

Performance
in
Preaching

BRINGING THE SERMON TO LIFE

EDITED BY JANA CHILDERS AND
CLAYTON J. SCHMIT


Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

©2008 by Jana Childers and Clayton J. Schmit

Published by Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Performance in preaching : bringing the sermon to life / edited by Jana Childers and Clayton J. Schmit.

p. cm. — (Engaging worship)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8010-3613-2 (pbk.)

1. Preaching. 2. Performance. I. Childers, Jana. II. Schmit, Clayton J.

BV4211.3P47 2008

251—dc22

2008019338

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations labeled KJV are from the King James Version of the Bible.

Scripture quotations labeled NIV are from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

In keeping with biblical principles of creation stewardship, Baker Publishing Group advocates the responsible use of our natural resources. As a member of the Green Press Initiative, our company uses recycled paper when possible. The text paper of this book is comprised of 30% post-consumer waste.



Jana Childers and Clayton J. Schmit, editors,
Performance in Preaching: Bringing the Sermon to Life,
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2008. Used by permission.

Contents

- List of Contributors 9
Acknowledgments 11
Introduction: Jana Childers and Clayton J. Schmit 13
1. The Truth and Truthfulness: Theological Reflections on Preaching and Performance 19
Marguerite Shuster
 2. Preaching, Performance, and the Life and Death of “Now” 37
Paul Scott Wilson
 3. At the Intersection of *Actio Divina* and *Homo Performans*: Embodiment and Evocation 53
Alyce M. McKenzie
 4. Performative Language and the Limits of Performance in Preaching 67
John M. Rottman
 5. Reversal of Fortune: The Performance of a Prophet 87
Mary Donovan Turner
 6. Performance and the New Testament in Preaching 99
Ronald J. Allen
 7. The Use of the Body in the Performance of Proclamation 117
Todd Farley
 8. Finding Voice in the Theological School 139
Richard F. Ward
 9. The Preacher’s Creative Process: Reaching the Well 153
Jana Childers

10. What Comes Next? Performing Music and Proclaiming the Word 169
Clayton J. Schmit
11. The Musicality of Black Preaching: Performing the Word 191
William C. Turner Jr.
12. Performance Study in Service to the Spoken Word in Worship 211
Charles L. Bartow
- Bibliography 225
- Index 243

Contributors

Ronald J. Allen

Nettie Sweeney and Hugh Th. Miller Professor of Preaching and New Testament
Christian Theological Seminary
Indianapolis, Indiana

Charles L. Bartow

Carl and Helen Egner Professor of Speech Communication in Ministry
Princeton Theological Seminary
Princeton, New Jersey

Jana Childers

Dean of the Seminary and Professor of Homiletics
San Francisco Theological Seminary
San Anselmo, California

Todd Farley

Associate Professor of Speech and Drama
Calvin College
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Alyce M. McKenzie

Associate Professor of Homiletics
Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University
Dallas, Texas

John M. Rottman

Associate Professor of Preaching
Calvin Theological Seminary
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Clayton J. Schmit

Arthur DeKruyter/Christ Church Oak Brook
Associate Professor of Preaching

Academic Director for the Brehm Center for Worship, Theology, and the Arts
Fuller Theological Seminary
Pasadena, California

Marguerite Shuster

Harold John Ockenga Professor of Preaching and Theology
Fuller Theological Seminary
Pasadena, California

Mary Donovan Turner

Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of the Faculty
Carl Patton Professor of Preaching
Pacific School of Religion
Berkeley, California

William C. Turner Jr.

Associate Professor of the Practice of Preaching
Duke Divinity School, Duke University
Durham, North Carolina

Richard F. Ward

Associate Professor of Preaching and Performance Studies
Iliff School of Theology
Denver, Colorado

Paul Scott Wilson

Professor of Homiletics
Emmanuel College, University of Toronto
Toronto, Canada

Introduction

JANA CHILDERS
AND CLAYTON J. SCHMIT

Preaching is a big tent with nearly as many kinds of preachers as there are people. High-wire artists, lion tamers, sideshow barkers, and ringmasters are only the beginning. In preaching's tent there are acrobats and dancers, strongmen, sequined ladies, and, of course, several kinds of clowns. Many successful preachers are extemporaneous performers. For others the real work gets done behind the scenes—in the dead of night, hunkered down in a pool of light in the middle of a battered desk. There are even some who do their best work at the business end of a cannon or behind the proverbial elephant.

There are a million ways to be an effective preacher. Probably more. Often a preacher's style is more a matter of life experience and temperament than conscious choice. Personality shapes pulpit style, sometimes for good and sometimes for ill. The preaching styles of teachers, life coaches, text critics, and priests will be different, no matter their homiletical training. The pulpit voices of therapists, soothsayers, exegetes, father figures, motivational speakers, and raconteurs will be easy to distinguish. What resources does homiletics have for helping preachers sift out the idiosyncratic from the individual? How much of the preacher's performance should be "doing what comes naturally" and how much should be governed by principles?

Preachers come in so many different stripes and styles. There are preachers who think of themselves as gurus, and preachers who think of themselves as CEOs. There are preachers who aim to change minds, and preachers who mean

to touch hearts. One big tribe of preachers looks forward to the preaching moment as an occasion for self-disclosure, and another would rather die than reveal a single square millimeter of their own souls. It goes without saying that this is a field where stand-up comedians and hams coexist with prophets and martyrs. How can homiletics help them all?

The questions of persona, performance style, and authenticity in preaching, always important, are particularly pressing in this age. Hypocrisy is the number one charge leveled at the church by the unchurched these days, with preachers being caught in the hottest part of the spotlight. In the person-on-the-street's mental dictionary, the word "phony" is illustrated with a picture of a televangelist. At the same time, the need of congregations for powerful preachers has not changed. "Passionate" or "dynamic" preaching is at the top of every search committee's list of requirements, as it has been for decades.

What does passionate preaching look like in the diverse contexts of the twenty-first-century church? How can authentic, lively preaching be distinguished from schlocky, manipulative preaching? What makes the difference, anyway, between sermons that fly through the air and into the minds and hearts of the listeners and those that dribble down the front of the pulpit and out into the aisle? Is preaching's tent big enough to include new personalities, theories, and technology? These are the kinds of questions this volume addresses.

