

Performing the Scriptures: Preaching and Jesus' "Third Way"

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The curtain goes up at the theater, and people sit up in their seats, ready to see the company of actors interpret a play by performing it. The lights go down at the symphony, and the audience tunes its ears to hear the orchestra interpret a musical score by performing it. While many of us have been present when the curtain has gone up and the lights have gone down, we may rarely have thought about a concert or a drama as an interpretation of a text. Yet that is precisely what these events are—performative interpretations of texts. And the performance is essential; for some texts, such as musical scores and dramas, “only begin to deliver their meaning insofar as they are ‘brought into play’ through their interpretative performance.”¹

According to Nicholas Lash, the New Testament is just such a text for the Christian community.² Moving biblical interpretation beyond both ideational “meaning” and individual experience, Lash argues that the Christian interpretation of the Bible involves primarily the *performance* of scripture. Like a Beethoven quartet or a Shakespearean play, scripture is a text for which the fundamental form of interpretation consists in its performance. The Christian community’s interpretation of scripture is similar to the interpretation of a play through the performance of a company of actors or the interpretation of a musical score through the performance of a group of musicians.³ As Lash writes,

...the fundamental form of the *Christian* interpretation of scripture is the life, activity, and organization of the believing community. Secondly,...Christian practice, as interpretive action, consists in the *performance* of texts which are construed as “rendering,” bearing witness to, one whose words and deeds, discourse and suffering, “rendered” the truth of God in human history. The performance of the New Testament enacts the conviction that these texts are most appropriately read as the story of Jesus, the story of everyone else, and the story of God.⁴

According to Lash, the primary poles in the interpretation of scripture are not finally written texts (for example, the biblical text at one pole and theological texts or sermonistic texts at the other). Rather, the poles in biblical interpretation are fundamentally patterns of human action: on the one hand, “what was said and done and suffered, then, by Jesus and his disciples,” and on the other, “what is said and done and suffered, now, by those who seek to share his obedience and hope.”⁵ Within this framework, the most important interpretation of scripture takes place in the performance of scripture by the Christian community. The interpretation of the scriptures is a full-time affair, involving their enactment as “the social existence of an entire human community.”⁶ According to Lash, the best illustration of the communal performance of scripture is the celebration of the Eucharist, including the life of discipleship which it enacts.⁷

Drawing on Lash’s work, Richard Lischer has recently argued that preachers need to take more seriously this performative character of interpretation.⁸ Biblical interpre-

tation in preaching, he writes, needs to move from “translation”—the attempt to restate the biblical idiom in relevant, contemporary conceptuality—to “performance.”⁹

Neither our worship nor our preaching has as its ultimate purpose the examination of a religious text for the sake of the lessons that can be derived from it. Just as the liturgy is not a text but an action, so preaching is not a translation of an ancient text but a “performance” of it. And the ultimate “performer,” after the preacher has led a sermon “dress rehearsal” of the story, is the Christian community.¹⁰

The “hermeneutical gap” between then and now, Lischer notes, is not a matter for reflection, but is daily overcome in the life of Christian communities. “Preaching is not...one person’s persuasive address. It is the ceaseless activity of the church....”¹¹

Without the community’s performance of and participation in the Word, the chasm between the Book and the contemporary community is unbridgeable. The Bible remains a dead letter. There is no “meaning” that lies dormant in the text. Meaning is disclosed in the community’s performance of the text in worship and in its witness in the world.¹²

Lash and Lischer thus invite preachers to consider the matter of biblical interpretation in a broader way than we usually do. Such interpretation is not limited to the ways we seek to glean a message from the biblical text for the sermon. Rather, interpretation also includes the ways in which the church’s practice of preaching is itself an interpretive performance of scripture. From this perspective the interpretive questions take a new form: How does the practice of preaching itself enact an interpretation of scripture? And what are the implications of this enactment for the way we preach? In what follows I will address these questions by examining more concretely the performative character of Christian preaching. I will suggest that, as one dimension of the church’s performative interpretation of scripture, the “dress rehearsal” of preaching embodies a distinctive performance of the New Testament. Specifically, I will seek to demonstrate that the proclamation of Jesus Christ is a concrete enactment of Jesus’ “third way,” which involves neither passivity nor violence, but is rather the way of active, nonviolent engagement with the “powers” of the world.¹³

