

James Henry Harris. *No Longer Bound: A Theology of Reading and Preaching*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013. 244 pages. \$22.50.

No Longer Bound is a homiletic mix-tape of recognizable theological and philosophical greats sampled to make the argument that “there is a positive correlation between Black sermonic discourse as communication, personal narratives as texts, and a Black practical theology of freedom as the necessary hermeneutic for interpreting the cultural, economic, social, and political lives of Black people” (7). James Henry Harris eschews systematic theology in favor of a practical theology in order to retrieve the experiences and theologies of those traditionally left out of academic theologizing, but whose “feet are firmly placed on the ground” making sense of the worlds they inhabit. Harris goal is “to shape sermonic discourse afresh such that it becomes an act of love as well as a sign and symbol of love in service to the people and the Word of God” (8). Harris understands preaching as an act of freedom and an act of love. His personal narrative, critique of literature and film, use of philosophical hermeneutics, semiotics, critical theory and black theology each contribute to his goal of reshaping black sermonic discourse.

Harris makes clear that preaching requires extra-biblical reading in the service of one determinant alone and that is an acknowledgment and eradication of racism. While each chapter ends with a sermon, his book is not an exploration in homiletic methodology. This book is not text on how to preach but rather how to prepare for the preaching moment. *No Longer Bound* is partly memoir, theory of reading for preaching, foray into hermeneutics and phenomenology for preaching, and sampling of the kind of preaching that brings each of these pieces together. *No Longer Bound* also begins to critique the literary and cultural function of the symbol of race in literature from the United States as it reimagines the preacher as an accessible and significant public intellectual.

Harris begins by identifying that “Homiletics and hermeneutics are first and foremost about reading and understanding as a prelude to preaching” (28). The strength of his book lies in the myriad examples from some of the aforementioned sources, but the very strength of the book belies its only fault: the weakness of the occasional unsustained argument. For example, he argues from Charles Taylor’s *The Ethics of Authenticity* “modern understanding of identity and recognition is highly correlated with the ideal of authenticity” (111). His point then is underscored by a reference to Taylor’s “citizen-dignity” and a reference to the quest of black dignity in the United States. He asserts recognition is as important as compensation. This chapter section makes the final point that preaching is in the service of recognizing folks rendered invisible. While human understanding and recognition are important aspects of a theology of reading and preaching especially for a people whose painful history is more reflective of the absence of recognition, Harris does not provide the reader propositions that expound the categories of his theology of reading and preaching. Instead he ends with a sermon. He does warn the reader in the introduction that “Each chapter concludes with a sermon that allows the reader to use her imagination to make connections between the theological discourse and the sermonic discourse” (9). The disclaimer is likely the pedagogic intent of a seasoned professor, but yet the open-endedness of the arguments might provide less of a theology of reading and preaching, and more a do-it yourself kit for assembling one’s own own theology of reading and preaching from the samples given.

The book would benefit from one adjustment: a concise statement on his theology of reading and preaching supported by subsequent moves he made quite well. Notwithstanding, the

success of *No Longer Bound* is two-fold. Harris' personal accounts of his childhood, seminary, and pastoral experiences are a gift, especially to the student of preaching. Harris is a gifted writer and reads his life against a black American experience, an American literary past that has struggled with its legacy of racism and bigotry, and white Christian tradition coming to terms with its colonialism and oppressive past, and black church culture, which is both good and evil, blessing and curse. He also weaves Bonhoeffer and Tillich, Ricoeur and Gadamer, Charles Taylor and Charles Long, Mark Twain and James Baldwin, and others to demonstrate how to read for preaching. For Harris literature, poetry, music, philosophy, linguistics, theology, critical theory, and Bible can each contribute to the goal of freedom, which for him is the "unbinding power of the imagination" (6). He demonstrates in his sermonizing how to include outside reading in preaching, he gives a clear narrative on how his own preaching has benefitted from this reading.

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