This book is intended for three audiences. First, it is for pastors and preachers who are interested in the question of how sermons get formed and embodied—and how they can be better formed and embodied. Second, it is for use in the seminary classroom where sermon skills are learned and reflected upon. Third, it is for those involved in the ongoing scholarly conversations about performance issues in preaching. While the chapters are written for a broad range of readers, we have also provided a bibliography particularly intended for those who are pursuing research in performance and related areas of inquiry.

The question of performance is often avoided relative to preaching. While every teacher of preaching knows she has to deal with teaching students how to perform the sermons they have crafted, it is usually handled quickly and in the most cursory manner. This book provides more than a passing look at a topic that is often treated as sub-theological, even sub-homiletical, not to mention antithetical to worship. The very word *performance* in relation to worship and preaching tends to make some people shiver with anxiety. The word (and the art) is, nonetheless, essential to preaching and other dimensions of worship leadership if preaching and prayer are to be lively means of communication. Performance does not have to mean "mere performance," or playacting. It is critical to the execution of things, in the way that a surgeon *performs* life and

death medical procedures. Performance, here, is treated as a necessary element of sermon production, valued alongside the other aspects of sermon preparation and delivery.¹ To perform the sermon, however it is created, is to admit that God still uses a human person to proclaim God's message. Once, that person was Jesus "who came and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14 RSV). Today, God's speech is incarnate in the lives, voices, and bodies of men and women who preach God's Word. It is, as Charles Bartow teaches us, God's human speech. To put it simply: to perform the sermon is to bring it to life.

In this volume, major scholarly voices from every area of homiletics are brought to bear on questions of performance. But this book is not simply a rehash of homiletical theories. Nor is it merely the product of twelve homileticians talking among themselves. Instead, we have sought to place homiletics in conversation with the academic field of performance studies. It is out of the confluence of these two fields of research that the large questions of the age are addressed.

Performance studies is the academic field that provides critical analysis of performance and performances, broadly understood.² It incorporates the insights of such disciplines as anthropology, sociology, and philosophy as well as the performance arts. Homiletics has been in dialogue with performance studies for some time; however, this is the first volume to undertake a comprehensive approach to the conversation.

A relatively new field among the formal disciplines of the academy, performance studies is comprised of several schools. Two approaches have been of particular interest to contemporary homileticians:

1. The school of thought represented by Richard Schechner and Victor Turner combines the research insights of theater and anthropology in order to describe and evaluate performance events. Intercultural performance, ritual studies, and social drama offer related methods.
2. The speech act theory, associated with philosopher J. L. Austin, is concerned with the performative function of words. Austin and other proponents of this theory have shown that some words do more than describe or state facts, they perform actions.

Methods of each of these are represented in the chapters that follow.

1. For more on useful and congenial descriptions of the performance aspects of preaching, see books by Charles L. Bartow, Jana Childers, Clayton J. Schmit, and Richard F. Ward noted in the bibliography.

2. For more information, see Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

The homileticians whose essays appear in this volume represent various corners of the academic field of homiletics. All are seminary or college professors. All are prominent preachers. The work of some focuses on theological reflection, some on biblical studies, and some on performance arts. Some write from a progressive theological perspective, others are more evangelical, but all are committed to the lively execution of the preached Word. Each of the contributors has applied his or her particular subfield of expertise to a performance question relating to preaching.

Marguerite Shuster gets us started in chapter 1 with a word of caution, pursuing a theological question about the legitimacy of performance in preaching. In chapter 2, Paul Scott Wilson explores the temporal element of performance and shows the theological implications of preaching's "now." In chapter 3, Alyce M. McKenzie shows how a performance-sensitive approach to reading Scripture can produce a genre-sensitive approach to preaching. John M. Rottman uses theological tools to critique speech act theory in chapter 4. Chapters 5 and 6 bring together biblical studies and performance issues. Mary Donovan Turner focuses on Miriam's song in Exodus 15 in order to explore the role of ritual performance and to discover the effects of putting performance theory and prophecy in conversation. Ronald J. Allen examines the oral aspects of the New (what he calls the Second) Testament and shows how a performance perspective can be useful to contemporary interpreters of these texts.

In the second half of the volume, various performance methods, theories, and arts are brought to bear on preaching. As a teacher of mime and communication, Todd Farley gets to the core of the issue in chapter 7, showing how the hands and body can be trained to be responsive and articulate tools for communicating a sermon's message. In chapter 8, Richard F. Ward mines the metaphorical and physical meaning of the preacher's "voice." In chapter 9, Jana Childers applies the insights of artists and creativity theorists to the preacher's experience. Clayton J. Schmit explores the intersection of music performance and preaching in chapter 10, and William C. Turner Jr. considers the musicality of African American preaching in chapter 11. Finally, in chapter 12, Charles L. Bartow presents a thorough study of performance issues seen within the broader scope of worship.

Along the way, it became clear that a book on performance in preaching ought to include a means by which to demonstrate some of its teaching. Given that among our team of scholars are some of the most able teachers of the performance aspects of preaching currently available, it seemed wise to share some of their practical performance exercises and techniques so that they could be used by those who are not performance specialists. Accordingly, we have

created a DVD that brings to life much of the teaching explored or implied in the written material.

In an initial planning meeting for this project, Professor Bartow encouraged the participants to think afresh what performance could mean for the discipline of homiletics. He invited the writers to be creative in rethinking performance for preaching because contemporary performance studies have moved in recent years away from areas most fruitful for preaching. Two meetings and twelve chapters later, the results of this rethinking have been surprising. The conversation between homiletics and performance studies has raised questions and provided a number of tantalizing insights. Most of all, it has opened a promising avenue for further research and reflection. In an age that has been more interested in and cynical about the performance aspects of preaching, the twelve homileticians whose work comprises this book show that there is more fruitful ground to till than we previously imagined, and that twenty-first-century homiletics is well positioned for the task.

