

BOOK REVIEW  
*Creative Styles of Preaching*  
Mark Barger Elliott  
Westminster John Knox Press, 2000

Generally speaking a book that encourages preachers to expand their methods of presenting biblical material is a welcome and useful addition to any minister's library. There are, however, some items this present volume must overcome to be of much value.

Elliott has briefly introduced some categories useful for the purpose of varying the style—constructed formats such as narrative, topical, exegetical, etc.—of preaching. He has challenged the preaching professional to consider handling his weekly address with some creativity and variation. This is a worthwhile undertaking despite his assumption that audience restlessness is predicated on preaching style alone. Some discussion on the relationship between form and function might have provided a more substantial rationale for such changes in preaching styles.

If the reader anticipates enough information to move quickly from reading this material to sermon preparation in one easy step he should aim his sights a little lower. The chapters are too short to provide the necessary detail and depth of understanding for immediately producing each style. Every chapter is no more than a brief review of material presented by other authors, and attempts to duplicate the sermon styles would require a deeper consideration of the books mentioned. The author admits to describing the material in "broad brush strokes," and many readers will yearn for more detailed explanations. His hope that these styles of presentation might "catch your fancy and encourage an extended stay," would also be more helpful had he excluded the two sermons at the end of each chapter. A brief outline would have been sufficient to give the reader enough of an idea concerning each style.

One of the glaring weaknesses of the book has to do with his categories. The reader is left to wonder why Biblical preaching is merely one style among many and not more appropriate as the very foundation of all the other categories. It is also curious how Imaginative preaching

demands its own separate category rather than simply be a mindset that the preacher must sometimes pursue for the purpose of expanding thought. Furthermore the style that he labels African-American seems more suited to classification as a social phenomenon than a particular style of preaching.

Most disturbingly Elliott does not subscribe to the notion that good preaching demands Biblical content, and this is evident in some of the sermons included with each chapter. This reviewer always suspects that books on preaching are more concerned with promoting a particular theological agenda when they include numerous sermons. This may explain why the author can perceive Biblical preaching as one style among many, and it certainly explains why he includes sermons with only passing looks at biblical content and one specifically that promotes a particularly liberal rationale for accepting homosexuality. It leaves one with the gnawing suspicion that there is a connecting link between Elliott's concern for a change in style and promotion of a change in content more suited to a liberal mindset.

If this book is meant merely to introduce some different ways of communicating ideas from the pulpit it lacks the depth necessary to do little more than create awareness of the possibilities. Considering the theology of the sermons included the reader is also forced to conclude that variation in style equates too closely with variation in theology, particularly the liberal variety. Any preacher concerned with keeping his audience legitimately interested in his sermons by varying his styles of outlining will have to overcome a lot of theological baggage to find this book of much use.

(Published in *Stone-Campbell Journal*, Spring 2002, Vol. 5, no. 1, p. 126.)