

### **A Book Review: Preaching and Teaching with Imagination**

#### I. SUMMARY

Preaching and Teaching with Imagination, Warren Wiersbe's book, subtitled, "The Quest for Biblical Ministry", is a popular discourse intended for all preachers, written to stretch their minds so that they will be able to deliver a message of biblical integrity combined with imagination.

The three major sections in the book are, "Imagination and Life", "Imagination and Scripture", and "Imagination and Biblical Preaching". Each section is intended to push and prod the preacher to proclaim the truth with his whole mind, and not to stop without using his sanctified imagination, all for the glory of the Lord. The first section deals with the metaphor of Hushai, the second discusses pictures in the Bible (from the Pentateuch, Historical, Poetical, Prophets, Jesus, Acts, the Church, and the Apocalypse), while the third section handles the topic of imagination with some very practical and pastoral concerns. The Book concludes with some good appendices that range from very practical to quite interesting. These are entitled, "Questions Preachers and Teachers Ask", "A Short History of the Imagination", and "Imagination and Myth".

#### II. CRITIQUE

**A. Purpose.** The preface contains the writer's purpose, saying, "I have a concern to challenge our preachers – and those who train preachers – to move out of the academy into the marketplace and to start communicating God's truth the way God communicated it to us in His Word..."

These chapters record the attempt of an amateur to bring together insights from many disciplines to help us find out how to do biblical preaching” (p. 9). Wiersbe later lays down the gauntlet in the form of a challenge, saying, “This book is a courageous attempt on the part of a novice to point out some neglected paths on the homiletical landscape” (p. 10). The overlooked trail is obviously using creativity with the mind, both before and during the sermon.

Did he fulfill his purpose? I think that he did, not because the book was so revolutionary or caused me to dramatically or drastically change my mind on preaching, however, it did challenge me to use more imagination in all my sermons.

**B. Credibility.** Even though I have not always agreed with the author, I have always respected both he, and his voluminous work. After his God-blessed ministry for many decades (all the “Be” series books), I probably gave this book more of an opportunity to challenge me than I might have otherwise. It is already so difficult to determine the meaning of two passages per week, so I was hesitant when it came to adding another “step” to sermon preparation. But quotes like, “Delivering God’s message is serious business” (p. 15), proved important in allying me against any skepticism that I had against the author’s premise.

**C. Scholarship.** I think this is very difficult to isolate for such a book, basically because the imagination is hard to footnote. How do you teach creativity? Even harder, how do you quantify and scientifically validate the whole concept of imagination in preaching? Because of strenuous questions like these, the footnotes and scholarly quotations are few and far between in this book. Having said that, I never thought that that book was written on only 3 legs of a chair.

Wiersbe did show adeptness of the subject with comments like, “Students who treat the speeches of Job or the songs of David as they would the narratives of the Gospels or the doctrinal

arguments of Paul are sure to miss the meanings wrapped up in these poetical packages” (p. 119).

**D. Writing Style.** Dr. Wiersbe is always readable, informative, and logical. He never, in my reading of him, comes across as vague or difficult to understand. The author often writes in such a way, that you think he is preaching to you. I am sure that is because – he is!

He also has the knack for utilizing choice quotes from others, for example, Wiersbe quotes Aristotle, saying, “strange words simply puzzle us; ordinary words convey only what we know already; it is from metaphor that we can best get hold of something fresh.” (p. 47).

Overall, I enjoy and benefit from the author’s style of prose.

**E. Main Strengths.** The best thing about this book is that it issued a good challenge for me personally. Am I just a “conduit”, or “conveyor belt”, just issuing raw data out towards the congregation? I definitely see a strength to this book as it challenges pastors, but the challenge comes from one from within the ranks of a pastor.

The author states, “You study hard all week, do your exegesis, apply all the rules of hermeneutics, and come up with a lot of helpful biblical material that you want your congregation to know” (pg. 19, 20). This is then used to drive home the point that there is MORE to be done, if in fact, the pastor wants to mirror much of biblical revelation. He needs to use his imagination for the sake of his congregation.

The author adeptly anticipates objections, when he intercepts possible worries about this subject, “This fear arises because many fine Christian people are prone to confuse *imagination* with *the imaginary*, what I call *fancy*” (p. 26). This is excellent for assuaging the skeptical pastor who is bombarded with “how to” books.

There is a great section in the “Pictures in the Prophets”, chapter, specifically, “Isaiah pictures salvation as cleansing; sins blotted out; a feast; a new exodus; healing; the dawn of a new day” (p. 138). Why go to the thesaurus when there is a virtual treasure chest of both wonderful and biblical illustrations and pictures?

