



*M. Laubscher*

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## **REVIEW – THE MISSION OF PREACHING: EQUIPPING THE COMMUNITY FOR FAITHFUL WITNESS**

P.W.T. Johnson, *The mission of preaching: Equipping the community for faithful witness*

(Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2015). 239 pp. Price: R369

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Two contrasting experiences may be the best introduction I can give in reviewing this work. First, my scepticism – yet another book on missional theology. That, however, did not last long, because Patrick Johnson thoroughly met this with his scholarly well-informed and theologically carefully considered mind and ideas. Surely, this is not simply another disciple on the bandwagon of flavour-of-the-month missional theology who tries to be relevant and trendy, and secretly longs “for the good old days of Christendom”, unconsciously seeking power and cultural influence. Rather, this book creatively challenges current critics and disciples of missional theology. Moreover, both sceptics and enthusiasts of the contemporary stream of thought within homiletics have a great deal to consider. In fact, one of the main contributions of this work is that it not only perceives the need for a critical discussion between the field of missional ecclesiology and testimonial homiletics, but also brings significant theological depth and crispness into this newly explored interdependency.

This is clearly visible in the structure and flow of the book’s argument. Johnson sets up the dialogue by first introducing three significant and influential homiletic proposals that resort under testimonial preaching, namely Thomas Long’s *The witness of preaching* (without the pun!); Anna Florence Carter’s *Preaching as testimony*, and David Lose’s *Confessing*

*Martin Laubscher, University of the Free State*

*Jesus Christ: Preaching in a postmodern world.* Before engaging the current literature on missional theology/ecclesiology, he analyses in detail and reflects on a fairly significant part of Karl Barth's very mature ecclesiology dealing with the "Holy spirit and the sending of the Christian community" (which entails the key concepts of vocation, witness, and turn to the world). This is followed by another introduction (Chapter 3) that discusses Lois Barrett *et al.*'s eight patterns of witness in missional congregations. All of the previous then comes together in Johnson's creative proposal in the fourth and last chapter where he introduces his "A missional homiletic of witness": "Preaching confesses Jesus Christ, through a missional interpretation of scripture, in order to equip the congregation for its witness to the world" (Johnson, 2015:22, 140).

The title of the book is, in this instance, fairly aptly formulated and revealing. All those critics who fear that missional theology will ultimately reduce or instrumentalise theology to serve the agenda of mission(al theology), or that "if everything is mission, then nothing is mission", can already sense an awareness of their reservations in the title. This is not a book on why we need more missional preaching ("the preaching of mission!" or even worse the preaching of "missional theology!"), or on how to preach (thematically, technically and strategically) more missional ("missional preaching"), but it is rather a thoughtful grapple with the idea that the practice of preaching is not only of critical importance to missional theology (and vice versa), but it is also, among others, a missional practice within itself! Like Charles Campbell made us aware that, before we consider the "preaching of ethics", we need to grasp the ethics of preaching (preaching in itself is an ethical practice/response), or as Stanley Hauerwas showed, the church does not have a social ethic, but it is that, this work at least is also making us aware that mission (like ethics, social ethics, public theology, political theology, and so on) is not something we first do, but in fact "something" we first and foremost "is". Thinking of preaching as being missional obviously does not imply that it is only a missional practice, or that all preaching should eventually become missional (or even being more missional), but rather that it cannot be practised without being critically informed, connected, embodied and orientated regarding a particular "mission" we sense in all theology. The mission of preaching is an excellent example of how to do theology more theologically in re-connecting fields, loci and disciplines for a more wholesome and integrated theological witness.

Missional ecclesiology (read: the mission of theology) can no longer continue without this homiletic turn, and homiletics now needs to turn (as David Lose rightly mentions in the foreword) (Johnson 2015:11) from performative to formative homiletics, because, although preaching involves

a preacher, it surely does not start with him/her, nor is it about him/her, but rather an ecclesial (communal and pneumalogical) activity. Our mission is to preach the gospel, and it does not simply introduce vocation, witness, commission and a turn towards the world, but it also involves the whole community in being for the entire world. Both kinds of witness and mission are thus enacted and signified. On the one hand, we know that we do not preach primarily or fundamentally in response to the need of the world, because “the primary impetus and basis for the preaching of the gospel is God’s gracious activity in Jesus Christ” (Johnson 2015:167). On the other hand, “[m]issional preaching must arise from this daily witness, center it in the confession of Jesus Christ, and kindle further witness as the community scatters again” (Johnson 2015:212).

