“I believe; help my unbelief”: Bonhoeffer on Biblical Preaching

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In the spring of 1938, a young pastor and theologian by the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached to a group of youth about to be confirmed and their sponsors and congregation in Pomerania. Based on a single verse from the Gospel according to Mark—“I believe; help my unbelief!” (9:24)—the sermon is striking not only for the seriousness with which it takes both its audience and the biblical witness, but also for the way in which it expresses this regard. That is, while the sermon treats only one verse and is not overtly exegetical in any traditional sense, it is nevertheless thoroughly biblical, as it takes this single verse as a microcosm of the biblical witness’s testimony to our human condition of dependence on God’s word and mercy. Similarly, while the sermon never once attempts to sketch the contemporary scene directly, it still pulses with the urgency of the time and is permeated, if largely in the background, with the historical events surrounding it.¹ It is this capacity to invite the biblical witness into the present circumstances that marks Bonhoeffer’s preaching, suggesting him as a useful resource and model for those interested in renewing “biblical preaching” in the church.

That there is need for such renewal few would argue. Recognizing that many of those who listen to preaching know very little of the biblical story, preachers

Christian preaching worthy of the name must be biblical preaching, insists Bonhoeffer. It will speak Christ into the present congregation, producing a worldly faith rather than an otherworldly religiosity.

from a variety of traditions have voiced in recent years a desire to reclaim preaching that has the biblical text as its central, animating impulse, as opposed to the pastoral, psychological, story-based, and motivational preaching that has swept through much of the mainline church in recent decades. Thus far, and not surprisingly, homileticians committed to the cause of renewing biblical preaching have turned toward developments in biblical studies like the emerging interpretive methods of literary, canonical, and listener-response criticism, and this quest has led to many fruitful developments in preaching. Amid this movement, however, I want to suggest that biblical preachers will also find an ally in the person and work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

On one level, it may seem surprising that in light of the recent Bonhoeffer revival, occurring in fields as wide-ranging as ethics and youth ministry, little has been written about Bonhoeffer’s preaching. The major book on the subject, *Worldly Preaching*, offers a translation of Bonhoeffer’s lectures on preaching to the seminary of the Confessing Church in Finkenwalde and a lengthy introduction to both Bonhoeffer as a preacher and his theology of preaching, but says relatively little about his potential impact on contemporary preaching.\(^2\) At another level, though, perhaps it is less surprising, as Bonhoeffer’s preaching rarely treats the biblical passage in a way those who have been influenced by recent trends in biblical studies would at first blush find attractive. He often treats a single verse or brief passage, at times exploring its historical or literary context only briefly, and occasionally seems to sacrifice biblical interpretation to theological aim.

Yet I would suggest that the time is ripe to consider three aspects of Bonhoeffer’s understanding of preaching: (1) his insistence that all Christian preaching is, inherently, biblical preaching; (2) his sense of what I would call the immediacy and integrity—or “present-tense” character—of the biblical word; and (3) his concern to promote preaching that is “worldly” rather than “religious.” After outlining these themes briefly by working primarily with his Finkenwalde lectures on preaching, I will return to the sermon he preached in 1938 to reflect on his possible value to contemporary biblical preachers.

**INHERENTLY BIBLICAL PREACHING**

As noted, Bonhoeffer’s sermons were only occasionally overtly exegetical and rarely took expository form, two attributes often associated with biblical preaching today. Nevertheless, Bonhoeffer’s own testimony about preaching should itself warrant us giving him another hearing. Consider this pronouncement, made during his lectures at Finkenwalde, the seminary of the Confessing Church: Christian preaching is “commissioned by and bound by the biblical witness. It does not

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\(^2\) Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Worldly Preaching: Lectures on Homiletics*, ed. and trans. with critical commentary by Clyde E. Fant, rev. ed. (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1991). To distinguish between Bonhoeffer’s lectures and Fant’s introduction, I will cite references to Bonhoeffer’s lectures as FL (for Finkenwalde Lectures) and to Fant’s introduction as WP (for *Worldly Preaching*).
spring from our own private interests or initiative. Its content is the biblical witness alone." Similarly, Bonhoeffer asserts, “It is not a good sign when someone says that the sermon was beautiful or moving. It is a good sign when the congregants begin to open up their Bibles and to follow the text.” Preaching, for Bonhoeffer, is inherently biblical. In fact, when it strays for its content from the biblical witness it strays from its evangelical mandate and validation. Hence, Bonhoeffer asserts that the proper question for a Christian preacher is never “what” shall I preach on, but rather, “from what” biblical passage shall I preach.

