

*A Captive Voice: The Liberation of Preaching*  
by David Buttrick  
(Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994,  
164 pages including notes)

reviewed by Carmen Mele, O.P.

David Buttrick is the Napoleon of contemporary American homiletics. In the 1980's his textbook *Homiletic* revolutionized the craft of preaching. In the 1990's Buttrick has continued his campaign. *A Captive Voice* recasts the relationship of preaching with its principal frames of reference -- Bible, Church, and culture.

The book's title raises the question: to what is preaching bound? Buttrick believes twentieth century pulpiteers (of the Protestant variety, at least) have been unduly attached to Karl Barth's understanding of *sola scriptura* as the legitimator of their activity. Likewise, they have fastened themselves to the psychological as the realm of God's gracious activity. Catholics may find similarities to these enchainments when they hear homilists quote a Scriptural verse and expound on a personalist dimension of salvation.

As a strategy for the liberation of preaching, Buttrick proposes the African-American model, best exemplified by Martin Luther King, Jr. Black preaching mines Scripture for its social implications. Jesus, Buttrick emphasizes, came to proclaim the kingdom of God which undercuts both yankee individualism and yankee imperialism in promotion of the human family. Buttrick would find an African-American preacher's fluidity with the correspondence between Biblical story and contemporary situation as normative for exposition of narrative texts.

*A Captive Voice* deserves a careful reading for its cultural analysis. Buttrick sees the position of the established Church eroding in the contemporary period of social dissolution. Rather than suggesting the preservation of an order which cannot facilitate the Church's mission in the new era, the author promotes an evangelism which would shape the emerging culture. For him the new order should be definitively more egalitarian and thus requires both an empowerment of the laity and a renewed social consciousness. Does this not sound like directions in which Vatican II led the Catholic Church?

Furthermore, the book recommends itself by inspiring more intentional preaching. Preaching, it claims, is the Word of God. This idea, astounding to many today, may be readily accommodated to Catholic theology which has always utilized analogy as an approach to truth. Thus, Jesus Christ is the Word of God in

its fundamental sense. Then, Scripture explicates this Word for humanity. Next down the line, the insights of those called to comment on Christ and Scripture must be paid due attention. Aware of their awesome task, preachers ought to prepare for it with every ounce of their being.

If I attended the lectures at which Professor Buttrick originally presented his analysis, I would have tried to formulate questions such as the following over areas of disconcert. When Buttrick emphasizes a social context for preaching, how faithful is he to the whole Christian tradition? After all, is not the resurrection of the individual body one of the revolutionary principles of Christianity. Did not Karl Barth's reliance on Scripture alone stem from a disillusionment with a social interpretation of the Gospel prevalent in latter 19th century Protestantism but shattered in the wake of the Great War?