
BOOK REVIEW

LEADING WITH THE SERMON: PREACHING AS LEADERSHIP

By: WILLIAM H. WILLIMON

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William Willimon is convinced that providing leadership is an essential part of the pastoral role because every congregation is called to participate in God's mission. He believes that leading and preaching are inextricably tied. In the preface he says, "My aim is to show how preaching aids and shapes our leadership and how our leadership proves the context, purposes, and test of our preaching" (8).

I wish I had been given this book when I began pastoral ministry thirty years ago. As I pastored, I gradually realized that three essential parts of the pastoral role are preaching, leading, and managing. In *Leading with the Sermon*, Willimon shows there is a natural coherence to these three activities. Helping congregations participate in God's mission requires leadership. Preaching is one of the best ways of helping a congregation grasp what God is calling them to be and do. Ensuring mission actually happens requires management. If any of these three are lacking, a congregation will struggle to play its part in God's mission.

Communication is a fundamental part of leadership. Many who lead outside the church look with envy on pastoral leaders who are required and expected to speak every week to the community they lead. For pastors the sermon is not just a pragmatic opportunity it is a theological necessity. "The vocative, missional intent of preaching (derived from the nature of the gospel itself) is why, from the first days of Jesus' earthly ministry, *preaching and leadership are inseparable*. In preaching, God's people are moved, that is *led*—little by little, or sometimes violently jolted—in the power of the Holy

Spirit, Sunday by Sunday, toward new and otherwise unavailable descriptions of reality” (16).

Willimon draws on more than forty years as a pastor, a seminary professor and a bishop. He makes a strong and persuasive case using well-chosen illustrations from the many congregations and pastors with which he has worked. Fundamentally this book is a plea to pastors to step up and lead and, since communication is such a core element of leadership, it is an encouragement for pastors to grasp the opportunity preaching presents to exercise leadership. “I know of no church that goes forth from the cozy confines of their contented congregation toward a world dying for want of the gospel without someone who is willing not only to preach but also to lead” (21).

Leading with the Sermon prompted me to reflect on how I exercise my calling. In naming the tendency of pastors and congregation to collude in what is comfortable it strengthened my resolve to speak and lead bravely. “Faithful sermons require risk-taking preachers because a sermon is not merely a statement about where the congregation is, but an inspired witness to where God is calling the congregation to be” (52).

There are, however, two assumptions Willimon makes which, I think, should be challenged. First, the model of the pastor, as one who is expected to lead, preach and manage, aligns with the omniscient pastor. Rather than the body of Christ, in which gifts are distributed by the Holy Spirit with every person participating a ministry, the pastor is seen as the one who ministers on behalf of others. Willimon’s case would have been stronger if he had explored how his understanding of the pastoral role fits with the body of Christ. Second, the model of preaching Willimon implicitly advocates is the traditional Sunday monologue. In the last twenty years the digital revolution has transformed communication. A pastor, seeking to share a vision of what God is calling the congregation to be and do, is faced with many styles and media for doing this. Willimon’s case would have been strengthened if he had engaged with this diversity, suggesting either how this variety might serve pastors as they seek to communicate, or by making a case for the benefits of the traditional sermon.

Those preparing to be pastors, particularly in mainline denominations, are likely to find *Leading with the Sermon* very helpful. Faced with the competing expectations of what it means to be a pastor Willimon offers a fresh frame. Whereas most see the different roles of leader, preacher and manager as a regrettable reality of pastoral ministry, he identifies a natural synergy in them and suggests how this can be used effectively both for pastor and congregation. For that very reason, pastors (like me) who struggle to make sense of their calling amid the conflicting demands they encounter every week, will also find *Leading with the Sermon* stimulating, encouraging and challenging.

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