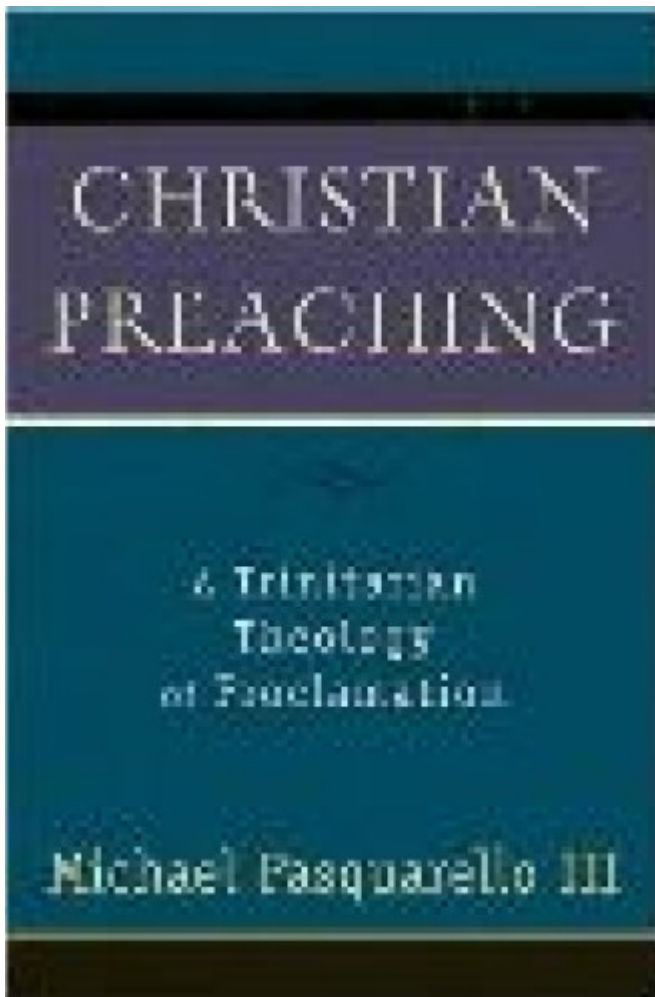


Christian Preaching: A Trinitarian Theology of Proclamation

reviewed by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [October 2, 2007](#) issue

In Review



Christian Preaching: A Trinitarian Theology of Proclamation

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Contemporary Christian homiletics has taken a wrong turn. Reaching out to speak to the world, we fell in—face down. Too troubled by what our audience could and could not hear, we reduced the gospel to a set of sappy platitudes that anybody could accept and no one could resist. Our testimony got reduced to whatever the market could bear. In the process, distinctive Christian speech was jettisoned and the discourse of pragmatic, utilitarian, therapeutic deism became the dominant homiletic mode. We're all in advertising now. This is how Michael Pasquarello assesses the current homiletic condition—rhetorical strategies dominate, theology takes a backseat to technique, and the riches of the theological heritage are junked in favor of “what works.” Charles Finney’s pragmatism and utilitarianism triumph.

Evangelical Rick Warren’s simplistic, instrumental homiletic strategy (“information + motivation + application = results”) earns Pasquarello’s particular scorn. Rick may be a nice enough guy, but a biblical, theologically driven preacher he is not, and his influence on contemporary proclamation is nefarious. When it comes to preaching, Pasquarello shows that we’re all 19th-century liberals these days; preaching is reduced to the communication of principles and abstractions that are more revealing of our desires and self-centered ends than of the will of a living and revealing God. Everything is reduced to “the message”—the gospel diminished to a slogan that fits on a bumper sticker.

God is the problem with preaching. We cannot let preaching be dominated by “how” when our greatest challenge and the source of our true power to preach is “who.” Faithful preaching is that which has been theologically authorized. What difference does it make that we preach in the name of a triune God whose nature is to speak? “And God said” is the basis of everything. Can it be that our principles for better living delivered in PowerPoint, our “culturally relevant” communication techniques, are just our latest attempts to keep a living, speaking, strange God at a distance? Pasquarello makes a lively, impassioned plea for us preachers to return to the proper subject of our testimony—the triune God who refuses to be silent or to abandon us to our own rhetorical devices.

Pasquarello’s robust trinitarian angle on preaching is all the more remarkable because of who he is and because of recent trends in homiletics. Pasquarello was trained at the University of North Carolina, renowned for its courses in classical rhetoric. His doctoral dissertation focused on the rhetoric of the great English divines, and he is an expert on the rhetoric of Augustine. Rhetoric has been all the

rage in homiletic studies of late: the study of persuasive speech, the discernment of various rhetorical strategies, a focus on the ethos of the speaker, and the matching of styles of speech to the nature of the audience (what Thomas G. Long has called the “turn to the listener”). Pasquarello, a skilled rhetorician who respects the contributions of rhetoric, respects and honors the theological basis of Christian preaching even more. Persuasive Christian preaching finds its source not in skillful use of rhetorical strategy but in the speech of a self-revealing, resourceful God.

The recovery and loving nurture of the peculiar speech engendered by a trinitarian God is Pasquarello’s goal. To get there, he mines the riches of our theological tradition. With help from Wesley and Augustine (Pasquarello’s wonderful reading of *De doctrina Christiana* will invigorate the most stolid of preachers), he reminds us of the joy of working with so interesting a God. Pasquarello also shows how preaching is a practice that keeps a pastor close to the theological substance of the faith. Homiletical practice week in and week out enables Christian ministry to be more than mere caregiving. If it doesn’t arise out of and always refer back to the Trinity, ministry is just another form of human-centered therapy and technique and is hardly worth the effort.

Just to show that he preaches what he teaches, Pasquarello includes some of his own sermons that demonstrate the fruitfulness of his theological assertions. While I found his historical and theological exposition and analysis to be more energetic and engaging than some of his sermons, he was wise to include these sermons as a demonstration of the theological practice that arises out of the mind of a theologically charged preacher like himself. There’s not much wrong with us preachers that couldn’t be cured by a good dose of wisdom from our predecessors from the past. Pasquarello takes us there.

But am I the only preacher who is beginning to be suspicious of all the talk of “practice”—Christianity as a practice, ministry as a practice, practicing the faith and so on? (Is practice what we do when we no longer are charged with the thrill and wonder of a living, speaking, assaulting God?) I wonder if Pasquarello’s commendation of the salubrious effects of homiletical practice could cause us to slip into another form of the theologically empty rhetoric that he abhors. Probably not, since the practice that Pasquarello advocates is the practice of constant attentiveness to the character and the movements of a living God.

A preacher told me the other day that her well was running dry and she was just about to throw in the towel so far as her ministry of preaching was concerned. She has been preaching for over a decade and now feels that her preaching is falling flat. I recommended Pasquarello to her. She read his book in a day and says that it recalled her to the task of proclamation.

May this good book be closely read and well marked by preachers and used in homiletics courses in seminaries. We need it.