

Larsen, David L. *The Company of the Preachers: A History of Biblical Preaching from the Old Testament to the Modern Era*. Kregel, 1998. (894 pp)

David Larsen spent over thirty years pastoring churches in evangelical circles. He taught on the faculty of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School beginning in 1981 where he served as the Chairman and Professor of Practical Theology. He currently is the Professor Emeritus of Preaching at Trinity. He stands in the Evangelical tradition and has been a practitioner of preaching for most of his ministry life. All this makes him eminently qualified to speak on the topic he has chosen to address in *The Company of the Preachers (COP)*.

## Purpose and Intent

Larsen begins by observing that many of the existing works that address the history of preaching are either no longer in print, limited in scope (for example, Webber's work only addresses the English speaking world), overly sketchy and anecdotal in nature, or too brief to do justice to the subject. To meet this need, Larsen determined to contribute a volume on the history of preaching that is descriptive, broad in scope, and analytic in nature. His commitment and ongoing interest in this topic is due in part to the sad condition that exists in regard to modern preaching. The winds of change are blowing and many contemporary evangelicals are considering radical changes in their approach to preaching. This is no longer true only of the outer fringes and more extreme and daring congregations. It is now common talk even in some conservative circles. In modern evangelicalism it is now fashionable to decry preaching in general and more specifically, expository preaching. If an answer is to be given to these new proposals, that answer must be biblical and should take into account the biblical, theological, and historical heritage of preaching in the Christian church. Larsen's book is one major contribution to that end.

## Structure and Organization

The organization and structure adopted by Larsen is fairly straightforward. He introduces *COP* with a chapter laying out what he terms "the postulates of preaching," and he ends with an epilogue addressing the prospects for preaching in the future as the Church moves forward. Between the introduction and epilogue, Larsen formulates twelve chapters consisting of key information describing the history and maturing of Christian preaching beginning with the Old Testament period and going up through the glory and agony of preaching in the modern age or the Twentieth-Century.

Larsen does not attempt to provide an exhaustive account of any of the periods but rather sets forth a brief description as well as selected men who represent different aspects of preaching for that period. He generally begins each chapter with a helpful selection of quotations by men from that period and ends each section in the chapter with detailed biographical information related to that preacher or to important topics discussed in that section. Due to his objectives, when he discusses the contemporary period Larsen elected to include only the names of preachers who are no longer living.

## Content and Description

### Introduction: The Postulates of Preaching

Larsen introduces the book by observing that the primary concern of any study of preaching centers on communicating and applying what the Bible teaches in relation to preaching. (p. 11) To this end, he addresses four primary areas related to any biblical and theological discussion of preaching. First, the importance of the Word of God must be established. Larsen's premise is foundational to all that follows in the book and is clearly articulated in the following statement. "Our study of the history of preaching is grounded on the undying conviction of the absolute authority and total sufficiency of the Bible as the inerrantly and infallibly inspired Word of God." (p. 12) Next, Larsen observes that a student of preaching must establish the importance of preaching as the God-ordained means of communicating this inspired and infallible Word. (p. 13) Further, one must understand that this important means of communication has a long and biblical history. He includes a quote by John Broadus worth including here.

*In every age of Christianity, since John the Baptist drew crowds into the desert, there has been no great religious movement, no restoration of Scripture truth, and reanimation of genuine piety, without new power in preaching both as cause and effect. (p. 14)*

Larsen reminds us that we need to read the stories and sermons of preachers of the past for our edification and the edification of our hearers.

*Reading the sermons of master preachers humbles us as we survey the high standards of many who have preceded us; realizing that even the best had their own weaknesses and were children of their times encourages us. While we should not read sermons in order to imitate them (or worse, appropriate them), we do find special friends and companions in our own pastoral journey and marvel at the diversity of the preaching which God has blessed. The history of preaching helps us understand the task with which we struggle and agonize every week. We are assisted in our quest for variety and enlightened to see contextualization in action. We garner new insights from familiar texts and glimpse into the wealth of unfamiliar texts. We are reminded of the importance of preaching and inspired by the lives and experiences of others who are part with us in "the royal order of the pulpit." (p. 15)*

Finally, Larsen stresses the importance of understanding the history of preaching if we are going to chart a proper course for pulpit ministry in our time. His words are indeed an ominous warning to review and remember the lessons learned at times the hard way by those who went before us.