1

The Truth and Truthfulness

Theological Reflections on Preaching and Performance

M A R G U E R I T E S H U S T E R

In a postmodern, pluralistic age, titles beginning with “the truth,” as if one could actually speak of “truth” in the singular and preceded by a definite article, must immediately come under suspicion, and the problem is only compounded if the further term *truthfulness* should end up being construed to entail something more than the sincerity and authenticity that have become the all-purpose characterological honorifics of our day. Be, then, forewarned! For I do indeed propose to say that every time a preacher enters the pulpit, he or she is called to speak as accurately and faithfully as possible of the One who unequivocally spoke of himself as the Truth (John 14:6); and I further propose to say that having good intentions, however fervent, is no guarantee of speaking in a way that is genuinely truthful.

The subtitle adds its own set of pressing problems, for many—and I include myself high on the list among them—will have a powerful and negative visceral reaction against construing proclamation of God’s Word as a sort of “performance.” Emphasis on the importance of *delivery* is of course ancient and commonplace. The sticking point with *performance* would seem to be the

way the term brings to the fore connotations of self-conscious intentionality and artifice and perhaps emotional manipulation of hearers that mere talk of delivery may conceal. Pulpit “performers” may readily be seen as distancing themselves from both their sacred subject matter and their congregations, while aiming at effect and at the sort of excellence to which applause is a suitable response. Presumably they do not have to be doing these things. But they could be. And those of us who retain a view of preaching as, properly, a holy mystery not in any human being’s full control can only cringe at every tendency to turn the service of Christian worship into theater, with its leader a well-tooled actor. We cannot banish all that smacks of self-display, falseness, manipulation, or the mere pursuit of audience approval from the deliverances of those of us who mount pulpits (or, equally, those of us who would never dream of preaching from behind a pulpit, but who nonetheless preach), for we are every last one of us sinners; but we can at least avoid baptizing such things.

I count it entirely proper, then, to wrap any discussion of performance aspects of preaching in cautions, for it is all too easy to forget the nature and dignity of one’s task and aim, when one is focusing primary attention on oneself as one undertakes the task. After all, as Augustine, and Luther following him, observed, the essence of sinfulness is to be curved in on oneself. That the preacher should hope to disappear behind the proclaimed Word—that the test of a good sermon is that hearers should remark not on how wonderful the preacher is but on how wonderful the Lord is—is a classic and, I believe, correct view. Similarly, the old inscription on the interior of pulpits or on the door from the sacristy to the chancel reminding the preacher, “Sir, we would see Jesus” (John 12:21 KJV), is good advice even if terrible exegesis. It would seem that such concerns can hardly be overemphasized at a time when all manner of self-revelation, however tawdry, is lauded as key to the authenticity people say they desire in a preacher, and when members of an entertainment-oriented society instinctively apply criteria derived from secular media when attending church.

The trouble is that we do not get rid of sin by failing or refusing to notice what we actually do in the pulpit.¹ Indeed, we may simply be engaging in self-deception. Or we may be lazy, a laziness with respect to presentation no more defensible than the laziness teachers of preaching have traditionally declined to tolerate when it comes to exegesis. Or—and this aspect may be as

1. See my *The Fall and Sin: What We Have Become as Sinners* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) for extended discussion of the doctrine of sin as it affects all of our faculties, including our use of language.

troubling as any—we may be so deeply imbued with our age’s deep suspicion of rhetorical excellence that it infects every aspect of our presentation of our materials.² Doing a poor job in the pulpit at the level of presentation cannot be defended as a proper way of honoring God, any more than one can defend refusing to prepare one’s sermon at the level of content on the grounds that one wants to leave the Spirit free to work (as if the Lord were more likely to redeem and use our slovenliness than our honest effort).

Performance and Truth in Preaching

Making an argument for the legitimate importance of the performance aspect of preaching involves taking account of the sort of thing “preaching” is and the sort of truth it purports to convey. No one seriously denies that preaching is fundamentally an oral (or, as is often said by other contributors to this volume, oral-aural) activity involving speaking to a particular group of people.³ While it may be unfair to count all printed sermons as mere corpses—many of us will have been deeply moved by classic sermons we have read—it still holds that many gripping proclamations of God’s Word for a particular time and place translate badly if at all into written form. We also know that preaching has traditionally been understood specifically to involve proclamation of the truth of the gospel, truth of life-and-death importance both for coming to faith in Christ in the first place and for growing in grace. One doesn’t stand in a pulpit and just say whatever comes to mind; one is responsible for a fundamental sort of content that may be truly or falsely conceived and well or badly communicated. Furthermore, however much we may already know of this gospel truth, many of us can testify that at critical points we have found ourselves unable effectively to tell *ourselves* the truth that we “know” in our heads, but

2. See, for example, the extended argument of John McWhorter, *Doing Our Own Thing: The Degradation of Language and Music and Why We Should, Like, Care* (New York: Gotham Books, 2003). Similarly John Dillenberger: “Language forms and transforms, and its many styles and powers could enrich us more than they do. The so-called decline of preaching, or the demise in our time of oratory—so prominent a part of nineteenth-century life—means that the widening, disciplined, imaginative use of language is in short supply,” *A Theology of Artistic Sensibilities: The Visual Arts and the Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 232. As something of an aside, I might note the distinction that Donald Davis makes between “presentation” and “communication,” the latter suggesting a relational quality that the former lacks. Donald Davis, *Writing as a Second Language* (Little Rock: August House, 2000), chap. 3. It will be obvious from what follows that I consider attentiveness to one’s relationship to one’s hearers essential to faithful preaching; mere “presentation” of some material will not do. Nonetheless, I am also arguing that presentational flaws can seriously limit communication.

3. The very lack of particularity of broadcast media as preaching venues constitutes a limitation of these media: what one may gain in scope, one loses in immediacy and specificity.

have needed to hear it from another (the old gospel hymn by Katherine Hankey puts it, “Tell me the old, old story, / For those who know it best / Are hungering and thirsting / To hear it like the rest”). As a kindergartner torn between divorcing parents begged as she climbed into her teacher’s lap, “Tell me again that Jesus loves me. I keep forgetting.”⁴ Faith comes by hearing, said the apostle Paul (Rom. 10:17). The spoken word has power to enter into us in a peculiarly pressing way. All of this is surely related to the fact that the truth conveyed by proclamation is not a merely propositional matter, as if one could enshrine a series of life-giving principles far above the vicissitudes of time and space and culture and present crises. Rather, the mysterious importance of hearing has to do both with the nature of sound itself and with fitting personal address in what may at least sometimes be a highly particular context.

