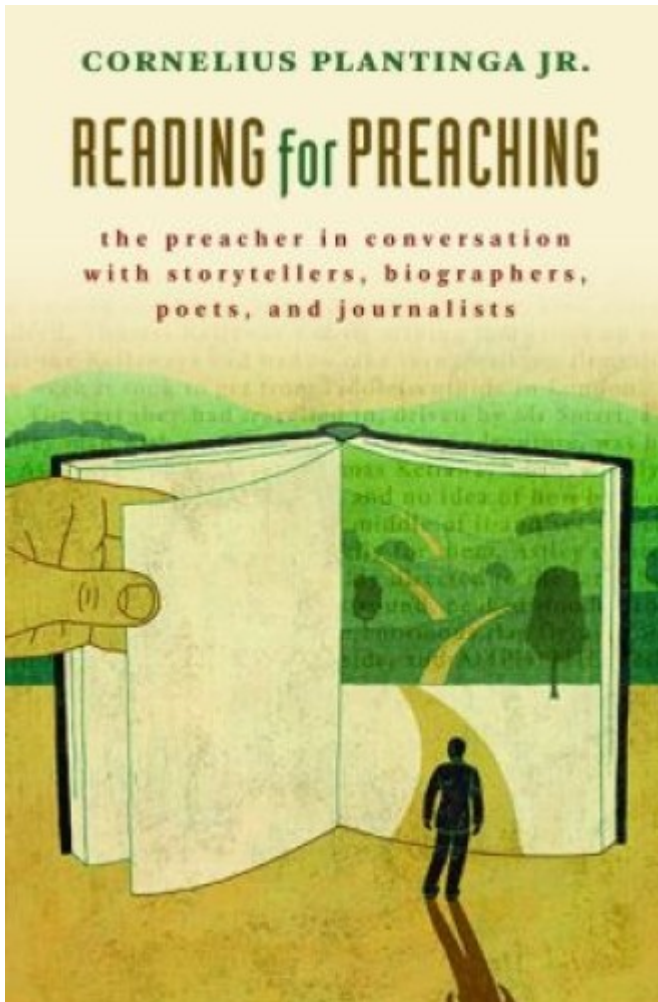


Reading for Preaching, by Cornelius Plantinga Jr.

reviewed by [Robert Cornwall](#) in the [February 19, 2014](#) issue

In Review



Reading for Preaching

By Cornelius Plantinga Jr.
Eerdmans

Karl Barth encouraged preachers to prepare their sermons with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. This is good advice, but Cornelius Plantinga Jr., the former president of Calvin Theological Seminary, contends that to be fully

prepared to share a word from God with a congregation, a preacher should also attend to storytellers, biographers, poets and journalists, who also “write about sin and grace, bondage and redemption, sorrow and joy, and the hunger for justice.”

Plantinga is a believer in pursuing an intentional program of general reading. He has co-lead annual monthlong seminars titled “Reading for Preaching,” which, together with his 2012 Warfield Lectures of the same title at Princeton Theological Seminary, provide the foundation for this brief but challenging book, in which Plantinga shares the homiletical and personal benefits of such a reading program.

Plantinga affirms the premise that the preaching task begins with the biblical text—to which the preacher owes primary allegiance. He does not intend to distract readers from the Bible or from the great works of biblical and theological scholarship. General reading, however, can enrich the life and preaching of the minister, as well as provide a rich trove of illustrative material that can be used in sermons.

The first half of the book focuses on the task of preaching. Plantinga introduces readers to a variety of available reading materials and shares how preachers might collect illustrations from them to use in sermons. This reading program helps tune their ear so they can better attend to the voices of God, their parishioners and the broader community. It also enables a preacher to engage congregants with such clarity that they will have a message to take home. Plantinga speaks here of proper diction, a skill that includes rhetorical pitch, narrative movement, economical use of words, and evocative speech that moves hearts without being manipulative.

The second half of the book focuses on forming the preacher into a sage, a person of wisdom. This is an important goal because preachers face a daunting task. Plantinga writes: “Where else is a man or a woman called forward once a week to address a mixed audience on things of final magnificence?” In order to deliver on this calling, a preacher needs good judgment regarding message, text, theology and audience.

For example, where should a preacher draw the line between “prophetic witness and scolding” when speaking about economic justice? The value of reading broadly is that preachers not only learn proper diction but begin to better understand the world in which they proclaim the message of God. Plantinga writes: “The wise know how human life goes—its times and seasons, its patterns and dynamics, its laws and rhythms.” A wise preacher is a discerning preacher who, over time, becomes “a

sage on everything under the sun.”

Preachers must be informed on a wide range of issues that go beyond what can be found in the biblical text or a theology book. Becoming a sage allows a preacher to make connections between the text and the world so that a divine message might break through. By broadening their reading habits, preachers can be more in touch with the human condition—including the reality of sin and the need for grace.

Although I am a preacher who is an avid reader, I confess that my reading choices are not nearly as broad as Plantinga recommends. The staples of my reading are books on theology, church history, the Bible and ministry. I do read newspapers and news magazines, and I enjoy reading biographies, but I have not made them a priority. Nor do I read much fiction or poetry, though I am a regular viewer of films. I could have come away from Plantinga’s book feeling chastised, but that is not his purpose. Instead, he graciously invites those of us who preach to pursue a broader program of reading so that we might be better equipped to share a word of wisdom with spiritually hungry faith communities.

Concise, thoughtful, provocative and engaging, this is a book we preachers should read. Plantinga writes as one who understands firsthand what it means to preach on a weekly basis. He understands the challenges we face and our tendency to read narrowly. Nevertheless, he strongly encourages us to commit ourselves to a program of reading that will enhance our lives, our preaching and the message we seek to deliver.