

A New Look at an Ancient Practice: Public Reading in a Plugged in Church

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The phone message was this: a group of pastors and laypersons had called to request a workshop. The topic? “The Oral Reading of Scripture.” Was this topic even relevant anymore? Apparently so. Within the swirling vortex of a mass-media culture stood a group of individuals who were interested in improving the quality of their oral presentations of scripture. This group believed that skill in oral reading of scripture is as important to the proclamation of the gospel as it has ever been. This came as something of a surprise to me, and a challenge to rethink the practice of oral reading in an electronic culture.

The Public Reading of Scripture: A Lost Art?

Lynn Miller wonders whether the art of reading itself is becoming “lost” in the avalanche of new electronic technologies. “One technology we fear will be left behind is the act of reading itself, something which for many of us epitomized a rich, and private, and highly individualized activity.”¹ She should go into a bookstore on a Friday night sometime. Readers lounge in comfort with a cup of coffee nearby “lost” in literature of all kinds. Books are highly marketable commodities on the Internet. One popular television host even conducts a book discussion on her show. It doesn’t look like reading is a lost art. Does the “new” media encourage or discourage the practice of reading? That question is still open for debate.

1. Lynn C. Miller, “The Study of Literature in Performance: A Future?” in *The Future of Performance Studies: Visions and Revisions*, introduced and edited by Sheron J. Dailey (Annandale, VA: National Communication Association, 1998), 10.

Walter Ong tells us that electronic technology has deeply affected the way we speak and listen.² Those of us who preach, read scripture, and plan worship experiences these days are only beginning to get our bearings within the vortex of this communications revolution. Those who were calling to ask for a workshop on how to do these readings were doing just that.

Mining the Old Tradition for New Gold

Two traditions of interpreting scripture will help us answer their concern. The first tradition has been identified by various names, “communicative reading,” “oral study of literature,” “oral interpretation,” or simply, “interpretation.” At the time that I entered formal graduate study in this discipline, it provided a better conceptual framework and set of practices for the oral study of scripture than did biblical scholarship. Reading a text aloud to appreciate both its logical and emotive content in order to share the experience of the literature with an audience was recognized and valued as a form of interpretation.

When it came to reading biblical literature, the late Charlotte Lee, one of the primary teachers in the field, assumed that “the Bible, like all other great literature, must be read aloud to realize its full potential.”³ Her voice joined others arising from the field who, for a long period of time, “magnified” the public reading of scripture “lest the people might not otherwise hear the Bible or might neglect reading it at home.”⁴ Now, however, “oral interpretation” has taken a turn away from its focus on “literature” and toward the study of performance in culture. Now the discipline studies a widening range of cultural

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2. Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982), 1-3.
 3. Charlotte Lee, *Oral Reading of the Scriptures* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), v.
 4. S. S. Curry, *Vocal and Literary Interpretation of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1903), 22.

events ranging from theatrical performances to street demonstrations, from street corner rap to storytelling, from festivals to personal conversation. The formal study of human performance is no longer constrained by narrow, pejorative associations with theater arts nor is it bound to printed texts. It believes that human beings are fundamentally performing creatures “who engage in an ongoing process of giving speech to their thoughts and feelings.”⁵ This means that it is through “performances” of various kinds that we humans construct, constitute, and sustain our cultural and individual identities.

Performance studies’ expansion of its boundaries has consequences and implications for the “oral interpretation” of the Bible. It is more difficult to develop a ready rationale for an oral study of the Bible or any other kind of “traditional literature” from within the discipline of performance studies. In fact, “textual objects” of any sort, or “textualism” of any kind is suspected by one influential thinker in the discipline as a “fundamentalism,” an inhibiting construct, which “makes it difficult to rethink performance.”⁶ It is a little harder these days to drop one’s hand into this swirling sea of performance theory and retrieve some helpful tools and constructs for this work but it can still be done.

On the other hand, a turn away from literature and toward “performance in culture” has happened at a time when biblical scholarship has joined with other kinds of communication studies to reassess the “orality” of scripture. Tom Boomershine is a biblical scholar who writes: “The foundational conclusion of this research has been that changes in communications systems are related to profound shifts in modes of perception and thought, patterns of cultural formation, and religious values.”⁷

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5. Ronald J. Pelias, *Performance Studies: The Interpretation of Aesthetic Texts* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 7.
 6. Dwight Conquergood, “Beyond the Text: Toward a Performative Cultural Politics,” in *The Future of Performance Studies*, 26.
 7. “Jesus of Nazareth and the Watershed of Ancient Orality and Literacy,” *Semeia* 65 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994): 8.

