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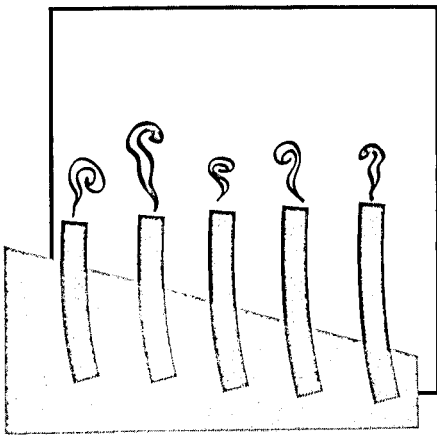
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DOING WHAT THE BIBLE DOES

Karoline M. Lewis



As a professor of preaching at a Lutheran seminary, I find myself regularly bemused and befuddled by the ever-pivotal lecture in the foundational preaching course during the session on law and gospel. Each semester I am confronted with the same reaction from students: “This is the hardest thing I have ever learned at seminary.” While law and gospel, as they express God’s activity in and for the world, is a core tenet of Lutheran theology and preaching, there is a consistent disconnect in the students between the idea itself and actually doing it in a sermon. The students are quite capable of grasping the concept of law and gospel as *content* in biblical texts, but they are persistently puzzled by the *functional* aspect of this hermeneutic. Able to determine what they think are clearly law or clearly gospel phrases, sentences, or claims in a biblical passage, the students are dumbfounded when they discover that what *they* thought was law could function as gospel, and vice versa. Their surprise turns to existential dismay when the one thing they think they need to “get” to be able to do Lutheran preaching seems as hidden as God was to Luther before he grasped Romans 1:17. I began to wonder if their lack of comprehension and ensuing alarm was my fault as a teacher.

What the Bible Says: Starting from Scratch

A review of the course raised the question whether I had to rethink just this one lecture, make a minor adjustment in my instructional plan, or imagine a whole new pedagogical approach to preaching. I eventually concluded that a more substantive lecture, a better PowerPoint presentation, or supplementary reading on the distinction between the descriptive and functional levels of law and gospel was not the answer. Rather, I needed a new starting point in my approach to biblical exegesis *for preaching*.

My professional title is Assistant Professor of Biblical Preaching, which many people find amusing. “Isn’t that redundant?” “What other kind of preaching is there?” And ultimately, “What *is* biblical preaching?” Of course, there is a lot of other preaching out there in which the Bible is merely a jumping off point to more “relevant” material,

stories, and illustrations, leaving the listener wondering if there was a text in the sermon at all. Yet more problematic than the assumption that the Bible is just not that relevant is the assumption about what exegesis is.

If the result of our exegesis is to leave the Bible behind, then we really think that some other story can say it better. The outcome of our exegesis (and therefore of our sermons) is what the Bible says and therefore what the Bible means. Or, to put it another way, what the Bible says is equated with what it means, which can be adequately determined by our exegetical method. In the end, the Bible’s *content* trumps the Bible’s *function*. If this is where we start—assuming that the Bible’s primary mode of meaning is information—then it is too easy to reduce the biblical text on which we preach to knowledge, quotable quotes, moral platitudes, or pithy sayings. An unintended consequence of beginning our exegetical process with determining what the Bible says is the reduction of our sermons to law and gospel formulae, easily remembered theological clichés, or merely factual statements about God.

Why has this happened? Perhaps our origins in and dedication to theological reform has made Lutheran preaching express creedal content but forget the professed nature of the Word of God—a Word that *does* something. As a body favoring scholarship and originating in theological disputes, Lutheranism and its preaching is predisposed to making the same contentions in sermons. I see this in my students. Concerned about whether or not the theology of their sermons is “right,” and without reflection on what “right” would mean, the biblical text is consistently reduced to known confessional constructs with little attention to the specificity with which a particular text articulates theological claims. While I openly share with the students great confidence in my systematic theology colleagues’ ability to convey sound doctrine, somehow the students end up fearing that their work with the biblical text has not resulted in a sermon that is adequately doctrinal in content. This observation is meant neither as a critique of the teaching of systematic theology nor of the Bible, and it is not a plea for better integration of exegesis and systematics. Rather, it is the beginning articulation of a growing realization that

biblical exegesis for *preaching* has to start from a different place. I have no concerns that the students will preach heretical sermons or that they lack excellent exegetical skills. My greater concern lately is the sense that the students do not actually believe that grace is a verb.