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The roots of this insistence rest in Bonhoeffer’s conviction that Christian preachers are dependent, or secondary, witnesses, and both the noun and its modifier matter. First, like the apostles, preachers are called to witness to what they have seen and heard; they do not bear witness to themselves, but to Christ. At the same time, and unlike the apostles, contemporary preachers “do not testify to what we have seen and touched, but to what we have not seen and touched. We declare the biblical testimony as faithful witness.” Hence, preachers are dependent witnesses, called to the same task as the apostles yet dependent on their prior and primary testimony to execute that task.

This, in turn, leads to two related elements of Bonhoeffer’s theology of biblical preaching: the relationship of the gospel to Scripture and the relationship of Scripture to preaching. First, for Bonhoeffer, Christ stands at the center of the Scriptures and the gospel of Jesus Christ therefore offers Christian preachers the hermeneutical lens by which to make sense of the whole biblical witness. Because Jesus is not simply “found” in the word, but actually “is” the Word, his life, death, and resurrection serve as the focal point and interpretive key of all Scripture. This leads to a very high sense of Scripture’s standing and authority: “The Bible is the book in which God’s word is stored until the end of all things.” It simultaneously leads to a clearly christocentric hermeneutic—the biblical, apostolic witness “is therefore a witness only because it has the testimony of God and of Jesus as its subject” for, as Bonhoeffer asserts, “only where Christ is preached is God present.”

From this vantage, then, we can appreciate Bonhoeffer’s conviction that “the

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3FL, 106.
4FL, 129.
5FL, 128.
6FL, 106.
8FL, 116–117.
9FL, 105–106.
church preaches only one sermon in all of its messages,” as the God revealed in Jesus Christ is consistently and simultaneously the subject of both Scripture and the evangelical sermon.

Second, it is important to note that, for Bonhoeffer, while Scripture is central to Christian faith and life because of its witness to Christ, Scripture nevertheless finds its primary expression not as it is read but as it is preached in the gathered assembly. Why? Because through the actual, concrete act of preaching we gain access, not to historical facts, data, or stories about Christ, but rather to the living Lord who meets hearers in the present. According to Bonhoeffer, as Clyde Fant describes, “Revelation must not be located in a unique occurrence in the past in some objective entity which has no connection with our present existence.” Rather, as Bonhoeffer himself asserts, “The preached Christ is both the Historical One and the Present One.” In fact, the proclaimed Christ provides our only “access to the historical Jesus.” Like Luther, Bonhoeffer describes both Scripture and sermon as “word of God,” but gives preeminence to preaching, as “Scripture is intended to be interpreted through proclamation that it might go forth into the life of the congregation.” For this reason, the primary task of the preacher is to interpret Scripture in order that the witness of past events and deeds may speak into the present and thereby usher hearers into an encounter with the living Lord.

PRESENT-TENSE PREACHING

Bonhoeffer’s interest in the capacity of biblical preaching to encounter hearers in their present existence helps to explain what often strikes contemporary preachers as one of the more curious aspects of his understanding of preaching. For at numerous points in his writing, Bonhoeffer evidences an almost allergic reaction to what he termed “relevant” sermons. Very much like his elder contemporary Karl Barth in this respect, Bonhoeffer distrusted the strivings of many preachers to be relevant, contemporary, even contextual. As he insists, “The source of the preached word is not the pious Christian experience or consciousness of the preachers, nor the need of the hour of the congregation, nor the desire to improve and influence others.”

Given this sentiment, one may naturally wonder if Bonhoeffer was arguing for irrelevant, a-contextual preaching. Given the degree to which his own sermons were clearly shaped by and addressed to the events of his day, that is hard to imagine. Rather, it appears that Bonhoeffer’s distrust of the quest for relevancy rested in his concern that when preachers approach the Bible seeking relevant or contemporary answers to contemporary questions they unwittingly transform the Scriptures

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10 FL, 139.
11 WP, 29.
12 FL, 126.
13 FL, 143.
14 FL, 111; emphasis added.
from a present-tense, living word into a static, past-tense reference book. What Bonhoeffer objected to, finally, was by no means the desire of the preacher to speak to the present realities of hearers but rather to the desire to apply so-called biblical concepts or principles to contemporary situations rather than interpret Scripture so that it might speak into the present.

