Craig Hovey, *Bearing True Witness: Truthfulness in Christian Practice*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011. 258 pp. $27.00. ISBN 978-0-8028-6581-6 (pbk).

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It is easier to use Christian rhetoric than to live faithfully as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Craig Hovey has made an important contribution to the discussion about how Christians develop the skills to bear witness in both word and deed to the gospel of Jesus Christ. In this theologically and philosophically rich text, he challenges readers not to rest content with churning out abstract theories, but instead to attend to the practices necessary to produce people whose actions make it possible for them to proclaim God’s truth with integrity. He points toward the church as an alternative politics that sustains truthful witness to the good news of Christ’s resurrection.

Hovey brings a diverse assortment of theologians and other thinkers into the discussion, including Gregory of Nyssa, Nietzsche, Foucault, Barth, Yoder, and Hauerwas, all of whom resist abstract accounts of how we see, know, and live in accordance with truth. He critically mines their work to undergird the claim that “the Christian life is not an application of principles, but a concrete, communal, hermeneutical process” (21). In contrast to Enlightenment claims for the objectivity and disinterestedness of seekers of truth, this project affirms that those who bear witness to the Lordship of Christ must be formed in ways that make “possible the discovery of what it means for someone to be a lord…[and] for something to be true” (26).

As an Eastern Orthodox Christian, this reviewer rejoices that Hovey grounds a chapter on “Seeing God” in Gregory of Nyssa’s *The Life of Moses*. He notes a point of similarity between Eastern apophatic theology and postmodernism’s “parallel way of affirming a dialectic between knowing and unknowing” (31). The desire for *thesis* observes no upward limit, which protects the visionary from the idolatry of human experience and concepts. Ever truer vision grows from “actively engaging in a way of life called discipleship” (36). Hovey demonstrates that Gregory’s stance coheres with the gospels’ portraits of the disciples’ growing knowledge of the identity of Jesus.
An abiding challenge for believers is to develop “the moral skills that accompany a competent Christian witness as one who can see the risen Christ” (41). Drawing on Nietzsche’s critique of Enlightenment epistemological assumptions about objectivity, Hovey affirms that cultivating “a new way of seeing” is a more appropriate means of describing the fundamental task of Christian ethics than is the effort to make abstract “criteriological decisions made…prior to any ethical involvement” (54).

Developing the skills to embrace contingency is necessary for this account of forming witnesses, as Christian proclamation focuses on what God does and not on theoretical abstraction. Hovey puts it nicely, “Here witness indicates not only that one cannot give a theory of Jesus, but one also cannot even give a theory of contingency…[A]ny contingency that is theory-described can no longer really be said to be contingent” (60).

Human beings learn to see mundane realities such as forests and cities in light of certain practices and social locations. Likewise, the vision of witnesses to the risen Lord grows from the practices and community that are necessary for the undertaking of discipleship.

Hovey employs Foucault’s account of parrhesia as “the virtue of witness that lies behind the moment of coming forward and, for Christians, enables a witness that is simultaneously bold and patient” (94). This rhetorical strategy challenges modes of discourse that are produced by the practices of the dominant powers. “Put simply, what Foucault provides is a demonstration that social critique is possible without appealing to transcendent metaphysical notions that his Nietzschean sensibilities will not allow” (110). He places priority “logically and historically” on “the activity and the person of the truth-teller” (116). Hovey notes that Foucault did not appreciate the key role of parrhesia in the New Testament as a distinctive speech act enabled by the Holy Spirit in apostolic preaching and witness. The social location of such free speech is the Church, a polis more inclusive than that of any empire and concretely manifest in “real gatherings in which the people of God are either present or represented” (125).

Indeed, Hovey argues that parrhesia is characteristic of the gospel itself, as is evidenced by the dependence of the disciples, the New Testament church, and the martyrs on the power of the Holy Spirit. They were not advocates for agendas or possessors of necessary truths, but witnesses to what God has done and is doing. As such, their witness is radically contingent upon the self-revelation of the Holy Trinity.

The author criticizes the church in the West for embracing liberalism’s “unity-generating loyalties that limit the role of Christianity…by disallowing the kind of parochial, politically external living for communities on which it in fact depends” (144). The particular practices of the faith do not, however, amount to abandonment of the larger world, for through
its communal life “the church inhabits the goods of the life it has been given through grace…[and] testifies to its conviction that these are genuine goods for all people” (146).

While Hovey notes Barth’s “notoriously underdeveloped ecclesiology,” he recognizes “solid Barthian themes” in the claim that the existence of the church—not “general human experience” or another “basic anthropological starting point”—is both a part and a presupposition of the proclamation of the gospel (178). The practices of the community sustain truthful witness, a fragile endeavor manifested by the “confession of historical contingencies,” especially the resurrection of the Christ. The martyrs are paradigmatic examples of witnesses who refused to accept false substitutes for the truth of the Lord.

Hovey’s argument would be enhanced by a thicker account of how the church forms faithful witnesses across the generations and in various times and places, perhaps by appeal to the lives of particular saints, monastics, and martyrs. Given the theological and moral fragmentation of Christianity, the book would benefit from greater specificity on the nature of the church in order to direct readers’ attention away from abstraction and toward concrete practice. If it is the case that certain ecclesial bodies are better at bearing witness than others, the author would do well to highlight their examples more clearly and to give a rationale for why that is the case. In a book that prizes contingency, an appeal to particular communities would be fitting.

Nevertheless, this book succeeds in providing a thoughtful account of the practice of truthful witness in the context of postliberal theology and the larger postmodern intellectual conversation associated with figures such as Nietzsche and Foucault. It will be of interest to scholars of contemporary Christian thought and practice, and would be useful as a text for advanced students. It is also an invitation for additional work on the practical theological question of how the church produces disciples prepared to proclaim the gospel in both word and deed.