What the Bible Does: A Biblical Model for Biblical Preaching

Reimagining biblical exegesis for preaching necessitates beginning with the Bible itself. Although an obvious claim, it demands an expanded awareness of biblical preaching, that biblical preaching means not just being faithful to what the Bible says but tending to what the Bible does. In fact, what the Bible says *is* what God *does* or what God has done, is doing, and will do.

In the classroom, the primary passage I have used to help students get a sense of this dynamic in the biblical text is the prologue to John's Gospel (1:1-18). We do a careful, verse-by-verse reading of the passage as a whole, but two details of the prologue specifically suggest that biblical exegesis needs to be more than figuring out what the Bible says. The first detail is the use of the word "grace" in the prologue. While the word "grace" appears four times in these eighteen verses, the word is never used again in the entire Gospel. I ask the students why not. Why would this critical term for understanding God's action in Jesus Christ be absent from the rest of the narrative? Because once the Word becomes flesh, the rest of the Gospel narrates what grace looks like, feels like, tastes like, smells like, sounds like. Grace is itself incarnated in Jesus so that it can exist neither outside of relationship nor human experience. The Gospel of John insists that grace is not information about God but the activity of God that is particularly experienced in the Father's son, Jesus. If "from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace" (1:16), then the promise of the incarnation is the profound experience of abundant

grace through every sensory mode. As a result, the first sign in John's Gospel is not an exorcism or healing but a miracle of abundance. The wedding at Cana (2:1-11) as the first of Jesus' seven signs narrates and creates an experience of what abundant grace can be. The theological claim is not that Jesus can change water into wine or even that Jesus can do miracles. The theological promise is the abundance of wine: twenty to thirty gallons, filled to the brim of the best wine. Consequently, the challenge I give to my students is to preach a sermon that creates the *experience* of grace without once using the actual word in the entire sermon.

The second feature of John's prologue that becomes critical for how biblical exegesis for preaching needs to be oriented to the function of the Bible is found in v. 18: "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son who is close to the Father's heart who has made him known." The last word in the verse is typically translated "made known," "declared," and "revealed," all adequate renditions of the Greek word ἐξέγνω. As a compound word that combines the preposition ἐκ ("out") and ἄγω ("to lead or to bring"), it literally means "to lead or bring out." In other words, the purpose of the incarnation is not to *learn* something *about* God, although that is certainly a possible outcome, but is quite literally to lead God out, to bring God out so as to have a living encounter, an actual experience, an event, a happening of the abiding relationship that the Father desires with the children (1:9).

This means that biblical exegesis for preaching needs to ask about the affective experiences of biblical texts and not merely their cognitive conclusions. One of the most helpful books on preaching to come out in the last few years is Mark Allan Powell's *What Do They Hear? Bridging the Gap between Pulpit and Pew*.¹ When clergy and laity were asked the meaning of Luke 3:3-17 (the preaching of John the Baptist), the clergy overwhelmingly assumed

the meaning to be information: "Luke wants to say that..." or "The most obvious point is..." In contrast, the laity began with emotion or effect: "I have felt like..." or "It encourages me..." If in the first encounter with the biblical text the preacher asks, "What did this text do to me?" and not "What is this text about?" the gap between pulpit and pew, between explanations about God and experiences of God, might be less of a chasm to span in our preaching. As a result, the move toward capturing the *function* of God's law and promise in our sermons might indeed be navigated as well.

How the Bible Says: The Bible as a "Mouth-House"

Luther's familiar designation for the church as *Mundhaus* certainly did not preclude the reading of Scripture. Yet our reading of Scripture in the context of worship has been substantially limited to sight: our parishioners' attention gets buried in bulletins, *Celebrate* inserts, or pew Bibles, reading along and most likely critiquing the readers as they go. With little to no consideration given to how the texts sound, to the reading aloud of Scripture as an interpretive event, we perpetuate the silence of words that were meant to be heard.

