

David R. Fields. *Preaching and the Mission of God: Faithful Witness after Christendom*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2023. 180 pages. \$25.00.

The essential claim of this book is that a missional reading of the Bible, or “missional hermeneutic,” is necessary for preaching that will bear faithful witness to the gospel and serve to form communities of faithful witness in our now-missionary context in the West. (3)

David Fields, an evangelical pastor in southern British Columbia, presents this claim in three stages. His first five chapters concern “God’s Book, God’s Story,” situating the authority for preaching in “the storied nature of the Bible” (21), by which he means that Scripture provides a counter-cultural narrative for human existence. More specifically, he draws on N. T. Wright’s schema of salvation history as a five-act play, in concert with Kevin Vanhoozer’s “theodrama,” to account for contemporary appropriations of the biblical text. Importantly, this formulation assumes rather than establishes the authority of the first four “acts” as the basis for innovative improvisation in “act five,” which represents the life of the church. Invoking David Bosch, Christopher Wright, Darrell Guder, and Richard Bauckham (amongst others), Fields advocates a missional hermeneutic as paradigmatic for homiletical engagement; in his view, this perspective entails “recognizing God’s missionary nature, the missionary nature of the Bible, and the missionary task of God’s people” (34).

Part 2 defines “Preaching as Participation in God’s Story.” According to Fields, “biblical preaching must aim to *do* what the Bible itself *does*: announce God’s saving work and prepare God’s people to live in light of it for the sake of the whole world” (57; emphasis original). Focusing on testimony to the person of Jesus, this formulation expands into a threefold definition of preaching: (1) “Participation in God’s mission”; (2) “Calling for repentance and conversion”; and (3) “Empowering and equipping the people of God” (59–60). Part 3 turns to contextualization, specifically, “Preaching in a Post-Christendom Setting.” First, citing the example of Lesslie Newbiggin, this section advocates an intentional “evangelization” of one’s congregation or audience so as to embed missional values and motivation and foster culturally appropriate ways of living as a church in the post-Christendom West. So, for instance, preachers should employ gender-inclusive and disability-sensitive language; attend to their local arts and music scene; “connect without capitulating”; challenge the reigning plausibility structure of religious pluralism; and invite repentance as a precondition for entering the Kingdom of God. Two further chapters offer both thematic and practical suggestions for sermon preparation (e.g., “Preach Grace” [93]; “Focus the Sermon” [104]; “Create a Tentative Outline” [105]; “Write the Sermon” [106], etc.).

Each chapter concludes with three or four questions for “personal reflection.” Each major section also includes a longer series of questions for group discussion, along with annotated recommendations “For Further Reading.” A final section consists of three sample sermons by Stephen Holmes, senior lecturer in theology at the University of Saint Andrews; Miriam Swanson, director of Fusion USA (which connects local churches with university students); and Fields himself. Two appendices offer “Missional Hermeneutical Questions for Sermon Preparation” and a “Congregational Sermon Evaluation Form.”

Although the book is based on Fields’ doctoral work (“Shaped for Faithful Witness: Missional Hermeneutics and the Task of Preaching,” D.Min., Acadia Divinity College, 2017), its tone and manner of presentation are both conversational and practical rather than didactic or

abstract. In his forward, Stephen Holmes (who supervised the original dissertation) observes that “This is a book for good preachers who want to be better.” Yet because most of its content is well-travelled territory (whether with regard to missional hermeneutics, the testimonial character of preaching, or suggestions for sermon preparation, each of which is more fully treated elsewhere), this text seems better suited for lay preachers without prior theological education who would benefit from a foundational grounding in missional reading strategies. It will prove especially congenial to readers who share the book’s theological (i.e., pietistic/evangelical) assumptions concerning Christian identity and ministry.

That being said, Fields’ invitation to the actual practice of missional hermeneutics (drawing on Guder) is both refreshing and helpful: how, he asks, does the biblical text “evangelize us... convert us... read us... focus us... [and especially] send us?” (102–103). As with the illustrative anecdotes from congregational ministry that appear in other parts of the book, here readers would have benefited from real-life examples indicating how these strategies might be implemented today in local ministries of preaching. A companion text or sequel along these lines would be most welcome.

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