



Preaching the Old Testament: A Retrospective

FREDERICK J. GAISER

When the voice came to tell our prophet that he should preach and take his message out to the people, he immediately and correctly responded with the question, “But what? What should I preach?” . . . He knows very well something which, I fear, many of today’s preachers do not, that a sermon that only repeats the tradition is not yet a real sermon. To preach, to comfort, means to have something *now* to convey to people from God. And that is why the question is right on target: What should I preach? Every preacher needs to ask it regularly.¹

Yes, what shall we preach? A question all preachers should ask regularly. I believe Mark Throntveit would agree.² Von Rad’s question is especially appropriate for this article, because it considers primarily the preachers in mid-twentieth-century Germany who were active participants in the “rediscovery” of the Old Testament’s witness to Christian theology.

¹ From a sermon on Isaiah 40:1–8 by Gerhard von Rad (Peterskirche, Heidelberg, 15 December 1963); published in Gerhard von Rad, *Predigten* (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1972), 129.

² Mark Throntveit is a lively teacher, a provocative preacher, a master of chiasmic and concentric reading of texts, a friend and sometime computer mentor. He has been a trustworthy book editor of this journal. It is both a pleasure and a privilege to contribute an essay to this issue.

The Christian leader is called to preach, to proclaim the Word of God in its power and truth. The biblical text as the Word of God is our guide and companion in this task, the older Testament as much as the newer one. The good news of God is seen as much in one as in the other.

Obviously, we don't live in mid-twentieth-century Germany, so in today's culture very different issues come into play. We preach in the face not of a tyrannical regime but of a world of entertainment, internet, social media, smartphones, podcasts, earbuds, and often very short-term attention spans. It will require bold and creative preachers to meet those challenges.

Despite the many differences, in my opinion the theological convictions of the preachers cited in this article still remain of utmost importance.

PREACHING THE OLD TESTAMENT?

In the period considered here, new questions had arisen in Old Testament studies. As Gerhard von Rad wrote:

The historical interpretation of the Old Testament has reached a kind of crisis. It furnished us with an entirely new picture of Israel, her life, and her religious ideas: but the question then arose whether a consistently applied historico-critical method could really do justice to the Old Testament scriptures' claim to truth. Is not the great gain here at the same time counterbalanced by a great loss, namely that we tend to beg the questions of their claim to truth?³

So, preaching the Old Testament. Before all other matters we must consider what it means to preach. Unlike teaching, which passes along information that can be interesting or boring, sometimes even inspiring, preaching is proclamation that requires response. I told my classes that preaching should elicit from the congregation either "Wow" or "Bullshit." Preaching should not be just "interesting."

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PREACHING CHRIST FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT?

Can one preach Christ from an Old Testament text? Must one? Dare a Christian sermon not name Christ? The questions necessarily arise from Martin Luther's definition of Scripture:

³ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology: The Theology of Israel's Prophetic Traditions* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 417.

All the genuine sacred books agree in this, that all of them preach and inculcate [*treiben*] Christ. And that is the true test by which to judge all books, when we see whether or not they inculcate Christ.⁴

One must understand the radicality of Luther's proclamation, especially as it pertains to the authority of Scripture. The "true test" of biblical books is whether or not they inculcate Christ? But what of others? Does this mean that some books are "more equal than others"? Or that the gospel always supersedes the law? What then constitutes authority?

In several instances, Dietrich Bonhoeffer brilliantly brings together Luther's "*was Christum treibet*," the written Scriptures, and the proclaimed Word:

This is its most proper use. The Scripture is intended to be interpreted through proclamation in order that it might go forth into the life of the congregation.⁵

The proclaimed Word is the incarnate Christ himself. . . . Therefore the proclaimed Word is not a medium of expression for something else, something that lies behind it, but rather it is the Christ himself walking through his congregation as the Word.⁶

The Word of the apostles' preaching is the same Word which has borne in his body the sins of the whole world; it is Christ present in the Holy Spirit.⁷

If "*was Christum treibet*" is the test of all scripture, does that exclude the Old Testament? And if Scripture is defined by inculcating Christ, how can the Old Testament do that? Or sermons on the Old Testament? First, we should ask what Luther meant by "*Christum*." Does this mean only the historical Jesus? Probably not. While Luther no doubt cared about the historical Jesus, he was certainly more interested in who Jesus was and what he accomplished for humankind. Luther, like the apostolic tradition, cared more for the *confessional* Jesus than the *historical* Jesus. In other words, Jesus exemplified the gospel, the good news of God's deliverance.

THE OLD TESTAMENT "GOSPEL"

Does not the Old Testament confession do the same? Not by mentioning Christ, of course, but by presenting an understanding of God that fully accords with the New Testament's confession of Christ. Were that not the case, Bonhoeffer

⁴ Martin Luther, *Preface to the Epistles of St. James and St. Jude* (1546), in *Luther's Works*, vol. 35, ed. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 396.

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Worldly Preaching: Lectures on Homiletics*, rev. ed., ed. and trans. with critical commentary, Clyde E. Fant (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 116. (Hereafter, *WP*.)

⁶ *WP*, 101.