Such shifts have exposed new links between performance studies and biblical studies. What performance studies have gained in the expansion of its research boundaries is a new and revitalized sense of its value to the study of human communication and culture. First, by pressing us past a preoccupation with literary “texts,” Dwight Conquergood reasons that “performance-sensitive ways of knowing . . . will extend (our) understanding of multiple dimensions and offer a wider range of meaningful action.”⁸ Included within that “wider range of meaningful action” is a performance-sensitive study of oral reading and preaching that will help close the distance, for example, between “literate” and “nonliterate” cultures, and between classical, Eurocentric homiletics and theories of preaching drawn from other cultural histories and experiences. Second, performance studies links with biblical scholarship to take “orality” quite seriously. Texts and traditions of interpreting them lie in the dynamic space between “writing” and “speech.” What Robert Frost once said still resonates, especially in developing “oral” hermeneutics for biblical study and performance: “Expression in oral reading rather than intelligent comment is made the test of appreciation.”⁹

Finding New Reasons for the Oral Study of Scripture

We need to build a new rationale for a study of scripture that is sensitive to its orality and value as a text for performance. We can build this new rationale on three planks. Here is the first: effective oral reading of biblical texts deepens and enhances liturgical communication. When those pastors and lay leaders called to ask if I was willing to offer a workshop in the oral reading of scripture, they were expressing their interest in deepening and enhancing the experience and communicative value of corporate worship. They were

8. Conquergood, “Beyond the Text,” 26.

9. William H. Pritchard, *Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 60.

acknowledging that worship is (among other things) a series of speech acts. Charles Bartow writes, "Worship is an experience in which we listen to and talk with God and one another."¹⁰ Worship is a communicative act in which we say something to ourselves and others about God and specifically about what God has done in Jesus Christ.

What we as Christians seek in worship is an encounter with God through communion with Christ. Our understanding about the nature of Christ's Presence among us is undergoing transformation. We are aware of some attempts to relocate "Jesus" in a history behind literary texts. The search for a "historical" Jesus that is the "real" one is getting a lot of attention. Literary texts do not say everything that can be said about what God has done and is doing through the Resurrection of Christ. Yet worship is a performance in which various kinds of texts are enacted, and by God's grace and through that enactment we are brought into the Mystery of Christ's Presence. Worship is more than rational assent to ideas and propositions; "the revelation of Jesus' communication does not consist of an intellectual idea; it discloses a way of being."¹¹

The public reading of scripture is one of those speech acts that worship leaders can do that makes the presence of Christ "come alive" in the community's hearing. It is one of the formal ways that we "talk" with one another about God and a means by which God "talks" with us. What is at issue is the quality of this kind of talk. Tom Driver characterizes modes of ritual speaking and acting in our churches and culture as impoverished.¹² This

10. Charles L. Bartow, *Effective Speech Communication in Leading Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), 21.

11. Pierre Babin with Mercedes Iannone, *The New Era in Religious Communication*, trans. David Smith (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 71.

12. Tom F. Driver, *The Magic of Ritual: Our Need for Liberating Rites That Transform Our Lives and Our Communities* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991), 81.

concern is what lies underneath the effort to enliven the public reading of scripture in worship—it is to make the act itself more viable as oral communication.

Reading scripture aloud is an act that is framed within liturgical performance and is subject to the rules of that performance. For example, in some communities of faith, the expectation is that a reader of scripture will not establish eye contact during the reading, lest that action distract the listener from the hearing of the Word. The actual biblical text is displayed as a sacred object by being carried in a procession, then placed upon a lectern or stand. The text itself may be richly ornamented and put on display, thus endowing its presence in the community as a prominent “voice.”

In other communities the participants are expected to carry their own personal Bibles into worship with them and follow along in silence while the preacher or reader reads the text aloud and then offers interpretative comments on it. They may even be asked to read aloud and in unison from Bibles distributed in the seats or read antiphonally in one of varied forms of responsive readings. Electronic technology has now made it possible to display texts on projectors, making books or printed matter unnecessary. Some communities perform texts together through congregational singing or chanting.