Precisely because of the Incarnate One who identified himself as the Truth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in a provocative essay unfinished at the time of his death, argued that truth and truth-telling are relational in their essence, part of a total reality seeking expression, and that for a word to be “true,” it must first of all fit the relational requirements of a particular encounter.⁵ One might think here of certain biblical propositions, such as those commanding slaves to be subject to their masters, that are true when they are addressed to slaves as a way of affirming their full human agency in a constraining situation, but false when used as a tool by masters to deny that same full human agency: to whom or by whom the statement is made is critical to its truth-value (this is my example, not Bonhoeffer’s). Emil Brunner makes a similar point when he says that “the truth of which the Bible speaks is always a happening.”⁶ Again, “what God wills to give us cannot really be given in words, but only in manifestation: Jesus Christ, God Himself *in persona* is the real gift. The Word of God in its ultimate meaning is thus precisely not ‘a word from,’ but God in person, God Himself speaking, Himself present, Immanuel.”⁷ He makes the application to preaching specific by saying, “When we consider the Biblical

4. Story told by the teacher, Marlene Linthicum, in my presence.

5. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Neville Horton Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1955): “‘Telling the truth’ means something different according to the particular situation in which one stands. Account must be taken of one’s relationships at each particular time” (363). “The lie is a contradiction of the word of God, which God has spoken in Christ, and upon which creation is founded. Consequently the lie is the denial, the negation and the conscious and deliberate destruction of the reality which is created by God and which consists in God, no matter whether this purpose is achieved by speech or by silence” (369).

6. Emil Brunner, *The Divine-Human Encounter*, trans. Amandus W. Loos (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1943), 201. One should note that the original German title, *Wahrheit als Begegnung*, means “truth as encounter.” Martin Buber’s seminal volume *I and Thou*, 2nd ed. (New York: Scribner, 1958), is also highly relevant here.

7. Brunner, *Divine-Human Encounter*, 109.

understanding of proclamation, we observe that it means an event entirely personal, in the nature of a personal meeting.”⁸

An argument of this kind—which implies that propositions not only fail fully to capture the essence of the truth but may also sometimes in the most important senses falsify it even if making factually accurate claims—must not be confused with a sort of postmodern affirmation that “true” means “true for me, from my perspective.” The point is a quite different one, namely, that we rightly speak of truth only when the whole context is properly taken into account and ordered, including, in Bonhoeffer’s analysis, what entitles or causes one to speak, one’s own location, and that about which one makes some assertion (this last component makes clear that one cannot claim truthfulness if one has lied merely to smooth over a difficult situation or to make someone feel good).⁹ For the preacher, these elements involve at the very least: (1) the authority of the God to whom one must first and foremost seek to be rightly related, (2) who one is as a person related to other persons in a particular cultural setting, and (3) the biblical text as one interprets and applies it. This, then, is a very demanding requirement for truth. And it is important to note that it implicitly requires including whatever bears on our interpersonal relationships, including the formal and presentational shape of our sermons.

But—even granting that matters involving presentation are intrinsic to our actual experience of what someone says—is there something about deliberate attention to performance that *essentially* betrays the truth, perhaps by shaping a purpose that substitutes the workings of human psychology for the work of the Holy Spirit? Or is there a fatally compromising loss of immediacy, as if one were thinking merely of the excellence of one’s technique instead of one’s beloved while making love? More about the immediacy question below. For now, I simply note that the question of thinking about technique is a form of the old question of the use of means in the proclamation of the gospel.¹⁰ An entirely traditional

8. *Ibid.*, 176.

9. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 370.

10. Debates about the use of means are old, and they contributed to the divide between “Old School” and “New School” Presbyterians. Charles Finney was a leading advocate of applying what he considered to be appropriate means in the seeking of conversions, though he was often accused of emotional manipulation. Evangelicals as a whole have been particularly eager to use whatever methodologies have promoted success (leading to a good deal of sometimes well-founded criticism by those who have doubted the integrity of the methods), but, as always, misapplication of a principle is not a proper argument against its legitimate use. Augustine’s oft-quoted words from *On Christian Doctrine* bear repeating yet again:

Now, the art of rhetoric being available for the enforcing either of truth or falsehood, who will dare to say that truth in the person of its defenders is to take its stand unarmed against falsehood? For example, that those who are trying to persuade men of what is false are to know how to introduce their subject, so as to put the hearer into a friendly, or

view is that God in his providence ordains the means along with the end. Thus, while we know that God knows our needs fully, he nonetheless invites us to bring them to him in prayer (e.g., Matt. 6:8–13). That God gives the increase does not mean that it is unnecessary that one plant and another water (1 Cor. 3:6–8), and so on. Preaching is itself a means: we are informed that “God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe” (1 Cor. 1:21). He could have accomplished his ends another way, perhaps without making use of us at all. The proper question, then, is not whether means are used, but whether the means have integrity and are suitable to the ends.

The Truth, Beauty, and Language

Performance in preaching may be taken to include both the verbal shape and the physical embodiment we give to what we have to say, and either or both of these may betray the truth by incompetence or ugliness. The God who is spoken of as beautiful (Ps. 27:4) is not rightly represented by the ugly, the vulgar, or the careless, or by a form that generates merely ennui and boredom—a point to which a significant proportion of today’s students seem curiously insensible. It is not just that they lack the sort of liberal education that would give them power to make clear and accurate distinctions with a measure of articulate grace, but that they are suspicious of the whole enterprise, as if whatever is done carefully or whatever is lovely thereby establishes itself as false.¹¹ One

attentive, or teachable frame of mind, while the defenders of the truth shall be ignorant of that art? That the former are to tell their falsehoods briefly, clearly, and plausibly, while the latter shall tell the truth in such a way that it is tedious to listen to, hard to understand, and, in fine, not easy to believe it? . . . Since, then, the faculty of eloquence is available for both sides, and is of very great service in the enforcing either of wrong or right, why do not good men study to engage it on the side of truth, when bad men use it to obtain the triumph of wicked and worthless causes, and to further injustice and error? (4.3)

And:

It is the duty, then, of the interpreter and teacher of Holy Scripture, the defender of the true faith and the opponent of error, both to teach what is right and to refute what is wrong, and in the performance of this task to conciliate the hostile, to rouse the careless, and to tell the ignorant both what is occurring at present and what is probable in the future. But once that his hearers are friendly, attentive, and ready to hear, whether he has found them so or has himself made them so, the remaining objects are to be carried out in whatever way the case requires. (4.6)

Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, ed. P. Schaff, vol. 2 (1887; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994). I am obviously taking a positive view of Augustine’s points here; but see below for McKenzie’s worries about the “Aristotelian captivity of the sermon.”

