

Timothy Keller:

*Preaching. Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism*

(NEW YORK, PENGUIN BOOKS, 2016)

This book is the essence of the decades-long preaching ministry of American preacher Timothy Keller, founding pastor of the Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, New York. The book is imbued with the deep conviction that in today's anti-authoritarian, skeptical age preaching plays an essential role in serving the Gospel. Timothy Keller's volume seeks to offer help to all those who participate in any way in communicating the Christian faith, but especially those who do so in a more formal way. How to preach well? What makes a sermon great? These are the questions Keller attempts to answer in his book.

For him, preaching must stem from two kinds of love: the love for God's Word and the love for people. Then out of the two comes a desire to reveal God's glorious grace to people. This idea is also reflected in the logical structure of the book. The first part talks about serving the Word, the second part about reaching out to people, and the third about the work of the Spirit.

The first chapter about God's Word (27–46) puts the fundamental question of whether we, as communicators of the Bible, are truly aware that it carries God's own authority and power. The biblical motto of the chapter also refers to this: "If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God" (1Pet 4,11). Keller argues that the best way to do this is through expository preaching. In his view, this is the best way to convey the belief that the whole Bible is true; it is God's guiding, living and active Word. In the Appendix (213–240) he provides useful, practical, step-by-step help for writing an expository message. It is a great aid for those who want to master this method.

Expository preaching undoubtedly has many advantages but, perhaps, Keller approaches the form of the sermon too one-sidedly at this point. In my opinion, it is more expedient to use several different forms of sermon and not to stick rigidly to just one so that sermons do not become predictable and boring. The Gospel is too rich and complex for us to use only one sermon form.

Keller believes in Christocentric preaching, that is, it is his conviction that all sermons must point to Christ and the Gospel. This is the topic of his second chapter (47–69). He also gives many examples to drive this point home.

Building on the first two chapters, Keller emphasizes in the third chapter (70–90) that Christ is to be preached by drawing on the whole of Scripture; every genre, theme, major figure, major image, and deliverance story line must be utilized.

The second part of the book concentrates on reaching people with the Gospel. It consists of three chapters: 1. “Preaching Christ to the Culture”; 2. “Preaching and the (Late) Modern Mind”; and 3. “Preaching Christ to the Heart”.

In these text units the author discusses questions about how to communicate the Christian faith in today’s increasingly secular age, while respecting what is laid out in the first part of the book. To Keller’s mind, we need a preaching practice that is able to adapt to cultural change but does so in order to be able to confront it when necessary.

In my opinion, the fifth chapter (121–156) is the most exciting part of the book. Here Keller conducts a cultural analysis, identifying five distinct cultural narratives of late modernity. These narratives are particular beliefs about human rationality, history, society, morality, and identity, which permeate people’s mode of thought almost imperceptibly in Western societies.

Out of the five narratives presented, Keller considers the narrative of identity to be the most defining. According to this narrative, the factors whereby we define ourselves are success, money, power, looks, and romantic love. People tend to think that they need to do everything to realize and achieve these, otherwise they will be a failure in life. With the proclamation of the message of the Gospel, preachers need to confront the false thinking inherent in this narrative.

One of the strengths of Keller’s homiletics is his cultural analysis, which helps us understand the secular mode of thought. That needs to be transformed by the Word of Christ, which must radiate into the world. While the principles formulated in the book are universal, their application is a task incumbent on the reader.

The sixth chapter is the most practical of all as it deals with preaching to the heart. In the author’s view, the purpose of preaching should not only be to articulate truth clearly and intelligibly to the mind but also to make it real and captivating to the heart. Only then will real change take place in the listeners.

The last part of the book (191–210) concerns the relationship between the person of the preacher and the work of the Holy Spirit. In addition to the two main tasks of preaching – proclaiming all Scripture and preaching to the heart of the listeners – there is another unavoidable dimension here: preaching is to be carried out in the power sphere of the Holy Spirit.

Keller explains that the spiritual maturity of the preacher is much more important to blessed preaching than their spiritual gifts. Spiritual maturity is characterized by the desire to exalt Christ; to praise him, and to call others to praise him. For fruitful ministry it is not enough to master techniques; spiritual formation is also essential.

Timothy Keller draws on the work of many contemporary homiletics, as well as theologians of the past, he reflects on their writings, and incorporates them into what he has to say. This is a major strength of the book. In addition, there are plenty of good insights, wise pieces of advice, and helpful examples in the book which accompany the preacher in their daily preparation. Overall, *Preaching* provides great assistance to all those who struggle to communicate the life-changing truth of the Gospel in an increasingly skeptical age. Preaching is a sacred duty, and pastors must continually improve themselves in it. This book will serve practicing pastors and teachers in particular as an introduction to, and a foundation of, their ministry.

*Beatrix Szabó*