Jesus’ Third Way

In his ministry Jesus both witnesses to and embodies the reign of God in the world. The fulfillment of God’s coming reign is proclaimed and takes place in Jesus’ preaching, teaching, and mighty works. During the period of his ministry Jesus is an authoritative figure, actively challenging the powers with freedom and scope of movement.¹⁴ Moreover, during his ministry Jesus gathers a community, a “contrast society,” whose life is shaped by the practice of nonviolence. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus constitutes this people as a community of nonviolent resistance to the powers.¹⁵

In the course of his ministry, however, Jesus’ preaching and deeds offend the powers of the world, which turn against him and seek to destroy him through the violent means which are their *modus operandi*. The powers simply cannot sit by and allow such a challenge to their dominion to exist. Nevertheless, even as the religious

and political authorities close in on him, Jesus explicitly refuses to respond to the powers in their own violent terms. At the beginning of the Passion narrative he triumphantly enters Jerusalem humbly on a donkey, both parodying and challenging the rulers of the world. Moreover, in the course of the Passion narrative, Jesus rejects the option of fighting the powers by violent means; he rejects the military option. In the Gospel of Matthew, for example, Jesus stays the hand that would defend him against arrest and asks, "Do you think I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?"¹⁶ Jesus intentionally chooses the way of nonviolence, for the purposes of God cannot be fulfilled through violent means.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus enacts a similar rejection of the violent option. Responding to Pilate's inquiry as to whether he is the king of the Jews, Jesus replies, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."¹⁷ Jesus is not affirming an unearthly, "spiritual" kingdom, but rather one that is "in the world, but not of it." He announces that his reign does not pursue the way of violence on which the powers of the world depend.

Jesus' refusal to take the military option, his refusal to combat violent domination by violent domination, is in fact his most profound challenge to the powers and his most crucial witness to and embodiment of God's reign. Indeed, this encounter between the way of the powers and the way of Jesus lies at the heart of the gospel the church ponders and performs during Lent. In his intentionally enacted nonviolence, Jesus resists the way of the powers of the world. And on the cross, through his apparent powerlessness, Jesus *unmasks* the powers by bringing their true nature to light.¹⁸ Far from being the legitimate rulers of the world, they are revealed as false gods opposed to the One who is very God. Further, in unmasking the powers, Jesus also *disarms* them; he takes away the "mirrors" by which they maintain the illusion that they are indeed the divine regents of the world. The powers are seen to be emperors without any clothes, a disarming humiliation for those who rely so heavily on their pretensions of dignity. Finally, on the cross Jesus *triumphs* over the powers; for their unmasking and disarming is their ultimate defeat, a fact that is confirmed in God's vindication of the way of Jesus in the resurrection.

Jesus thus actively challenges and engages the powers of the world; his way is not the way of passivity. However, the way of Jesus is also not the way of coerced belief or violent domination. Jesus does not "mirror evil" or become the evil that he opposes.¹⁹ Rather, enacting a "third way" that is neither passivity nor violence, Jesus actively engages with the powers, but at the same time breaks the "spiral of violence"; and it is this third way that triumphs over the powers and breaks their ultimate ability to enslave humanity.²⁰ Jesus lives free from the powers and once and for all opens the way for others to begin to do so as well. Through baptism, Christians are initiated into this freedom and this way.

