

Confronting the Controversies, by Adam Hamilton

reviewed by [Mark Horst](#) in the [November 7, 2001](#) issue

There was a time when I was willing to declare what good preaching is: "Every sermon must begin with a scripture text," I declared. "Every sermon must go by Calvary. Every good preacher holds the newspaper in one hand and the scriptures in the other." And yet the formal rules of preaching seem like hurdles which able preachers routinely surmount in the struggle to proclaim the gospel. And I've come to believe that great preaching has to do with things far more subtle and personal than rules can express.

The effectiveness of Gardner Taylor's soaring homiletical architecture and the verbal muscularity of his delivery are tied to his unique self. The rich character descriptions that light up Jeremiah Wright's biblical exposition have everything to do with what this preacher notices and values. A great deal of the power and impact of the preached Word comes from the fit between the preacher and the words being preached.

Adam Hamilton preached the series of sermons collected in this book to his megachurch congregation in Leawood, Kansas. He gives a number of more or less divisive social issues a good working-over, combining an interesting preaching style with a summary of the key ethical challenges facing our culture. Hamilton invites people to think over topics which tend to stir deep passions both inside and outside the church, topics such as the teaching of creation and evolution in the public schools, euthanasia, abortion and homosexuality.

In approaching these issues, Hamilton makes no pretense of having either the "right answer" or theological authority. Instead he distinguishes himself from the extremes of the theological spectrum and sets out to articulate the center of public and perhaps mainstream Protestant opinion on these matters. Claiming the center is always a dicey proposition, since most of the people who speak out on controversial issues see themselves in "the center."

Several assumptions enable Hamilton to approach his subjects in a pastoral and respectful way. "My first assumption is that what makes an issue truly controversial is that it is a complex issue . . . [which] by definition will result in multiple perspectives." Another is that "thinking, compassionate, and caring people of faith can hold opposite positions on these issues." This, he hastens to add, "does not mean that both are right, but both may have appropriate motives for holding their opposite perspectives and both will likely have valid points to make in the debate."

The sermons, then, unfold like debates. Hamilton moves inside a particular stance and energetically defends it, using scripture, tradition, reason and experience as his sources. Only after he has sketched out the competing points of view does he declare his own. Though such an approach could result in dry, instructional preaching, this style seems to fit Hamilton, whose sermons never become impersonal. A surprising amount of passion undergirds them.

By offering a personal opinion at the end of the sermon, the preacher reduces his voice to that of a very particular but nonetheless equal participant in the process of discerning the word of God. This approach raises questions about the role of scripture and doctrine in relation to the preached word. Here Hamilton fails to declare himself clearly. He peppers his sermons with scripture, reminding us that both sides of the aisle invoke the Bible, yet his firm closing comments leave no doubt about his own sense of where the scriptures point us. God's voice does not thunder here. But these sermons are not meant to stir up a storm so much as to calm the winds, and in this they are very effective.