

One New Book for the Preacher

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Mark A. McIntosh, *Divine Teaching: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008)

In a Doctor of Ministry class last year, I gave my students a pretty stiff bit of reading to do in systematic theology. One preacher, who held a Masters of Divinity from a prestigious divinity school, observed, “You know this was tough sledding. In fact, I have never been asked to do any reading of this kind.” I showed some surprise (most of which, I admit, was feigned) and said, “Surely you’ve read something like this before.” “No,” she answered, “my systematics class wasn’t all that systematic. We were introduced to a variety of hermeneutical approaches—including black, feminist, and liberation theology—but we weren’t exposed to the larger systematic task.”

That pattern, I have discovered, is increasingly common—perhaps not everywhere, but in many places. Systematic theology is no longer a conversation about the great, over-arching themes of the theological enterprise, including soteriology, eschatology, ecclesiology, and similar categories. Instead, what we emphasize and often focus on are what I would call discrete, if not competing communities of discourse. It’s little wonder, then, that many clergy, when given the opportunity to read works that point them in the direction of the larger theological task, experience it as a rare, if not completely novel undertaking.

I would not want to suggest for a moment that the hermeneutical works to which seminarians are exposed are either lacking in importance or without significance in correcting the imbalance that has marked the way we read Scripture. But when the two tasks are so closely identified with one another that hermeneutics substitutes for systematic theology, clergy are often left in the dark about the larger theological task. As a result, they are also deprived of a roadmap that would help them to navigate the evolution of Christian theology across cultures. It is little wonder, too, that preaching in today’s pulpit often lacks any explicit theological content or that less and less solid catechetical work is done anywhere in the church.

Enter the gift that is Mark MacIntosh’s *Divine Teaching: An Introduction to Christian Theology*. Although it is not new (Blackwell published *Divine Teaching* in 2008), it is likely to be new to the vast majority of preachers who have been at their task for a while. The beauty of this book is that it invites the reader to re-engage the task of theology from an ancient, but now novel vantage point, urging the reader to consider God to be the first and best teacher of theology. As such, it challenges the reader to consider systematic theology not as an esoteric enterprise fit for specialists, but as the language we use to describe our journey into God.

This approach has the advantage of re-introducing the reader to the passion that should have marked the theological task from the beginning if that was not the case. It also suggests ways the theology of the church arises from, connects with, and frames the spiritual journey, giving the reader some sense of the vital connection between the theological task and the life of faith.

Unlike some scholars, MacIntosh does not try to stipulate in too close a detail what the reader must believe. Wisely, he notes that the theological enterprise requires a pirate's instincts, commandeering language and analogy to sail into the transcendence and otherness of God that escapes a mere mortal's grasp. But by exploring soteriology, the Trinity, incarnation, creation, revelation, sacrament, and the ecclesial life, MacIntosh provides the reader with a sense of the directions in which one might move.

How what MacIntosh offers here might shape the work his readers do in the pulpit will vary, of course. But an engagement with his approach to theology offers rich results. What MacIntosh says, for example, about the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the theologian, is true of the Spirit's work in Pentecost as well:

When you see these characteristics (faith, hope, and love) showing up in anybody..., what you have going on is not just a little of the divine way of life impressing itself within the life of a human being. More than that you have someone whose life has begun to partake of Christ's way of being in the world; what you have is someone whose way of thinking, and acting, and desiring is being inspired by the same Spirit who led Jesus towards the truth of himself and his relationship with one he called Abba.

If a preacher is looking for reading that will rekindle a passion for engagement with the story of Pentecost, what better way to begin than by pulling apart this one paragraph in a way that is accessible to a congregation? To help people understand that Pentecost is not just "the church's birthday," but the initiation of a journey into the triune God under the leadership of the Holy Spirit and to see that journey as a process of transformation is far more than I have often heard offered. To see the church as that place where a journey into the same truth and relationship that Jesus enjoyed with the Abba, is also to offer a far more robust ecclesiology than the vast majority of Christians possess.

It would take some careful work to unpack MacIntosh's rich, compact paragraphs into an accessible homily. But it is hard to underestimate the value of introducing congregations to the "the faith once delivered" – particularly in a day and an age in which churches do so little to acquaint their members with the content of that faith. If you are looking for a companion in that task, you will find Mark MacIntosh is a valuable guide.