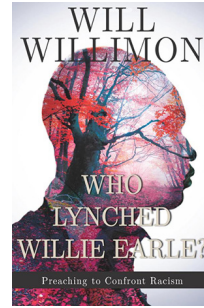


Book Review

William Willimon.
Who Lynched Willie Earle?: Preaching to Confront Racism
Abingdon: 2017. 138 pages. \$17.99.

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Racism is deeply imbedded in American history and culture. To proclaim it as a Christian nation, or at least a Christian nation once upon a time, is somberly ironic as professing Christians stole Willie Earle, a fellow Christian, out of jail and killed him in February 1947.

Will Willimon's work *Who Lynched Willie Earle: Preaching to Confront Racism*, brings together the fields of history, sociology, and homiletics with the hope of encouraging white preachers to preach prophetically against the demon of racism. In an expertly crafted narrative, Willimon uses a case study approach to a 1947 sermon preached by Hawley Lynn, a young Methodist preacher, two Sundays after the infamous lynching of Willie Earle in Greenville, South Carolina. He then moves from this particular sermon towards general prophetic homiletical practices that confront the sin of racism. The first chapter of the book tells the tale of Willie Earle's murder, using eyewitness accounts, personal interviews, and court room records. The second chapter provides a brief look at Hawley Lynn's life immediately before the sermon and analyzes his sermonic preparation. The third chapter is Lynn's powerful sermon, interlaced with brief comments by Willimon. The fourth chapter provides a multifaceted assessment of Hawley's sermon, leaving the reader in awe that Hawley, a white preacher could say this sermon to a

white congregation; As Willimon says, "The most remarkable aspect of Hawley's sermon...is that it was preached... When a white preacher like Hawley Lynn...stands up and preaches on race before a white congregation, it is an act of faith that God is able" (37, 54). The fifth chapter offers a preliminary exploration into Christian prophetic rhetoric in regard to race, racial identity, racial reconciliation, and racial equality; Willimon works with the realities that "race is a fiction" and "racism is a fact" (55). This exploration includes a discussion about the creation of race and whiteness, engaging a myriad of voices. Here, one would profit from tracking footnotes closely. He stands biblical theology next to numerous, contemporary examples of violence perpetrated in the name of racism and religion, squarely putting racism as specifically a Christian problem. The sixth chapter capstones the book with specific homiletical practices to engage racism, including what White preachers can learn from Black preachers.

Who Lynched Willie Earle is a fine case study documenting how one sermon was so uniquely and boldly preached that we have much to learn from it today. Willimon crafts together detailed and diligent research in this readable and impactful, yet brief, book. The narrative Willimon tells is captivating and prompts the preacher to preach, to preach boldly, and to preach now. This book makes it clear that the same devil of racism which caused a group of

Christians to murder Willie Earle is alive today. Pedagogically, homiletics instructors would do well to include this book as a standalone exemplar of prophetic preaching in their foundational homiletics course.

The work's relevance is limited by the author's background, "older, white Southern male" from a mainline church (xiii), and his intended audience white preachers. Preachers of color may find encouragement from this work, however their homiletical practices will not benefit much. Likewise, Willimon's exploration would only be marginally helpful for preachers who are African, Arab, Asian, or Latinx among others. To preach prophetically against racism from a different social location would yield a different set of homiletical practices than the ones described in Willimon's final chapter (126).

Another weakness is Willimon's case study methodology. First, it limits the conversation of race to black and white. The history of racism perpetrated against other ethnicities and the manifestation of that racism is as varied as the cultures themselves. While some guidance is provided from the taxonomy provided on page 126 of what "preaching that confronts racism"

is, it limits the conversations to racism that is white against black. Particularly, in a culture where racial rhetoric is especially detrimental against those from Latin America and the Middle East, additional projects are needed. The second set of limitations calls for further exploration of prophetic preaching against racism by cataloging more sermons delivered during other historical events when racism was perpetrated. While this fine work may be used as an example project, sermon examples from the additional perspectives of social location and racial issues are needed.

For now, Willimon's book breaks the silence for white preachers. Something ought to be said and it needs to be said now. Much of the majority church has too long left justice up to the American justice system or has been too afraid to talk about justice, fearing that it may be seen as too radical, liberal, or outside the Gospel. Worst, many preachers have remained silent out of privileged ignorance. Willimon awakens white consciousness to the systemic racism many do not see, yet benefit from, and calls for the white voice to preach, to preach boldly, and to preach now.