

*Reflections on the Theme**

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It is a shabby thing to have to confess under these circumstances, but I must honestly report that I never quite understood what a “keynote” address is. Though I have been billed as giving them on a number of occasions, I have usually, in my innocence, just barged ahead and said what I would have said under any number of other captions; and, so far, no one has set me straight. Given the high caliber and *savoir faire* of the intellectual leadership of this conference, however, I felt compelled at last to inform myself on this subject; and from that impeccable textual source, *Webster’s Dictionary*, I learned that “keynote,” when it does not refer to a musical tone, denotes discourse on the basic idea or principle informing an occasion or event. I am much relieved by this information; and I expect that you will be relieved, too, knowing that for the first time in his life this speaker will do exactly what he was supposed to do and deliver a “keynote” address, nothing more and nothing less.

Now, the basic idea or principle informing *this* event, clearly enough, is stated most succinctly in the theme, “Reclaiming the Text.” Accordingly, my address will take the form of reflections or commentaries on this phrase; and I shall introduce each of these commentaries (there will be three of them), by asking you to deliberate briefly on a question deriving directly from that theme.

What Text?

The first question is obvious: What text is intended here? The answer, too, would seem at first glance to be perfectly obvious: the biblical text, the texts of the older and newer Testaments. If one considers the descriptions of the “academic study units” listed in the brochure for this event, no fewer than eighteen of them, one cannot miss the point that this conference aims to investigate the contemporary significance of the Bible for the life of the church in general and for the preaching ministry in particular. “The text is the thing,” declares this pamphlet, “the thing that mediates us to a voice other than our own. And surely we have all understood that the text intended by this striking assertion is the text of Holy Scripture.

I have no wish to unsettle that assumption. I think that is indeed our reason for being here. Yet it is interesting to ask whether the purposes of this gathering, including our individual and no doubt varied expectations of it, would be satisfied were we to confine our deliberations exclusively to the scriptural text and its significance for preaching. Suppose that at the end of the week we had confirmed for one another, in ways both new and old, that the Bible is and must be the foundational and inspirational basis of all preaching: would we then have accomplished the goals of this convocation? Perhaps. Yet on the other hand such an accomplishment might have been little more than a restatement of the obvious. Rhetorically, if not in consistent practice, most of us, I suppose, already assume that the biblical text constitutes the primary sourcebook of Christian preaching. What has brought us here, I suspect, is not a need to have that

**This is a slightly different version of Hall’s address to the “Preacher’s Conference” on “Reclaiming the Text,” Montreat Conference Center, Montreat, N.C., May 30, 2000.*

lesson underscored once more, but the opportunity to address a more engrossing question, one redolent of cultural as well as confessional perplexity: How, in an age that no longer brings to the contemplation of Holy Scripture either the knowledge or the trust and reverence that are assumed by the theological and homiletical conventions in which we stand, can the preacher expect to engage his or her contemporaries through the medium of this ancient text?

Insofar as that describes our state of mind at the outset of these deliberations, it indicates something interesting--and complicating--about the noun in this theme, "the text." Particularly for those of us schooled in the various disciplines of theology and working professionally in the church, the text of scripture is important not only because of its own unique witness to the core events of our faith, but also because it has been and is the subject of a whole tradition of doctrine—a tradition culminating in a theology of authority encapsulated (at least for Protestants) in the formal principle of the Reformation, *sola scriptura* [scripture alone]. Just as this "alone," this "*sola*," never meant scripture without any reference whatsoever to anything else, including doctrinal traditions, so "the text" that we want to "reclaim" here, while concentrated on the Bible, is linked for us inseparably--historically, existentially--with a vast *doctrinal, historical, and exegetical* literature that has functioned to define and refine the meaning of the biblical text and the nature of its authority for faith. Thus the reclamation of the biblical text necessarily involves us in a review and reconsideration of the theological assumptions we bring to the reading of scripture.

