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THE END OF WORDS

A review of Richard Lischer, *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation In a Culture of Violence*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005. 165 pp + bib. \$18.00 (Cloth). ISBN: 0-8028-2932-5.

RICHARD LISCHER is the James T. and Alice Mead Cleland Professor of Preaching at Duke Divinity School. His most recent book, *The End of Words*, is a compilation of lectures he delivered at Yale, Princeton, Lutheran Southern Seminary, and Duke. In these lectures and the book that they produced, Lischer has attempted to portray the difficulty of preaching in the modern world where “mass violence overrides the significance of language” (ix). In the preface he poses the question of whether we live in an era in which “everything has changed,” with regard to the vocation of the preacher, or whether the ministry has just been given “a terrible new urgency” amidst this “clamorous language of violence” (viii). However, Lischer does not stop with a mere analysis of the current struggle that preachers face. In fact, he goes on to assert a number of viable techniques clergy can use to overcome the difficulty of preaching in a world of violence, the ultimate end of which, he suggests, is to overcome “the rhetoric of the barricades,” and “speak the word of God’s peace” (ix).

The End of Words is divided into four major sections: Vocation, Interpretation, Narration, and Reconciliation. Each of these four sections is then divided into short subsections.

Lischer begins the book with a discussion of the “Ultimate Vocation.” He gives a general introduction of what it is like to have a vocation in language, and how the traumas of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have “produced a sense of futility” (5) among those with such a vocation. Lischer insists that the world of violence has created a “silence of words” through the corruption of language. He uses the examples of the message of Jesus Christ being ‘Nazified,’ or used as a tool of “racism, anti-Semitism, apartheid, or capitalism” (5). Lischer asserts that the place to start in a vocation of language is in silence, and he uses a quote from

Dietrich Bonhoeffer to solidify this sentiment. Bonhoeffer wrote that, “The time when people could be told everything by means of words, whether theological or pious, is over.”¹ Lischer then draws his own conclusions that the world has outgrown the set of symbols from which it once received ultimate meaning. His subsequent discussion focuses primarily on this difficulty as it manifests itself for the preacher, for whom the “path to authentic expression has closed” (10).

In the next three subsections, aptly titled, “A Sea of Words,” “The Retreat from the Word,” and “The Gospel of Technology,” Lischer explores the many ways in which the message of Jesus Christ is currently being preached—or not preached, as the case may be. In the first of these three subsections, the reader is told that the current setting is “marked by white noise” (18), a virtual “sea of words, images, and ideologies” (12) within which a preacher attempts to communicate. Lischer briefly touches on how many ministers have turned to teaching sermons, or informal “Starbucks-style” group discussions, as a way to negotiate this sea of words. He also discusses how the language a minister uses has been mixed and “blurred” with the languages of philosophy and psychology. Lischer further claims that we have become “bit players in a pageant too big to be comprehended by any of us” (15), and that we are now free to select messages that work for us, please us, and interfere least with our lifestyle. He states that this has created a social situation in which “any expression of faith is appropriate and any religion true so long as it does not question the priority of the system or the individual’s right to choose from its rich menu of options” (15). Lischer concludes this section by saying that there is a language void of any moral suasion in the media, and that this has translated into churches in which morality is preached without the radical claims of Jesus or the kingdom of God, and in which “virtues regarding war and dominion” (16) are generally left out of the discourse.

Lischer uses this cultural framework for the next two subsections in which he proposes that the ministry has become ambivalent in a society that “devalues proclamation” (22) and elevates other forms of ministry. He claims that the word of God has become professionalized, secularized, and marginalized, and that this has left a missing center of authority, and ministers “with no heart of passion” (23). Lischer terms this “The Retreat from the Word.” Part of this retreat from the word, Lischer claims, is embodied in many large, successful churches “whose members would never dream that the light-shows, videos, and PowerPoint presentations that accompany the Sunday sermon represent a fundamental lack of confidence in the spoken word of God” (24). He claims that the “cords of

¹ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Edited by Eberhard Bethge. 1953. Reprint, New York: Macmillan, 1971.

memory have been cut by the very technology they are uncritically adopting" (26), and that the presence of this type of media technology associates the sermon "with the glamour, power, and authority of the same technology that rules the world" (27). In a moment of sarcasm, Lischer suggests that if the old symbol of power was the high pulpit, the new symbol of power is "the remote in the shepherd's hand" (27). He states that this "Gospel of Technology" has brought ministers to a vocational crossroads, where the choice is between those who trust the information of the moment, and those who continue to trust the spoken word.