11. See, again, the whole of McWhorter, *Doing Our Own Thing*. He comments on the common perception that Al Gore lost the presidency to George W. Bush in part because he was too articulate (xxi).

can only grieve a generation so much of which seems to suppose that only the utterly unstudied, the broken, and the misshapen are true—most particularly when that same generation is quite allergic to the sort of doctrine of sin that would put pervasive misshapeness in its proper context as a violation of God’s will.

Of course artistic and Christian truth cannot simply be identified, as if the ineffability of beauty and of the holy were simply different aspects of the same thing.¹² Not only do emotional and evocative aspects of art have a slippery relationship to truth—equally stirring appeals can be made on both sides of many questions—but also, imaginative and intuitive perceptions, however compelling, do not in themselves have quite the status of divine revelation.¹³ Furthermore, as the Thomist theologian Jacques Maritain notes, art in itself is not properly judged by moral criteria, nor does art as such have anything to say about the good of human life. But he continues,

Yet human life is in need of that very Beauty and intellectual creativity, where art has the last word; and art exercises itself in the midst of that very human life, those human needs and human ends, where morality has the last word. In other words it is true that Art and Morality are two autonomous worlds, each sovereign in its own sphere, but they cannot ignore or disregard one another.¹⁴

I have already affirmed that, in a sense, human needs and ends are the least of it: at stake is how we learn, consciously or unconsciously, to conceive of God himself. If, as George MacDonald commented, we would view God quite differently if we lived our whole lives under a flat white ceiling instead of

12. Pelikan warns against this danger as especially prominent when religion has been put in an emotional framework (Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, *Fools for Christ: Essays on the True, the Good, and the Beautiful* [Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1955], 121). He later continues, “To a greater extent than either intellectualism or moralism, aestheticism has been able to satisfy yearnings deep within the human breast. For that reason, those who had possessed the Beautiful could very easily be deluded into supposing that they had taken hold of the Holy itself” (124); “it [is] more comfortable to live with an art form than with God, and this has been the fundamental temptation of the identification of the Holy and the Beautiful—that in aesthetic rapture I had enough commitment to satisfy me, yet not so much that I lost my self-respect” (133): surely these dangers are ones to which the contemporary worship and the arts movement needs particularly to pay heed.

13. See John Hospers, *Meaning and Truth in the Arts* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974), esp. 215; also Bernard C. Heyl, *New Bearings in Esthetics and Art Criticism: A Study in Semantics and Evaluation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943), 85–86. The former speaks of art as the sort of truth that is “true to” its subject rather than conveying “truth about” the universe (162–207).

14. Jacques Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist* (New York: Scribner, 1960), 41.

under the starry heavens,¹⁵ so also would we view God differently if we heard of him only in ways that convey nothing of grandeur, beauty, design, power, or purpose. That is, those who preach in a way that is careless, sloppy, and unskilled, perhaps thinking that they are thus being “authentic,” may fail to recognize that they are communicating something else as well. Humans have a perfectly natural and unselfconscious response to real beauty and power of expression whether visual or verbal or characterological: we need to regain candor about our almost instinctive appreciation of these sorts of excellence and about how excellence is achieved—not, surely, apart from God’s good gifts, but not without effort, either. The needed skills do not just fall on our heads (note 2 Tim. 2:15, as well as Paul’s pervasive metaphors involving athletic training: plain laziness is not a Christian virtue!). Form and content cannot be torn apart in these matters or in any others.

Even apart from questions of beauty, we get many hints that the relationship of language to truth is not simply a matter of propositions that may stay lodged neatly in our brains. It is not just the words used but their intonation that conveys the meaning of the sentence, as can be seen in those sentences in which one has a choice of which word to emphasize, and each choice conveys distinctly different meaning.¹⁶ In fact, it has been shown that in situations that are even slightly ambiguous, intonation will trump literal meaning.¹⁷ What is more, literal meaning itself is often best conveyed to the ear. Thus biblical scholars often recommend that, in particular, the book of Revelation be read

15. C. S. Lewis, *George MacDonald: 365 Readings* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 66.

16. For a particularly engaging example, consider the sentence and interpretations offered by Leo Rosten, *The Joys of Yiddish* (New York: Pocket Books, 1968), xvi: “Problem: Whether to attend a concert to be given by a neighbor, niece, or friend of your wife. The same sentence may be put through maneuvers of matchless versatility:

“(1) ‘Two tickets for her concert I should buy?’ (Meaning: ‘I’m having enough trouble deciding if it’s worth one.’)

“(2) ‘Two tickets for her concert I should buy?’ (‘You mean to say she isn’t distributing free passes? The hall will be empty!’)

“(3) ‘Two tickets for her concert I should buy?’ (‘Did she buy tickets to my daughter’s recital?’)

“(4) ‘Two tickets for her concert I should buy?’ (‘You mean to say they call what she does a “concert”?’)

“(5) ‘Two tickets for her concert I should buy?’ (‘After what she did to me?’)

“(6) ‘Two tickets for her concert I should buy?’ (‘Are you giving me lessons in ethics?’)

“(7) ‘Two tickets for her concert I should buy?’ (‘I wouldn’t go even if she gave me a complimentary!’)”

An extended treatment of these matters is given by Stephen H. Webb, *The Divine Voice: Christian Proclamation and the Theology of Sound* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004).

