

Rev. M. Laubscher
M. Laubscher
Rev. M. Laubscher,
Dept. Practical and
Missional Theology,
University of the
Free State,
South Africa
ORCID: [https://orcid.
org/0000-0002-4240-
1991](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4240-1991)

BOOK REVIEW

THE PRACTICES OF CHRISTIAN PREACHING. ESSENTIALS FOR EFFECTIVE PROCLAMATION

DOI: [http://dx.doi.
org/10.18820/23099089/
actat.v40i1.13](http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.v40i1.13)

ISSN 1015-8758 (Print)
ISSN 2309-9089 (Online)
Acta Theologica 2020
40(1):168-171

Date Published:
17 June 2020

Alcántara, J.E. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019) 214 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8010-9866-6 (R403)

Most teachers of preachers have probably by now already taken note of Jared Alcántara's "practice-centered, collaborative, technologically innovative, next-generation introductory preaching textbook with supplementary online resources" (see back cover). Although the book is cleverly constructed around six characteristic Cs of preaching (Christian, conviction, context, clarity, concreteness, and creativity), it surely makes a strong case for an A-grade within the A-league of being one of the best recent introductory homiletical textbooks to announce itself for our classrooms. Stating the book's impressionistic play with both the letters A and C, it is hoped that it makes readers anxious and curious for the eventual grade of this reviewer.

On the positive side, there are numerous aspects to note about this book. Whereas Alcántara's previous two books mostly focused on conversing with Gardner C. Taylor about the art and essence of preaching, he now launches himself from this learning curve and expresses his own take on what he believes are to be the essentials (6 Cs) for effective proclamation. His exploration is with conviction, emphatically contextual, clear, concrete, and very creative. In short, without any irony, Alcántara practices (deliberately!) what he



Published by the UFS
<http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at>

© Creative Commons
With Attribution (CC-BY)



preaches *and* teaches. In fact, thinking of Charlie Parker with whom he starts and ends his book, he has also done some “woodshedding”!

Some of the fine print assumptions about (teaching) preaching nowadays – such as being on a journey of learning-by-doing where we critically reflect within some kind of group environment where diversity matters as a gift – are indeed further refined in the development of this book’s central claim. Alcántara states his central claim as follows:

[P]reachers who cultivate life-giving preaching habits through deliberate practice will enhance their proficiency, grow in their commitment, and flourish in their homiletical ministry (italics original) (p. 5).

The keyword in this claim is, of course, “deliberate practice”. Learning-by-doing in itself has indeed a very limited scope, because such a general and more of the same old approach to the practice of preaching would not necessarily make us better preachers. What we need, according to Alcántara, and he is surely right about this, is “deliberate practice”. He qualifies this further with

[o]ne needs well-defined and specific goals, focused attention, a consistent feedback loop, and a willingness to get out of one’s comfort zone (p. 5).

It is especially his second qualification on deliberate practice for which, I think, Alcántara should be applauded. In a significant formulation, he redefines the state of the scholarship in this field:

Instead of following the standard formula of presenting readers with a method-centered, single author, monocultural, monolingual, text-based approach, it sets forth a practice-centered, intentionally collaborative, strategically diverse, consciously multilingual (English and Spanish versions), technologically interactive approach (p. 6; see also p. 191).

Although these trends, shifts and challenges were already previously mapped in Sally Brown and Luke Powery’s *Ways of the Word – How to preach for your place and time* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016), Alcántara develops this state of scholarship further in a very polished and sophisticated manner. His off-centre, collaborative, inclusive, global approach to the “deliberate practice” of (teaching) preaching today manifests itself not merely in the pedagogically smart construction of the different Cs related to this approach, but substantiates it, actually, in an impressive bibliography (drawing on a wide range of sources from many places, traditions and times). He also provides some further material and resources (such as a panel discussion with other colleagues in the field; sermon clips; reflective exercises

for individuals and groups, and so on) on an additional website (www.PracticesofChristianPreaching.com) to thicken the emphasis on the deliberate practice of Christian preaching today. The excellent groundwork done by Brown and Powery's *Ways of the Word* – see their stereoscopic approach in their outline, complemented with numerous “sidebars” in the text to complement and explore the creative tension and gift of diversity in the church; strengthened further with lists of “further learning strategies” and “reading material” at the end of each chapter – is cultivated further by Alcántara's six essential Cs he sees within his refined focus on “deliberate practice” as the significant key for us that may reveal the pulpit to be more than simply a woodshed.

Or does it? Surely that is the idea, but does he pull it off? Is this deliberate practice within the woodshed of such a nature that it really leads to the pulpit? Does this clever and constructive approach with all its characteristic Cs mean that we are dealing with an emphatic A-grading of a review for Alcántara's latest book to be the leading textbook in our preaching (classes) within years to come? Although I could still elaborate more on the impressive developments and gifts of this book, continuing to give credit where it is due and making a strong case for a definite A-grade, it probably makes more sense to explicitly name and reflect on some of the concerns I think we need to have about this work. The clever, informative, sophisticated, well-articulated approach of Alcántara's work is clear without a doubt, and thus it does not serve any purpose to state more of the obvious in this regard. Let me rather continue to state what is perhaps less obvious, and thus more problematic (given its seeming presence) about the book.

What has happened to the (deliberate) practice and agency of the Triune God as such in the act, practice and event of Christian preaching? Although Alcántara states:

I define the gospel as an announcement and a call from God through Jesus Christ that welcomes us into covenant relationship (p. 15)

it is not really clear how God's act continues vividly in the present tense within this statement, and thus makes me curious and concerned about God's initiative and primacy in the deliberate practice that follows in the remainder of the book. Although “Christian” preaching precedes and centres the other Cs (and rightly illustrated in Figure 1.3 on p. 14), the eventual impression is that it functions merely as an idea or concept. For preaching to be essential Christian preaching, I would have liked to have seen how the Triune God has the initiative and leading role through each of the different essential characteristic Cs of this approach. Obviously, there are glimmers in the text where this seems to be present (see pp. 51, 53, 81), but in the end I cannot help

judge that an overwhelming anthropological primacy distorts the theological character and quality of this homiletical approach.

The acid test for Christian preaching – especially when it is deliberately practised with these characteristic essential Cs – is still upon how it focuses on the living voice of God’s Word who, in the end, still speaks radiantly and eloquently for itself. It is one thing to start with a “Christian” note in the five remaining Christian Cs, but is each one of them eventually theologically (and homiletically) thought through? There is more to Christian preaching than merely citing Scripture and referring to tradition. Although one is grateful for the initial references to Scripture and tradition in each of the different chapters, surely that is not the *alpha* and *omega* to comfort us that this is essentially *Christian* preaching that is *deliberately* practised in this instance. Opting for preachers being “stewards” of the gospel (instead of being possessed and addressed by God) or accentuating “convictional” preaching of the gospel (instead of being constantly called and claimed by God) undermines the eventual theological character of this proposal. If we want to flourish in our preaching ministry, then we need to hear more about how God speaks to us in the present tense. Finding our voice in preaching does not lie primarily in deliberately practising these characteristic Cs of preaching, but rather in whether we hear and obey His voice. Reflecting upon our homiletical being in Christ, the latter is neither static, nor a reality of merely past or future, but still at the forefront and deliberately practising Christian preaching for us. We as homileticians in Christ are also dynamically present within his presence, but it is receptive and dependent on the disruptive and unsettling movement of His promising Spirit.

In sum, only time will tell whether Alcántara’s book is to B (or not to be) the A-book with its characteristic Cs of (teaching) preaching in years to come.