The fourth subsection, titled "A Vocation of Agony," finally gives the reader a definition of 'vocation.' Lischer lays a foundation for this definition by writing that a vocation is often confused with a profession, and that professionalism is marked by "specialization, process, credentials, and measurable outcomes" (30), but that by definition this concept undermines the ministry. Instead, Lischer asserts, the mark of distinction between a vocation and a profession is that "you have to die to enter a vocation" (30). It is something that "calls you away from what you thought was best in you, purifies it, and promises to make you something or someone you are not yet" (30). He supports this claim with the image of Martin Luther King Jr. preaching the word from the ashes of burnt churches, as well as the writings of the apostle Paul, who portrayed the ministry as a daily process of death and renewal.

Here Lischer seems to begin a transition into the art of preaching itself. He begins this new phase with a discussion about the union of a preacher's language with the church. He says that the words of a sermon belong to the people, and that the sermon should emerge from the community. In addition, he says that for a preacher there is no place for the radical individualism that claims to be independent of any community. Lischer uses the final paragraphs of the first section of the book as a rallying cry, stating that preaching is the "ultimate postmodern activity," that preachers are only armed with the conviction that they can preach, and that the existence of this vocation means there is hope for us all.

In the second section of the book, titled "Interpretation," Lischer constructs a way of preaching that meets the demands of the modern world that he described in the first section. He begins with an analysis of where the words are to come from. "Where Do You Read?" is the title of the first subsection. This question is one of place. Lischer is asking the reader from what place they are interpreting the Biblical scriptures. He points to limitations both within approaches to interpretation that only focus on the objective accuracy of the text, as well as approaches that only focus on the world in which the text was produced. Rather,

he suggests the Bible should be read from its “native habitat in the church’s worship, catechesis, and pastoral care” (53). Lischer claims that this is the only place from which the Bible has a chance to make sense.

Next, Lischer asks the reader, “How do you read the Bible in such a way that you quit translating and begin to think and speak in its language?” Lischer writes that preachers should read the Bible evangelically because it “radiates the good news about the character and disposition of God” (57). He goes on to compare the preacher to a gemologist who “turns a precious stone this way and that in order to capture its brilliance” (58). Lischer states that too many seminaries first introduce their pupils to the many factors that make the scripture problematic, such as patriarchy, chauvinism, and violent behavior. Starting interpretation from such a place, he argues, makes it “difficult if not impossible to arrive at a receptivity to the true character of God” (59). He says that in this culturally distant view of the Bible the messages don’t seem to be addressed directly to the reader. He contrasts this view with the oracular view, in which the words of the Bible appear to be addressed directly to its interpreters. Although he declares both to be extreme, Lischer suggests that preachers err on the side of the oracular view because preaching is suggestive of just such an improbable dramatic encounter between God and the hearer. He focuses on the “evangelical insight,” or what he terms the ‘generous’ method of reading the Bible, in which the hearers use their theological imagination to wedge the scripture into their contemporary consciousness. He then compares this ‘generous’ method to the three popular homiletic approaches: flat, convenient, and ironic.

Lischer then asks, “With Whom Do You Read?” He maintains that preachers should learn to read the Bible with the church, with “those who have already experienced its surprises and twists and who know its glorious ending” (68). Lischer specifies that this group is composed of our parents, grandparents, pastors, counselors, siblings, friends, and teachers. He also briefly discusses the difference between the “religious” reader, or one who reads slowly, so that the “light of the text can illumine his or her own life and that of the congregation,” and the “consumerist” reader, or one who “reads as quickly as possible” and basically “guts the book the way one cleans a fish” (68). In this section, Lischer also discusses the story of the ascension and the three scenes of the enthronement. He suggests that these are not just lessons or principles to be artificially divided, but that they are “emblems of everything the church hopes and strives for” (70) and so should be read “with the church.” He concludes this section by saying that there is often too much emphasis on human nature as the bridge between the generations of the biblical world and our own, suggesting instead that the common denominator is the church, and therefore only a reading ‘with the church,’ where the reality of the people of God is central, can create a

bridge between the generations.

