



Transforming Word

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Karl Barth kept a small reproduction of Matthias Grünewald’s “Crucifixion” triptych over his desk throughout his career. Barth said on a number of occasions that we preachers ought to strive to be no more but no less than John the Baptist, standing to the side of the cross, pointing toward the Crucified. More pointedly, Barth said that our sermons are neither more nor less than that long, bony finger of John the Baptist pointing beyond our sermons and ourselves to Christ.¹ The sermon, by implication, has as its goal not to get something said but to provoke something seen. But is merely pointing to Christ an adequate goal for preaching? In my sermons I long to do more than merely point; activist me wants to prod, push, and persuade. I would like my preaching not only to be understood but also to transform.

In his influential study of the American presidency, Richard Neustadt (founder of Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government) famously said, “Presidential power is the power to persuade.”² The key to the power of persuasion, Neustadt argued, is the ability to speak—the exercise of rhetoric in order to strengthen supporters and to win over opponents. In my lifetime, I have experienced two very dif-

¹See my discussion of the influence of Grünewald’s painting upon Barth in William H. Willimon, *Conversations with Barth on Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006) 6.

²Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power: The Politics of Leadership from FDR to Carter* (New York: Macmillan, 1960) 10. I became interested in presidential rhetoric literature after reading Ezra Klein, “The Unpersuaded,” *New Yorker*, March 19, 2012, 32–38.

The goal of preaching is sometimes said to be transformation. But we can get that wrong. The word of God transforms, the Spirit transforms, Christ transforms, not the preacher’s rhetoric. The preacher’s task is faithfully to point to the transforming Christ—which then makes the sermon itself God’s transforming word.

ferent presidents who were wonderful speakers and communicators: Ronald Reagan and Barack Obama.

Responding to the demands of my present job, I have read dozens of business books, and as a preacher I was delighted to find a common theme running through them: a good leader is a good speaker. Some of these leadership books stress the rhetorical importance of focus in what the leader says, reiteration of the message, or staying on target with one's comments, but all stress the importance of clear, persuasive communication.

I was, of course, thrilled to read this strong stress upon public speaking and persuasive communication because I am already an experienced talker. Though I had few experiences (and even less innate talent) for fulfilling many of the leadership demands of my job (as bishop) of herding eight hundred churches and six hundred pastors, I at least knew how to make a speech.

"A good leader talks people into doing work they have been avoiding because they feared that the work was too painful," says one of my management gurus. Well, that's me just about every Sunday morning!

To paraphrase Neustadt, "The power of the pastorate is the power to persuade." I bought Neustadt's book because I regularly attempt bullying from the pulpit and thought Neustadt, with his high regard for the presidential bully pulpit, would give me more confidence in my preaching. Neustadt's faith in the ability of public speakers is unbounded—quite a surprising affirmation of us preachers from a secular political scientist.

Now comes along George Edwards, a political scientist from Texas A&M University who says, based on careful scientific analysis, that there is absolutely no empirical evidence that presidential rhetoric persuades anybody.³ A Gallup study, after reviewing presidential State of the Union addresses since 1978 and correlating them with public opinion polls, notes that presidential speeches—even the best of them—have zero effect on the public.⁴ No study of presidential rhetoric could discover any politician of record who has ever said, "I was against this until the president spoke last night, and now I'm for it."

Presidential rhetoric, Edwards argues, preaches to the already converted rather than to the general public. Edwards leaves us with the provocative idea that we do not need a great communicator so much as a skilled negotiator in the White House. What we need is a president who will spend less time and energy on the effort to win public approval and will concentrate instead on the more productive goal of cajoling Congress.

Edwards refers to Franklin Roosevelt—maybe a great president, but his "fire-side chats" had no effect upon his political opponents.⁵ Same for Ronald Reagan:

³George C. Edwards III, *On Deaf Ears: The Limits of the Bully Pulpit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003) xi.

⁴*Ibid.*, 73.

⁵*Ibid.*, 99–100.

no correlation between his great speeches and lasting transformation of any of his opponents.⁶ Those who attempt to show that speaking—including preaching—transforms people have got their work cut out for them.⁷

And yet, who told us that the point of preaching was transformation? Maybe preaching is about something more important than mere human transformation.

PAUL ON TRANSFORMATIVE PREACHING

Maybe the preached word really is the word of God, a word free and elusive, not subject to human direction, and a word utterly dependent upon God, a word that sometimes transforms and sometimes does not. Let us take a vignette from Paul as a case study in transformational preaching.

