

Protagonist Corner

Just What Do You Think You're Doing?

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She knew how to get my attention. All she had to do was to speak the words in that icy voice of hers and I was frozen in mid deed, or more often, mid misdeed. "Young man," she would ask, "just what do you think you're doing?"

Having recently retired from active ministry, I realize I am no longer young. But for more than thirty-six years I was pastor to Presbyterians in South Carolina, North Carolina, and Texas, in congregations ranging from fourteen to fourteen hundred members. I did all those things pastors do and enjoyed all of them to varying degrees. But nothing seemed as important to me, or as enjoyable, as preaching.

But, just what did I think I was doing when I preached? What were the theological and methodological assumptions behind the thousands of hours of preparation that issued in those hundreds of hours of preaching? What was the theological foundation on which I stood to preach? In this forum, I'd like to try to spell out those assumptions with every bit as much honesty as I tried to muster when responding to my mother's probing question so many years ago.

So I begin with my belief in the authority of Scripture. I came through seminary in the early sixties, in the heyday of biblical theology, and at a seminary (Union in Virginia) that played a prominent role in that movement. Although we didn't talk a lot about the authority of Scripture, it was clearly the theological beacon that guided the work of faculty and students alike. Of course we were Barthian back then, but even at this distance I remain convinced of the rightness of Barth's understanding that God's Word comes to us in three forms. First, God's Word is incarnate in Jesus Christ, through whom God works redemption. Second, God's Word is in Scripture, which testifies at every point to Jesus Christ. And then, God's Word comes to us through the preaching of Scripture.

So the authority of the Bible is dynamic. While ancient theological statements about Scripture are very important, especially in guiding the church's use of Scripture, the Bible's authority can never be fully contained in propositions from the past. Rather, the authority of the Bible, like the power of the Spirit who conveys that authority, is also observed and experienced in the present. And because of the dynamic nature of the authority of Scripture we do not have to boost the Bible's position by forcing on it theories of inspiration that make God its literal author or insist that it is infallible and inerrant in all contexts. It is enough to know that by the mysterious activity of the Holy Spirit, people long ago remembered and wrote about what they believed to be God's activity in their world. And when I read and study Scripture today I, too, become the recipient of the Spirit's graceful activity as the ancient words of the Bible become the living Word of God for me. It has been my joy through these years to know that, from time to time, God's Spirit has taken my efforts at preaching and transformed them into God's living Word in the minds and hearts of some who listened.

As a member of a group of pastors who meet regularly to discuss theological

matters, I have had a vivid experience of the dynamic nature of the authority of Scripture. The first two meetings of our group were dominated by efforts to impress. We couldn't help it. Like most pastors, we were afflicted with an occupational disease contracted from frequent exposure to large gatherings of people who sat in silence and listened to us talk on a weekly basis! For our third meeting, however, we agreed that each of us would concentrate on specific portions of Matthew's Passion Narrative and that, as a group, we would make an effort seriously to engage those texts. For two days we made that effort together. At the end of our time, several noted that our group seemed to have jelled, that we had begun actually to listen to each other, that no one was trying to dominate. That's when one member of the group observed that we had all been attempting to sit together under the authority of the Word, and it was that very experience which had dominated and molded our group's character.

In just the same way, then, preaching partakes of the dynamic of the authority of Scripture. When I have stood to preach through these years, I have been clear that what I had to say was, in some mysterious but quite real way, not just my opinion on some current topic but truly a "word from the Lord." I am not, by nature, a very brave person, and my personality leads me to avoid conflict even when I shouldn't. But because of my conviction on the authority of Scripture I was enabled to preach to Deep South congregations in the sixties about the church's role in transforming racist culture. And later, I was led to preach to congregations of affluent Presbyterians about exercising justice and compassion for Hispanic immigrants in Texas as well as homosexuals and mentally ill persons in North Carolina. I was even given some words of guidance to the faithful in how to pray for Bill Clinton prior to and during his impeachment! And just as important, if not so dramatic, I was also given messages of comfort and hope, strength and guidance, on a regular basis.

