

Practicing Witness

A Missional Vision of Christian Practices

By Benjamin T. Conner

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In *Practicing Witness*, Benjamin T. Conner draws missional theology into a “collegial interchange” with contemporary theological discussions in order to offer a fuller, and more compelling, vision for practical theology in contemporary contexts. This is a revision of Conner’s doctoral dissertation that he defended at Princeton Theological Seminary under the advisement of Darrell Guder, a leading voice in the missional theology conversation. Conner’s thesis comes in two parts, which simultaneously supplement each other. The first part of his thesis is that missional theology requires deeper attention to Christian practices than the literature currently exhibits. The second part of his thesis is that exponents of Christian practices require a missional orientation to carry their aims to fruition in the life of the church. He writes, “I will argue that an understanding of Christian practices that is informed by missional theology makes explicit and pronounced the witnessing aspect of Christian practices that is occasionally stated but undernourished theologically in the practices discussion” (6). The merging of these two discussions results in what Conner labels “practicing witness.” His argument in defense of this practicing witness is concise, clear, and compelling, and participants in both camps will find Conner’s work a welcome conversation starter.

Like many works of practical theology, Conner’s arises from an on-the-ground, theological crisis. In his ministry to differently abled teenagers, Conner’s experiences challenged the theological convictions and ministerial paradigms he had received through his theological education. He found himself confronted with the task of addressing faith formation—discipleship—in a way that did not merely re-inscribe the sociological (and ecclesiological) exclusion of those who are

differently abled. He writes, “My time with the kids in our ministry has been filled with such experiences that have challenged my understanding of able and disabled, my notion of ministry and witness, and my fundamental understanding of faith and discipleship” (2–3). Conner found the *Practicing Our Faith* discussion, whose leading voices include Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass, a welcome conversation partner in his ministry to differently abled teens.

In chapter two, Conner moves in the direction of the symbiosis he envisions by introducing the major voices and key concepts in the missional theology (a.k.a. missional church) conversation. He defines missional theology as a kind of practical theology in which all aspects of ecclesial life and mission participate in the mission of God (*Missio Dei*) toward the redemption of the created order. Missional theology thus touches upon all aspects of theological education and church praxis to the end of enabling Christ-followers to partner with the Holy Spirit in particular ways in particular contexts. With marked dexterity, Conner introduces the major voices in the missional church conversation. He begins with Lesslie Newbigin and David Bosch’s first-wave missional theology in route to the second-wave missional theology articulated by Darrell Guder and George Hunsberger. For those unfamiliar with the discussion, they can rest assured that Conner’s exposition is a clear and accurate overview; for those familiar with the conversation, Conner provides historical insight and a number of details seldom mentioned in scholarly treatments. Sifting through the theological voices, Conner concludes:

Missional theology is a kind of practical theology that explores in every aspect of the theological curriculum and praxis of the church the implications of the missionary nature of God with the purpose of forming congregations to better articulate the gospel and to live faithfully their vocation to participate in the ongoing redemptive mission of God in a particular context. (39)

Chapter three presents a broad overview of the *Practicing Our Faith* conversation that is commensurately judicious and fulsome with his preceding chapter on missional theology. The *Practicing Our Faith* series is an intentional conversation oriented around religious practices funded by the Lilly Endowment and administered by the Valparaiso Project. The conversation has taken shape amidst the decline of mainline Protestantism in North America. In Dykstra’s words, *Practicing Our Faith* is “a theological movement that is invested in the quality and depth of the practices of faithful Christian living” (47). Conner outlines the theological background and foundational assumptions of the practices discussion, arguing that the conversation coalesces around six aspects of Christian practice: historical, social, universal, local, conversional/ transformational, and witnessing. The telos of Christian practices in this specific movement is worship, broadly defined: “Worship is all the practices *in nuce*” (67).