The practices of reading the Bible in worship are as varied as the traditions of liturgical performance in which they arise, and will continue to take new expressive forms as electronic technology shapes corporate worship practices. Yet even on that vast, shifting landscape, there will certainly be a place for one who will stand and orally present the words of scripture as printed in the Bible. I do not foresee electronic technology eclipsing the importance of this traditional means of addressing the community with words from a sacred book.

In fact, given the burgeoning variety of choices for reading scripture in corporate worship, I see an opportunity for this traditional means of speaking the scriptures to take on renewed importance as a special communicative event within the

performance of the liturgy. What was once familiar may appear strange in this new climate of liturgical expression.

Not long ago, I attended a service of worship in a Benedictine community near my home. The service is open to the community and is held in an old barn on the property, refurbished for use as a worship center. There was standing room only in the space and the experience itself was so richly textured that I can scarcely devote the space here to give it a full, descriptive report. But I will say that I was quite taken with the way the scriptures were orally performed.

Two lay readers in that community had emerged with a special vocation for leading this part of worship. Neither of these two readers was particularly trained as actors or oral interpreters. They did, however, grasp the idea that such an act of leadership in worship required certain competencies—an understanding of worship, prayerful attention and study of what the text was saying, how the priest would use the text in the homily, and what vocal and physical behaviors would evoke an affective response to the texts when read aloud. I heard many people complement them after the service by saying, “I had never *heard* it that way before!”

In what other place in our lives do we bear witness to one who stands in front of the gathering and reads aloud to us from a book? Like the soloist in the choir, the reader of scripture may become one of a growing ensemble of liturgical performers who commands our respect and attention as the bearer of words from a sacred text.

Reading Dramatizes Theology

The second plank in our rationale is this: effective oral reading of biblical texts is embodied theology. In that request from those pastors and lay leaders was not only a concern for enriching liturgical communication, there was also the echo of some theological convictions about the Bible. In their request was an affirmation of the Bible’s importance as an authoritative guide for Christian faith and practice. We read the Bible aloud because we still believe that it is crucial to our understanding of

a Judeo-Christian ethic of justice and liberation. The Bible remains a locus for God's revelation to Israel, the Church, and the world of human affairs.

Leander Keck suggests, however, that confidence in the Bible's capacity to speak a Word from God has dangerously eroded in many communities.¹³ The Bible is held in such scrutiny that we keep it at a safe distance, limiting its capacity to speak, question, interrogate, comfort, or confront. Poor or indifferent public readings muffle it further, aggravate confusion over what texts mean, and deaden the Bible's presence and vitality even in the communities it was written for.

Another concern arises from parts of the Bible that are experienced by some as "texts of terror." Mary Catherine Hilkert warns that "the conviction that the Christian assembly gathers to be shaped by the text can be dangerous "to women, Jews, gays and lesbians, or whoever functions as the subordinated, rejected, or demonized 'other'."¹⁴ Ron Allen feels that sometimes it is necessary to preach against such texts in order to proclaim God's good news. Ellen Davis acknowledges that the writers of either Testament were not "at all times successful in upholding the mystery and radical grace of God's presence," but warns against writing off texts with an attitude of "moral superiority."¹⁵ Keck wants to make the Bible a companion more than a useful object; he wants to allow its "mythological character to restore our imagination" rather than start fights over "what it means." To do so, we must find ways to "develop a new relation to the Bible, and to begin afresh to think everything through."¹⁶

13. Leander Keck, "The Pre-Modern Bible in the Post-Modern World," *Interpretation* 50, no. 2 (April 1996): 130.

14. Mary Catherine Hilkert, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1997), 16.

15. Ellen Davis, *Imagination Shaped: Old Testament Preaching in the Anglican Tradition* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995), 263.

