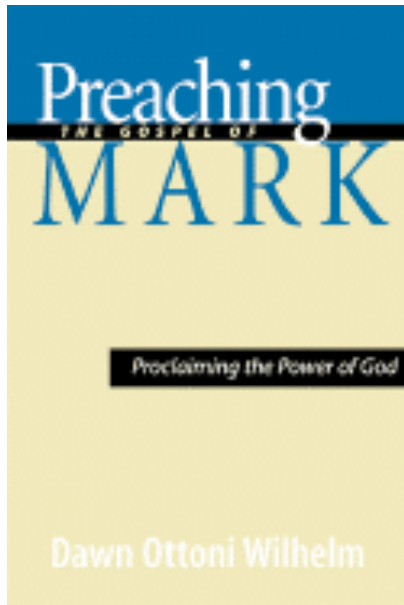


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Wilhelm, Dawn Ottoni

Preaching the Gospel of Mark: Proclaiming the Power of God

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Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm's *Preaching the Gospel of Mark: Proclaiming the Power of God* is distinctively an interpretive guide to the study of the Gospel of Mark through the voice of a preacher for the purpose of preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is not a typical commentary for biblical interpretation. This book, moreover, is a helpful aid for sermons on this Gospel, sermons grounded in the biblical text. Also, it serves as a constructive companion to the Revised Common Lectionary (Year B).

In the second edition of *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, published by Baker Academic, Haddon Robinson says, "The type of preaching that best carries the force of divine authority is expository preaching" (20). Wilhelm's book points the reader in the direction of Robinson's definition of divinely authoritative preaching as she identifies the power of God in Christ as a three-dimensional theme in Mark: (1) Jesus the Son of God; (2) Jesus' encounter with the cross; and (3) Jesus' proclamation of God's reign (xii and xiii). She, moreover, guides the reader in extrapolating meaning from Mark that is Christ-centered, empowering, and relevant to the issues in everyday life.

In terms of structure, this volume outlines the Gospel of Mark from 1:1 to 16:8, organizing her reflections within the corpus of three parts as correlated with the three-dimensional theme mentioned above. Wilhelm approaches each selected pericope of the Gospel, first “exploring the text” or exegeting the text, then offering lessons on helpful approaches for the purpose of “preaching and teaching the Word” from the given passage. Her goal in this volume is to assist “preachers, teachers, pastors, and students of Scripture to faithfully interpret and engage Mark’s Gospel as it proclaims the power of God’s reign and urges the participation of all God’s people in the witness of the gospel” (xi). She aims to achieve this goal in her careful and close read of the text, while also suggesting contemporary implications as she moves section by section through the pages of the Gospel.

This book’s unique character rests in its responsible exegesis coupled with the author’s skill in identifying homiletical moments throughout the Gospel. Wilhelm’s presentation of Mark brings the preacher fresh excitement as she sheds light on the theme that she identifies in it. I have read Mark and have preached from its pages many times, yet time and time again as I read through Wilhelm’s book, I found myself thinking, “Now that would preach!” For example, Wilhelm’s rendering of Jesus’ healing of the deaf mute suggests innovative implications of the gospel of Jesus, taking seriously the literal account but adhering to a broader interpretation of the text. She says,

Although we do not want in any way to denigrate the physical hardship of the man who is brought to Jesus for healing, the story of his ears being opened and his tongue being loosed inspires us to consider the ways in which we may be spiritually deaf to God and the world around us. If not only physical but spiritual disabilities are suggested by the deaf mute’s condition, then we may consider what we are willing or unwilling, able or unable, to hear from God, our neighbors and the larger world of which we are a part. (133)

Wilhelm’s unique read of the Gospel of Mark through her homiletical lens calls attention to insights preachers might overlook even though they may have studied the text many times. Her interpretive recommendations startle the reader and inspire her or him to return to the Gospel to read it again and again. Few biblical commentators express the depth of the biblical text with the preacher’s approach that alerts the reader to fresh homiletical moments like Wilhelm does.

In addition to the homiletical focus of this commentary on Mark, Wilhelm provides a narrative presentation of the Gospel that is also conversational. Her arrangement of the text synthesizes the stories of the Gospel in a manner that helps the reader understand their placement in the Gospel. This exegetical approach to understanding the biblical text helps the reader place the context of events in the text within perspective. For example,

when treating the text on “Healing the Blind Man of Bethsaida—Twice” in Mark 8:22–26, Wilhelm shows sympathy toward the reader as she narrates the placement of events in the Gospel, placing the story in context. She writes, “Following Jesus’ frustrations with his disciples earlier in the Gospel and culminating in the question, ‘Do you not yet understand?’ (8:21), the healing of the blind man of Bethsaida comes as a welcome relief. Just when we were beginning to wonder if anyone fully recognizes who Jesus is or what he is doing, we catch a glimpse of a man whose eyes are opened by the grace and power of God” (146). For Wilhelm, all roads lead to the centrality of “the power of God” in Mark.

This book is well written structurally and grammatically. Technical language of the academy and a plethora of Greek terms from the original translation of Mark often appearing in biblical commentaries do not clog the pages of this volume. As a result, this book is readable for anyone who loves the Gospel of Mark and is hungry to understand the ancient book germane to enhancing the contemporary life of the believer. Another poignant example includes Wilhelm’s commentary on Mark 9:14–29, “Jesus Heals the Possessed Boy.” She exhorts, “The story of the possessed boy also reminds us that although we cannot do everything, we can open the way for God to do something when we pray.... The evil forces at work in our world cannot be exorcised without prayer.” Throughout the book, Wilhelm offers devotional reflections on pericopes, modeling a practical biblical commentary written particularly for Bible study and homiletical purposes, written to help both preachers and students of the Bible in sermon preparations and ministry inspirations grounded in the biblical text.

One wonders, however, why Wilhelm postures the book as companion to the lectionary. While this might be helpful to some, preachers like me, who do not come from a tradition that subscribes to lectionary preaching, might find her continuous references to the lectionary unapproachable. Perhaps the book would have a wider appeal if it omitted the frequent references to the lectionary. One might ask: What is the lectionary, and what does Year B of the lectionary mean? Perhaps Wilhelm should have included these terms in her glossary. These unexplained terms seem to limit the intended readership to readers from mainline denominations. This book should make its way into the hands of a wider range of preachers and students of Scripture who take biblical expository preaching seriously.

Overall, Wilhelm’s book is an enjoyable, stimulating read. It is presupposed in her approach that her treatment of Mark emerges from her experience as a preacher and student of the Gospel. Only if readers expect the book to render traditional academic commentary within the field of biblical studies might they be disappointed. This book is a commentary on the Gospel for preaching and personal Bible study and inspiration. It invites the reader on a journey of further exploration of the Gospel of Mark.

Furthermore, Wilhelm advances the much-needed contemporary academic literature in the field of homiletics. Often, when designing courses in the area of homiletics, I find it challenging to locate books with the academic depth yet practical relevance necessary in training preachers to be sound biblical preachers. As there is a widened gap between the theological academy and the church, books such as Wilhelm's are courageous to extend a bridge between the two.