17. For demonstration of how nonverbal cues may actually reverse the meaning of the explicit message, see Albert Mehrabian, *Silent Messages: Implicit Communication of Emotions and Attitudes*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1981).

aloud if one wishes rightly to interpret it: one's understanding changes as one speaks and hears the words. The converse can also be true: if, in the presence of smoke and flames one has just noticed, one says, "fire," without any suggestion of capitals and an exclamation point, one presumably has not understood one's situation, and one's hearers will not rightly perceive their danger.¹⁸

One wonders whether this phenomenon of the importance of tone (and, as we will remark later, bodily involvement as a whole) rests in significant part on our bodily experience being embedded from the beginning in our language. As Mark Johnson argues in a provocative volume,

understanding is never merely a matter of holding beliefs, either consciously or unconsciously. More basically, one's understanding is one's way of being in, or having, a world. This is very much a matter of one's embodiment, that is, of perceptual mechanisms, patterns of discrimination, motor programs, and various bodily skills. And it is equally a matter of our embeddedness within culture, language, institutions, and historical traditions.¹⁹

In Johnson's view, not just our metaphors and ways of expressing ourselves, but everything about our reasoning and our attribution of meaning, depends heavily on our relationship to our physical world. This relationship has both the particularity of our own experience and the universality provided by the uniform laws and aspects of our physical reality; but no human being thinks or speaks or hears or reads without a body and a world. One is not, in thinking, simply manipulating logical symbols or making abstract statements; even in abstract statements—as, say, when one refers to "higher" values—physical realities lurk behind the scenes. Insofar as what Johnson says is accurate, we cannot escape our bodies even when reading in private. How much less, then, when we are speaking in public and are ourselves being both observed and heard. (The highly visual character of many mathematical insights suggests that Johnson's point may hold even in what may appear to be a supremely abstract arena.)²⁰

18. "Contemporary research in cognitive science makes it clear that content cannot be separated from form, abstract thought from bodily function, or intellectual grasp from emotional commitment. Theology, art, and technique thus converge in any human performative enterprise." Charles L. Bartow, *God's Human Speech: A Practical Theology of Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 3.

19. Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 137. This philosophical view may have a concrete physiological representation, as manifested by the fact that, at least in males, whether one is right- or left-handed appears to bear importantly on whether language is processed primarily in, respectively, the left or the right hemisphere of the brain.

20. There may be parallels to be explored between Bonhoeffer's view of truth as entailing right interpersonal relationships and Johnson's view of truth as relative to standards of

The Truth and Truthful Presence

That conveying and receiving truthful communication involve our bodies in a fundamental way, even at the level of our thinking and the level of meaning, should not make anxious those Christians who are convinced that God likes physical stuff, since he made it and did not scorn becoming incarnate. Without engaging the currently popular but largely fruitless and inconclusive debates between monists and dualists on the ontological constituents of persons, one can surely affirm that in human life as we normally experience it, human bodies and souls or spirits cannot be disentangled, and both are involved in all normal communication. In the lovely tones of a theologian of an earlier century, J. R. Illingworth remarks that “thought and will and love must needs communicate themselves to others; spirit craves intercourse with spirit; and here again we depend on matter. . . . To give expression to a thing is to realize it, in the sense of making it more real; and hence matter, as being the language of spirit, is also the medium of its realization.” He continues, “good intentions are of no avail, till they have faced the resistance of the outer world, and in overcoming its opposition become moral acts; and love can never rest, till it has proved its own intensity by a thousand tender, thoughtful, self-sacrificing deeds. In every case contact with matter strengthens the spiritual fibre, forcing vagueness into outline, confusion into clearness, doubt into decision, hesitation into act.”²¹

So, indeed, we might agree, it should be; but the question comes when we wonder whether, so to speak, the inside actually matches the outside, whether there is a wholeness and integrity in the act or whether what we perceive on the surface is designed in some sense to deceive, manipulate, or otherwise take advantage of us. That is the question that plagues focus on “performance.”

Our doubts can scarcely be wondered at. On the one hand, we are bombarded by the productions of a slick and highly sophisticated commercial advertising industry, whose concern for our well-being we have every reason to doubt. This industry very much wants us to believe what it says, but it solicits our trust in order to enhance self-interested aims (and thus there is a certain credibility gap when churches or public service agencies use these same techniques: those who are at all self-reflective will be likely to generalize the assumption that their good is *not* the primary goal of such appeals). On the

adequacy with respect to our purposes and our interactions with our environment (Johnson, *Body in the Mind*, 211), though Bonhoeffer intends theological claims that Johnson would plainly reject.

21. J. R. Illingworth, *Divine Immanence: An Essay on the Spiritual Significance of Matter* (New York: Macmillan, 1898; repr., Kessinger, date unknown), 11–13.

other hand, the ability to enjoy the contemporary crop of movies and video games involves being told and believing that, however realistic they appear, they are *not* in fact real. One may safely (?) be deeply engrossed and emotionally engaged only by discounting the correspondence of these depictions to one's behavior in the world in which one lives. How the act of preaching and the preacher will be perceived in such a cultural setting can hardly be anything but very, very tricky. And the complexity is surely increased to the extent that the preacher seems to be engaged essentially in either advertising or acting. In fact, one wonders to what extent the current attraction to plain sloppiness in preaching manifests a confusion of skill with artifice and an instinctive desire for distance from polished cultural forms that we define as involving some intrinsic measure of falseness.

In any case, one cannot *not* present oneself. Whatever one does or fails to do will communicate something; we make choices in these matters.²² Even if one is dissimulating, it is not unimportant that one chooses this mask rather than that one. I can always get a laugh from my homiletics class when, in discussing such questions, I ask them to contemplate how differently they would have regarded me on the first day of class had I come in attired in spike heels and a micro-miniskirt, with spiky, multicolored hair, and liberally adorned with piercings and tattoos, instead of appearing in tailored garb and looking utterly conventional.

Enter, here, the old emphasis on “ethos” and credibility, or what has traditionally been called the importance of the person of the preacher, if the message is to be believed. Richard Lischer has noted that the question of holiness in the one proclaiming the gospel, once considered so important, has garnered little attention in recent days.²³ No doubt that is attributable at least in part to the perception that the alleged “holiness” of too many preachers was itself a charade, so that only confessions from the pulpit of the less-redeemed aspects of one's humanity have come to be seen as authentic.²⁴ It is not difficult to discern that we have a double downward spiral here if believability becomes linked to presentations of poor quality and manifesting flawed character:

22. See here the old sociological classic of Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959).

23. Richard Lischer, *Theories of Preaching: Selected Readings in the Homiletical Tradition* (Durham, NC: Labyrinth, 1987), 3.