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This difference between application and interpretation is central to Bonhoeffer’s theology of preaching. Application, for Bonhoeffer, consists of seeking to find some past principle or religious truth and apply it to today’s questions and circumstances. For instance, if you have a question about how to handle the stresses of contemporary life or are wondering what candidate to vote for in a given election, then you should turn to this or that passage of Scripture and find a religious principle or timeless truth that fits your situation. Interpretation, on the other hand, is the attempt to speak Scripture into the present on its own terms so as to see what questions and answers, problems and responses Scripture itself elicits. In the interpretative act, neither the answers nor the questions are presupposed; rather, the task is to see what happens when we stand amid our own circumstances and attempt to listen as attentively as possible to the living and active word.

Bonhoeffer’s counsel invites a reversal of the common expectation about the flow of biblical preaching. That is, rather than begin with contemporary issues and probe Scripture to see if it has anything relevant to offer, the preacher begins with Scripture to see what insight it might shed on the nature of our contemporary issues. As he writes, “The relevant is not where the present age announces its claims before Christ, but where the present age stands before the claims of Christ.” Or, to put it another way, were we to ask Bonhoeffer whether he thought the Bible is pertinent, he would not only insist that it is, but then also warn us that it is also reliably impertinent as well, calling into question even our own questions and issues and demanding that we rethink all in light of the gospel of Christ.

At the heart of this difference between application and interpretation, Bonhoeffer insists, stands a fundamental question about the relationship between preacher and Bible: Is the preacher the primary actor in the sermonic enterprise or is Scripture? When we attempt to apply Scripture to present circumstances, Bonhoeffer fears, we place ourselves over Scripture: “Every application on our part indicates that we stand above the Word rather than beneath it; that we regard it as a

principle which has to be applied to each individual case.”

In contrast, the preacher who attempts to interpret Scripture attempts to stand in the background, not advancing a particular agenda but rather merely assisting with the release, or even birth, of the word into the present that it may affect and shape the congregation. As Bonhoeffer writes, “The Scripture is intended to be interpreted through proclamation in order that it might go forth into the life of the congregation. The preacher is only its servant and helper. He does not bring it into the pulpit for his own use; he allows himself to be used by it for the congregation.”

Bonhoeffer’s conviction that the sermon is a present-tense, immediate word (rather than merely a relevant one) stems from his earlier conviction about Scripture itself as a present-tense, immediate word, through which Christ encounters people through the proclamation of the gospel. Indeed, as Bonhoeffer intuits, one’s sense of the nature of the sermon is intimately related to one’s sense of the nature of the gospel. Posing a rhetorical question about the aim or end of preaching, Bonhoeffer offers several possible answers:

For what purpose do I preach? The preacher should have something he wants to accomplish through his sermon. But it may be that the preacher for that very reason may spoil the essential thing if he sets out to ask, into what frame of mind do I intend to bring the people? What do I want? As with Schleiermacher, to declare the pious consciousness of the congregation? To build up the congregation, to inspire them, to teach them? To convert the people?

Dissatisfied with these possibilities, Bonhoeffer offers the following insight:

Everything hinges on the question of what the gospel is. Is it inspiration, education, conversation? Certainly it includes all of these things, but all under the one goal that the congregation of Christ might become the church. I preach, because the church is there—and I preach, that the church might be there. This means that I do not set a personal goal for myself to pursue, a goal of either inspiration or edification.

In fact, as Bonhoeffer continues,

I must refuse to indulge in tricks and techniques, both the emotional ones and the rhetorical ones. I must not become pedantic and schoolmasterish, nor begging, entreating, urging. I do not try to make the sermon into a work of art. I do not become unctuous and self-centered or loud and boastful. By forsaking my personal ambitions I accompany the text along its own way into the congregation and thus remain natural, balanced, compassionate, and factual. This permits the Word’s almost magnetic relationship to its congregation. I do not give life to it, but it gives life to me and to the congregation. The movement of the Word to its congregation is accomplished through the interpretation of it.

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16FL, 114.
17FL, 116.
18Editor’s note: In the translation of FL, Bonhoeffer’s “sachlich” is regularly rendered as “factual,” though a better translation throughout would be “objective” or “material” (to the matter at hand).
19FL, 111–112.
Biblical preaching, according to Bonhoeffer, is precisely present-tense interpretation that rests on confidence that the Scripture is a living, active word, not merely a static reference book of religious principles that are to be applied to contemporary life. And when this happens—when Scripture is set loose and goes forth to create an encounter between contemporary hearers and the living Christ—a congregation of persons is transformed into the church of Jesus Christ.