I am convinced that our "exegesis" of the biblical text needs to begin with how we imagine the text sounds. Biblical preaching takes seriously that the Bible began as words that were meant to be heard. As "textualized orality" or "residually oral,"² the Bible's use of oral techniques and aural patterns is essential to what and how it means. Reclaiming the orality of the Bible captures the "eventness" of the Word and words. The expectation for the first listeners of these stories was that something would happen in the hearing. Again, the Gospel of John provides a biblical basis for this claim. "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may *come*

to believe/continue to believe³ that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (20:30–31). There is an assumed effect and affect, that the words recorded in this story will bring hearers to belief in Jesus or sustain present believers in their believing.

One outcome of a focus on the orality of the Bible is that preachers can begin to reclaim and commit to the orality of their sermons. It is not enough for a preacher to have a sermon that *says* something. Equal attention, perhaps even more so, must be on what the sermon *does*. Accordingly, beyond the composition of the sermon, two more steps in sermon preparation become vital. The first is to recognize that the sermon “writing” is not complete until the preacher has spoken the words that have been written—and then rewrites them for sound. This means writing for the ear, using rhetorical devices that are inherent in the Bible itself and in all forms of speech, such as repetition, alliteration, and imagery. The second step is delivery and performance. Once the words have been chosen for their oral and aural effectiveness, how the words are preached is critical. Vocal variation in volume, pace, and pitch; the well-placed pause; emotion that communicates what the text did *to you*; all these will make the difference between an engaging preacher and an engaged preacher, between information and proclamation, between explanation *about* the word and the embodied presence *of* the Word.

*How the Bible Does:
Too Deep for Words*

The preacher needs to remember that what happened during study, in

exegetical method, in the quiet of her mind, will actually be part of a larger whole, creating a sermon of words that will be spoken. The sermon does not exist as words on a page but as an event in time during worship. There is a disconnect when our sermons remain products of our silent imagination and are then inserted into a profoundly vocalized experience. If worship is where we expect God to show up, but the sermon does not reveal that same expectation of the biblical text on which it is based, we perpetuate the divide between preacher and parishioner, between expert and laity, between Scripture and daily life.

In other words, to mirror how the Bible does what it does is to locate the sermon in worship, even while it is being written. While there are many assumptions about the purposes of worship, its communal identity is presupposed by all. It is the gathering of God’s people, profoundly relational, communal, and participatory. To bring even to our first encounter with the biblical text the relational, communal, and participatory context of its preaching can open up the relational, communal, and participatory elements that are built into its narrative mode. In other words, the reciprocity between the oral culture from which the Bible originated and the oral context for which it is preached might create a mutual interpretive reality that engenders regard for the Bible’s inherent orality and worship’s expressed auralty.

This goes beyond simply bringing your parishioners into the study with you. It imagines an interchange between exegesis and worship that witnesses to the promise of the incarnated Word. Because of the inseparability of Word and worship, of exegesis and

believer, of Scripture and community, we are able to acknowledge that the theological claims with which we wrestle and that we so desperately desire to make are beyond mere human words and expression. The inextricable union of Word and flesh that we try to understand yet never can is a promise too deep for words. And so we depend on the power of proclamation, the singing of the soul in liturgy and hymns, and the real presence of Christ in bread, wine, and water, all of which together give us only a glimpse of grace upon grace. And perhaps, in this renewed understanding of how the Bible *does*, grace upon grace will be more than a glimpse but actually experienced as a flutter of the heart, a fleeting stroke on the arm, a whisper of a voice that promises over and over again, “I love you.” LF

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Notes

1. Mark Allan Powell, *What Do They Hear? Bridging the Gap between Pulpit and Pew*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2007.

2. For use and discussion of these terms, see Matei Calinescu, “Orality in Literacy: Some Historical Paradoxes of Reading and Rereading,” in *Second Thoughts: A Focus on Rereading*, ed. David Galef. Detroit: Wayne State, 1998, 51–74, and Walter J. Ong, “Text and Interpretation: Mark and After,” *Semeia* 39 (1987): 7–26.

3. The dual translation represents the equal textual support for either an aorist or present subjunctive of the verb *πιστεύω* in the manuscript evidence.