24. In a fascinating volume, Lionel Trilling comments that “much that culture traditionally condemned and sought to exclude is accorded a considerable moral authority by reason of the authenticity claimed for it, for example, disorder, violence, unreason” (11); and, “that the word [authenticity] has become part of the moral slang of our day points to the peculiar nature of our fallen condition, our anxiety over the credibility of existence and of individual existences” (93). *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972).

soon there is nothing that seems *worth* listening to or believing. It would seem that higher aspirations on both fronts can hardly be misplaced. Meanwhile, we are faced with the conflicting facts that in important respects we become what we do, and hence rightly reach beyond where we currently are, and that every gap between what we do and what we now are may be perceived as a manifestation of hypocrisy.

So how can one attend to “performance” in preaching without violating the truthfulness of one’s presence? (When one speaks of “presence” in preaching, one normally intends to refer to a particular magnetism felt in fine speakers, usually linked to an intensity that is not fully unleashed, which virtually compels attention from listeners. Here, I intend only the weaker meaning of the way one presents oneself and is perceived, with the physical aspects particularly in view.) Does not attention to methodology create, at the very least, a sort of distance from oneself and one’s hearers that is every bit as serious as the distance created by reading, or even memorizing, a manuscript?²⁵

One answer to that question is perfectly straightforward and uncomplicated: namely, that one practices technique while one is out of the pulpit precisely so that one will not need to pay attention to it while one is in the pulpit, so that one will in fact be free to be fully present to one’s material and one’s hearers. An athletic analogy is as good as any here. If the tennis pro tells her charge to change his grip, for a time he will be able to think of nothing else, and his game will suffer. Only when the grip becomes natural will it serve him well; only then will his game improve. Or imagine telling a soccer player that she shouldn’t work out in the weight room or run to increase her wind or practice kicking the ball because it would spoil her “natural” style: obviously, that would be ridiculous, for playing a sport well involves practice and training and development of skill. One’s freedom in the game is enhanced by the discipline outside of it; one can do all sorts of things that would otherwise be impossible, and do them without thinking about them. Presumably the correspondence to training in the proper use of voice and body for the preacher is transparent. One does not thereby become false, any more than one becomes false by learning Greek and Hebrew and sound exegetical method; one simply gains needed skills.

Still, might there not be a difference, for the preacher, between getting exegetical and theological training and getting training in presentation of self? In the former case, one focuses on something other than oneself that has its

25. Note well that preachers whose concern for as perfect as possible a form of words, which keeps them anchored to a written text, do not escape the problem of sinful self-absorption of which “performers” are readily accused; they simply manifest a different form of it (*mea maxima culpa!*).

own integrity and makes its own demands; in the latter, a certain solipsism may threaten. True, yet preachers should recognize that many actors and those who write about acting are keenly aware of this danger; they are very solicitous that the text retain its own integrity and not be twisted and swallowed up by the performer, who thereby makes all pieces she performs sound pretty much alike²⁶—not unlike the preachers whose own experience so dominates what they say that they make all biblical texts sound alike.

The following words of secular writer Wallace Bacon—who notes that it is the speaker who is “sure, controlled, attentive to the text” who disappears or becomes transparent²⁷—might well be taken to heart by preachers trying to meet the broad requirements of their task in the pulpit (reading “biblical text” where the writer has “poem,” which latter means in the context any work of literary art, and making other necessary translations):

Perfect congruence is not possible, nor even to be hoped for, since there are in fact two different bodies involved. But it is best for the interpreter to seek to match his body with that of the poem, since the interpreter exists (in terms of the art form) to perform the poem. (Bacon, 38)

The performer who cares more about pleasing an audience than about enactment of the poem will endanger the whole poetic experience, both for the performer and for the audience. The interpreter needs always to remember that reader and audience must be brought together to the act of communion with the poem; if the reader communes with the audience but not with the poem, the audience is likely to come away with spirits unfed. (Bacon, 69)

The more passionately a reader *cares* about literature, the more devoted will be the search into its nature. The caring must come first; no amount of cold critical analysis will itself lead to genuine literary life. Nevertheless, such critical analysis can stimulate the reader who already feels the life of literature. The capable reader draws on reservoirs of knowledge and feeling. One cannot simply wait until there is a specific need for knowledge; one must seek it constantly, ingest it, be nourished by it. We do not suddenly develop strength; we grow to it. (Bacon, 195)

It is to the process of matching—of bringing one’s own life form for the moment into congruence with the life form of the poem—that the interpreter first and foremost devotes attention. The process of matching is also a process of

26. Wallace A. Bacon, *The Art of Interpretation*, 3rd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1979), 38. Note also Alla Renée Bozarth, *The Word’s Body: An Incarnational Aesthetic of Interpretation* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1979).

27. Bacon, *Art of Interpretation*, 10. Cited in text in following paragraphs.

maturation; one grows by giving in to the otherness of the life of the text by extending oneself, by reaching out, by loving. (Bacon, 511)

The argument “from the lesser to the greater” surely applies here: if secular performers are enjoined to give such care to the whole of their task, how much more ought the preacher to do so. The aim is not falseness or dissimulation of any kind, but rather the fullest possible faithfulness to both the text and the congregation, which latter, as we have noted, will always and inevitably respond to the whole of what the preacher does in (and, of course, also outside of) the pulpit, not just to the bare words of the sermon.

While faithfulness to the text is a *sine qua non* of preaching, since the preacher does not speak out of his or her independent authority, faithfulness to one’s congregation in the sense of attending to what enables them to hear accurately (not to be construed as necessarily involving their liking what they hear) is of comparable significance, insofar as one holds a relational view of truth. Speaking Dutch to Koreans obviously won’t work. But neither will a certain sort of stiffness with most young people, or a certain sort of sloppiness with most high-church Episcopalians. A volume and level of personal expansiveness appropriate in a living room won’t work in the open air; norms of eye contact befitting white American contexts may be rude in many African or Asian ones. To care about these matters is not to become captive to technique but simply to respect and care about other people and to try to speak in a way that makes it possible for what one says to be heard by those whom one is actually addressing. As Augustine put it, “what advantage is there in purity of speech which does not lead to understanding in the hearer, seeing that there is no use at all in speaking, if they do not understand us for whose sake we speak?”²⁸ Yes, there are temptations here, most especially along the lines of confusing approval with understanding, but to ignore how one is actually being perceived is to fail to consider the relational character of telling the truth. If one is to be rejected, one should hope that it will be for the right reasons.