*Evidence does exist of a paradigm shift underway in evangelical preaching from text-driven and text-dependent preaching to need-driven and market-driven preaching. Some signs in homiletical training programs and recent homiletical*

*publications reinforce the contention that serious attention and dialogue-in-depth are needed right now as we consider where we are and where we ought to go. There has never been a time when we had a greater need for the perspectives and patterns that can be drawn from the history of biblical preaching. (p. 16)*

## Chapters One and Two: The Gestation and Birth of Biblical Preaching

Larsen opens the first chapter by reminding the reader that God has spoken. His speech represents the most important, most powerful, and most authoritative force in the universe. By means of divine speech, God created all that exists and upholds it with His Word. Since God has spoken, God's men must also speak. This is so because God's mighty acts of power and mercy are given meaning by an accompanying authoritative word from God that explains and interprets His acts. (pp. 21ff) However although God's spokesmen, the preachers, are commissioned to speak, they are not given the same limitless power and authority in proclaiming the message that is true of God. They are bound and limited by the constraints of the Word that was delivered to them by God. He includes a helpful chart on the OT prophets and their relationship to three primary parts of the communication process: ethos (the speaker), pathos (the hearers), and logos (the message). (pp. 27-30)

Out of this backdrop (briefly touched on by Larsen), New Testament preaching was born. Larsen observes that there are 221 references to preaching in the New Testament (p. 38) and points out that all true Christian preaching starts with Jesus and relates to his person, life, deeds, death, and resurrection. (p. 43) He has an interesting but overly simplistic discussion on the content of the *kerygma* in the New Testament, although he does rightly observe the weakness in Dodd's overstatement of the radical difference between the concepts of *kerygma* and *didache*. (p. 43) Perhaps the greatest help in this chapter is the extensive chart detailing the different words for preaching and their uses. (pp. 52-53)

Larsen ends this segment by demonstrating that those who immediately followed the Lord, His apostles, were also preachers and they were convinced that preaching was imperative for the spread of the gospel and the establishment of the church. Furthermore, they preached a message that had deeply impressed them, and this gave their preaching vitality and power. As a result, it had great impact in the world of their day and a band of followers literally turned their world upside down by means of preaching.

## Chapter Three and Four: The Infancy, Childhood, and Adolescence of Biblical Preaching

While acknowledging the paucity of material related to preaching prior to the fifth century, Larsen none-the-less believes that much can be learned about how the early Church engaged in preaching. He argues that there are three types or stages of preaching that developed and were in transition during this period: missionary preaching, instructional preaching, and liturgical preaching. (p. 64) As Christianity spread and developed in the early centuries after Christ, so did preaching. The sermons that are extant from early in that period are somewhat biblically based and tend to be instructive in nature, but tended to deteriorate toward the end of the second and third centuries. One interesting observation Larsen makes is that some of the most powerful preaching was

done by the Christian martyrs whose death for their faith was in itself a powerful sermon preached by life as well as lip. He states it thus: “A theology of suffering has always been a necessity for the church. Christian proclamation of the gospel inevitably brought the early church on a collision course with the constituted authority and culture.” (p. 69) Larsen has selected some great examples of preachers during this period. The following are a few of the key representatives and his description of their contribution. Tertullian is presented as the champion of truth, Irenaeus as the consummate churchman, Hippolytus of Rome stood against heresy, Cyprian of Carthage served as the custodian of the middle way. However, chief in his gallery of early preachers is Origen—craftsman of the text. (p. 73) It should be observed that Origen crafted the text in ways that caused a departure from biblical preaching as seen in the New Testament. Larsen devotes a good bit of space to an important Patristic preacher, Chrysostom of Antioch, who was nicknamed “golden-mouth” for his preaching ability. Larsen notes that more than 700 of his sermons are extant covering a wide variety of topics and situations. They provide a window into the life of the Church and her worship in Chrysostom’s day. (pp. 79-86) He also includes the contribution of Augustine who represented the Alexandrian school of interpretation and the counter movement to Origen’s allegorical method. Unfortunately, Origen and his method ended up shaping the preaching of the medieval era.

What most historians call the Dark Age or the medieval period of Western civilization, Larsen calls the adolescence of preaching. While there were some preachers who remained true to the gospel, many of his examples tend to be from the Roman Catholic Church. While it is true that early on in that period as Roman Catholicism gained ascendancy, most preachers were orthodox by the seventh century, and orthodoxy had been thoroughly mixed with error. This is probably the weakest section of Larsen’s work. As one example, he holds up Saint Patrick of Ireland as an example of one who preached the gospel and was generally worthy of emulation. His discussion of monastic preaching is interesting, but it is difficult to see their preaching as biblical preaching which was one of the delineating guidelines Larsen set in his introductory comment. One can hardly wait to get through this section to the Reformers

