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Kysar, Robert

Preaching John

Fortress Resources for Preaching

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For those charged with the responsibility of preaching and teaching in the church, Robert Kysar has placed us once again in his debt. For more than twenty-five years Kysar has provided reliable guides through the thickets of Johannine scholarship, beginning with *The Fourth Evangelist and His Gospel* (Augsburg, 1975), followed by *John, the Maverick Gospel* (John Knox, 1976; 1993) and his accessible commentaries on John and the Johannine Epistles in the Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament series (1986). Now in his most recent book, *Preaching John*, Kysar again summarizes and explicates the main currents of Johannine interpretation, but this time with a particular commitment to aiding the preacher faced with “the problem and promise” of John.

The book is composed of six succinct and clearly presented chapters. In the first, “A Tangle of Theses,” Kysar offers a synopsis of the state of research into the historical origin, social world, and literary features of the Fourth Gospel. He then, in three successive chapters, delves into the inner workings of the Gospel itself. First, major theological themes—Christology, paradox, sin and evil, faith and salvation, and hope—are explored. Then the metaphorical and symbolic use of language is investigated. Finally, Kysar turns to the interweaving of narrative and discourse so distinctive in John. The book concludes with a guided reading of the Johannine passion story and a final chapter on Johannine texts in the Revised Common Lectionary.

Preaching John has twin commitments to academy and to church, to lectern as well as pulpit, but it does not—and this is its strength—fall into two distinct parts. Rather, the two are integrated together. Homiletical implications and sermon examples are interwoven throughout the book, illustrating ways that engagement with both the text itself and the contributions of generations of scholars might issue in faithful proclamation. Strictly speaking, this is not a “how-to” book; instead, it is suggestive, allusive, and stimulating. Kysar obviously knows firsthand the predicament of the preacher struggling to speak with integrity from an ancient text to the contemporary situation of a congregation. He offers us not simple rules to follow but rather encouragement, guidance, and his own personal attempts to bridge that gap.

A word should be said here about Kysar’s homiletical commitment. *Preaching John* does not promote a particular style of preaching. Indeed, Kysar notes that the field of homiletics has been in turmoil for several decades, and he does not offer this slim volume as an attempt to weigh in on a particular proposal. Further, he indicates that he has found it quite fulfilling to help “students discover their own preaching voices” (xi). This book continues that generous openness. However, Kysar believes quite firmly that whatever style the preacher commands, good preaching of the Fourth Gospel allows the distinctive voice of John to be heard without distortion. Biblical preaching for Kysar means being “particularly interested in the story’s world and leading our congregations into that world by means of particular texts” (40). The introduction is an extended caution against various common distortions. The Fourth Gospel is, Kysar insists, “a seamless garment, ‘woven in one piece’ ” (9). To preach a part, one must know the whole. This book is a useful aid in this project. Furthermore, adequate preaching attends to the distinctive portrayal of the Johannine Jesus. In conflating John with the Synoptics, “we violate our contract to preach the Scriptures faithfully and betray the church’s commitment to the diversity of the Gospels” (11). Finally, faithful preaching of John resists “Pauline encroachments.” Reading John through a Pauline lens may lead one not deeper in but actually away from John’s story. In short, Kysar is committed to a careful reading of John and a proclamation that emerges from it. This view stands in contrast to much actual practice of popular preaching, where exegesis has much more to do with the congregation’s situation, and even the preacher’s own situation, than with a particular biblical text. *Preaching John* is a gentle but firm and persuasive advocate for traditional biblical preaching and a support to those who want to do it better.

The book includes three indices—Johannine passages, Sermons and Sermon Fragments, and Johannine Lessons in the Revised Common Lectionary—that will make *Preaching John* a useful reference after preachers have read it from cover to cover.