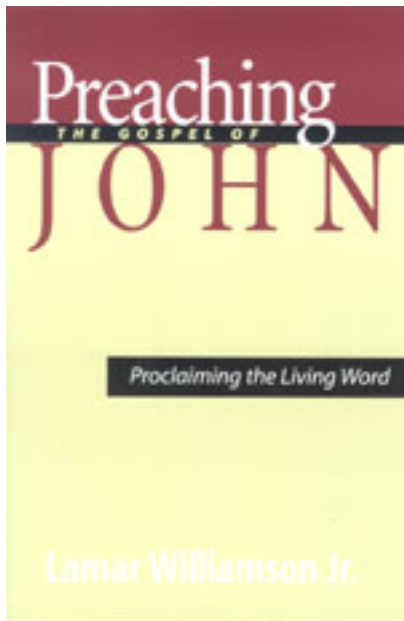


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**Williamson, Lamar**

***Preaching the Gospel of John: Proclaiming the Living Word***

Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004. Pp. xiii + 342. Paper. \$24.95. ISBN 0664225330.

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With *Preaching the Gospel of John: Proclaiming the Living Word*, Lamar Williamson makes a valued contribution to the preacher, teacher, or individual reading the Fourth Gospel for personal edification (though Williamson admits the latter is not a primary target). The breadth of application that can be made of *Preaching the Gospel of John* illustrates, positively, the misleading nature of the title. The title gives the impression that this book is only for pastors. While the subtitle uses a much broader term in *proclaiming*, it is only when one delves into the book that the broader possibilities become evident. Another manner in which the title “errs” concerns the content of the text itself. One may be led to believe that the book serves as a resource for sermon outlines. In fact, the author nowhere presents any prepackaged outlines.

*Preaching the Gospel of John* presents the text of the Gospel as primary, which is revealed in its overall format on the macro-level. Williamson opens by presenting the Prologue (1:1–18). This is followed by a linear treatment of the Gospel in three major parts: (1) “Meeting the Living Word” (1:19–12:50); (2) “Words to Live By” (13:1–17:26); and (3) “The Word That Does Not Die” (18:1–20:31). Discussion of the Epilogue (21:1–25) concludes the main part of the book. Thus, apart from the further division of chapters 13–21, indeed acceptable on the basis of content, the author follows the

generally accepted outline of the book. In addition, Williamson maintains his “Word” motif introduced in the subtitle.

The primary goal of *Preaching the Gospel of John* is met within the successive sections of the book, wherein the pertinent discussion is presented in two parts. Treatment of each section of the Gospel begins with “Exploring the Text.” This section offers commentary on the meaning of the text. This commentary section, while concise, is solid in presentation, integrating well the historical, literary, and theological matters pertinent for proper interpretation of the text. Worthy of note is Williamson’s appreciation for and explanation of the Fourth Gospel from a narrative perspective. Reading his commentary sections in a linear fashion leads the reader to a heightened appreciation for the literary artistry employed by the Fourth Evangelist. This approach to the Gospel is too often overlooked in exchange for an approach designed to draw out propositional and theological truth when studying, teaching, and preaching the Gospel. Yet it is such insight into the narrative aspects of the Gospel that contributes so immensely to an understanding of its theological message. Narrative and theology go hand in hand, and Williamson brings this out well in his presentation of Jesus as both proclaimer and proclaimed.

The “Preaching and Teaching the Word” section then follows. As stated, Williamson does not use this section to offer sermon outlines. Rather, he presents ideas and themes that could be topics for the preaching and teaching. Here Williamson presents the reader with a wide array of possibilities. He presents ideas for sermons in general or for how the text could be presented in conjunction with the use of the common lectionary. With regard to the latter, Williamson is observant to point out where the lectionary on occasion fails to incorporate relevant Johannine texts. He is also sensitive to identify issues and difficulties in the text that are better handled in a teaching setting, as opposed to within the sermon, and follows up with sound suggestions for such a situation. Beyond that, there are occasions when Williamson offers insights for a devotional approach to the texts as well. This section also reveals the author’s vast knowledge of poetry, music, current events, and contemporary cultural conditions, particularly as they contribute to his suggestions for illustrations. Yet his humility is refreshing. At no time does Williamson give the impression that his suggestions exhaust the possibilities in presenting the Gospel.