#### Chapter Five: The Reformation—Preaching Comes of Age

This section is one of the best in the book. Larsen has selected the right preachers and given plenty of information about each of them to inspire the reader and to create a spirit of admiration and gratitude for what these Reformers accomplished in the face of incredible odds and often at the expense of their lives. The reader is taken on a biographical tour of the lives and ministries of men like Wycliffe, Huss, Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and a host of others. One of the more interesting biographical sketches was that of Erasmus. Larsen paints the brilliance and the weakness of the man in bold colors. One revealing quotation included in the section presents this weakness in Erasmus’ own words, “I have tried to call back theology, sunk too far in sophisticated subtleties, to the sources and to ancient simplicity.” (p. 149) Larsen’s description of Erasmus’ use of rhetoric would be helpful to any student of rhetoric and preaching. (p. 150ff) One preacher not commonly included in works like this is Menno Simons. Larsen has a fascinating, albeit brief, sketch of his life and ministry and sets him in chronological context with the other Reformers.

## Chapters Six and Seven: The Ripening Maturity of Biblical Preaching and the Robust Days of the Puritan Pulpit in the Seventeenth Century

In this segment, Larsen paints an exciting and rapid moving portrait of the later English Reformers and the suffering that many of them endured at the hand of English monarchs such as James I. Admittedly, after having read the lives and martyrdoms of men like Latimer and Hooper in the previous section, these accounts may not seem as impacting. However, Larsen refuses to let his reader simply breeze by as though these later Reformers were not of the same mettle as their predecessors. Particularly important is his sketch of John Donne, wordman of the preachers. (pp. 213ff) Additionally, Larsen discusses the seeds of destruction that were surfacing in Germany and presents an interesting account of the rise of pietism in that country. (pp. 238-244) Before moving on to a discussion on the Puritan preachers, Larsen points out a little known fact in the history of preaching—the existence of a strong counter-reformation complete with a renewed interest in preaching on the part of Roman Catholics such as Ignatius Loyola and Francis Xavier as a means to counter the advances made by the Reformers.

Larsen is strongest in presenting his material on the Puritans. He has a section dealing with the lineage and heritage of the Puritan pulpit followed by a very helpful section (taken in part from Lloyd-Jones) relating the genius of the Puritan movement as a whole. (pp. 253ff) Most of the major Puritan preachers are given fairly thorough treatment. Of special value is the explanation Larsen provides in the recounting of these men's lives and ministries of the conflicts between the English Puritans and the Church of England as well as explanations of many of the acts and laws passed against them.

## Chapter Eight: Malaise and Revival: Preaching in the Eighteenth Century

In some ways this chapter represents one of the saddest chapters in orthodox preaching. Larsen details the demise of preaching and of a concern for truth due to the advance and spread of theories spawned in Germany and brought to England and American pulpits through seminary training. Higher criticism robbed the true church of her power and for a period, preaching languished under the heavy cloud of unorthodox teaching in the house of God. Thankfully, there were men scattered here and there who stood as lights in this dark time. Joseph Butler in Durham, Philip Doddridge in London, Matthew Henry, Isaac Watts, and John Newton were some of the men that God used in great ways to keep truth and preaching alive. Many of these men left important legacies in writing for the coming generations.

While some rays of hope existed in England and Scotland, almost none existed in Germany and France. Larsen details the dearth of biblical preaching by presenting the horrible theological picture of the preachers that were standing in German and French pulpits. Men like Bengel, Schleiermacher, and Tholuck are better known for their higher critical theories than for their prowess as preachers, yet this was in many ways the pulpit fare of the day.

God had not forgotten His preaching and though the sound of the Word lay dormant, it would soon sound forth again in the preaching of men like Wesley, Whitefield, and Edwards. These men stirred souls, moved nations, and were the

instruments of God for a great spiritual awakening in the lands where they preached. Larsen has great material on all of these preachers that is well worth reading.

#### Chapters Nine and Ten: Starbursts and Sidetracks of the Victorian Pulpit

By the time the reader arrives at these chapters, he is greeted by many familiar names. In Scotland, the Haldane brothers were lighting revival fires by their preaching. So was Robert Murray McCheyene. Larsen takes the reader across the Atlantic to meet some important American voices among them Timothy Dwight, founder of Yale, and Francis Asbury the famous Methodist evangelist.

Larsen moves on to the important contribution made by the school-men. One example will suffice given the constraints of space. There is a wonderful sketch of Archibald Alexander who founded Princeton seminary to train expository preachers. Larsen goes back to the continent to discuss events and preaching in Germany. He seems surprisingly generous to some of the men who typically have been associated with modernism or neo-orthodoxy.