16. Keck, 138, 135.

To make the effort to enliven the public reading of scripture is to work in collaboration with God's Spirit to make the Bible a companion by creating a deeper and more enhanced experience of worship. It means that we bring the resources of our God-given imaginations—our thoughts, our experiences, our convictions and questions—to the task of speaking scripture. It also means that we bring our voices and physical presence into the act to enable a biblical text to speak within the growing cacophony of voices that address us. The primary responsibility an oral reader has is to “enable the hearers to enter the world that Scripture discloses and thus make a genuine choice about whether they will live there.”¹⁷

To consider this kind of effort often awakens resistances of all kinds that also have theological implications. There is, for example, a lingering assumption in consciousness and in memory that since the Bible is sacred, then its content will be sufficiently communicated when read aloud, regardless of how skillful or inept, how prepared or unprepared the reader is. Since anybody who can read can also read aloud, then a reader needs not make an effort since the words can speak for themselves.

There are other times when resistances to this effort are organized around the word “dramatic.” I have often heard the objection: “I don't want to become too ‘dramatic!’” I take this to mean that the reader does not want to call attention to his or her gifts (or lack thereof) for animated speech and gesticulation that have little or nothing to do with what is being read. It recalls a period in the history of speech instruction when the content and meaning of literary materials were subsumed to the vocal artistry and histrionics of “elocutionists.”¹⁸

17. Davis, *Imagination Shaped*, 250.

18. I am indebted to Charles L. Bartow here. See his article, “In Service to the Servants of the Word: Teaching Speech at Princeton Seminary,” *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 13, no. 3 (1992): 275-76.

“Elocution” was a thorough and extensive training program within speech education. It involved exercising the speaker’s voice and body so that the speaker might “give proper expression to the best thought” offered either by “great authors” or the speaker’s own.¹⁹ The challenge to any speaker at that time was to make oneself understood in large auditoriums. Voices that were audible, flexible, and full of variety in pitch, tone, and attitude were requirements for public speaking and reading of texts before there were microphones. Developing one’s vocal and physical dexterity to meet the demands of communicating speeches and texts was considered a means to an end, not an end in itself. Effective public reading, like any other form of public address, means achieving a balance of emphasis between the speaker, what the speaker is saying, and whom the speaker is addressing. Elocutionists placed primary emphasis upon the skill and technique of the speakers in reading scripture aloud.

Yet we can also see how the pendulum swung away from such concerns. We may laugh at the elocutionists’ posturing in the dimming recesses of our memory, but we have paid a high price for neglecting this kind of study. Most of us attended seminaries where the study of scripture was conducted with virtually no regard for training public readers of scripture. With the remarkable exception of Princeton Theological Seminary, there are relatively few courses offered where theological students perform and practice an oral study of biblical texts. The neglect is nothing new. S. S. Curry complained nearly a century ago that “there is no well-defined conception or realization of the power of the living voice to interpret (a biblical text’s) meaning.”²⁰ The study of scripture is conducted

19. Herman Cohen, *The History of Speech Communication: The Emergence of a Discipline, 1914-1945* (Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1994), 98. Cohen is citing an essay by R. L. Lyman, “Oral English in the High School,” *Quarterly Journal of Public Speaking*, 1 (1915): 241-59.

20. Curry, *Vocal and Literary Interpretation*, 22.

almost completely in silence. There is very little sense of the value of “sounding” scriptures in order to study them, much less some determination of how we should speak them aloud in corporate worship. Perhaps the old departed elocutionists were so excessive in their emphasis upon mannerisms and gesticulations that they scared us off from oral studies and renderings of scripture. However, we are seeing the consequences of silent, detached, and solitary readings of biblical texts. Public readers are ill prepared for the demands of reading aloud, listeners are indifferent to the content and claims of Bible texts, and overly dependent upon professionals to explain what the scriptures mean. Now the pendulum has swung again, this time in the direction of the audience. Some forms of criticism emphasize that the reader is the sole creator of meaning. Authors are “fictions,” the meanings of texts indeterminate outside of the reader’s subjectivity, and the act of interpretation itself is extremely politicized. Interpretation is an act that privileges some readings while silencing others.

We live in a highly politicized climate for interpretation where “fear” is a recognizable response! All interpretations are contested. Why should we be surprised at anyone’s lack of confidence in one’s choice for interpretation—oral, “dramatic,” or otherwise? Still, one of the ghosts that haunts and inhibits the work of the oral, public reader of scripture is that of the platform performer of long ago whose excessive concentration on vocal technique and style puts us off. One woman said the following thing to me in a class: “I don’t want to be too dramatic in my reading because I want to maintain the theological integrity of the text.” “Dramatic” is a pejorative term that often drives a wedge between what we want to speak (a text or message) and the way we want to say it. This perception inhibits one’s desire to “work on” one’s public reading of a biblical text. These readers feel they might somehow intrude upon the way that God is addressing the hearer through the text if they “put too much of themselves into it.” There are other ways we can use “dramatic” as a term that

integrates our theological and stylistic interests where public reading is concerned.

