



*The Mission of Preaching:
Equipping the Community for
Faithful Witness*

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“Patrick Johnson focuses the continuing investigation of the missional church on the theology and practice of preaching. He ably engages the primary resources for this undertaking . . . and lays out the trajectories for the missional renewal of preaching in our post-Christendom context. Combining scholarship and pastoral passion, he is profoundly broadening and deepening the exploration of the missional church with this pioneering work.”

—Darrell L. Guder, Henry Winters Luce Professor of Missional and Ecumenical Theology, Princeton Theological Seminary

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“Preaching confesses Jesus Christ, through a missional interpretation of Scripture.”

We now come to the moment where the voices in this conversation come together to move toward a missional homiletic. This does not mean that these voices will now speak in unison, nor that they will speak in perfect harmony. While there is much commonality among them, there is also strong disagreement. In this chapter I will take up some arguments and leave others behind, and I will argue that some of the voices in this conversation are more useful to a missional homiletic than others.

The best way to understand this work is as ironic discourse. As I mentioned in the introduction, I understand practical theology as a form of ironic discourse, using the terminology of the rhetorician Kenneth Burke. This means, first, that practical theological reflection proceeds as discourse; it is an interdisciplinary and mutually critical conversation about a practice of Christian ministry. In this discourse, each conversation partner approaches the subject from a different perspective, and no perspective is privileged above the others. Indeed, it is mutually critical because each perspective is open to critique and revision.

However, at some point the conversation must come to a tentative conclusion, a conclusion held with full recognition of its own perspectival nature. Burke uses the rhetorical trope of irony to describe the way a discourse of multiple perspectives is brought to a tentative conclusion. He writes, “Irony arises when one tries, by the interaction of terms upon one another, to produce a development which uses all the terms.” From the standpoint of an observer who considers the participation of all the terms, irony offers a “perspective of perspectives,” which is then able to produce a “resultant certainty.” This certainty is necessarily ironic because it requires that “all the sub-certainties be considered as neither true nor false, but contributory.”

Thus, we are now at the point when the conversation must come to a tentative conclusion, as we now embark on the development of a “perspective of perspectives.” To organize this discussion logically, we will carefully work through the following assertion, which describes succinctly my understanding of a missional homiletic: *Preaching confesses Jesus Christ, through a missional interpretation of scripture, in order to equip the congregation for its witness to the world.* Here is a brief summary in advance of how this argument will unfold:

Preaching is a discrete form of the church’s witness, and the normative paradigm for preaching is proclamation of the gospel in response to the reading of scripture in Christian

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worship. Here I will address the crucial questions of authority and ordination that have arisen in this conversation and the proposal of a communal preaching ministry that is a distinctive contribution of missional theologians.

Confession is the most appropriate mode of testimony for preaching; moreover, the essential content of the confession is Jesus Christ. This contention is not at all clear or universally held in the homiletical literature, but it is essential for preaching to take its place as one form of Christian witness and to have coherence with other forms of witness.

Third, preaching arises from a missional interpretation of scripture. It is commonly held in homiletics that a sermon arises from the interpretation of scripture and the preacher uses some hermeneutical lens through which to read scripture. In a missional homiletic, the hermeneutical lens is a missional interpretation that understands scripture as equipping the reader and hearer for participation in God's mission.

Finally, the witness of preaching equips the congregation for its witness to the world. The congregation is the basic unit of Christian witness, and preaching has a particular centering, contextualizing and kindling function within the congregation, as preaching arises from and moves into the whole witness of the community.

– Taken from chapter four, "A Missional Homiletic of Witness"