Preaching and Jesus' "Third Way"

As a form of discipleship empowered and shaped by this story of Jesus, faithful Christian preaching embodies a distinctive performance of the New Testament. The faithful proclamation of Jesus Christ is an enactment of Jesus' third way. As Jesus embodied the reign of God and challenged the powers of the world, but refused to resort to violence in that effort, so in proclaiming Jesus Christ the preacher is engaged in this same nonviolent resistance to the powers. The preacher witnesses boldly; she

or he challenges the powers of the world that oppose God's reign; she or he proclaims the reign of God in Jesus Christ and the freedom made possible by that reign. Indeed, the preacher may seem assertive, even a bit pushy at times; for Christian preaching is not a form of passivity, but an active engagement with the powers. Not surprisingly, third-way preaching may even create conflict, not only with the authorities outside the church, but even among those within the church, who in many instances are as much beneficiaries as victims of the "powers that be."²¹

As disciples of Jesus, however, faithful preachers not only reject passivity, but also refuse to coerce belief or resort to violent domination, even in the face of conflict, disbelief, and rejection. Preachers accept a strange kind of powerlessness, which finally relies on God to make effective not only individual sermons, but the very practice of preaching itself. Nevertheless, precisely through that powerlessness, preachers resist and challenge the way of the powers—the way of coercion and violence.

The faithful "dress rehearsal" of preaching enacts on behalf of the entire church an interpretive performance of Jesus' nonviolent engagement with the powers. At the very point at which the church seeks to speak truth, the church also enacts its refusal to resort to violence in the service of that truth. Indeed, in the act of witnessing to Jesus Christ, the church is reminded that a resort to violence would be a contradiction of the One who is proclaimed. In moral obedience shaped by the story of Jesus, the preaching of the church takes the path of nonviolent witness, rather than the path of coercion or domination.²² It is thus not surprising that for centuries the church refused to let priests serve in the military, even after other Christians were unfortunately allowed to do so.²³ To participate in warfare was a contradiction not only of the message of the gospel, but also of the scripture the priests performed from the pulpit (and at the Eucharist). The faithful proclamation of Jesus Christ is an odd practice in a world in which people seek to get their way and impose their truths through violent means. And this oddness should not be overlooked; it is part and parcel of preaching as a performance of scripture. Preaching is a countercultural practice in a world in which attempts to control and manipulate the future through violence often rule the day. Preaching is a strange, risky way for the church to spread the gospel and build up people in the way of Jesus Christ. But preaching is odd because it enacts the odd way of Jesus in the midst of a violent world.

I do not mean to claim that preachers are always nonviolent. Preaching can and often does participate in the world's structures of domination. The church itself is not yet completely free from the powers, and preachers often succumb to uses of the pulpit that partake of violence. The practice of preaching is distorted when it is located within hierarchical structures of domination. And preachers can and sometimes do disempower their hearers, making them mere passive servants of a kind of pulpit domination. However, as a performance of the story of Jesus, the practice of preaching continually calls both the preacher and the church to follow the pattern of Jesus' nonviolent engagement with the powers. As an enactment of Jesus' third way, the proclamation of Jesus Christ challenges the use of the pulpit in the service of violence or domination. And this fact has important consequences for the actual practice of preaching.

Most basically, faithful preaching will resist using the pulpit to support violent solutions to problems, particularly the violent solution of war—something preachers have unfortunately forgotten from the Crusades to the Gulf War. The support of warfare from the pulpit stands in fundamental contradiction to the practice of preaching as an enactment of Jesus' third way. Similarly, this understanding of

preaching challenges sermons that support or aid the kinds of systemic violence—for example, racism—that participate in the structures of domination. Third-way preaching stands with the victims against the powers.

