

Book Review: *The Whole Counsel of God: Why and How to Preach the Entire Bible*. Tim Patrick and Andrew Reid; Crossway, 2020

Tim Patrick and Andrew Reid have done us a great service in producing this challenging and practical apologetic for preaching systematically through the entire Bible. They recognise there are many good contemporary resources on how to preach.¹ “Instead, this book is about *what to preach*, and about *how to plan and manage a long-range, ordered, and deliberate preaching program*.” (23)

The authors’ foundational conviction is that God has revealed himself progressively, that these words have been inscripturated, and that they are sufficient for the establishment of his people and their ongoing growth. Most importantly, they argue that all of these words are necessary for the growth of God’s people today. So, “we wish to encourage preachers to make it their goal to preach the *entire* Bible because we are convinced that *all of it* is the word of God for us.” (22) They recognise that this is “a monumental ambition.” (23) Indeed, their argument ultimately leads to this challenge: “All vocational preachers should set themselves the goal of preaching though the entire Bible over a thirty-five-year period.” (81)

Although not their primary purpose, Patrick and Reid argue refreshingly for preaching solely from Scripture, given its “inspiration, perspicuity, inerrancy, sufficiency and authority.” (224) They remind us of how fortunate we are to have the written word of God (36) and, more particularly, they argue well for the authority of both the Old and New Testaments (52-58).

The authors remind us of the need “to let the Bible set our agenda.” (71) They note there is a significant difference between saying, “What does God say about X?” and “What does God say?” Asking the latter question should ensure appropriate proportionality in our preaching and, concomitantly, in our theological debates and lives. It should ensure we are alert and committed to what God is alert and committed to, proportional to his revelation. Simultaneously, it should prevent us from making claims where God is silent. As preachers, it forces us to ask the questions, “Why is this passage in the Bible?”, “How does it contribute to the whole?” and “What would we lose if it wasn’t there?”

Patrick and Reid argue especially well for preaching that recognises the progressive and cumulative nature of God’s revelation. In other words, preaching that lives and breathes Biblical Theology. “The goal is to understand the theology of the passage itself; where the theology fits into the progress of the revelation of God’s purposes outlined in the Bible, which find their focus in Jesus; how it engages with the theological priorities of the Bible already revealed; and how it contributes to further develop that theological revelation.” (91)

In addition to the integration of Biblical Theology, Patrick and Reid also argue for the integration of Systematic and Gospel Theology into the regular preaching series (94-101). On this basis they argue against, for instance, preaching a doctrinal series synthetically, or having special “evangelistic” sermons. Incidentally, I am very mindful that the Biblical, theological, pastoral and homiletical skills required to preach through the entire Bible in this way are substantial.

The authors exemplify the implementation of their proposed preaching program by dividing the Scriptures into six different sections and planning for series from a variety of genres throughout the

¹ See www.preaching.org.au for a helpful collection of Australasian resources.

year. Where there is more than one preacher, they discuss the principles by which they have chosen preachers for texts. For those at home in reformed evangelical contexts, their illustrative program will not be unfamiliar and is quite accessible. However, for those used to using the common lectionary, moving to their proposal will require significant change and congregational training, which they address on pages 223-7.

While having great sympathy for the overall thrust of the authors' argument, I have wrestled nonetheless with some of the theological, pastoral and practical implications of their 35-year plan. While recognising that all of the Bible is God's word and is helpful, I need more help in understanding how, for example, the food laws or the dimensions of the temple need equal treatment compared to the New Testament passages of their fulfilment. The theological question is also raised as to whether some parts of Scripture are more pertinent than others to God's people at certain times and contexts. Of course, the danger is that many pertinent parts are avoided because of the preacher's competence, disposition, theological position, contextual misreading, external pressures, or any number of other reasons, so one well understands the authors' fallback position.

Pastorally and practically, covering the gospels and significant sections of the Old and New Testaments only once in 35 years may be unrealistic, even within a strong Biblical Theological framework, where one is constantly bringing to the congregation the Biblical, Systematic and Gospel implications. In our own Australian context, for instance, surely the issues addressed in 1 and 2 Corinthians bear repeating more than once every 35 years!

I wonder whether the authors may be placing too much freight on the sermon, even when it is accompanied by a weekly Bible Study before or afterwards. Indeed, the book could be strengthened by more discussion of the place of the sermon within the broader task of training all in the whole counsel of God. Enabling families to train each other and their children, greater use of an adult Sunday School program, as is so ably done in many North American churches, greater use of a year or more at theological college and even greater encouragement of individual learning will take pressure off all that's being asked here of the sermon, which includes teaching, exhortation and evangelism. It would also give greater freedom to the preacher to use the sermon for those ministry aspects of the word of God for which it is best suited and needed in that particular context.

Indeed, changing one's focus from the sermon to training by numerous means for all in their various stages of life and discipleship takes pressure off the sermon while still giving it a high place in congregational life. Such a focus does ask more of a preacher. It means charging them with the assessment and implementation of a congregation's teaching needs, including the preaching program. Nonetheless, that is the role we see Paul adopting in Ephesus, as outlined in Acts 20.

Such considerations aside, *The Whole Counsel of God* is a great encouragement to read, both for its affirmations and its challenges. Australians have much to be thankful for in terms of our contribution to Biblical Theology. This integration of Biblical Theology and Preaching, with its practical call, takes this contribution to the next step.

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