Later in this era, Larsen presents the stories of the great evangelists and missionary preachers such as Finney, Moody, and lesser known evangelists such as Nettleton. He gives a fair portrayal of Finney's ministry including the unorthodox beliefs he held. (p. 500-501) Larsen includes the ministries of several women in the book, Pheobe Palmer being one of them with little or no statement related to Scripture's stance on women and preaching. While her inclusion in the historical review is understandable and necessary, Larsen's silence on this issue is somewhat disappointing. He includes some of the more humorous and colorful (eccentric) characters as well such as Christmas Evans (p. 507) and Lorenzo Dow (p. 504)

In the next section, the great missionary preachers are presented. Livingstone, Taylor, and Judson make their brief appearances. Other important preachers presented in this section are Alexander Maclaren, C. H. Spurgeon, and F. W. Farrar.

#### Chapters Eleven and Twelve: The Glory and Agony of Twentieth-Century Preaching

Larsen ends his massive tome with two chapters dealing with preaching and preachers in the modern era. Beginning in the early part of the twentieth century with the famous Plymouth Brethren preachers, Larsen chronicles the rise and development of Dispensationalism. Starting with its most identifiable early proponent, J. N. Darby, Larsen moves through descriptions of men like Mackintosh, Scofield, Arno Gaebelein, Sir Robert Anderson, Harry Ironside, and Pink.

One of his better sketches in this section is that of G. Campbell Morgan who Larsen describes as the "expositor of expositors." (p. 630ff) He also has great sketches of F. B. Meyer and J. H. Jowett that are well worth getting to in the book. His comments on General Booth of the Salvation Army as well as his observations of the ministry of John R. Rice are both helpful and insightful. He provides background on several preacher-commentators or authors whose works would be standard volumes in the libraries of most pastors. Examples of such commentators include his sketches of W. H. Griffith Thomas, Andrew Murray, and W. Graham Scroggie. Many of these men are included not just for their written contribution but for their connections to the Keswick movement both here in

America and in England. Larsen includes famous missionary women from this century such as Amy Charmichael in South India and Ruth Paxon in China. He does observe in the case of Paxon that when she preached, she generally did so to women. He does not portray Charmichael as having preached even in her teaching ministry at Keswick. Some of this may just be due to limitations of space given his openness to women in pulpit ministry as seen earlier.

Finally, Larsen concludes with some familiar figures. George W. Truett from Texas, A. C. Dixon and William Bell Riley, R. G. Lee who preached his famous message "Payday Someday" over one thousand times, Robert Ketchum who founded the GARBC, Machen who stood for truth and put an entire denomination on trial, A. T. Robertson the premier Greek scholar whose works have aided many pastors with exposition of New Testament texts, and C. S. Lewis apologist for the faith.

## Analysis and Evaluation

Larsen has made a valuable contribution to the literature on preaching in general and to the material related to the history of preaching in particular. There are many strengths that make the book a valuable addition to the preacher's library. First and most obvious, it is the broadest and most exhaustive treatment of the topic available in one volume. Second, Larsen has done his research. One will be hard pressed to argue with his selections for each period. Even if he does not devote an entire sketch to an individual, he will often mention them and work them into the sketch of a contemporary preacher whose sketch he does include. Third, his citations at the end of each sketch are one of the more valuable features of the book as is his exhaustive index at the end. One can easily look up every reference to a preacher in question and generally find at the end of his sketch a wealth of additional material on his life. Generally, Larsen includes at least one major biography of the individual where one is available. Frequently, he interjects his evaluation of that biography in the footnote where the biography is cited. Fourth, he writes from a staunchly conservative viewpoint. He clearly stands against any of the theories of higher criticism and generally he does not seem to present their holders in an overly positive light. Finally, he is particularly helpful when he takes certain important preachers whose contributions merit a broader and more inclusive presentation than the normal sketch he gives to the majority of the names in the book. When he expands on a personality, in almost every case the reader is in for a treat. Larsen has a way of organizing his material so as to present a fairly comprehensive picture in a short amount of space.

The book has very few weaknesses that are not due to the nature and approach Larsen elected to take in accomplishing his task. For example, some might argue that the length of the book makes it tedious to read and difficult to use in a classroom setting. Furthermore, the limited material provided on most preachers is available in more complete form in other sources. However, these criticisms are in part due to Larsen's intent to produce a relatively exhaustive work on the history of preaching in one volume. While it is true that there is generally more information available on the lives of most of the men mentioned in the book, none of that information is available in one easily available resource like *COP*. In fact, it is this very feature which makes the book so attractive to anyone doing basic research to become familiar with the history of

preaching. More troubling is his silence regarding the New Testament's teaching on preaching and women discussed earlier in this review. Additionally, there are places where Larsen seems overly negative in his footnotes toward men who are Calvinistic particularly when they speak to the issue of revival and revivalism. One of the few examples of this relates to his comments on Iain Murray's works. However, these few concerns in no way diminish the overall value of the book as an important contribution to the history of expository preaching.