For instance, it will matter a good deal to one's appropriation of this theme whether one comes to it under the influence of some lingering belief in the verbal inspiration of the biblical text, or on the assumption that the Bible is a work of strictly human authorship, manifesting the usual propensities for error and platitude as well as truth and wisdom. Or again, the reclamation of the text will convey something different to those who (perhaps with Calvin or Barth) assume a reverential attitude toward the *whole* Bible and those who (with Luther or Tillich) are ready to distinguish more from less authoritative biblical texts.

So, yes: it is the biblical text that concerns us first and foremost, but we should not imagine that we can come to it independent of a diverse extra-biblical corpus with which this biblical text is, for us, inextricably linked. Our pathway to the Bible passes through nearly two millennia of Christian discourse, oral and written, concerning the meaning of the text and the appropriate attitude of Christians to their primary literary source. Many of the differing and sometimes incompatible responses to that subject are, in all likelihood, represented in this room. In short, *theology*, with all of its potentiality for clarification and *tumult* will be conspicuous among us as we go about this task of "Reclaiming the Text"; we should recognize this from the outset.

Why Does the Text Require Reclamation?

The second question posed by our theme is, I think, particularly important: Why, or in what sense, does the text require reclamation? That such reclamation is required seems a foregone conclusion at least of the planners of this consultation. The negative assumption behind the positive slogan, "Reclaiming the Text" is that the text, or our claim upon it, or its claim upon us, has been diminished, forfeited, neglected, submerged, brushed aside, overruled trivialized, or in some other way rendered less than vital. It must be "reclaimed" because, without it, we sense a loss: something

essential is missing from our corporate life and witness.

This, if I interpret it aright, comes close to the *raison d'être* of this gathering. "The text," specifically the biblical text, surrounded, upheld, and interpreted by centuries of devotion and scholarship, is not performing for us, as contemporary communities of faith, the service that it can and must perform. In consequence, we are deprived of that which "mediates to us a voice other than our own." Our own voices, individually, congregationally, denominationally, ecumenically--our own all-too-human voices, which have become so prominent in this historical epoch, have begun to sound hollow and unconvincing even to ourselves. Instead of seeming echoes of a more transcendent Word, our words as preachers sound to others flat and one-dimensional. For all our talk of "spirituality," we seldom sense the presence of that "voice other than our own" that "the text," we've been taught to believe and hope, "mediates."

If this is indeed our state of mind, it seems to me salutary that we should acknowledge it openly. Some (and I include myself) would consider such an admission the *conditio sine qua non* of any real renewal of the Christian Movement. In one of the strongest statements of that judgement known to me, George Lindbeck writes:

A religion, especially a heavily textualized religion such as Christianity, can be expected to survive as long as its Scriptures are not ignored. It has no future except in its own intratextual world. One may hope that more and more Christian theologians whether Protestant or Catholic, will soon get the message.¹

This is not the statement of an evangelical biblicist; indeed, in the same essay, Lindbeck identifies himself with the "catholic" side of his Lutheran heritage. Nor is it the statement of one who has neglected the *testimonium internum Spiritus sancti* and the Spirit's continuous regeneration of the Body of Christ. It is a frank recognition on the part of a sophisticated Christian scholar that without the biblical text, without its foundational, inspirational, and corrective centrality in the life of the church, the process of fragmentation and peripheralization that is already far gone must eventually result in disintegration. The "reclaiming" of the text is therefore a matter of life and death, the life or death of the churches.

There is a subtle suggestion in the idea of reclamation, however, of which I think we must be rather wary. To reclaim something usually infers that the lost or neglected object had been in one's possession before, that it actually belongs to one, though one's original claim upon it has been allowed to atrophy. Thus, where the reclamation of "the text" is concerned, the impression can easily gain currency among dissatisfied contemporary Protestants that, in the past, the biblical text was indeed "the thing, the thing that mediated a voice other than our own"; that in that golden past, the church lived and breathed the air of biblical sensibility; that Christians both old and young could cite chapter and verse; that preachers invariably based their sermons on sound exegesis of biblical texts--and that between that admirable past and the present something else entered in, gradually or suddenly, to displace the centrality of the Bible in the Christian life.