Third-way preaching also invites preachers to examine their use of language. Part of the preacher's resistance to the powers is resistance to certain kinds of speech. Michael Williams, for example, has explored the way certain images serve as lenses through which we view the world; and he has suggested that the image of domination and subordination has become a comprehensive metaphor through which many in our society see the world.²⁴ This image tends to break personal and social reality into the basic categories of superior and inferior. Moreover, this basic image finds expression in popular speech, in which "certain individuals are named 'losers' and others 'winners.' Winners are those who successfully dominate; they are the ones on top."²⁵ Consider the simple word "one," Williams suggests, in two very different celebrations:

In sports, the word 'one' usually means number one, the victors, those who have dominated their inferiors. The winners of a contest prance around and shout ecstatically, "We're number one!" In the eucharistic liturgy, however, the word "one" signifies the human unity of those joined by the Spirit of Jesus. Here "one" means communion and unity.²⁶

As an enactment of Jesus' third way, the proclamation of Jesus Christ calls for a counterimagery, a counterspeech, which both resists and challenges the cultural imagery of domination and subordination.

In addition, when preaching is understood as a practice of nonviolent resistance, preachers may even receive some stylistic guidance. In his discussion of Matthew 5: 40, Walter Wink notes the comic, even burlesque character of Jesus' command to "give your inner garment also."²⁷ The situation is one in which the economic structures have so milked the poor that all they have left to be sued for are their garments. When their outer garment is claimed in court, Wink argues, Jesus' counsel is to give the inner one also. That is, the victim of the economic system, who has no other recourse, takes off the inner garment and walks out of the court stark naked. In this way the victim not only retains his or her status as a moral agent, but also unmasks the system's essential cruelty and "burlesques its pretensions to justice, law, and order."²⁸ As the person walks out of court naked and people begin to ask what is going on, the economic system itself stands naked and is revealed for what it is—a system that treats the poor as "sponge[s] to be squeezed dry by the rich."²⁹ Indeed, by presenting this ethical option in his sermon, Jesus himself burlesques the economic system.

Such a comic and burlesque style can be appropriate to third-way preaching. Through the use of risky humor, preaching may demonstrate the logical conclusions of the way of the powers and thereby unmask them for what they are, burst their pretentious bubbles, and free the hearers from their tyranny. Rather than the usual somber, self-important sermons dealing with such matters as capitalism or individualism, preachers from time to time may offer startlingly comic or burlesque depictions of the powers, revealing the absurdity of their claims. Then a space may be created for the redemptive power of the Word, not just for the hearers, but for the powers themselves.³⁰

Despite these rather practical suggestions, however, an understanding of preaching as Jesus' third way finally directs preachers beyond matters of hermeneutical

method and homiletical technique. In this kind of preaching the character of the preacher becomes important, for one cannot preach nonviolently without developing the virtues, habits, and disciplines of nonviolence in one's own life. No mere technique is adequate for such preaching. Rather, Jesus' third way invites preachers to discern the violence in their own lives and to participate in communities within which the skills of peaceableness are practiced and learned.³¹

Some of the disciplines of peaceableness may be simple; they may seem almost trivial. However, it is within the small, daily, "trivial" activities of our lives that peaceable characters are formed.³² As Stanley Hauerwas has written,

. . . learning the discipline to wait, to be at rest with ourselves, to take the time to be a friend and to be loved, are all . . . practices that are meant to free us from the normalcy of the world. Through them we are slowly recalled from the world of violence that we might envisage how interesting a people at peace might be.³³

Other disciplines may be more dramatic, including even the practices of those communities engaged in the tactics of nonviolent political resistance.

As an enactment of Jesus' third way, preaching will also require certain virtues, particularly the virtue of patient hope. All too often it is our need to secure ourselves and control our futures that is the breeding ground of our violence. A people of hope can actively engage the powers of the world without losing patience (as preachers often do) when their efforts are not immediately effective. For our hope is born of the assurance that it is not simply our task to transform the world's violence into God's peace; that has already been done in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.³⁴ In that hope, those who proclaim Jesus Christ can follow his third way with patience and even with joy—the joy that comes with the assurance of God's redemption and the confidence that we are at least in the right struggle.³⁵

NOTES

¹ Nicholas Lash, "Performing the Scriptures," in *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM Press, 1986), 41-42.

² *Ibid.*, 37-46.

³ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁸ Richard Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching: The Dynamics of the Gospel*, 2d ed. (Durham, North Carolina: Labyrinth Press, 1992), 90-92.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 91.

