
Harris is associate professor of practical theology at the School of Theology, Virginia Union University in Richmond. He has formerly published Preaching Liberation (1995) and Pastoral Theology: A Black Church Perspective (1991). Now with Fortress Press, he offers us six chapters on preaching in the black church experience. His first chapter, “The Preacher’s Self-Understanding” builds a doctrine of selfhood around the illustration of the life and work of Martin
Luther King, Jr., concluding with a sermon entitled “Everybody’s Talking” on Luke 4:31-37, regarding the healing of the boy with the unclean spirit.

The second chapter is “The Preaching of the Elders: Princes of the African American Pulpit,” describing the ministry, particularly the preaching of J. M. Ellison, S. D. Proctor, and M. J. Jones. This chapter ends with a sermon called “From Talk to Testimony” on Mark 8:27-30, about what has been uncritically called Peter’s great confession. “The Sermon As Interpretation” is next, describing the polyvalence of the sermon, the deep symbolism of plain words, textuality and dialogue in preaching, and the novel as a hermeneutical discipline. The sermon in this chapter is “The Power of God,” based on Ephesians 1:18-23, regarding the supremacy of Christ and the power and powerlessness of the church as believing community.

“Second Chances” is the sermon for chapter 4, “The Sermon as Art,” and it addresses Jonah’s pilgrimage in 3:1-3a. This chapter deals with the usual performance issues of preaching such as reaching the right as well as the left brain; speaking to the heart as well as the mind; and the importance of embodying the message and incarnating the word, rhythm, cadence, and style. The last two chapters are, respectively, “The Sermon as Story,” and “The Harris Method” of fashioning preaching and liturgy. For the former, which focuses on dramatic narrative in African American preaching, the concluding sermon is “When Jesus Was in the House,” based upon Mark 2:1-5, the story of the paralytic let down through the roof. The latter ends with a sermon “A Question of Identity—Chaos, Self, and Other,” on Luke 8:22-25, about Jesus’ calming the sea.

Harris’ sermons are attractive. His compact handbook on preaching is very useful, but for experienced pulpiteers, it is predictable. The Harris Method of preaching assumes that preaching is the heart and soul of the church; together with liturgy, it requires careful conscious planning; it goes forth into a word-infested world; and the main tools for the black preacher are the biblical text and the African-American experience. Harris insists that preaching is always in and to the local congregation, requires repetition, explication of a scriptural text, illustration from real life, and illumination with story to float the divine message into the human soul.

I hate how-to books. They usually leave the reader unempowered instead of empowered, in my experience. Usually under the guise of sheer practicality they tend to be theoretical and of little practical function either in the practice of the writer or the reader, except to put some coins into the bank account, material or psychological, of the author. This how-to book is more than that, and, for the beginning student of preaching and pastoring trying to find his own stance and style, it is useful reading and very highly readable. The book has chapter notes and an adequate index.

—J. Harold Ellens