One senses that the temptation to adopt such an explanation is strong among certain segments of the once mainline Protestant churches; and alas, there is just enough external evidence to make that explanation seem plausible. Anyone who has

lived sixty or seventy years knows that biblical knowledge *was* greater, much greater, two or three generations ago than it is today, both in the churches and in society at large. And it is also fairly evident that topical and exhortational preaching long ago surpassed and, in North America, practically rendered obsolete exegetical preaching. Moreover, in the churches' thoughtless determination to keep pace with all things "televisible," and to render all knowledge instantly communicable, the shamelessly abbreviated sermon of today's average church service can hardly be expected to carry anything so weighty as kerygmatic wisdom.

More seriously, as I argued in my own attempt at "reclaiming" in a book called, *Remembered Voices: Reclaiming the Legacy of "Neo-Orthodoxy,"* it is true that the biblical narrative was subtly sidelined, after about 1960, by a new and intensive quest on the parts of various identity-based or cause-based theologies for greater prominence in Christian discourse. These quests in most cases did not ignore the biblical text, but they appealed to certain scriptural themes such as liberation, justice, peace, equality, shared creaturehood, which then became the hermeneutical clues to the whole faith, producing successive waves of theological enthusiasm *without*, as a rule, encouraging a greater awareness of the breadth and variety of the biblical narrative. Under the impact of some of these movements, one lived, not with the text *in toto*, in all of its otherness and refusal of ownership, but with some powerful theme or trope, partially derived from the text but driven more immediately by some specific social or ethical concern. For many in the churches, this kind of "contextual" preoccupation constituted a displacement of the biblical text by "ideas," not to say ideologies, accessible only to those immediately served by them. I shall return to this thought later.

The present point is only that some evidence may be found for the supposition that the biblical text once enjoyed a prominence that it has lost and that now ought to be "reclaimed." But did the text in reality ever enjoy such prominence? Was the Bible in fact in our remembered past, the kind of influence, at least in the churches, of which it could be said, this, truly, is "the thing that mediates to us a voice other than our own"? May it not be more accurately said of the biblical text throughout the history of Christendom that it functioned largely as a magnified and sanctified version precisely of our own voice, that is, of the voice of the Western world's cultural bravado, or of the Caucasian world's racially-tinged self-esteem, or of our New World technological optimism; the voice of "bourgeois transcendence" (Ernst Ksemann); the voice of Victorian propriety and middle-class morality; the voice of *religion*? In short, was not the prominence of the Bible in earlier forms of Christian hegemony due, in large measure, to our sense of ownership where this Book is concerned, to the point of repressing the fact of its being shared with our parental faith, Judaism, and to some extent with Islam? Even if we were (and we were, certainly) shaped by it to some degree, was this text ever, for any of the successive imperial peoples that have laid claim to it, a source sufficiently independent to confront, judge, transform? Was it ever for long, or for many, truly "another voice"?

Could these great empires of the West have developed in the bold, magisterial way they did and do if the biblical text had really been their cultic guide and charter? As for the so-called "golden age of preaching," without denigrating the few truly remarkable Christian orators of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, one may be allowed to ask how much of that preaching can legitimately be thought mediation of that so radically other voice, that "strange new world within the Bible," and how

much of it a matter of accommodating the text to the religious, ethical, and aesthetic priorities of earth's successful peoples.

I regard it as a laudable thing that we are set upon reclaiming the text for Christian life and witness in the twentieth century; but I think we should be quite clear that such a "reclamation" does not equate to an attempt at recovering a past in which, with exceptions, the biblical text could too readily function as a pretext for cultural self-congratulation and the preservation of the status quo. To live with this text, really to allow it to be the "lens" (Lindbeck) through which we view the world and ourselves in it, is to know in the most concrete and often excruciating sense that its voice is indeed "other than our own."