Additional features are found at the end of the book. One is the afterword, subtitled “A Note from the Author to Readers of This Commentary.” Here Williamson offers four excurses on issues that could be considered difficult to grapple with, that is, issues of a problematic nature: (1) “The Problem of Distinguishing the Voice of the Evangelist from That of Jesus; (2) “The Polemic against ‘The Jews’ ”; (3) “The Exclusive Claim of Jesus”; and (4) “The Relation of the Fourth Gospel to the Word of God.” The reader will

appreciate the candid nature of these discussions as Williamson admits his own struggles with these issues. Of particular interest to a conservative reader would be discussion 3 in which Williamson provides a brief outline of the ways Christians have interpreted Jesus' statement in John 14:6 and his own conclusion. A benefit to employing these excurses is that it does not require the reader to read the book in linear fashion. Wherever these issues arise in the Fourth Gospel, the reader is directed to the excurses. However, the reader will find cumbersome the dual steps involved in arriving at the afterword. When Williamson desires to direct a reader to the afterword, he inserts a reference number to an endnote corresponding to the section under investigation. The reader must go to that endnote at the back of the book and only then will it be recognized that this is not a bibliographic or content note but a note referring the reader to the appropriate excursus in the afterword. Incidentally, the notes section follows the afterword, causing unnecessary backtracking. Surely the middle step could be eliminated altogether by using either parenthetical references or some other indicator in the text instead.

The other feature useful to the reader is the glossary. This section provides brief discussions on recurrent, major theme words present in the Fourth Gospel. Here Williamson wisely uses bold type of the first occurrence of such words in a given section to alert the reader to further discussion in the glossary. The themes taken up include: above/below; believe; Father; glory/glorify; "I Am" sayings; know; life; light/darkness; love; name; signs; truth; Word; and world. Again, the primary benefit of this feature is that one is not required to read the text linearly and possibly be forced to locate the first occurrence of the word (where such discussions would typically take place). Regardless of where the reader may consult *Preaching the Gospel of John*, if that section contains one of these key words, he or she is informed that more information is available in the glossary.

Regarding the content of the book, several issues are notable. Though coming from a Reformed background, Williamson demonstrates the ability to live with the tension between election and free will in the Gospel. He well recognizes that the Fourth Gospel communicates both concepts without attempting to explain the paradox, so he refuses to go beyond the Gospel's own claims in that regard. He calls this the "mystery of election and free will" because the Gospel presents both without trying "to work out the paradox rationally" (79). Further reminder of this tension is given in the notes section on page 323, where he lists the references that present the idea of election followed by a list of references affirming free choice. This is a sober word for individuals on both sides of this debate. In another instance, Williamson offers preaching and teaching insights on 16:1–4a and Jesus' warnings of the world's hatred for the disciples. Some conservative readers may find objectionable his application of Jesus' words to homosexuals. While Christians agree that no one is deserving of hatred for any reason, some would disagree with the

compatibility of homosexuality and the Christian faith. This one brief remark, however, should not deter anyone who disagrees with him on this point from gleaning the many insightful interpretations and suggestions Williamson has to offer the preacher and teacher.

Some minor errors in content and formatting appear in the text as well. One instance deserves mention. In his discussion of 12:46, Williamson notes that there have been four “I Am” sayings with predicates spoken by Jesus up to this point. In actuality, the sayings number five. In his list, Williamson omits the climactic “I Am” saying of the Book of Signs spoken to Martha in 11:25 (“I am the resurrection and the life”). Other minor typographical errors appear from time to time as well, but the reader will readily recognize the author’s intentions. All told, *Preaching the Gospel of John* is a valuable resource for readers of various levels of exposure to the Gospel of John.