Chapter four narrows the practices discussion by engaging one of the discussion’s most influential and prolific exponents: Craig Dykstra. It is in Dykstra’s particular articulations of Christian practice that Conner finds the greatest reservoir for the missional mash-up he envisions. Conner carefully traces Dykstra’s theological development, drawing particular attention to Dykstra’s re-

sistance to the “clerical paradigm” in view of a “strong theology of the laity” (75). Conner shows how Dykstra’s theological trajectory was impacted by the works of Edward Farley and Alasdair MacIntyre, but what is most significant about Conner’s reading of Dykstra is the latent missional thrust he finds in Dykstra’s oeuvre. Conner writes, “I believe once one understands Dykstra’s way of speaking about mission in terms of participation in the ongoing redemptive work of God, the idea of mission can be found embedded in virtually every other essay in that collection” (85). Dykstra becomes a kind of theological hinge for Conner, enabling him toward his fusion of missional theology and Christian practices under the heading of *practicing witness*.

Practicing Witness arises from the assumption, gleaned from the missional church conversation, that “mission is not an optional second movement for the worshiping community” (87). Rather, it “reorients” the *Practicing Our Faith* discussion toward a deeper and broader purpose: the redemptive activity of the *Missio Dei*. At the same time, the *Practicing Our Faith* discussion lends itself to missional theology, giving the latter “some shape and direction” (88). At day’s end, Conner envisions a mutually edifying collaboration between the two conversations that supplement the other’s weakness and complement the other’s strengths vis-à-vis the current cultural realities to which each faithfully responds (see Conner’s helpful chart on p. 99).

Conner succeeds in facilitating a conversation “across departmental borders” that catalyzes “fresh reflection on the ministry of the church” (106). These benefits notwithstanding, the work could have been strengthened in several ways. First, I would have appreciated greater terminological precision in Conner’s text. He frequently employs the terms “postmodern” and “post-Christendom” while providing little or no help to his reader as to how he understands these terms. For instance, he follows Kathleen Cahalan’s distinction between late modern, radical postmodern, and countermodern approaches to practical theology. He then focuses upon the countermodern “approach to post-Christendom, postmodern practical theology” (49) without providing any rationale for ignoring the other two approaches. Why? What makes this “approach” better suited to the contextual complexities besetting the church? One could make the argument that the “radical postmodern” approach is better suited to deconstructing the marginalization of differently abled persons from societal and ecclesial structures, which Conner explicitly desires (3), but Conner himself does not explicitly make this claim.

Second, Conner’s conversation is sketched too narrowly. Conner himself is theologically Reformed, as are his most salient conversation partners (Hunsberger, Guder, Dykstra, and Serene Jones). This denominational circumscription gives the book an intermural feel, and one gets the impression that Conner views his own theological tradition as the only valid theological perspective with the chance of responding to the “postmodern post-Christendom” context pervading the North American religious landscape. Conner acknowledges this “foundational assumption” (7), but he fails to put such an assumption sufficiently to the test when he stresses the need to “extend the conversation” to the theological insights emerging from the surge of Christian converts in developing nations of the Global South (103–5).

Lastly, I would have liked to see the “theology associated with the disability movement” (110) integrated into Conner’s theological proposal. Even as he seeks to overcome a certain marginalization of differently abled persons from church and society, his own approach re-inscribes the very marginalization he seeks to overcome. Conner bookends his argument with a few anecdotes from his work with differently abled teens, making the de facto argument that such persons are peripheral to God’s redemptive mission and the church’s praxis. Moreover, in what seems little more than political correctness, Conner introduces a few theological voices who write in the area of disability studies. How might such important work critique the practices and missional theology conversations from within?

In spite of these critiques, Conner has written a splendid book that will be a welcome resource to those wishing to learn more about the *Practicing Our Faith* and missional church conversations. Those who teach in the area of practical theology will find Conner’s book a particularly welcome resource for introducing students to these discussions in a clear and compelling manner.

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