And here I must return, briefly, to the matter of those contextually based theologies of identity and cause that, in the eyes of many, recently displaced the biblical center. It may be that while in short-term perspective the various liberationist and other theologies that have gained prominence in church and society during the past four decades had the effect of diverting attention away from the biblical text in its wholeness and otherness, from a longer perspective the great service of these theologies is the fact of their having challenged the captivity of the Bible by the religious, political, economic, sexual, and other preoccupations and values of the dominant culture. And so, at least in a preliminary way, these same context-specific theologies have prepared the ground for a new and better appreciation of the text as a voice that is truly "other." If they are not peripheralized but incorporated more intentionally into the self-understanding of the church in relation to its worldly context, then, in my opinion, these theologies of radical cultural critique must be said to be, already, the first step toward a generous reclamation of the text. This assessment of the place of contextual theologies leads directly to the third and final question:

What would reclamation of the text mean, concretely?

Here let me begin by stating my own answer to that question; then I shall attempt to justify it, or at least to explain why I must answer in that way. *There could be no authentic reclamation of the biblical text, I believe, which was not simultaneously a deeper, clearer, and less guarded immersion in the socio-historical context.*

That is my thesis. Let me try now to defend it. I shall take a roundabout and a rather personal way of doing so.

Throughout the four years of my residency in graduate studies at Union Theological Seminary in New York beginning in 1956, I had the honor of serving as tutor under the professorship of the late Paul Scherer. Paul Scherer was for many years pastor of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church on the edge of "Hell's Kitchen" in Manhattan, and was regarded by many as the most gripping, as well as the most literate and poetic, preacher of his generation. As a teacher of homiletics at Union Seminary and, after his retirement in 1960, at Princeton, Professor Scherer's constant aim was to help his students to master what he regarded as the most difficult task of Christian preaching, namely, conveying the message of the biblical text to contemporary men and women. Unlike many of his peers, Scherer was a strong critic of consistently "topical" or even "doctrinal" preaching, because, as a child of the Reformation, he believed that it was the mandate of the preacher to interpret the biblical text. But as a person steeped in the artistic and philosophic traditions of the modern world, he also knew that bald exegesis of the text as such could not speak to the situation of most of his contemporaries. "The

biblical situation,” he would say, “*is our situation*”; but only by the most disciplined and, often, agonizing, exercise of responsible thought and language could the sermon become the medium through which that biblical reality could be seen, provocatively and evocatively, to intersect with ours.

For this reason, in his assignments of biblical pericopies for sermon preparation, Scherer insisted that *between* serious exegesis and the sermon outline the student must engage in what he called “exposition.” This consisted of bringing to the text questions, concerns, and experiences out of daily life and literature that might provide preachers with some of the existential wherewithal to appropriate to themselves an ancient piece of writing, to the end that the resulting sermon might go some way towards bridging the gap between text and context. No sermon, he assumed, being a good Protestant, could go all the way toward that goal; only the divine Spirit could cause the words either of the text or the preacher to become God’s Word. Yet the attempt must be made, he believed; and, in the attempt, the intermediary stage between exegesis and sermon—exposition—was vital.

Being obliged as his teaching assistant to read and comment upon no fewer than sixty of these homiletical exercises every week for four academic years, I learned that lesson well; and if, later on, I produced three volumes of systematic theology in a “contextual” mode I know that that is due as much to Scherer’s homiletical method as to anything that I learned from Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, and the other great teachers with whom I was privileged to study.

The experience has also caused me, I fear, to be a nervous and far too critical hearer of sermons over the past thirty-five years! There are exceptions, but two serious problems, I have found, typify contemporary preaching.