¹³ Although I do not claim that my work reflects that of Walter Wink at every point, I am indebted to Wink for the phrase, "Jesus' third way." See Walter Wink, "Neither Passivity nor Violence: Jesus' Third Way," *Forum* 7 (March/June, 1991): 5-28. See also Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992). For further reflection on resistance, see "Toward a Theology of Resistance," in *Thomas Merton: The Nonviolent Alternative*, ed. Gordon Zahn (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980): 186-92; and

Dorothee Soelle, "Resistance: Toward a First World Theology," *Christianity and Crisis* 39 (July 23, 1979): 178-182.

In speaking of the "powers" of the world, I am referring to those religious, social, political, and economic structures which were created good by God, but which have become idols actively opposed to God's way, enslaving and oppressing human beings and relying on violence to enforce their rule. Wink refers to them as the "Domination System." For a fuller discussion of the powers see Wink, *Engaging the Powers*; and John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 135-162.

14 My reflections on the pattern of the story of Jesus are based in part on Hans W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 102-138.

15 On Jesus' gathering of a nonviolent community, see Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, trans. John P. Galvin (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 50-56. On the Sermon on the Mount as constituting a people of nonviolence, see Stanley Hauerwas, "Living the Proclaimed Reign of God: A Sermon on the Sermon on the Mount," *Interpretation* 47 (April 1993): 152-58.

16 Matthew 26: 53-54; NRSV. See also Luke 22: 47-53; Mark 14: 43-50. In Luke Jesus virtually equates the carrying of a weapon with "being numbered among sinners" (Luke 22: 35-38). Ched Myers has argued that the activity of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark is shaped by the way of nonviolent resistance. See Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988).

17 John 18: 36; NRSV.

18 My discussion of the way in which Jesus unmasks, disarms, and triumphs over the powers on the cross is taken from Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, 147-150. Yoder's work depends on that of Hendrik Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1962). See also Wink's discussion in *Engaging the Powers*, pp. 139-155; and Colossians 2: 13-15.

19 Wink, "Jesus' Third Way," 23-24; idem, *Engaging the Powers*, 195-207.

20 Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 139-155.

21 On the role of conflict in peacemaking, see Stanley Hauerwas, "Peacemaking: The Virtue of the Church," in *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World and Living in Between* (Durham, North Carolina: Labyrinth Press, 1988), 89-97.

22 Stanley Hauerwas, "The Church as God's New Language," in *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World and Living in Between* (Durham, North Carolina: Labyrinth Press, 1988), 53.

23 James William McClendon, *Systematic Theology: Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 301.

24 Michael Williams, "Culture, Counterculture, and the Word," *Liturgy* 6 (Summer, 1986): 90.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Wink, "Jesus' Third Way," 9-12; idem, *Engaging the Powers*, 177-79.

28 Wink, "Jesus' Third Way," 12.

29 Ibid.

30 Because the powers are not destroyed or violently overthrown, the possibility is opened for their redemption, their return to the good purposes for which they were created. As Wink notes, the unmasking of the creditor in Matthew 5: 40 is not simply punitive; "it offers the creditor a chance to see, perhaps for the first time in his life, what his practices cause, and to repent" (Wink, "Jesus' Third Way," 12).

31 On the importance of discerning the violence in our lives, see Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 279-295.

32 On the importance of the "trivial," see Stanley M. Hauerwas, "Taking Time for Peace: The Ethical Significance of the Trivial," in *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World and Living in Between* (Durham, North Carolina: Labyrinth Press, 1988): 253-266. As Hauerwas notes, "the primary meaning of 'trivial,' after all, is not 'trifling,' but 'that which can be met anywhere.' To speak of the significance of the trivial is to remind us that some of our everyday activities. . . embody significant moral commitments" (p. 263).

33 Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 150.

34 Ibid., 147.

35 Ibid. Thanks to Stan Saunders, who read an earlier draft of this essay and made many helpful suggestions.