**A Theology of Preaching: The Dynamics of the Gospel**

**By Richard Lischer**

Richard Lischer is James T. And Alice Mead Cleland Professor of Preaching at Duke Divinity School. He is the author of several books on preaching, including *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King, Jr.* and *The Word That Moved America*, the *Concise Encyclopedia Of Preaching*, and *A Theology of Preaching: The Dynamics of the Gospel*. He comes from a Lutheran background, which is reflected in his writings. In *A Theology of Preaching* Lischer aims to show that theology informs preaching. In his opinion, preaching is a kerygmatic, oral, and practical activity. He believes there is a disconnect between theology and preaching in many circles. The causes of the exclusion of preaching from theology are: First, is a lack of substance; Second, is the lack of coherence; Third, preaching’s loss of authority; and fourth, the irrelevance of preaching.

Lischer believes theology calls preaching back to the gospel by relating to the broader articles of the gospel and by telling preachers what the gospel is not. He contends, “Preaching turns theology back to its center which is the gospel and insists upon a gospel–based budgeting of theology’s resources” (p. 9). In other words, preaching becomes the final expression of theology (p. 14). Lischer is quick to make much of the gospel. In fact, he argues that preaching was born in the resurrection of Jesus. In other words, for Lischer “preaching belongs to this eschatological age” (p. 20).

The book is divided into six chapters. In the first chapter, Lischer reveals the impetus for his focus on providing an emphasis for theology in preaching. He believes modern theology is broken and fragmented (p. 1). In chapter two he makes the case that the resurrection bring with it the power to preach. In chapter three he explores the dialectic of law and gospel. He contends, “The preaching of the gospel – whether from the Old Testament or the New Testament – is always dialectical” (p. 33). In other words, the law is “bad or old news” and the gospel is “good news.”

In chapter four Lischer reveals that in his opinion “the sermon is the oral Word of God.” In the first chapter of the book, he already pointed out that the original proclamatory theology of the church was aural–oral in nature. However, in chapter four he seeks to make the argument the sermon is the Word of God. In fact, he contends the sermon does not exist as a sermon until it is uttered. But if the preacher’s words become the very words of God, then how come sinful humans like preachers claim they speak the words of God? Well, the answer to that question is provided in chapter five. Therefore, in order to refrain from becoming “peddlers of God’s Word,” preachers must utilize the resources available to every Christian man and woman, which include baptism, the community of the past, the brothers and sisters in today’s church, the Scripture, prayer, and the Holy Spirit.

Finally, in the last chapter, Lischer supposes that preaching is for the gathered body. He wrties, “No biblical writer envisioned a reader curled up alone reading the Bible” (p. 79). In other word, he explains, “The view of preaching that locates the Word within a community of faith corresponds to a theory of rhetoric that encloses language within the situation that evokes it.” Furthermore, if preaching is meant to shape the body of Christ, then it must also be formative. Lischer makes the case that “Preaching–as–formation is not content with its own eventfulness … It directs the faithful into the implications of their redemption in Jesus Christ” (p. 89). In other words, the church is transformed by the preaching of the Word.

**Critique:**

Lischer is a man steeped in Lutheran theology. The dialectic model of Luther’s theology seems to be the basis for his theology of preaching. Lischer supposes that there is a brokenness in theology today. However, though he provides a few examples of why issues exist, he does not seem provide a thorough analysis of why theology is broken. Rather he attempts to offer his own theological ideas as an alternative. His theology is certainly gospel–centered. He does a good job making much of the gospel. Further, he encourages preachers to relate all the articles of the broader gospel –– creation, fall, providence, sanctification, church, eschatology. His encouragement certainly appeals to those of a more evangelical mindset.

Lischer does well to emphasize the role of the text, “Preachers are charged with proclaiming the gospel in texts, by means of texts, and in faithfulness to texts” (p. 5). Theology without careful attention to the text is lackluster. Like Stott, Lischer encourages preachers to bridge the world of the text and the present (p. 8). He is successful in making the case that preaching and theology of inseparable. In attempting to answer the question “Did preaching give rise to theology or theology to preaching? (p. 10), he crafts a good argument for both being one in the same. In other words, it is not the case of which came first, “the chicken or the egg,” but that they are the same.

*A Theology of Preaching* is not an easy book to read for most. It also offers some provocative thought through the assertion that “the sermon if the oral Word of God.” Lischer’s warning about concupiscence in preaching is also most helpful. Further, Lischer contention that “the way the church ‘talks to itself’ at worship ultimately constitutes its witness to the world is perhaps overstated. Does the church not also become a witness through outreach, missions, social endeavors, and community engagement? The gathered church in fact is a better witness to the world when outside of the confines of its buildings.

Lischer seems a bit contradictory at times. For instance, her says that preaching is the final expression of theology, while claiming they are one in the same. Are there no other ways in which theology is expressed? He also asserts that Christian preaching began with the resurrection of Jesus. But was Jesus not preached and proclaiming also in the OT? Jesus himself also preached prior to being resurrected (i.e., Matthew 5–7, Sermon on the Mount). Lischer also does not mention the various examples of preaching, heralding, and proclaiming from the Old Testament. He only briefly references the Old Testament in chapter 4 (pp. 53–54). Lischer is prone to a Marcionite view of preaching by completely ignoring the value of preaching from the Old Testament.