First, there are the sermons that may be said to be rooted in the here and now, but beg the question of their connectedness with the text. Since I am most often listening to sermons in churches of the liberal and more or less liturgically informal Protestant traditions, the contextual themes that engender or motivate these sermons vary considerably. Sometimes they have to do with very basic societal questions--questions that ought to concern every serious Christian; questions of justice and peace, of the environment, of public health and human rights, of consumerism and technology; questions that men and women of conscience in every walk of life cannot ignore. Sometimes, again, these very “engaged” sermons deal with more personal matters--the loss of purpose and personal worth in present day mass culture, contemporary morality and the struggle for individual integrity, family relationships, human suffering and death, and so on. When such sermons are well done, both as to content and communicability, they are certainly engaging. And sometimes they *are* well done. But almost always they leave one (at least they leave me!) wondering what connection they might have with the biblical text--indeed, with the Christian faith generally. Even when such homilies are attached to scriptural texts, they do not often seem biblically grounded. The texts are not necessarily sheer pretexts, or merely arbitrary, but one does not have the impression that the sermon has come to be in a profound struggle with the biblical passage employed. Listening to such sermons, it is hard to overcome the feeling that the text is essentially incidental to the preacher’s purposes. What is more frustrating still is that, very often, one feels that, had the text been more studiously pondered, it would have resulted in a sermon that was not only “biblical” but in some way more *profound, nuanced, and wise* from a purely human point of view.

It should not be necessary to observe this, but I will anyway: If we are asking about reclaiming the text as preachers it is in considerable measure precisely because this kind of sermon so dominates in the churches of the Protestant mainstream today.

But self-consciously “biblical” preaching is not *necessarily* the answer to this problem (and this, in my experience, is the second problematic sort of preaching today) because most of the exegetical preaching that I hear, for instance in churches that follow a lectionary, fails, and often fails miserably, to connect with life! Frequently, there is an almost tangible assumption in such preaching that the mere retelling of the biblical story or the reiteration of the main phrases or ideas of the text is itself a sufficient achievement in the communication of gospel. In those sermons that manifest truly fine scholarly exegesis--perhaps especially in those sermons!--what Scherer called the “expositional” component is often so conspicuously absent that one is left asking (with Luther) “What is that to me?” One may be biblically edified by such sermons, and in a world where genuine edification of any kind is rare, one should probably be grateful for that! But one is not convicted by them, or changed by them, or moved to faith or its renewal and deepening by them.

I know that I have exaggerated both of these problems, and I apologize in advance to anyone who may take offense at this; but it is, I believe, an instructive exaggeration. If the first problem illustrates once again the need for an intentional reclamation of the text, the second illustrates the fact that reclamation of the text must be something more than and different from simply giving greater prominence to the biblical text in our preaching. And the latter point is, of the two, it seems to me, the more significant for our present consideration. For it is tempting in many concerned Protestant circles today (in such circles as are represented among groups wishing to “reclaim the text”!) to opt for the quick fix: since the text has been neglected, let us return to the text! This, I say, is tempting to many, partly because of a good and right respect for the Bible, partly because of a sentimentalized Bible pietism that lingers in post-Reformation Protestantism, and partly (let us be honest) because we are surrounded on this continent by a true believing biblicism that may be personally distasteful to us but is eminently and tantalizingly successful!

Merely to *return* to the text is not to *reclaim* the text, at least not as the text itself lays its claim upon us and asks us, in turn, to acknowledge it. Returning to the text is altogether too easy, and in certain situations it may constitute little more than obeying the law of supply and demand! Something vital is missing still, as we noticed, in the sermon that is, ostensibly, biblically grounded, even when it is exegetically sound and intellectually edifying. This missing dimension is what Scherer was trying to teach his students to search for when he insisted that between scholarly exegesis and sermon there must be an intermediary process he called “exposition,” a process involving the preacher himself or herself in a rapt personal dialogue with the text.