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Paul excuses his own mediocre preaching (through the sly use of Paul’s brilliant anti-rhetorical rhetorical devices!) by telling the Corinthians that his proclamation was formed by the subject of his preaching:

My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God. (1 Cor 2:4–5)

Paul believes that the “God who raises the dead” (2 Cor 1:9) is not only the content of Christian preaching but also its agent. Faithful proclamation is speech of “Spirit and of power” that participates in, and is dependent upon, “the power of God.” “Success” in preaching is therefore not as arbitrary or capricious as we preachers often experience it; it is dependent. Sometimes God speaks; sometimes God does not. Preaching, according to Paul, is not simply a preacher’s word about God but God’s word to us. Over every bit of homiletical advice to us preachers (including this article!) this caveat ought to be placarded: *Preachers pray for results that cannot be achieved through homiletic proficiency alone.*

If God has not raised the crucified Jesus from the dead then there is no homiletical technique that can make preaching “work.” This is in part what I think Paul means when he complains of the “daily pressure because of [his] anxiety for all the churches” (2 Cor 11:28). Paul possesses a deep awareness that if the church were not Christ’s own body, nothing he (Paul) could do would produce a church. It is no easy task to be a preacher, not simply because we North American preach-

⁶Ibid., 72–73.

⁷See the attempts to rebut Edwards in J. Michael Hogan et al., “Report of the National Task Force on the Presidency and Public Opinion,” in *The Prospect of Presidential Rhetoric*, eds. James A. Aune and Martin J. Medhurst (College Station, TX: Texas A&M Press, 2008) 296.

ers are forced to proclaim the gospel in one of the most violent and superficial cultures, but also because (to paraphrase Barth) we are ordered to preach Jesus Christ, but we cannot. Only God can speak a true word about God.

We so want our preaching to work. How can we preachers know if our preaching of the word of God is effective? If it is transformative or not? One response lies in Paul's tangled reference to Moses' shining face upon receiving the law on Sinai (2 Cor 3:7–18). According to Exod 34:30–35, Moses wore a veil in order to calm the Hebrews' terror that might result from their gazing upon a mere mortal who had just had a chat with Yahweh. Paul makes the astounding claim that the real purpose of that veil was to hide the *fading* illumination of Moses' shining face (2 Cor 3:13). Would it be too great a jolt for the Hebrews to see the atrophy that quickly results from moving away from face-to-face divine glory back down to the worship of fake gods in the valley?

In the metaphorical circuitousness that follows his reference to Moses' veiling in 2 Cor 3, Paul plays with the veil metaphor and says that all those who continue in the Mosaic law have a "veil" over their hearts (v. 14) but that turning to Christ removes such misunderstanding. The poor Israelites could only gaze at the veiled glory of Moses' face, enabling them to see only a partial view of the covenant, a rapidly fading glory rather than the full, radiant glow of God. But thanks be to God! God's Spirit has, in Christ, effected a dramatic transformation: "...where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:17–18, NIV).

We are receivers when it comes to God's revelation, never active deciders, choosers, or creators. Modern people like us find it hard to be recipients of revelation because we enjoy thinking of ourselves as active fabricators and discoverers of knowledge.

That verb, "gaze," *katoptrizo*, can mean to gaze upon something in a mirror whereby we are transformed in the gazing or it may mean that each of us, through the proclamation of the glory of Christ, is transformed. I take it to be the former. In daring to gaze upon Christ, beckoned by Christian proclamation, we are transformed. A few verses later, Paul says that just as God said, "Let there be light," so the same God says that light will shine in the hearts of believers (2 Cor 4:6). When we gaze upon Christ, it can be almost like Gen 1 all over again. New creation. Second Corinthians 3:18 can be paraphrased to "We are being transformed, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." Two verses later, Paul's mention of "this ministry" (4:1) shows that Paul is talking about preaching whereby Christ's glory shines on believers and they are thereby transformed. All this is work of "Christ, who is the Spirit."

A few observations for us preachers: I like the way Paul speaks of this transformation as "reflection" rather than as "programmed" or "designed." Reflection

implies passive reception of the light. We are receivers when it comes to God's revelation, never active deciders, choosers, or creators. Modern people like us find it hard to be recipients of revelation because we enjoy thinking of ourselves as active fabricators and discoverers of knowledge. We so hope that transformation can come through self-improvement; it is a surprise to hear Paul speak of transformation through reflection of God's glory.

And I like that Paul says it is the divine "glory" that is transforming, through the Spirit, rather than successful adherence to divine rules, laws, or principles. Poor Moses, Paul implies, had only sporadic, mountaintop access to the presence of God but now believers have that once-privileged gaze made accessible through Christ by looking upon the face of Christ (2 Cor 2:17). The trouble between God and us, the great apophatic distance, has been bridged—not through our skillful proclamation, but by Christ, the Word.

Paul is rather sweeping in his claims for the reality of transformation through gazing upon glory: "And all of us...seeing the glory of the Lord...are being transformed" (2 Cor 3:18). All—not just the enlightened ones among us—are enabled by Christ to see on a regular basis that which Moses gazed upon only briefly on Sinai.