And after all these years, I can see how the dynamic of an authoritative Scripture has been active in those communities of faith to which I tried to deliver its message. I can look at what has happened in the South Carolina congregation I served in the sixties. I was there when the schools integrated. I was there when Martin Luther King was assassinated. I can remember the hardened attitudes and minds closed to what I believed Scripture wanted us to hear. I can remember the heated and angry confrontations. But now, thirty years later, I read in that church's newsletter that they regularly worship and hold Vacation Church School and teacher training events with the small, African-American congregation of Presbyterians a few blocks away. And, no, I don't take credit for that. And, yes, I am aware that there are many cultural factors that have entered into the changes that have occurred in that place. But I am also aware that the Word of God was, and continues to be, preached in that congregation and it has been demonstrably active among those people.

I think, too, of the congregation, also in South Carolina, that chose to be intentionally interracial in the seventies and still models, twenty-five years later, exemplary inclusiveness. I think of the congregation in Texas, several of whose millionaires took the lead in funding and putting together a community wide, interfaith social service agency which provides housing, medical care, and other necessities of life to literally thousands of persons each year. And perhaps even more remarkable is that this congregation also welcomes some of those same persons into its fellowship on a regular basis. I think of the wealthy congregation in North Carolina that rejoices in the dances mentally ill young adults regularly hold in their plushly carpeted

fellowship hall and who provide beds and meals, tutoring and hospitality, to homeless families who sleep in the room with the tapestry and dine on the church's best china.

I think of persons who made difficult decisions, of marriages that experienced the miracle of reconciliation, of distraught and defeated persons who found courage for living, and of at least seven persons who heard and responded to God's call to a church vocation.

The reader will understand that I am not bragging about any of this. In a culture of mega mergers and of mega stars (I did, after all, retire in the same year as John Elway, Wayne Gretzky, and Michael Jordan!) these are not things about which one bothers to brag. But I am pointing out that Scripture has an authority that is dynamic and powerful and that when Scripture is preached remarkable things happen.

So, let me make it explicit. Preaching is biblical interpretation. To be honest, I learned this in seminary more as a technique than a conviction. We were taught to begin the task of preaching with a text and to seek its meaning as the way to begin crafting a sermon. Some years later, I was very surprised by a seminary intern who came into my office and confessed that he was out of ideas for sermons. Although he had spent two years in seminary before his year of supervised ministry, he had not yet heard that one does not start a sermon with ideas and then seek a text from which to preach those ideas. I had great fun working with him that year on biblical preaching and have felt genuine satisfaction over his development as a preacher of high repute.

Preaching is biblical interpretation! And, yes, I am aware that there are other definitions afloat. For some, preaching is moral discourse, or it is a theological critique of culture, or, most often, the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. I would argue that all of these tasks emerge in the process of preaching, but none of them is its primary aim. That, for me, is the interpretation of Scripture. By making the text the primary focus, the preacher not only upholds the authority of Scripture but also ensures that a particular passage of Scripture is neither violated nor misused for other, even noble, ends. Along the way I experimented with other understandings of the preaching task, but I always came back to this one. And if I learned anything in the past thirty-six years, it is this: preaching is biblical interpretation because Scripture is dynamically authoritative.

But how does one go about interpreting Scripture? This brings us, of course, to the methodological question. And to ministers my age it is a peculiar question. For these many decades the historical-critical approach to Scripture has ruled the roost in our seminaries and divinity schools, and the vast majority of us who are in active ministry in mainline churches today were taught the assumptions and tools of that approach. But readers of this journal are well aware that those assumptions and tools are being questioned today as many have come forward to advocate new approaches to the preaching task.

And, to be honest, I have learned much from many such advocates. It is certainly possible to get so immersed in the minutiae of historical-critical research that one loses sight of both forest and trees. Canonical criticism, the work of James Sanders and Brevard Childs, is a valuable corrective at this point. It helped me to focus on the canonical version of the text without getting bogged down in considerations of sources or original form. Childs' "postcritical" reading of the text can help us avoid the endless digging and dissecting that does sometimes characterize the historical-critical approach.

Those who seek to bring the social sciences to bear on certain texts have been helpful to me, too. These scholars taught me, a pastor of mostly affluent persons, to see the parables of Jesus as “subversive speech” whose sharp point is aimed at the elites of His day and mine. I gained helpful insights, too, from these scholars, on the struggles among the apostles recorded in Acts, and on the rhetoric in Galatians. Their concept of the routinization of charisma gives us a sociological understanding of what was happening in the early church and continues to happen in the contemporary church.