The questions and implications are in the end quite challenging and thought provoking. Besides the reaffirmation of missional hermeneutics’ guiding presence in the way we read (and academically study!) scripture (or any other text thereafter), or the practical-theological issue of reforming ordination regarding (whose!) criteria-and-authority as determinative in “allowing” or “licencing” people to preach, or the “ironic discourse perspective” (Johnson 2015:139-140), with which he introduces the fourth and last chapter, I have indeed found the focus on the content of confession very compelling and insightful. For all the enthusiasts doing (and even preaching!) missional theology, he correctly highlights that we should not mistake or substitute a quality of Jesus Christ for Jesus Christ himself (Johnson 2015:175). The distinctions are quite subtle and peculiar, but in the end of crucial importance – like that Christ is not only the incarnation of God’s will and kingdom, but also the incarnation and revelation of God himself (as well as the real man) (cf. Johnson 2015:178). Or, still regarding confessing Christ, but only from a different angle, we should be careful not to confess Christ only as the inauguration of God’s Kingdom, because “[y]es, Christ inaugurates God’s reign and rule, *but he is also its fulfilment and completion.*” [Italics mine] (Johnson 2015:178). In this instance, the crucial theological insight to discern is that the church in no way replaces, prolongs, supplements, complements or even continues God’s revelation in Christ, but “only” witnesses to everything that is already fully reconciled in Christ Jesus. What we confess obviously matters and will determine how we confess (approach and receive the world)!

The high quality of the work, however, not only elicits appreciation and impression, but also invites a few critical observations and questions to consider. I am not so sure whether Johnson (and others) sufficiently appreciated Barth’s turn to the world. He correctly shows how the church is relative to the world in Barth’s theology (Johnson 2015:89; see also CD IV/3.2, 826), so that I cannot imagine that the church-world relationship

in Barth's or any "Missional Homiletic of Witness" could predominantly or exclusively be a one-directional movement. The Christian community's commission not only entails a sending into the world, but also leaves room for a reception, listening, openness towards the world. The fact that the church cannot claim or master Christ, but continuously needs to receive Him anew, allows, in principle, a greater openness and receptiveness in the way we missionally engage the word and they perceive and receive our witness. I am of the opinion that part of the problem lies with the way in which Johnson interprets contextual specifics and particularity – and to get to the actual issue that I miss in Johnson's work and also in the remainder of the missional literature, is that Trinity and *Missio Dei* are often mentioned in the same breath, but then the next move/implication is not actualized to interpret the *Missio Dei* as *Missio Trinitatis*. In this instance, we are not dealing with a general or generic God who sends and witnesses, but rather with a very particular and specific God that all of a sudden highlights key concepts such as fecundity, ec-stasis, ec-centric living, affirmation of the other, self-gifting and otherness, hospitality, and so on, whereby contextual particularity and specifics are much more appreciated as being central to the mission of theology and preaching. Ultimately, Johnson is quite correct to show how Christian witness is essentially an ecclesiological and pneumatological activity, but the discussion in Barth's ecclesiology (and everything else within the doctrine of reconciliation) reaches its climax under the prophetic office. The prophetic nature and dynamic of such a missional homiletic of witness obviously needs more reckoning off.

In conclusion: I fully recommend this work to both critics and enthusiasts of missional theology, anyone unfamiliar or acquainted with the actuality of Karl Barth's ecclesiology for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and, of course, to all interested or concerned about the mission of preaching. Surely it is not whether, but rather what kind of missional theology and preaching we are called to do in our various contexts. We cannot but continuously read and interpret our contexts theologically, and this is surely a very helpful and insightful contribution to our ongoing task at hand. In both contexts, we are perhaps beyond the captivity of Christendom's church and state dynamics, but there is also the Christendom of the church-and-market pact where the gospel is traded, commodified and cheaply for sale in the current commercialised church business. Therefore, this work is of such timely arrival for the witness and mission of theology and preaching in church and society in various places nowadays.