

## Book review

June Alliman Yoder

*Preaching as Testimony*, by Anna Carter Florence. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007.

**S**ome of us would say that testimony is really the core of preaching. A faithful preacher is one who can testify or give witness to what she has come to know through careful listening to scripture and to the Holy Spirit who gives her the message for this time and place. Anna Carter Florence is helping us hear with new ears this

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old preaching tradition, which is again getting attention in preaching circles. Like legal witnesses who testify only to what they have seen or heard, so the preacher must preach what he knows, not what he has merely heard about. Thank you, Anna Carter Florence, for a brilliantly written, magnificent study of this traditional preaching style.

One of my friends always skips to the last chapter of a book and then decides whether to read the whole volume. That approach won't work for this masterpiece. This is not a collection of stand-alone essays. More inductive in nature, this book's sections carefully build on what has gone before, and without the early chapters, the last chapters are only mildly interesting and helpful.

Florence begins with a brief but careful essay in which she describes her thesis and defines her terms. This section of the book is essential to understanding the sections that follow. She then adopts a case study format, with three uncredentialed women preachers as her subjects: Anne Marbury Hutchinson (1591–1643), Sarah Osborn (1714–96), and Jarena Lee (1783–?). Using their stories, Florence identifies a preaching tradition that is

not just for these long-ago women but for us all. “In these narratives,” she tells us, we “hear echoes of our own conversations. . . . In these stories, unfinished and ongoing, lie the bright threads of an unmistakable tradition of preaching women and preaching men, becoming preachers in America. It is a tradition that belongs to us all” (4). The three stories are captivating, showing us how preachers in the testimony tradition develop. Though the women’s stories differ markedly, Florence helps us hear the important overtones in all of them.

Next comes a provocative treatment of Paul Ricoeur’s argument that all Christian interpretation is based not in facts but “in testimony, which is an entirely interpretive framework” (61), and then a discussion of Walter Brueggemann’s contribution on testimony as biblical speech. These pieces help us see testimony as authentic Christian and biblical speech.

The following section looks at testimony as theology, through the work of theologians Mary McClintock Fulkerson and Rebecca Chopp. Each contributes a perspective that gives depth to the notion that testimony is the theology of proclamation. These writers impel us toward working the theology of testimony into our own preaching.

In the last section of the book, Florence helps us understand how we can become practitioners of testimony preaching. After telling us something of her own journey, she invites us to join step by step in moving toward becoming “wide-awake preachers”—but only after she has walked us through the barriers that keep us from being faithful.

I think of this book as an onion. Usually the onion metaphor asks us to imagine peeling away layers. The movement of this volume reverses that action: Florence first gives us the center, and then chapter by chapter adds layers, until in the end the whole is revealed.

If you are committed to biblical preaching and looking for a faithful and energizing new perspective for preaching, I urge you to read *Preaching as Testimony* and accept Anna Carter Florence’s invitation to become a wide-awake preacher.

### **About the reviewer**

June Alliman Yoder is Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Elkhart, Indiana) professor emerita of communication and preaching and lives in Goshen, Indiana.