In Lischer’ view the sermon does not exist as a sermon until it is uttered. He means, only when it is spoken out loud. However, there is a lot more to a sermon than simply the audible words uttered by the preacher. The sermon is a complex web of prayer, manuscript writing, gestures and more. Lischer is less traditional in his view of preaching. He seems to believe preaching is not confined to the pulpit. He writes, “Preaching is not represented as one person’s persuasive address. It is the ceaseless activity of the church” (p. 90). In this way, he is less traditional in his view of preaching, perhaps sharing some of Tim Keller’s view on the three different levels of preaching.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for most in reading Lischer’s book is his dialectical emphasis of law versus gospel. He contends that is the best theological approach for a theology of preaching but does not counter other opposing ideas in the book. His theological focus is steep into Luther’s thought and theology. It is not original. A broader theological perspective could have been offered by Lischer.

**Significant Quotes:**

* Today, most assessment of modern theology have found a common point of departure: the brokenness of theology. (p. 1)
* Nowhere does this fragmentation impact with greater force and nowhere is the pain felt more deeply than in the church’s preaching. (p. 1)
* Causes of the exclusion of preaching from theology: First, is a lack of substance. Second, is the lack of coherence. Third, is preaching’s loss of authority. Fourth, is the irrelevance of preaching. (p. 1–3)
* Theology monitors the church’s proclamation of the gospel. (p 5)
* Preachers are charged with proclaiming the gospel in texts, by means of texts, and in faithfulness to texts. (p. 5)
* Theology requires the preacher to relate all the articles of the broader gospel –– creation, fall, providence, sanctification, church, eschatology –– and all the texts of Scripture to this constitutive core of the Christian faith. (p. 6)
* I am inviting preachers to understand their task as broader and more demanding than the serial restatement of a pericope’s religious ideas. (p. 7).
* In all stage of sermon preparation and delivery the preacher is probing the mind and milieu of the listener. (p. 8)
* We must establish a theologically sound conception of the listener’s world before we can address it. (p. 8)
* In preaching theology recovers three elements it had at its origin: its kerygmatic impulse, its oral nature, and its character as worship. (p. 10)
* Thus we do not ask the pointless question, Did preaching give rise to theology or theology to preaching? For at their source, they were one … at their source, preaching was theological, and theology was proclamatory. (p. 10).
* When I suggest that preaching can do something for theology, by preaching I meant not the academic discipline of homiletics, but preaching as the sum total of speakers, listeners, and settings throughout the church, that is, preaching as the ceaseless activity of the church. (p. 11)
* The original proclamatory theology of the church was oral–aural. (p. 11)
* So debased is preaching as an oral event that manuscripts are called sermons, and in some places, seminarians are taught to preach by being made to read their manuscripts. (p. 12)
* Preaching might be termed the projective, or public, function of theology itself. (p. 14)
* The preaching of the gospel – whether from the Old Testament or the New Testament – is always dialectical. Dialectic implies two interacting forces within the unitive Word of the one God, addressed to whole persons. (p. 33)
* We anchor our preaching in the story of Jesus, which recapitulates the history of Israel and the destiny of all people. He enjoyed primal unity with God, experienced the shattering of it in the sin of the world, and was recreated by God to greater glory. (p. 36)
* No matter their order of presentation, gospel and law (or vice versa) still sound the two tones of God’s holy word. (p. 40)
* The gospel indicative contains an imperative, else it purveys cheap grace. (p. 40)
* The Christian life is not a simple matter of exchanging external law for an internal one (i.e. swapping a demanding statute for a nagging conscience), but of exchanging the extrinsic demand for the indwelling Christ. (p. 40)
* At least half the sermons I hear are moralistic. These sermons usually preach Jesus–our–example and think that by mentioning his good behavior they have preached the gospel. (p. 45)
* If we can be fiery mad about sin, then with an even greater sense of vibrancy and passion we can be fiery glad about salvation. (p. 46)
* Paul knew that the preacher is but a steward, mouthpiece, witness, emissary, slave, | and earthen vessel, but by virtue of the mystery over which he is *oikonomos*, the message for which he is *kerux*, the event to which he is *martus*, the Lord from whom he is *apostolos*, and the master to whom he is *doulos*, he boldly claims yet another title: *sunergos theou*, God's partner. (p. 54)
* Christian preaching continues the ministry of Jesus just as surely as it continues the ministry of the apostles. (p. 56).
* A biblical sermon is an exposition of the Scripture, which is an exposition of the gospel, which is an exposition of the life of God. (p. 59)
* Any theology that takes the Word of God seriously must reckon with its greatest source of embarrassment: the Word must be spoken and received by sinful human beings. (p. 63)
* No biblical writer envisioned a reader curled up alone reading the Bible. (p. 79)
* Those who attend worship may be more definitively shaped by common Western values than by the Christian story (p. 83).
* Preaching–as–formation is not content with its own eventfulness … It directs the faithful into the implications of their redemption in Jesus Christ. (p. 89)
* The ultimate “performer,” after the preacher has led a sermonic “dress rehearsal” of the story, is the Christian community. (p. 90)
* Preaching is not represented as one person’s persuasive address. It is the ceaseless activity of the church. (p. 90).