadus, Charles Spurgeon, Phoebe Palmer, John Wesley, John Calvin, Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, contemporary crafters like Fred Craddock and Henry Mitchell, and several others. An introductory essay framed the group.

The book demonstrated both the diverse perspectives that still influence the theory and practice of preaching and the general set of themes that make this a tradition. Meant as a resource for preaching pastors as much as for scholars in the field, the book balanced writings with a direct influence on the academic teaching and thinking about preaching with those with a more generative influence on the milieu in which mainstream preaching has unfolded. Essays in general biblical and theological interpretation, such as an excerpt from Paul Ricoeur's *Conflict of Interpretations*, were included.

Now we can thank Lischer again. He has expanded, rearranged, updated and retitled the earlier collection. *The Company of Preachers* offers an even richer glimpse into the arguing, proclaiming, teaching and wrestling that forms homiletic theory and practice. The number of essays in the new book has increased to 57, but the increase hasn't come by simple addition. Lischer made hard choices to exclude 12 of the essays in the earlier volume in order to open space for 21 new ones. This

expansion and reordering has allowed the inclusion of more voices and perspectives, increasing the number of women writers from two to five, for example, and including an excerpt from Hispanic theologians Justo and Catherine G. Gonzalez.

The essays and excerpts are again arranged thematically, with each piece given a title that relates it to the book's overall structure. This means that many of the original titles of the essays or excerpts have been changed—which can make the book a bit peculiar for scholarly use, especially as in the earlier book some of the now-retitled essays already had different titles from their originals. The practice does make the book easier for nonscholars to use, however. In the next printing, it would be helpful if Lischer included an appendix listing all of the essays with their original titles, as well as a chronological index for readers interested in the development of the tradition through these writings.

Readers from many traditions of Christian preaching will find both confirmation of their own approaches and fresh challenges. Still, like any attempt to anthologize an unwieldy tradition of actual practice, the book risks opening itself to as much criticism for what it excludes as thanks for what it includes. More could have been presented from evangelicals or Pentecostals, for example. But these perspectives are not absent. And given that some of the new essays are not time-worn “classics” but are related to current discussions, one might also ask why there could not be a couple more essays from the growing group of women teaching homiletics.

These questions may not be as critical as they are appreciative, however. They simply show the way in which this generative collection invites the next question: “Whom else shall we include?” That the book is more provocative than exhaustive is a wonderful strength. Thanks, Rick Lischer!