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THE SCANDAL OF HAVING SOMETHING TO SAY: Ricoeur and the Possibility of Postliberal Preach-ing By Lance Pape

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THE SCANDAL OF HAVING SOMETHING TO SAY: Ricoeur

and the Possibility of Postliberal Preaching. By Lance B. Pape. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2013. 166 pages. Hard- cover. \$39.95.

None can accuse Lance B. Pape of domesticating the word of God. On the contrary, Pape begins his monograph with the insistence that the only valuable Christian preaching is the preaching that conforms to the scandal of the cross of Christ. The scandalous word of the cross is not something to be embarrassed by, but proclaimed in a bold and confident fashion. More than that, Pape decries preaching that seeks to conform to the milieu of human experience. The preacher’s task is not to locate a need in the hearers and fill it, *per se*. Rather, the preacher’s task is to encounter the strange word of God and bring the hearers into the divine encounter in life-changing and formative ways. Such thinking shifts the usual paradigm of American, consumeristic thinking under submission to God’s word, and is the gist of postliberal theology.

Pape picks up the postliberal direction of homiletics where Charles Campbell left off in *Preaching Jesus*— he even critiques the same Walter Brueggemann sermon as Campbell does at the end of the monograph. However, instead of carrying exactly the same torch, Pape detours from Hans Frei’s postliberal theology in favor of Paul Ricoeur’s. Through a deft and dense comparison, Pape shows that Frei and Ricoeur are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but instead Ricoeur’s three-fold mimesis supplies what is lacking in the

practical application of Frei’s postliberal theology.

Mimesis, the narration of human experience in time, is the grappling of humanity to find meaning in an otherwise disconnected, confusing jumble of experiences. It is broken down into three sub-categories, which Ricoeur (and thus Pape) names: mimesis₁, mimesis₂, and mimesis₃. Each sub-category addresses a theoretical moment in the preaching task that enables divine transformation in the Christian community. Mimesis₁, which Pape nicknames “Debt to the Actual,” is the event in which the preacher is sent to a text on behalf of the hearers. There is a debt to pay, so to speak, to the situation itself: like a photographer snaps a

portrait, the preacher needs to reflect an accurate picture for the hearers. This is not the “context” of the text in an historical vein, but rather the context of the hearers themselves. Much of this is done subconsciously, as preachers have a natural grasp over the predicaments of their people and the various jumbles of experience that make up their lives.

Mimesis₂, or “Debt to the Real,” is the interaction of the people and preacher with the text itself. Here is where the preacher pays a debt to the meaning of the text itself, like the director of a musical score. The text is not described with propositional statements, as if humans could transcend physical experience and capture God, nor is it explored with a fine-toothed exegetical comb, as if the mere exercise of exegesis brings transformation. Rather, the text brings sense to the hearers, and joins their mimesis₁ together into a comprehensive narrative. Put another way, mimesis₂ is the proclamatory word of the scandalous Gospel of Jesus Christ interacting with and making sense of the rigmarole of human life.

Mimesis₃, then, is the “Debt to the Possible,” in which the hearers (and preacher) naturally find themselves transformed by God’s word and redefined—changed forever. The preacher functions here as a museum docent, showing the hearers their experience in a different light. The three-fold mimetic process then begins anew, with the hearers discovering themselves in a less puzzling amalgam of human experience. Pape likens the cyclical nature of mimesis to be a spring, building on Ricoeur’s notion of mimesis gaining “altitude” with each cycle.

This work is deceptively short. While only 166 pages (including a bibliography and an index), Pape’s verbiage is a dense forest best navigated slowly. Indeed, he wastes no space with inane chatter, but gets straight to the point. While not

comprehensive homiletic, Pape elucidates the often inaccessible world of Ricoeurian hermeneutics and sheds light on this important theory in postliberal theology. Peppered throughout the book is Pape’s insistence on divine authority: only a preaching that conforms people’s lives to God’s will is worth preaching. This book should be read by anyone interested in postliberal theology and homiletical theory (certainly anyone familiar with Campbell’s work *Preaching Jesus* owes themselves a continuation of the discussion), but not necessarily the average preacher looking for sermon ideas. Indeed, Pape himself leaves the discussion of sermon poetics, structure, and delivery to another conversation.

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