ANTE-NICENE PREACHING IN RECENT LITERATURE

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In its earliest days the Christian faith spread through the Greco-
Roman world with remarkable rapidity. Around thirty years after
Jesus’ crucifixion in Palestine its adherents were disruptive enough in
the city of Rome for Nero to regard them as the natural scapegoat on
which he could blame the burning of the city. About 250 years after
that, Christianity was legally tolerated throughout the empire and the
religion favored by the emperor. Everyone recognizes that one of the
major factors in the success of the movement was its preaching. It is
therefore highly ironic that we have neither a great deal of knowledge
of Christian preaching during that period nor much trace of it outside
its remarkable results.

1. Books and Authors

Although the shortage of identified information makes it difficult to
change that situation, there has recently been a number of books that
have sought to summarize the available data. That in itself is a little
surprising since the history of preaching has not been a field that
many scholars have attempted to survey until recently. For almost a
century the only major work in English was the study made by Edwin
C. Dargan.¹ Along the way a short survey by the scholarly Swedish
archbishop Yngve Brilioth appeared.² Also Werner Schütz published
a helpful, but terse little volume in German.³

The most ambitious undertaking was a thirteen-volume work edited
by Clyde E. Fant Jr. and William M. Pinson Jr.⁴ While this set makes

¹ Edwin C. Dargan, A History of Preaching, 2 vols. (1905–12; reprint, New York:
Burt Franklin, 1968).
² Yngve Brilioth, A Brief History of Preaching, trans. Karl E. Mattson, The Preacher’s
³ Werner Schütz, Geschichte der christlichen Predigt, Sammlung Göschen, Band 7201
⁴ Clyde E. Fant Jr. and William M. Pinson Jr., eds. 20 Centuries of Great Preaching, 13
texts of many sermons available in English, the introductions to individual preachers are not all of the same quality, and the first eighteen centuries of the Christian era are dispatched in two and a half of the twelve volumes. The only works discussed there from the period we are considering are 2 Clement and the first of Origen’s homilies on the Song of Songs. Thus until the very end of the twentieth century it could not be said that investigating the history of preaching in the Ante-Nicene church was a major sphere of scholarly production.

In the last decade, however, there has been a flurry of activity in this enterprise. Besides my own contribution, there have been studies by Hughes Oliphant Old, Ronald E. Osborn, and David Dunn-Wilson. In addition, Mary B. Cunningham and Pauline Allen have edited a collection of essays covering the period. With the exception of the work of Dunn-Wilson, all of these are parts of multi-volume series. Each of the volumes under consideration, however, covers more than the Ante-Nicene period. All reach back into the biblical age to some extent and all but this first volume of Old’s work extends into the Post-Nicene era.

These writers bring a variety of skills to their undertaking and have different aims in view. After writing a dissertation on Tatian under our honoree, I taught first New Testament and then preaching in seminaries. My curiosity about how and why preaching has changed over time is given rein in two long volumes, one devoted to a survey and the other to documents illustrating that development. Old was a scholarly parish pastor when he was invited to follow his interest in the relation of the reading of scripture to preaching in Christian worship at the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton. He is close to publishing the sixth of a projected seven volumes noting the various combinations in which those two elements have appeared through the ages. Osborn was a

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5 The thirteenth volume is an index.
9 David Dunn-Wilson, A Mirror for the Church: Preaching in the First Five Centuries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).