

*The Practices of Christian Preaching: Essentials for Effective Proclamation.* By Jared E. Alcántara. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019. 214 pp., \$24.99, hardcover.

Jared E. Alcántara is Associate Professor of Preaching at Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary. He holds the PhD from Princeton Theological Seminary. A Baptist minister, he has served as a youth pastor, associate pastor, and teaching pastor. From 2014–2018, he served as an associate professor of homiletics at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He is the author of two other books: *Learning from a Legend: What Gardner C. Taylor Can Teach Us about Preaching* (Cascade, 2016), and *Crossover Preaching: Improvisational-Intercultural Homiletics in Conversation with Gardner C. Taylor* (IVP Academic, 2015).

*The Practices of Christian Preaching* is the third installment of Alcántara's emphasis on culturally contextual preaching. The first two volumes employed the preaching of Gardner C. Taylor as an example of homiletic contextualization via art and essence, while he touts this work as an introductory homiletics book (p. 191) that:

Proposes a different way to get where you are going than the typical roadmap you will find elsewhere. Most introduction to preaching books are method-focused, single author, monocultural, text-based, and monolingual whereas the book you have just read is consciously practice centered, intentionally collaborative, strategically diverse, technologically interactive, and purposively multilingual...deliberate practice over time creates more space for growth than a particular method does, that creative ideas emerge through an encounter with a multiplicity of perspectives, that preachers get better not just through reading but also through hearing and seeing, that difference is an opportunity rather than a threat (p. 191).

The book consists of six chapters, the latter five which constitute what Alcántara calls the "5 C's." Alcántara's assertion is that "preachers who cultivate life-giving preaching habits through deliberate practice will enhance their proficiency, grow in their commitment, and flourish in their homiletical ministry" (p. 5). He bases the notion of *deliberate* practice on two phrases from Romans 12:18, "If it is possible" and "as far as it depends on you." According to Alcántara what makes practice deliberate is a commitment to (1) well-defined and specific goals, (2) focused attention, (3) a consistent feedback loop, and (4) a willingness to get out of one's comfort zone. Alcántara and Baker Academic provide online exercises at pivotal junctures within each *preaching practice* chapter (at [www.PracticesofChristianPreaching.com](http://www.PracticesofChristianPreaching.com)) in order to cultivate these habits. Resources include writings, discussions between homileticians, and sermon clips in both audio and video formats.

In chapter 1 Alcántara reminds us that we are to engage in *Christian* preaching and proclaim the gospel, that is “transformative, offensive, hopeful, prophetic, and eschatological” (p. 17). This message is “an announcement and call from God through Jesus Christ that welcomes us into covenant relationship” (p. 15) and serves as the driving force of the five practices. Alcántara observes that pseudo-gospels often replace the true gospel: (1) the gospel of moralistic therapeutic deism, (2) the gospel dressed in a flag or banner, (3) the gospel of prosperity, (4) the gospel of discipleship without grace, and (5) the gospel of grace without discipleship. Chapter 2 is a call to preach *convictionally*. Conviction is “a commitment to a cause greater than oneself for the sake of a mission greater than one’s life” (p. 43). Alcántara provides models of conviction from both Scripture and history and grounds conviction in (1) the call to preach, (2) God preaches through preachers, (3) God expects us to be faithful stewards, (4) faithfulness matters more to God than success, and (5) preaching that lives comes from living that preaches.

Chapter 3 involves preaching *contextually*. Contextualized preaching is the “faithful and fitting proclamation in a language that is local, intelligible, hospitable, and transformative” (p. 85). Alcántara encourages preachers to preach *clearly* in chapter 4. Clear sermons will have (1) concise exegesis, (2) accessible language, (3) a clear main idea, and (4) commitment to brevity. Preaching *concretely* is the substance for chapter 5 and it is the ability to bring abstract terms and ideas down to *sea level*. Preachers are to climb down the ladder of abstraction through (1) focusing on text details, (2) using appropriate illustrations, and (3) focusing on specific applications. Chapter 6 is preaching *creatively*. Alcántara applies this to preaching as “sermons that are fresh, high in quality, and valuable to the community” (p. 157).

I have just a few concerns: (1) copious footnotes (396 *in toto*) make the work seem more like a dissertation or extended journal article rather than homiletic primer, (2) the assertion that “deliberate practice over time creates more space for growth than a particular method does” (p. 191) remains unproven and, furthermore, simply because someone promotes a particular homiletic method does not remove their hope, desire, plan, or habit to practice and improve their craft through all means necessary, and (3) the notion of *deliberate practice* per Romans 12:18, “If it is possible” and “as far as it depends on you” is desired, but discussion on the complementary ministry of the Trinity, especially the Spirit, in regard to preaching and preparation seems insufficient.

There are several positives worth noting. First, Alcántara’s desire to preach Christian sermons is commendable, “If we miss the call to preach Christianly, then we miss out on our primary task as gospel witnesses” (p. 13). Second, the reminder that “every preacher has cultural blind spots. The sooner we realize it, the better off we will be” (p. 92) may leave some uncomfortable but does not diminish its truth. Third, the chapter on preaching *clearly* may be the best section of the book. He rightly states

that “my larger point is *not* that every sermon should be brief—it is that every sermon should be *clear*” (p. 104). Instead of short sermons, “Make every minute count no matter the sermon length” (p. 124). Often in the preacher’s haste to be thorough, “An exhaustive preacher produces exhausted listeners” (p. 125)—which is quite convicting. Fourth, the call for a compelling and controlling main idea is much appreciated. In developing the main idea Alcántara reminds all preachers that “God can work powerfully through the fragility of an unclear sermon with an unclear point. But should God’s sovereignty be an excuse for sloppy communication?” (p. 120).

Two other features are worth noting before diving in. It is obvious that Alcántara’s perspective on women in ministry is full-blown egalitarianism, hence his “strategically diverse” thesis. Numerous positive quotes, references, illustrations, collaborations, and sermons by women who are social activists, preachers, and professors of feminist theology lend at least tacit endorsement to perspectives that may run contrary to some conservative evangelical positions. One such evidentiary quote, “We can also look to the courageous female preachers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women who faced countless obstacles, insults, attacks, and adversity but who nevertheless persisted in preaching” (p. 48)

While the casual observer may glance at the title and sense that this in fact just another homiletic primer, that view would in fact be a mistake. Clearly, Alcántara is calling for a homiletic not based on method per se, but a homiletic leaning heavily on contextualization, improvisation, and focused practice. If you are a proponent of classical exposition or text-driven methodology this will not be a “go to” text. This book does bring unique perspectives that are worth reading, but one might better serve themselves with Vines and Shaddix’s *Power in the Pulpit* (Moody, 2017), or Allen, Akin, and Mathews’s *Text-Driven Preaching* (B&H Academic, 2010) as primers. May our listeners never feel that our message is sub-Christian or even non-Christian. May we learn from God, His Word, and the practices of Christian preaching.

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*Divine Impassibility: Four Views of God’s Emotions and Suffering.* Edited by Robert J. Matz and A. Chadwick Thornhill. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019. 200 pp., \$25.00, softcover.

Divine impassibility, the doctrine that God is impervious to suffering, external action, and emotional fluctuation, is of central importance to constructing a full understanding of who God is and how he relates to his creation. Therefore, Robert Matz and Chad Thornhill

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