I have certainly been challenged by feminist interpretations of Scripture. On the one hand, such interpretations have heightened my sensitivity to the male dominated culture of the church if not of the Bible. In common with the work of Ulrich Luz, feminist interpreters have helped me to see the “history of effects” of texts that have been interpreted for generations for and by men. Finally, the feminists have heightened for me an awareness of my own assumptions as I approach a given text, assumptions that I do, of course, bring to the task of interpretation. In similar ways, I have been challenged and helped by some Latin American and, especially, some African-American understandings of the meaning of Scripture.

Even so, my basic approach to the task of biblical interpretation is still that of the historical-critical method. At a basic level, I operate with the assumption that before I can know the meaning of a text for today’s believers I must first know what it meant in its original context. “What did it mean to them?” comes before “What does it mean to us?” In order to discover what I can of the “original” meaning, I do word studies, historical, and geographical studies. I attempt to set the text in its historical and literary context. In this connection, I have found the insights of form criticism, which I discovered first in the work of Rudolph Bultmann, to be especially helpful. Redaction criticism, too, has become an indispensable tool in interpreting the gospels.

On reflection, I believe I have held onto the historical-critical approach because it encourages me to take history seriously, which is important for two reasons. First, as is generally true of culture itself, so it is true of the Christian community: we are shaped and molded by our history, especially that history which is reflected in biblical texts. Second, Christians believe that repeatedly God has been revealed in history, supremely in Jesus of Nazareth. For both of these reasons, history becomes a major consideration in the task of biblical interpretation.

In my early ministry I was not so interested in history as a component of biblical interpretation. Back then, it seemed to me that a too ardent concern with what actually may have happened in, for example, first century Palestine, inevitably led to questions that were diversions from faith, such as questions about the miracles of Jesus or His bodily resurrection. But the longer I stuck with the task of preaching, the more I came to understand that history is not just a legitimate concern of the exegete but a crucial concern for preaching and, indeed, for faith. Although I cannot always discover the historical core of an event recorded in Scripture, behind the church’s proclamation of that event and the mythological language, which may be used to describe it there is, nevertheless, the event itself. I am not a fan of the so-called Jesus Seminar and have questions about their methods if not their motives. But their interest in uncovering the history of first century Palestine and of the man Jesus is not only legitimate but also laudable. If the Incarnation is what I believe it to be, then history is critical precisely because it leads to the consideration of the most crucial of questions — what God has

done and may yet be doing in history!

When I was ordained in 1963 one did not talk overly much about the historical-critical method. Many preachers and laypersons of that time approached Scripture from a pre-critical stance that included views of the Bible's verbal inspiration and inerrancy. Now, all these decades later, the historical-critical method is under attack for being antiquated and reflecting the values and opinions of male dominated, university trained American and European points of view. (I guess it really was time to retire!) And, of course, there are those today who use the historical-critical method as a purely descriptive tool, totally devoid of any vital connection with the church's faith and proclamation. Obviously, that is not the historical-critical method as I learned it in seminary and as I shared it with the communities of faith I served. And as long as I preach, I will continue to use this approach to interpreting the Bible, with just a dash or two of some of the newer and fresher approaches thrown in here and there where helpful.

And that's what I think I was doing in the pulpit for all those years. I was interpreting Scripture, using appropriate methodology to let God's Word speak to those who sat to listen. As often as not, I didn't do it all that well. Like any busy pastor I had to fight for time and struggled to be disciplined enough to use wisely the time I had. Like any other fallen human being, I let self-serving agendas and motivations creep into my preaching. In worship I was often distracted, watching the clock and begrudging time to ushers and musicians. But when I stood to preach, it was consistently the same: the dynamic power of the Word took over, and in some instances even took me over!

Scripture's authority is dynamic, and preaching that aims at biblical interpretation, whether it always hits the mark or not, will partake of that dynamic. To have had that experience steadily for more than thirty-six years was altogether remarkable!

This is a slightly modified version of Vaughan's address to the 1999 meeting of the Pastor-Theological project at the Center for Theological Inquiry in Princeton, New Jersey.