While transformation can never be the goal of preaching (because it is something God does—not us) and all of Paul's homiletical failures in Corinth notwithstanding, Paul has exaggerated faith in the ability of God to transform through preaching. God chooses, through our thoroughly human proclamation, to do miraculous work akin to what God did at creation. Paul makes quite a claim for the Christ-changed mind in his preaching to the Romans: "Be transformed (*metamorphousthe*) by the renewing of your minds..." (Rom 12:2). Just a bit after his discussion of the veiling and unveiling that occurs in Christian proclamation (2 Cor 5:17–18a), Paul declares, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God."

I can testify that, after four decades of preaching, I have little evidence that my preaching transforms anybody. And yet, after four decades of preaching, I believe that God transforms people (occasionally, though not as often as I would like) through my preaching. In fact, I would not know that "the preaching of the word is the word of God,"⁸ had I not seen it (occasionally, though not as often as I would like) through my preaching.

In my experience, preaching that sets out to transform rarely does. As Kierkegaard noted, the best a transformation-seeking preacher to an entrenched Christendom can hope for is to "wound from behind."⁹ More importantly, as Paul

⁸Chapter 1 of the sixteenth-century Second Helvetic Confession, online at <http://www.ccel.org/creeds/helvetic.htm> (accessed August 7, 2012).

⁹Søren Kierkegaard, "The essential Christian needs no *defense*....Christianity is the attacker—in Christendom, of course, it attacks from behind," in *Christian Discourses*, Part Three, "Thoughts that Wound from Behind—for Upbuilding," in *Kierkegaard's Writings*, vol. 17, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) 161.

notes, human transformation is a mysterious work of God, a miraculous byproduct of having God lift the veil between God and us.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PREACHERS

If Paul is right in his depiction in 2 Cor 3:17–18 of the miraculous transformation that God sometimes offers through our pitiful proclamation, then allow me to tag a few implications for us preachers:

Despite everything that argues against human transformation (thank you, contemporary psychology, sociology, gender studies, and all the other means of demonstrating that we are caught, determined creatures who are enslaved by a host of factors that make true transformation highly unlikely), sometimes transformation miraculously occurs as gift of God, but hardly ever as a human achievement. We preachers are frighteningly dependent upon the reality of a God who loves to raise the dead—or our preaching is in vain. All preaching is post-Easter. If anyone ever hears anything in a sermon, it is a miracle.

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Some of the most transformative moments in preaching occur not through a direct, willful determination of the preacher to change listeners, but rather when our preaching gives people an unobstructed vision of truth that is Trinitarian. At our best, we preachers are but witnesses to the truth that is Jesus Christ; as Barth said, that bony finger of John the Baptist pointing to the cross. Transformation occurs through contemplation, through beholding the glory. The most we hope for is to reflect God's glory—not to understand it, and certainly not to use or to control it.

Therefore, we preachers must resist contemporary calls to make our preaching more mundane, such as with rules for better living, purpose-driven platitudes, or commonsense speech that gives listeners a practical takeaway to be used to make their daily lives a bit less miserable. Preaching that strives only to be helpful to achieving human ends is doomed never to be more than that. At its grandest, preaching lifts people's gaze out of themselves and toward the glory of the Lord. The goal of Christian preaching is to point to Jesus in the faith. To see Jesus is to risk being vulnerable to the transforming grace that enables us to follow Jesus.

During the summer after my sophomore year of college, I bummed about Europe with three guys. Out of my new interest in art history, I dragged them to the little, out-of-the-way French village of Colmar. One of our rollicking cohorts, George, the crudest of us all, was drinking heavily, all the time whining about taking this much time "to go see a damn picture." We entered the hall where Grünewald's masterpiece is now displayed, not far from the site for which it was

originally painted, the Monastery of St. Anthony in Isenheim, where the brothers brought victims from the plague to gaze upon Christ: his arms splayed out unnaturally, hands nailed to the cross, his skin ravaged with the same sores caused by the plague.¹⁰

The picture, which Paul Tillich called the greatest Christian painting, was worth the trip. Even I, with my sophomoric knowledge of German expressionist art, knew I was in the presence of a masterpiece. We all stood there, transfixed before a great wonder, with John the Baptist on one side, pointing to Christ, and Mary Magdalene, weeping, on the other. I was stunned to hear George's knees hit the stone floor and aghast at the sight of heathen George, weeping uncontrollably, babbling something about, "My God." The other two of us stood there dumbfounded, embarrassed, not knowing what to do with George reduced to this blubbery heap. We helped him to his feet, and sort of dragged him past the other tourists and out the door.

George gained some control over his weeping and muttered, "I don't know what got hold of me. I didn't expect that." He rambled a little more as we silently walked back to the car. When we got in the car, George, now composed, said, "If any of you ever mention this to anyone, I'll kill you." But that day, that gaze upon Grünewald transformed George. He wasn't the same guy who went into the museum. A picture had spoken.

Please do not tell George I told you the secret. The only reason I'm telling you is this: if you intend to preach this Sunday, you ought to know the secret. ☩

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¹⁰The painting can be seen online at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isenheim_Altar (accessed August 8, 2012).