“Being dramatic” is nothing more than responding to a basic human impulse to “show” and “tell.” “Showing” and “telling” are actions “based in conflict and dramatic in nature.”²¹ There is something in our characters as human beings that urges us to tell our stories to one another as a way of showing how conflicts achieved (or failed to achieve) resolution. In the telling, we “show” ourselves on the various “stages” we inhabit and reveal ourselves to be competent performers of the narratives we make.

What flows from showing and telling are two kinds of traditions. On the one hand, “tellings” can evolve into oral and literary narrative traditions; “showings” can develop into either ritual or theatrical traditions. All showings and tellings are communicative acts because they presuppose that there will be a response from those who receive them. In fact, audiences are also actors because they collaborate with speakers in making the message event meaningful.

When a reader stands in the assembly to orally present the scripture, that reader is standing at a place where showing and telling converge. By reading the text aloud, he or she is “re-oralizing” the written tradition of scripture; the performed text is a gateway by which reader and listener enter into the experience of an other who also struggles with God’s presence in human experience. It is through this sort of encounter that we achieve a richer, fuller understanding of our own situations.

By standing (as the reader will most likely do) in the assembly of worshipers, the reader is taking a particular part in the performance of a sacred ritual. The reader “shows” that he or she is visible and radically present in the performance as a willing participant. The reader also “shows” through the public reading that the scriptures are a highly valued and privileged voice and presence in the ritual, a voice that will evoke responses from all who listen. The reader is the one who

21. Pelias, *Performance Studies*, 47.

mediates the voice and presence of the scriptures by lending his or her own voice and presence and allowing the scripture to speak. He or she “draws on both oral and written traditions” to speak in a manner that is “more oral-centered than print-centered.”²²

A public reading is an embodied mediation that involves what the text says, how the reader speaks it, how the listener hears it, and what God might say through it. Mediation might be imagined as a web of encounters. The one who will read the text in public encounters the words of the text by reading it in silence and then aloud. As the reader studies the text by asking questions of it, investigating its historical and literary context, deciding what the author of the text seems to be saying to its auditors, and where to place vocal emphasis, the reader opens himself or herself up to an encounter with God’s Word through the text. It is the experience of that encounter which the reader intends to share in the act of reading that text to a group of listeners. To convey meaning, the reader uses the resources of his or her voice, body, thought, and attitude. This is what makes it embodied. It is an act of mediation that communicates the thought, attitude, and spirit of the biblical text to its auditors. This dynamic of “words becoming flesh” is what makes a reading dramatic.

“Dramatic” is a viable term that describes how the text functions as effective and incarnational communication. Dramatic reading is not so named because it employs stylistic conventions appropriate to the theater. It is dramatic because it effects a transaction between the biblical text and its several auditors. In this transaction, the words printed on the page become an experience in literature, liturgy, and theology for both readers and hearers. What the preacher (or some other public reader) aims for is not simply the oral transmission of the words that appear on the page in front of the reader or congregation, but a lively encounter through which a text (that

22. Carol Simpson Stern and Bruce Henderson, *Performance: Texts and Contexts* (New York: Longman, 1993), 3.

which is written and read from a page) becomes a form of aesthetic communication (a creative act in time in which meanings are made).

This is a place where “performance” becomes a helpful word. It clarifies our theology of communication for speaking texts aloud. Performance is usually used as a way of describing the work of the individual in reading scripture aloud. The word literally means “form coming through” and can describe the dynamics of oral reading. From this angle, we see one who is preparing to read scripture to the assembly. He or she has worked on understanding the text itself, how it is constructed and what it is trying to say to any who would hear it. The performer also works at placing the resources of his or her body and voice into the service of what the text might be saying or doing in the assembly. The mediation of the text’s multiple meanings takes concrete shape in the public reading. A text’s form and structure are transformed into a living presence forged by the mediation between text, reader, and hearer. *Performance* is the term that helps us catch and hold the meaning of this emergent moment in liturgical time.