**WORLDLY, RATHER THAN RELIGIOUS, PREACHING**

The third aspect of Bonhoeffer's preaching deserving our attention is his insistence that true Christian preaching is not so much *religious* as it is *worldly*. If we take “worldly” to mean contemporary, of course, this may seem at first quite inconsistent with his counsel that preachers should not seek to be relevant. But when Bonhoeffer spoke of worldly, he had an entirely different conception in mind, one that has its roots in his conviction that God meets humans always and precisely in their own space and time. In fact, it was “religion” that Bonhoeffer mistrusted, believing that religion was humanity's attempt to use God to fit our own ends.

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The issue at the heart of the distinction between pious religion and worldly faith is not dissimilar to that between biblical application and interpretation. In each of the former, the believer or preacher makes use of God or God’s word in order to secure a measure of certainty or independence, while in each of the latter the believer or preacher remains dependent on God’s grace and mercy alone. It is this dependence that Bonhoeffer believes Christians must cultivate, dependence like the children of Israel on the manna from heaven. Preaching, then, becomes important because, like manna, it establishes the church anew in each hearing.²¹

Worldly preaching, then, stands against any attempt to ground Christian faith in anything but dependence on God’s word and grace, and urges Christians to expect God’s promise and summons to come to them precisely amid their day-to-day circumstances. These convictions have at least three implications for biblical preaching. First, and as anticipated above, the preacher should focus not on prearranged agendas, even when these are developed to meet the perceived need of the congregation, but rather should seek to set the Bible loose in the assembly so that it may surprise, confront, and comfort them. The word, according to Bonhoeffer, is self-propelled, working according to its own self-momentum. As he writes, the word proceeds from itself toward the congregation in order to sustain it. The preacher

²¹See *FL*, 99–100. See also his sermon that stands in the background of this essay, in Bonhoeffer, *Testament to Freedom*, 295–296.
does not therefore accomplish the application of the word; he is not the one who shapes it and forms it to suit the congregation. The self-movement of the word to the congregation should not be hindered by the preacher, but rather he should acknowledge it. He should not allow his own efforts to get in its way. If we attempt to give impetus to the word, then it becomes distorted into words of instruction or education or experience.22

For this reason, Bonhoeffer conceives of exegesis primarily as attentive listening, discerning in what way Jesus is calling us to be his disciples gathered as the church here and now, responding to the need of the world not simply on the world’s terms but in light of the biblical witness.

Second, sermons should be concrete, that is, not focused on abstract doctrine or ethics, but rather delving into the concrete actions and events described in Scripture so that they may speak to the concrete realities of our present life. As Bonhoeffer contends, “It is possible for the church to preach pure doctrine that is nonetheless untrue.”23 We should again note, however, that to be concrete is not the same as pandering to the perceived needs or issues of the congregation or larger culture in the vain attempt to gain a hearing by being relevant. Rather, Bonhoeffer insists that only by being faithful to its unique and concrete identity will the church find an audience. Such a commitment, as he contends,

implies discipleship and not proximity to what people expect, or unity with their culture. It is not the church which suits the people, but the church which is obedient, that is heard. This form of existence does not simply mean that we do the same things that others do, except that we do them a little better, but that we do things differently.24

Only by creating for hearers an encounter, even confrontation, with the concrete witness of Scripture to God’s action in Christ can a preacher hope to speak into the actual world that his or her hearers inhabit.

Third, a preference for worldly faith rather than pious religiosity demands preachers to pay careful attention to the language they employ. In particular, Bonhoeffer warns against fleeing too easily to the language of the church—which he sometimes refers to as the language of Zion—be that the language of piety, doctrine, or liturgy. Rather, preachers should strive to speak naturally, in the vernacular of their people, so that the biblical witness might more easily address contemporary hearers. In this regard, Bonhoeffer took Luther’s translation of the Bible into German as a model and urged preachers similarly to render their biblical interpretations as simply and clearly as possible.25 The preacher, in short, should strive for language that makes the biblical witness imaginable, compelling, and inviting, so that the hearer is drawn into the witness to take his or her stand. As he

22FL, 102.
23FL, 113.
24Ibid.
25FL, 143–144.
himself urges in a 1932 sermon: “[A] proper sermon should be like holding out to a child a shining red apple or to a thirsty man a glass of fresh water and asking: Wouldn’t you like it? In this way we should be able to speak about the things of faith so that hands were stretching out faster than we could fill them.”

