

## Getting It All Book-wards

You can't judge a book by its cover, especially if you can't see it. The cover, I mean. I'll explain.

A hot new decorating trend has proud homeowners turning their libraries spine-side in so that only the serried edges show. It's true! I saw it in the leisure section of last Sunday's paper. The idea seems to be that all those ill-matched spines with their varying widths, uneven heights, and clashing colors steal attention from the décor. A variation of this technique consists of hanging pictures right smack over the front of the book case.

I suppose that to some people books are mere background – a species of wallpaper. I've always gotten a chuckle out of the fellow in *The Great Gatsby* who discovers that the calfskin volumes in the library of the *nouveau riche* American have uncut pages, meaning no one has ever actually read them.

Some preachers take the same view of The Book. Too many pastors drape giant self-portraits before the pulpit in order to keep scripture from interfering with their self-celebration. The Bible's odd-sized anthology of ill-matched genres tends to clutter up showpiece sermons as poetry and history tumble untidily into adjacent texts. Troublesome passages insist on both sides of huge truths and distract the heart from our lovely hermeneutical throw-pillows. Alliteration and outline impose order on this embarrassment by turning Holy Writ blank-side out to make room for our elegant accessorizing.

In *Spirit, Word, and Story* Calvin Miller chides orators who "thrust and parry with the Word as though it were a fencing foil." While impressive, such sermonizing, he insists, "ultimately distracts the mind to allow the preacher to get in his footwork." Miller argues that "in such deft displays of biblical skill, God rarely gets the spotlight." He offers a litmus test for such biblical backwardness: "If the congregation leaves remarking how clever and scholarly the preacher is, it is likely that real authority has been usurped by ego."

Abba Sissois, one of the ancient desert fathers, put it even more plainly. When a disciple confessed a tendency to prepare impressive remarks on the Bible the old man replied, "There is no need. It is better to speak the word simply, with a good conscience and a pure mind."

The spine-shifting idolatry of style denotes a spineless preacher whose hearers will find their own backs eventually bowed beneath the crushing load of life. May God grant us grace to face the Book forward and keep ourselves behind and beneath it. May the rhetorical furniture of our sermons hold the Bible, not hide it.

Right Way 'Round,  
Doug