Yet, “performance” has wider theological implications and applications. Nicholas Lash uses the term to create an image of the Christian congregation’s relationship to biblical texts. “The fundamental form of the Christian interpretation of scripture,” says Lash, “is the performance of the biblical text.”²³ Here Lash means that we are to construe “the life, activity and organization of the believing community” as a “‘rendering,’ bearing witness to, one whose words and deeds, discourse and suffering, ‘rendered’ the truth of God in human history.”²⁴ So we can say with Lash that the form of the scripture “comes through” in the life of the congregation.

“Performance” describes the work of the public reader who offers an oral, incarnational and communicative act as an

23. Nicholas Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London, SCM Press, 1986), 42.

24. *Ibid.*, 42.

interpretation of scripture in the gathered assembly. It also describes the vital relationship that a Christian community has with those written texts it has deemed sacred and capable of having revelatory power. What these texts reveal and disclose is the story of Jesus as a story of God's work in the world. "Performance" indicates those practices that a community does in the name of Christ and which are empowered, interrogated, inspired, and even judged by Christ's risen presence.

Reading as Sacred Play

Now, we lay the third plank: reading the Bible aloud is playful. When the reader settles into that comfortable chair in the old, used bookstore on a rainy Saturday afternoon, it is a pleasurable event. Reading is one of the many ways that we human beings "play." It is a form of "free activity, standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary life' as being 'not serious'" but at the same time utterly and completely absorbing.²⁵ Freedom to play with language in this and many other ways is what makes us human.

I want to accent this image of reading as play because I believe that a spirit of play is sorely needed for reading the Bible in public. We all shudder when we think of those pieces we had to memorize at church or school, standing and stiffly declaiming what we learned from a page. Or we squirm when we think of the awkward, obligatory fumbling with a text we are likely to hear on Sunday morning. What we are after is a means of releasing the words from a text into a lively and expressive form of speech; we aim to transform the record of an experience into an experience itself. To read aloud and to read well is an invitation to play, that is, to willingly participate in the conversation between a biblical text, its authorship, and the many different audiences that it draws. It is "an experience involving not simply the isolation of themes or extraction of ideas but also the engagement of the senses and the play of

25. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 13.

writer and reader, of competing voices, and of timing and rhythm.”²⁶

There is no such thing as pure play; play is governed by some kind of rules. Reading the Bible aloud is a form of play that is subject to some rules. You and I might disagree about what those rules should be. Am I permitted to present myself in any way when I read scripture in public or not? Am I to place myself strictly at the service of the words on the page, to the extent that I do not make eye contact? When I read aloud, am I subjecting my reading to aesthetic conventions? Is a public reading of scripture more like conversation, acting or public speaking? Am I free to memorize a text and speak the words “as if” they are my own? Or, am I getting too far away from the “holy” Bible when I do this? Right now I want to mention one rule that I believe governs our public reading of biblical texts. It is certainly a contested rule, because it has to do with the web of relationships between the reader of a text, its author, and its audience. I believe that the primary task of the public reader of scripture is to “reproduce the self created by the writer in the text for an audience.”²⁷

Interpreters of written texts are reaching widely different conclusions about the “presence” of authors. On one end of a spectrum are those who hold that clues to the meaning of texts lie strictly within an author’s intent. The one who is writing a text is the ultimate source of meaning. If we could only adequately identify that writer’s circumstances for composition, and discern his or her theological motives, then we would have the key to a text! A variation of this position is that God is the ultimate author of any and all biblical texts. “Writers” are merely inspired vehicles or human instruments that God uses to get things written down. To interpret adequately a biblical text, then, means to apprehend what God is saying to all readers, regardless of their social and temporal location.

26. Stern and Henderson, *Performance*, 184.

27. *Ibid.*, 263.

On the other end are those who say that the author is a “fiction,” that is, that the “I” who is writing is simply a construct for holding together the writing itself. What gives meaning to that text is not an author, but the one who is reading. What replaces “God” as the ultimate author at this end of the spectrum is a set of culturally bound rules and conventions for writing and producing texts. Readers and interpreters create meaning out of clues, traces, and impressions present as “texts.”

