As a student of Dr. Proctor at Duke Divinity School, I started a journey that profoundly affected several of my academic and ministerial pursuits. The class, Preaching about Social Crisis, became my introduction to black theology, the ethics of John Rawls, and the Hegelian dialectical method to preaching. More importantly, the class material was filtered through a man whose persona and ethos garnered not only a hearing but also a following.

Adam Bond, assistant professor of historical studies at The Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology, Virginia Union University, describes the life, theology, and ministry of his chair’s namesake in The Imposing Preacher. Bond depicts Proctor as a significant academic, preacher, and social reformer during the civil rights movement of the late twentieth century. Primarily, Proctor was true to his convictions that Jesus was the center of the gospel and pressed for the “personhood” of all people. Consequently, he “saw himself as the theological bridge between his black social gospel theology and the emerging voices of black conservative ideology, black and womanist theologies, and the black Christian political and economic uplift traditions of public faith in the post-segregation era” (27). Proctor harmonized his historical critical modernist position from a liberal tradition and his American Black Baptist tradition. He believed preaching to be the primary vehicle for public theology and social reform. He introduced many preachers to a Hegelian dialectic form of preaching (that he learned while listening to Harry Emerson Fosdick on the radio while attending Boston University School of Theology) as a persuasive means for social reform.

Bond’s six chapters explore Proctor’s life and vocation. Most notably, he served as president of Virginia Union University and Agricultural and Technical College of North Carolina, associate director of the Peace Corps in Nigeria, Martin Luther King Distinguished Professor of Education at Rutgers University, and preacher at the 18,000-member Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. He worked closely with the Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Carter administrations. He mentored Martin Luther King Jr., Jeremiah Wright, and Jesse Jackson among many others. For example, he is credited for introducing King to
thinkers such as Fosdick, Niebuhr, and Rauschenbusch. In depicting his long career, Bond highlights the basis of Proctor’s high view of personhood and community as a public theologian.

After his retirement from Rutgers and Abyssinian Baptist, Proctor continued to work in academia, teaching at Vanderbilt and Duke. He delivered the 1990 Lyman Beecher Lecture at Yale and created a doctor of ministry program at United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio. He died in 1997, still active in academic and social endeavors.

Throughout the book, Bond has a generous critique of Proctor’s work. For example, Bond kept Proctor in his historic context when describing his modernist perspectives of biblical interpretation that did not keep pace with advancing scholarship. Likewise, Proctor’s humanist perspectives kept Proctor from identifying with newer more radical approaches to race relations. Similarly, he relied heavily upon his own middle-class background and social gospel roots as launching points for social change that encouraged Proctor to work within the system of a highly valued American democracy. He was a man of his times whose work affected the next generation in profound ways.

On the one hand, The Imposing Preacher, while biographical in nature, lacks a narratorial style, making it a bit ponderous to read. On the other hand, the numerous details are well documented with many primary sources (e.g., sermons), thus marking the book as a definitive investigation of Proctor’s life and work.