As we have seen, Bonhoeffer’s concern for a “worldly,” even nonreligious faith was occasioned in part by his conviction that religion regularly served to distort the true import of the gospel. That is, while, in the humiliation of Christ, God clearly determines to meet us in our finitude and vulnerability, religion urges us to find the means ourselves by which to reconnect with the divine (hence, the linguistic connection between legio—“attachment,” as in “ligament,” and re-ligio, as in “religion”). But it was also occasioned by his conviction that the world had “outgrown” and even become suspicious of typical religious explanations of the events of the world that the church had been accustomed to offering without question. In a “world come of age,” as Bonhoeffer termed his society, Christian theologians and preachers need once again to avoid simply trying to apply religious principles and instead ask what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ in this day and age. In fact, Bonhoeffer contends that such a world—aware as never before of its stark “aloneness”—will be more open to and appreciative of the kind of genuine, concrete, and worldly preaching he advocates.

“In light of these brief reflections on several elements of Bonhoeffer’s theology of proclamation, it seems useful to draw on his sermon to give concrete examples of how these theological and homiletical concerns played out in his actual preaching. While no one sermon should be expected to embody any theologian’s complete theology of preaching, nevertheless, there are several characteristics of this sermon that are useful to note.

First, while drawing only upon a single verse—Mark 9:24, “I believe; help my
unbelief”—yet Bonhoeffer’s sermon explores a major theme of the entirety of Scripture, our daily dependence on God for faith, as encapsulated in this one verse. It is, in this regard, a thoroughly biblical sermon, drawing upon various elements of the biblical narrative in order to flesh out this single verse as a microcosm of the whole.30

Second, while Bonhoeffer does not attempt to preach a relevant sermon in the sense of self-consciously highlighting aspects of his audience’s day-to-day world and consequent concerns, the sermon, nevertheless, brims over with the significance of the current events. That is, Bonhoeffer’s sermon strikes the hearer as incredibly relevant precisely because he does not aim it at some contemporary issue but rather because he listens to Scripture from within his world, eager to hear what Scripture may say about his world and what it means to be a disciple in this world. Hence, today’s reader—and, we presume, the original audience—could not help but see the implications of Bonhoeffer’s interpretation in light of the given circumstances. Consider, for instance, the following quotation where the context seems compellingly implicit and yet is never explicitly mentioned in order to make room for the self-propelling word:

Belief means decision. But your very own decision. No one can relieve you of it. It must arise out of solitude, out of your heart’s aloneness with God; it will be born out of fierce struggles against the enemy in your own breast. You are still surrounded by a community, by families which support you, by parents who take care of you, by people who help you whenever they can; thank God for that! But more and more, God will lead you into solitude. God wants to prepare you for the great hours and decisions of your lives, in which no other person will be able to stand by you, in which only one thing will count: I believe, yes, I myself, I cannot do otherwise; dear God, help my unbelief.31

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Third, Bonhoeffer does not offer his young hearers the comforts of a religion that divorces the physical and spiritual but rather drives them into the world, promising, “your faith will be tried by sorrow,” all in order to urge them to depend upon God. There is no escape from worldly faith, Bonhoeffer preaches, because it is in the world and its struggles that God determines to be found. Hence, the Christian cannot escape the challenges and trials of the day—and keep in mind the place and date of the preaching—but rather will be driven by them to dependence on God so that he or she may engage the powers that be with the courage of faith, say-

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30 This is not the only form a typical Bonhoeffer sermon takes. Indeed, Bonhoeffer resisted holding up a single biblical form, insisting rather that the concrete form of the sermon should arise from the preacher’s engagement with a concrete text (FL, 129).

31 Bonhoeffer, Testament to Freedom, 295.
ing again and again (and as Bonhoeffer does seven times during this brief sermon), “I believe, dear Lord; help my unbelief!”

While Bonhoeffer’s sermon on Mark 9 may lack the exegetical specificity to which we have lately become accustomed, he nevertheless offers an interesting, even alternative vision of biblical preaching, as through his direct, clear, even urgent probing of the text he offers the listening youth a clear sense of the significance and import of the faith they are about to claim as adults during this confirmation service. He does so by parsing a single verse and theme so as to open up the whole of the biblical witness in order to make room for his hearers to place their decisions, their questions, indeed, their very lives in the biblical story that begins in Genesis and ends in Revelation. Or, to use language more conducive to Bonhoeffer’s own theology of proclamation, he accompanies the word into the congregation that it may encounter his young hearers with the invitation and summons of the living Lord to become his disciples in their own time and place, linked to those who have come before by a common dependence on God’s grace and serving as a witness for those yet to come. Given this, I’d argue that if you’re looking for a model of how to renew the biblical preaching of the church, you could certainly do worse.

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