"How Do You Preach What You Have Read?" This subsection focuses on overall preaching style and acts as a transition into the third section of the book, which focuses specifically on different techniques. Lischer asserts that modern preachers err by defining style as a projection of their personal qualities, claiming to strive only to be themselves while preaching. In contrast, he feels that the approach to style should be focused more on what 'persona' is needed in a given moment, 'persona' being defined as a mask through which an actor speaks. In addition, he suggests that a preacher should develop her style as dictated by the nature of a given text, or the demands of the speaking occasion. Lischer emphasizes the importance of performance in preaching, and writes that the preacher embodies the spirit of the text first in its reading and then more explicitly in its proclamation. He uses examples from Martin Luther King Jr. and Rowan Williams to support this assertion, and concludes the section by saying that in realizing the importance of this style, the preacher has "moved toward a reading-strategy of trust in the faithfulness of God who is revealed in the text...to embrace the possibility of multiple performances of biblical texts...determined by the character of the passage and the needs of the community" (87).

The third section focuses on the narrative form, which Lischer claims has been the exclusive focus of American homiletics. He asserts that the 'coding' of religious language in terms such as "covenant," "providence," and "salvation," has negatively created outsiders, and that such codes are working less effectively than ever before because these words no longer trigger a world of meaning for listeners. He states that this problem was not solved when theologians attempted to recode language using terms from psychotherapy, politics, or philosophy, and that this actually "led us deeper into a thicket of additional terms and concepts" (93). Lischer maintains that the missing element is the "background" of the stories that the modern congregation knows little about. He attributes some of this to the digital generation's impatience with narrative. He also calls for more decisive speech that "claims your attention and with it your will" (96). Lischer mentions the notion of competing Christian narratives, but alleges that there are three features of the Christian story that importantly separate it from the Grand Narratives of modernity: the perspectival character of its telling, the mystery of the cross, and the unfinished character of the Christian story. He claims that preachers must carefully separate the Christian story from the Grand Narratives and serve as "counter-narrativists, the rebels, who now dare to tell the world another, more excellent story" (104).

Lischer next discusses the "Art of Preaching," which he characterizes as "participation in an age-old chain of repetition, sustenance, and formation...part

discipline, part craft, and part mystery" (107). He evaluates the use of sermon stories, maintaining that they are inadequate for satisfying the congregation's deepest longing, which is an exploration of its life before God. Lischer claims that preachers are not just "generic storytellers nailed to a particular plot" (110). Instead he offers three alternative narrative techniques for preaching. The first is the "focal instance," the second is the "perspectival retelling of the biblical story," and the third technique is the use of a "master metaphor" whose "elaboration defines and controls the entire sermon" (119).

The fourth and final section is titled "Reconciliation." Lischer's focus here begins with 2 Corinthians 5:19, which states that, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and has entrusted to us the message of reconciliation." Lischer claims that "whenever we preach, our sermons participate in this, God's definitive gesture toward the world" (133). He suggests that the end of preaching is reconciliation and asks the question of how sermons can become instruments of reconciliation. He supports this vision by employing Barth's ideas that the world is reconciled to God, persons are reconciled to persons, groups reconciled to groups, and that humans are reconciled within themselves. Lischer then returns to his opening dialogue regarding the language of the world and says that "the language of terror divides the world and the regimes of the world into good and evil...such rhetoric dominates the script of politics and the media and, to an extent and with a force that cannot be measured, threatens to silence the voices of peace" (143). His discussion circles around the establishment of identity and the origins of conflict in a world that uses such language, describing the need for a reconciling sermon. "Most sermons," Lischer writes, "encourage the listener to accept the good news, usually at the level of a personal relationship with God...Most sermons, however, do not make the final ascent...Too many gospel sermons do not make the ultimate gospel gesture by celebrating God's reconciliation of enemies in the church and the world" (153). Lischer concludes with a question, "In the Argument Culture of the twenty-first century, who will speak a word of peace, if not the preacher" (165)?

At only 166 pages *The End of Words* is an economical read, but it is not a book that should be read quickly. Lischer offers too many great examples, shares too many profound insights, and teaches too many important methods, for an interested reader to skim over this material. The final section on reconciliation, especially, is much too important to hustle through. There were times that it would have been helpful to have a deeper explanation of some of Lischer's arguments, but the mixed tone of his writing, at times sarcastic and playful and at other times stern and passionate, created a space for some questions to still exist in the end. There was one thing, however, that was never in question: Lischer feels preaching is

the “ultimate vocation,” because, he suggests, “at this the end of age when so many sit stupefied and traumatized, the word gives power both to those who hear and to those who speak. It will save your life” (40).

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