I believe that one who is reading a biblical text in and for corporate worship, and certainly one who is reading a biblical text in preparation to preach, assumes the presence, not absence, of biblical authors and in doing so, assumes something about the presence of God. The language on the page is coming from somewhere, from some place in time, in the play of shadow and light deriving from some part of God’s revelation of God’s Self to human beings in particular times and places. Texts are presentations of voices and selves and call for an infinite array of embodiments, enactments, and interpretations from readers and their communities. These texts have power because they are resonances of events in God’s self-disclosure. They require us to tune our ears, our eyes, our senses, and intelligences for what God’s Spirit might be saying to us now through these echoes of other times and places. No printed text, biblical or otherwise, can simply speak for itself. It requires collaboration from those it addresses to make sense.

The communicative power of biblical texts to speak in the assembly is limited. In order to speak more fully and completely the texts must become literally part of our bodies. We read them with our eyes, we have oral/aural memories of them being spoken, interpreted, preached, and sung. Words and phrases, narrative and poetic structures of thought, interweave with episodes, images, anecdotes, and emotional memories retained in our own experience. The meanings of biblical texts are certainly not self-evident. As they come to us, they are fixed on pages, silent, and mass-produced in a bewildering variety of translations and expressions in a widening array of media. The purpose of reading aloud is to give voice, bodily shape, and

expression to the “presences” we find evoked by the texts we find in the Bible.

Reading a biblical text aloud is an intentional act of turning something as fixed and abstract like a text is into concrete, embodied human speech. It is a convergence of language and action, of “saying” and “doing.” What is present at this site of convergence is a “realness,” a substantiation and an embodiment of otherness. This otherness can be known through transcendence and disclosure. George Steiner declares that human speaking that is alive with focus, motive, and intentionality has this quality of “realness.” Any coherent understanding of what language is and does, of how language performs, of the capacity of human speech to communicate meaning and feeling is, in the final analysis, underwritten by an assumption of God’s presence.²⁸ It is this presence that prompts the act of reading aloud, and, in collaboration with the ones reading and listening, comes through the reading as the sound and shape of human speech and gesture. It is through such oral, embodied interpretive acts that we “reorder our existences and the universe in which we exist.”²⁹

I build a liturgical, theological, and playful rationale for reading texts aloud because I want to do three things: first, I want to open a window in the preacher’s homiletical imagination. I believe that to engage in an oral/aural study of scripture is to open oneself to new questions, interrogations, inspirations, and new possibilities for presentation. It is, as Leander Keck hopes, a way to help the scriptures become more of a “companion” in our daily lives, while anticipating it will have a fuller voice and presence in worship.

Second, I believe that this kind of commitment to scripture will heighten the communicative power and the aesthetic value

28. George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 137-64.

29. J. Paul Marcoux, “The Bible as Literature: An Experiential View,” *Reading, Preaching, and Celebrating the Word* (Palm Springs, FL: Sunday Publications, 1980): 6.

of the liturgical climate in which we preach. A reading of a text that “bodies forth” is a text that calls to a listener in an explicit way. It gives a text a communal dimension that a solitary and silent reading does not. I would much rather preach in an environment where a reading or some other form of expressive presentation of a sacred text has caused listeners to care about what I might have to say in regard to that text.

Finally, I want to find ways of instigate interest in reading the Bible in a culture that either fights about it, fights with it, or ignores it altogether. Reading and biblical study has become the province of professional interpreters who, until only recently, conducted their critical study in the silence of the study. The command of critical apparatus and traditions of interpretation and/or appeals to one’s ecclesial authority tend to take the Bible out of the hands, hearts, and imaginations of those to whom we speak. Taking the Bible seriously as a work of theological imagination, as residue of active oral and ritual practice that begets new forms of expressive communication, and as play in God’s drama of self-disclosure will certainly empower new readers and new reasons for preaching. The motive and substance of this work is not easily explained as an “academic discipline of inquiry” with clearly defined boundaries. One approaches the prospect of corporate worship with hunger, desire for experience, love, devotion, and even perhaps a measure of fear and suspicion. We bring the raw materials of our experience and hopes for meaningful transactions between divine and human “word.” When we are in the presence of God in worship, and participating in the ensemble performance of praise, the boundaries that divide human knowledge and expertise are quickly blurred.

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