I like how the author even “practices what he preaches” when speaking about the imagination. He says, “In your mind’s eye, survey your congregation and try to imagine how various people will respond to the teachings in the text” (p. 213). Now that is what I call a well thought out (and a skilled use of imagination) question!

Lastly, the author makes good use of the practical ways and means of going to a text with your imagination. For example, he says, “What did it mean? Must precede “what does it mean?” (p. 207). It is one thing to implore pastors to use their imagination, but it is another to actually try to teach it. Wiersbe teaches by bringing forth the biblical examples and by carefully prodding the reader to ask questions of the text.

I believe that Wiersbe covered his bases by firmly declaring that, “The Bible doesn’t need to be “made relevant”; it already is relevant” (p. 215). To me, this seems to check against any propensity to go overboard when it comes to the imagination. Insightful imaginations by preachers, do not make the text any more inspired, sufficient, or relevant, but homiletical imagination is demonstrated in the Old Testament and New Testament, as acceptable, or even proper.

**F. Main Weaknesses.** The main weakness of this book is that it is replete with a lot of psycho babble and psychological statements that are, at best, irrelevant, and at worst, not proven. For instance, the writer says, “In modern terms, Ahithophel used a cerebral ‘left brain’ approach and Hushai, a visceral ‘right brain’ approach” (p. 17 – further discussion on left and right brain on p.

228). Is this necessary? I don't buy his italicized statement, "*We have forgotten that the bridge between the mind and the will is the imagination...*" (p. 24). I think that this is so important to the point of his book, which he should have tried to prove this point and then the reader could decide for himself, if, in fact, it is true, and secondly, what would the implications be?

Thirdly, I did not like the "Tale of Two Preachers" chapter with the Ahithophel and Hushai references and comparisons. The author unfortunately spiritualizes these men and turns them into groups of people. When the use of imagination turns into improper spiritualization, that is going too far.

I was surprised to read, "The preacher isn't a lecturer on a pedestal, shaking his finger and telling his people what to do. He's a fellow pilgrim, going through the same valley with them, sharing what God has helped him to learn and to do" (p. 217). What about Jeremiah, Isaiah, Peter, or any other man God has chosen to speak His oracles? This smacks of the unfortunate paradigm shift away from "second person imperative" preaching. I totally disagree with Wiersbe's style and do not think it can be biblically substantiated.

Another glaring weakness would be the section that dealt with "storms of life" and "boat experiences" sermons (pg. 229, 230). I am so surprised to see this unbiblical tendency still pop up. If this is a proper and God ordained method, then I believe it should have been substantiated, not just assumed. Closely associated with this error, the author falls into the well trodden trap of preaching sermons about one of the 2700 plus Bible characters. This wrong way of preaching is found in Chapter 19, entitled, "Imagination and Biographical Preaching".

Lastly, I think the editors at Baker went a little too far when, on the back cover, they stated, "Biblical preaching is far more than the proclamation of Bible truth." I know what they

meant, but my immediate response would be to call 1 Corinthians 2:1 and following to their recollection.

**G. Value for Preaching.** The good news is that this book should be read and worked through, by every pastor. It is worth the money if we only monthly ask a few more questions about excellence in preaching. Overall, this book is a quick read and despite some of the downfalls, this book motivated me to “imagine” more. I have also purchased a book edited by L. Ryken, entitled, The Christian and the Imagination, because Wiersbe perked my study of imagination.

As stated before, I like it that this book spurred me to think that preaching is more than spewing out information. I never want my sermons to sound like an exegetical digest. The author convicts his readers when he says, “Exegesis empties language and enriches us with facts; but imagination fills language and yields nourishing truths” (p. 222). I think his book, especially Section II, proved this point with passion and clarity.

There was a surprisingly good discussion on television and its affects upon the imagination. How unfortunate that we are surrounded by many appealing imagination snatchers. Wiersbe gives timely advice for feeding your imagination, instead of starving it.

The author yields many good exhortations to be creative. Wiersbe even quotes Andy Rooney, “Creativity is a by-product of hard work” (220). There is a lot of truth to that. It is difficult enough to prepare a God honoring message, but with a little more work, every preacher could yield a richer sermon to feed his flock.

On a very practical level, the author gives wise warnings against excessive alliteration (pg. 234, 235) and he also gives super-practical encouragement even by using the imagination in funerals, saying, “At the funeral of an amateur gardener, I spoke about the three gardens in the

Bible: the garden where sin entered; the garden where sin was defeated; the garden where sin shall never enter” (pg. 256, 267).