Caveats

In the preceding pages, I have intended to argue that because “truth” is not merely a matter of accurate propositions but has an intrinsically personal, relational character, and because human beings are so constituted that how they use their bodies cannot be separated from what they say when they speak in public, it follows that proper attention to “performance” aspects of preaching

28. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 4.24.

is highly important to its truthfulness. “Highly important”: should I not have written, “essential”? That I did not do so suggests that I think that despite the importance of what one *does* as well as *says* (and the importance of *how* one says what one says at the level of use of language), this importance is not absolute. And the first and foremost reason it is not absolute is because of God’s freedom to accomplish his ends as he chooses, through the weakest and most inadequate means as well as through the most skillful. That God is not in any absolute sense limited by our failures may be all that enables some of us to step into a pulpit at all. Many of us can, in any case, recall life-changing sermons that were technically flawed—even seriously so—and impressive ones that made no lasting difference.

If the Spirit does not work through what the preacher does, nothing else ultimately matters, and anything—most explicitly including a cultivated talent for highly skilled performance garnering enthusiastic response—that seduces the preacher or the congregation away from recognition of that fact is a positive hazard. Surely the extreme dangers of prideful self-reliance here constitute at least one of the reasons Paul said so sharply in 1 Corinthians 1:17 that he was sent to proclaim the gospel precisely *not* “with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.” When a powerful effect occurs, the humble and even cracked vessel will better reveal that the power is God’s than will the elegant and admirable one that calls attention to itself (2 Cor. 4:7). There is a corresponding temptation on the side of the hearer who may come to church with much the same attitude with which she attends a movie—wanting, perhaps, to be moved; taking the posture of an observer; freely evaluating style as much as substance; and in general having an attitude far removed from active worship that attends first and foremost to God. That the better the performance, the more acute these dangers, does not constitute an argument for clumsiness in the pulpit; it simply provokes a warning that here as elsewhere, the greater the power, the more the risk of grave harm accompanies it. Effective hypocrites can do more spiritual harm than ineffective ones. But even by hypocrites, God’s hands are not tied: Paul rejoiced that the gospel was being proclaimed whatever the motives of the proclaimer (Phil. 1:15–18). I myself had a student, the fruitfulness of whose ministry I had no reason to doubt, who was converted under the preaching of the infamous Jim Jones, destroyer of hundreds of lives at Jonestown in Guyana (which I take to be an argument for the power of the sheer content of the gospel, not an evidence that character and mental health do not matter).

Unfortunately, much as we rightly fear hypocrisy and dissimulation, simply “being ourselves” will not do, either, in a fallen world; supposing that it will is a sort of romantic delusion, similar to the sentimental supposition that every

voice has something equally worthwhile to say, provided it is the genuine voice of the speaker.²⁹ No, we need something to rely on much steadier than our sinful selves. As Bonhoeffer acutely observed, God made clothes to cover humankind after the fall: not everything ought now to be revealed. It is cynical to assume that evil that cannot be eradicated should be exposed (an important warning for preachers too attached to self-display in the pulpit).³⁰

One should also be aware that although it is desirable that all the aspects of one's preaching be aligned with and supportive of one another, many forms of excellence cannot be reduced to cookie-cutter rules. Certain skills will be more important to some hearers than to others; certain faults will distress some hearers more than others. Some faults can be compensated for by strengths; some faults are fatal; and the lapses in performance are rarely fatal if the preacher is a person of conviction and character. (I, for instance, though I inevitably notice and am greatly distracted by poor grammar, sexism, poor sermon design, faulty inflection, and so on, will and do put up with them all; but if I distrust a preacher's character, I will never return, no matter how great his or her skills.)

Other important warnings might include the commonly made observation that adequacy and truthfulness of proclamation do not correlate in any precise way with positive reception of what one says; if they did, the ministry of Jesus would condemn itself. Yes, for a time, large crowds may have listened with delight (Mark 12:37); but in the end, most of them demonstrated the legendary fickleness of crowds and left. And those whom Jesus confronted most directly were as likely to want to kill him as to follow him. He seemed not to have had the slightest inclination to make hearing and following him pleasant and easy, as if one could get people through the door and then get to work on them. Truthfulness, in other words, is not determined by customer satisfaction surveys. And it is not enhanced by the rapport one may achieve by dealing only with sins and evils committed by people half a world away.

Nor is the kind of beauty that Scripture reveals the Savior to have the innocuous sort that fits in well with elevator music (see, e.g., Isa. 52:14–53:5), or the sort of physical decorativeness that our society seems to hold in such high esteem. The “pretty” and sentimental are as offensive in the pulpit as they are in the visual and literary arts, and for more important reasons. Beauty of character and the beauty of holiness may terrify as readily as console. The

29. See Bartow, chap. 12, and (more extensively and from a more positive angle) Ward, chap. 8, below, on aspects of this point.

30. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 372.

content of the gospel must govern the form of expression. Never must this order be reversed, least of all for aesthetic reasons.

And preachers must, perhaps supremely, guard against the temptation to think that if they have developed the proper performance skills, they may simply “present” something, as if it were an object, without first being addressed by it and without ever seriously addressing the living persons in front of them.³¹ Not that we are always, or even usually, fully “present” to God and ourselves and others when we preach: everything from the complaint of the parishioner at the door, to a toothache, to serious illness, or another real calamity pulls us away and may leave us mechanically intoning what we have, one hopes, prepared. But something of character will still come through to those who have anything of an instinct for perceiving it, and if it is lacking, nothing whatever can substitute for it. The point is seeking a certain wholeness in what we do, never forgetting that we are doing it, first and foremost, before the God who cannot be deceived and who will not be mocked.

31. “Our Christian orator, while he says what is just, and holy, and good (and he ought never to say anything else), does all he can to be heard with intelligence, with pleasure, and with obedience; . . . and so far as he succeeds, he will succeed more by piety in prayer than by gifts of oratory. . . . He ought, before he opens his mouth, to lift up his thirsty soul to God, to drink in what he is about to pour forth, and to be himself filled with what he is about to distribute. . . . And who can make us say what we ought, and in the way we ought, except Him in whose hand both we and our speeches are?” (Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 4.32).