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GOSPEL HANDLES: Old Testament

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GOSPEL HANDLES: Old Testament Lessons. By Francis Rossow. St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 2014. 208 pages. Paper. \$31.99.

“Rev” has done it again. Those familiar with the gospel-handle methodology of Dr. Francis “Rev” Rossow, professor emeritus of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, hardly need a review of his latest work, *Gospel Handles: Old Testament Lessons*. However, for the uninitiated, a “gospel handle” is a strategy for proclaiming the gospel from texts that contain little or no gospel. The “handle” uses language or images from the text as a bridge to gospel found elsewhere in Scripture with similar or identical language to that of the text. Properly administered, a gospel handle is faithful to the text while providing a smooth yet, for the hearer, unexpected transition to the gospel.

The fundamental assumption underlying each handle is that the entire Scriptures are “they that bear witness about [Christ]” (Jn 5:39). In a theological climate in which preaching is often biblical but not Christ-centered, this little volume provides an excellent reminder and encouragement for the preacher in “developing a gospel mind-set in the approach to any and every biblical text regardless of its gospel content; the hearer perceiving the Scriptures as a unified witness to Christ rather than a religious scrapbook of maxims, morals, proverbs, parables, prophecies, stories, and events” (10).

Every preacher suffers through creative dry spells. This book serves as a refreshing tonic for such times not only because it provides excellent

material that can be imported directly into a sermon, but even more because it provides an ongoing strategy for creativity. But it is not unfettered creativity—we’ve all heard or perhaps (true confessions!) even delivered such monstrosities. It is creativity on a leash; refreshing, even arresting, expressions of the gospel that are properly respectful of the text.

The layout of the book is simple and easy to use. From the Pentateuch through the Minor Prophets, selected Old Testament texts from the Three-Year Lectionary are explored in terms of the gospel actually present in the text, if any, plus at least one example of “bonus” gospel via a gospel handle. The one thing the book lacks is an index of the texts that are “handled,” but it doesn’t take long to flip through each section to see if the particular text you are studying is treated.

The obvious use for the book is as a reference tool for sermon preparation, serving much like a commentary. Stylistically, however, it has a strong devotional character. The preacher may well lose himself in reading far beyond the assigned text because, well, it is simply fun to read. Take this example from the story of Naaman the Syrian in

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Kings, in which the author comments on the ordinary, mundane means God consistently uses to deliver his gifts:

He chose to get the Good Word out through people, through ministers, who, despite their special vestments and honorable titles, are of the earth earthy: paunchy, sweaty, bumbling, stut-tering, and still tempted more than they care to admit by ava- rice and lust and gluttony and pride.

Extroverts and introverts, family men and recluses, culture vultures and clods, sports enthu- siasts and bookworms, over- weights and underweights, high-voiced and low-voiced, chancel prancers and liturgical bump- kins—these are among the kinds of men God calls and ordains into His holy ministry. (89)

The only danger I can see is the temptation to plagiarize. If ever I preach on Isaiah 6, it will be difficult to not “borrow,” at least in part, the author’s delightfully descriptive language: “This pericope is an effective corrective to the distorted contemporary view of God as a cozy, comfortable deity, an ‘Aw-shucks,’ ‘There, there, it’ll be all right’ sort of God, who rocks no boats and hopes that everyone is having a good time. Our God is a God of purity, awe, splendor, and majesty” (109). If and when I do preach this text, I promise to give the proper attestation. Maybe.

Another thing “Rev” has always stressed is brevity. Enough said.

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