“Exposition” is of course an absurdly inadequate way of naming this process, and Scherer knew that as well as anyone, because what is involved here is something infinitely more demanding than the mental exercise of putting contemporary questions and concerns to the biblical text. It is a matter, rather, of living, consciously, in the situation of the human being, the beloved of God, the sinner, who is being addressed by this text. It is a matter of becoming, knowingly, deliberately, part of the human civilization that is being summoned by this text; of recognizing, with Isaiah, that “I am a creature of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.” It is

a matter, in Luther's unforgettable definition of the Christian theologian and preacher, of "living, dying and being damned": *vivendo, immo moriendo et damnando fit theologus, non intelligendo, legendo aut speculando*. We are not talking here about mere communication or homiletical skill, and we are certainly not just talking about technique! Whoever would dare to preach from this text must first become *the one addressed* by this text, not once, but again and again, always anew, never quite as one accustomed to hearing it.

This is, I think, precisely what makes the difference between biblical preaching and preaching that makes use of the Bible. Preachers who have reclaimed the text are preachers who have experienced the claim of the text upon *them*. Apart from that experience, no amount of exegetical preaching constitutes a genuine reclamation of the text. Congregations--even biblically illiterate congregations--know well enough when the preacher before them has heard that "other voice"; no scholarship, no homiletical professionalism, no stained-glass accents will compensate for that elusive factor when it is absent.

But such authentication is more subtle than the mere recognition that the preacher himself or herself has been visited by that other voice. There is more at stake here than personal integrity and the sincerity of the preacher. The question of those who listen to sermons (of whom for some thirty-five years I have been one) is not only, has the preacher also heard that other voice, but does the preacher hear that other *as one of us*? Not only as a lone individual, but as a citizen of this place, a person of this time, a contemporary; not only as "a man [or woman] of unclean lips" but as one belonging to "a people of unclean lips." Does this man, this woman who is addressing us live where we live, with the problems and possibilities, the hopes and anxieties, the limits, the temptations with which we live? And is she, is he, capable of clarifying for us, not only what the text says to us but who we are as those to whom the text speaks?

That is why I formulated my thesis in this final section of my address in the way that I did: What would it mean to reclaim the text? Answer: *There could be no authentic reclamation of the text that was not, simultaneously, a deeper, clearer and less guarded immersion in the socio-historical context*. It is particularly important to recognize that that immersion must be "less guarded." For perhaps the greatest barrier to the communication of the biblical message--of gospel!--is that those of us who feel called to proclaim it are ourselves so insulated from the great instabilities of our socio-historical context by the very message that we proclaim--so protected from life by faith that, if we are not deliberately vigilant, we become inured to harsh realities of the human predicament that the biblical message is intended to address. It was for this reason that Paul Tillich, in the introduction to the second volume of his *Systematic Theology*, wrote of the task of theology as follows, and it applies as much to the theologian of the congregation as to the theologian of the classroom:

In order to [formulate the theological answer--or, *we could* say, to preach thy gospel], the theologian [the preacher] must participate in the human predicament, not only actually --as he always does--but also in conscious identification. He must participate in [human] finitude, which is also his own, and in its anxiety as though he had never received the revelatory answer of "eternity." He must participate in man's estrangement, which is also his own, and show the anxiety of guilt as though he had never received

the revelatory answer of “forgiveness.” The theologian [the preacher] does not rest on the theological answer that he announces. He can give it in a convincing way only if he participates with his whole being in the situation of the question, namely, the human predicament. [Such participation] protects the theologian from the arrogant claim of having revelatory answers at his disposal. In formulating the answer [in formulating gospel], he must struggle for it. ²

Stating this in the metaphor of the brochure for this event-and here I conclude--the “other voice” that Holy Scripture` represents remains “other,” even to those who live with it daily, who interpret it Sunday after Sunday, year after year, throughout the better part of a lifetime. Only as it is experienced as “other” will it also be experienced by preacher and hearer alike as the voice for whose compassionate tones and searing truth we, like lost sheep, were waiting: the voice of the good shepherd.

Notes

¹“Barth and Textuality,” in *Theology Today*, Vol. 43, no. 3, October 1986, 374.

²*Systematic Theology*, Vol. II, “Introduction”(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957),15. I have not attempted to correct Tillich's noninclusive language because of the grammatical confusion that would result.