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# Review of George Buttrick's guide to preaching the gospel in homiletic

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George Buttrick and Charles N. Davidson, ed. *George Buttrick's Guide to Preaching the Gospel*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2020. 221 pages. \$15.97.

Thanks to the committed editorial work of Charles Davidson we now have in published form George Buttrick's hitherto unpublished lectures on preaching. Those unfamiliar with George Buttrick should know he was a giant among the princes of the pulpit in the mid-twentieth century. Those familiar with the more recent work of his son David Buttrick will see the legacy he carried forward from his father, not just for his prodigious writing, but even for his stunning syntax and style and the way he did theology in the pulpit. Charles Davidson in his introduction and general editing is to be commended not just for capturing George Buttrick's living voice but for his careful footnotes that place this vaunted prince of the pulpit in his context and in a way that captures his cultural and intellectual range.

The book is structured in three parts that together are telling for how George Buttrick understood the preaching task. Part I is called "Reassessment," and in four quick chapters helps the reader to understand Buttrick's conception of the gospel as four-fold event: the life of Christ, the cross of Christ, the resurrection of Christ, and the Spirit of (Christ's) presence. Buttrick, writing toward this end of his life in the 1970s is even now aware that preaching is changing and heralds the work of the language of sermon event in what is for him the "new homiletics" (44). That said, his view of the four-fold event of the gospel gives a deeper theological cast to anything "new" in homiletics: for George Buttrick the event of Christ's life, death, and resurrection confirm each other, but the key event is the Spirit's presence who aims to render the four-fold event as far more than just past tense. Part II is called "Practicalities." Its six brief chapters comprise the kinds of things found in most preaching texts, especially from George Buttrick's time: background, text and context, illustrations, delivery, etc. This section loses some of the depth and energy of the first part, but still has sections that shine through. The chapter on outlining is spritely. The advice for conclusions in this chapter still holds energy for today's reader. Part III, "Preaching in this Time," becomes Buttrick's opportunity to deal with the competing ways of viewing the world as a matter of ongoing theological and homiletical work. By now, some of the repeated phrases from earlier sections begin to wear thin. That said, there is a doggedness to Buttrick's treatment of matters of social and personal sin, dialectically and bravely rethinking eschatology that remains worthy of any contemporary preacher's reflection.

To be sure, readers today will also struggle with George Buttrick's important legacy in these pages. Buttrick's style of writing, updated modestly by Davidson, is undoubtedly brisk, engaged, and still shines even now. The cultural stance it takes, however, often presupposes a confidence in Christian faith relative to culture that now feels a little bracing and sits at best uncomfortably in those places where vigorous difference is embraced both ecumenically and interreligiously.

What remains, however, is a powerful, life-giving frame of gospel in which George Buttrick situates his lectures and the practice of preaching itself. We may still need to articulate gospel differently, but its centrality to his lectures, and to his teaching of preaching, remains a living legacy even now.

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