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 210.

would never have said, “The Old Testament must once again be preached much more often.”⁸

The primary and recurring version of the Old Testament’s “gospel” proclaims God’s mercy, steadfast love, and faithfulness. The first usage stems directly from God. It functions as God’s self-identity:

The Lord passed before [Moses] and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.” (Exod 34:6–7)

While this confession occurs often, it is interesting that in the later versions the negative section is usually omitted or even reversed:

The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made. (Ps 145:8–9)

Rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. (Joel 2:13)

That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. (Jonah 4:2)

Apparently at a later time, Israel chose to emphasize gospel over law, a happy movement and one that certainly lends itself to preaching. Might not this be an Old Testament version of Luther’s “*was Christum treibet*”?

THE SERMON AS WORD(S)

Virtually all sermons are oral. They use words. But not just any words. Like the manger, the sermon bears Jesus Christ—that is, the word of God’s good news—in both the New and the Old Testaments, but it does so only as long as the words are faithful to a biblical text—not slavishly, for a sermon must be creative and personal, but faithful nevertheless.

Since the sermon is the proclamation of the Word of God, its whole promise rests upon the assumption that it remain bound to the Scripture and the text. . . . For the sake of the promise, that God speaks in

⁸ *WP*, 131.

the sermon through the exposition of biblical texts, the text governs our endeavors.⁹

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A word faithful to the biblical texts invites; it never coerces:

The text [Mark 16:15–18] shows the nature and way of faith; for faith compels and forces no one to the gospel, but leaves each person free, opening the gospel to each. Whoever believes, believes; whoever comes, comes; whoever remains outside, remains. . . . For the Lord commanded the disciples to do no more than preach the gospel, and that’s what they did: they preached the gospel, letting hear those who would; they did not say, “Believe or I’ll kill you.”¹⁰

Bonhoeffer made a similar point 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.¹¹

Many of the preachers considered in this article warned against sermons that included too much of the preachers themselves and their artistic or creative activities. This may have been because theirs was the era that emphasized and even rediscovered a confession based on God’s Word.

Niels Hasselmann wrote:

The rise of the Word-of-God theology and then especially the *Kirchenkampf* was one of the primary reasons for the development of this genre and its peculiar form in German-speaking areas. This explains in part its main characteristic . . . that because of the primacy of its tie to the text it includes an extensive discussion of the text and only on that basis moves to questions of proclamation and sermon. The concern of this

⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 128.

¹⁰ Martin Luther, “Sermon for Ascension Day” 29 WA,DB 7:25 (May 1522), in WA 10/3:139, lines 8–16 (my translation).

¹¹ Cited by Clyde E. Fant in *WP*, 112.

new theology and of the Confessing Church was an interpretation of Scripture that moves directly to proclamation.¹²

Also behind this Word-of-God theology was the fear that only the Word would be able to resist the rise of Nazism with both its horrors and, to some, its attraction. The widespread liberal theology of an earlier period would not suffice. It would not have the needed *gravitas*. The emphasis on the Word not embellished by artful techniques and rhetoric—so strong that it seems quite foreign to our own era—was because of the fear that liberal preachers offered more embellishment than Word. Sermons were far too optimistic, too idealistic, topical rather than textual, historical rather than theological, and therefore not up to the current catastrophe.

Back to the warnings:

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 become unctuous and self-centered or loud and boastful. By forsaking my personal ambitions I accompany the text along its way into the congregation. . . . 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.¹³

Every biblical text admits any number of very different possibilities for preaching. Further, it should become clear through them that we can help one another come to trust the biblical texts more than the art of preaching.¹⁴

In easily misunderstood language, Karl Barth, calling for “submission to the text” rather than focus on a current event (here, World War I), writes, “All honor to relevance, but pastors should be good marksmen who aim their guns beyond the hill of relevance.”¹⁵

On the other hand, despite these warnings, Bonhoeffer wrote, “As a Protestant preacher I am in fact the one who speaks the Word of God. As this speaker I am what I am, and I must not attempt to be anything else.”¹⁶ And more: “The

¹² Niels Hasselmann, *Predigthilfen und Predigtvorbereitung* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1977), 19 (my translation).

¹³ *WP*, 112.

¹⁴ Claus Westermann, “Preaching Old Testament Texts,” in *Verkündigung des Kommenden: Predigten alttestamentlicher Texte*, ed. Claus Westermann (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1958), 12 (my translation).

¹⁵ Karl Barth, *Homiletics*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Donald E. Daniels (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 118–19.

¹⁶ *WP*, 140.

sermon is to be prepared to the point of organization but not to the point of declamation. . . . The sermon must be born at the pulpit.”¹⁷

And what of other preachers of this era? Did they avoid Karl Barth’s “relevance”—that is, external current events? Not exactly. Though their sermons may be primarily theological, they are in no way abstract or merely doctrinal. It is theology that cuts to the heart of human life in their worldly existence. This is certainly true for Bonhoeffer and even Barth himself. Von Rad does a marvelous job of retelling the story of the text for the modern hearer, bringing ancient texts into the present (*Vergegenwärtigung*). Westermann’s gift is to bring modern readers into the biblical text, allowing them to experience both the similarities and the differences. Not surprisingly, Thielicke often referred to human experience that, even if not reported in the daily newspaper, was typical of the hopes and fears of the present hearers. He often quoted current literature, often about deeply secular matters.¹⁸

THE POWER OF WORDS

According to the old proverb, “Actions speak louder than words.” But what if words *are* actions? Words accomplish things. This was understood not only by biblical writers, but also in the secular world. A fine example is the poem by Emily Dickenson:

A word is dead
When it is said,
Some say.
I say it just
Begins to live
That day.¹⁹

Or by the Harvard University historian Sven Birkerts:

In the beginning was the Word—not the written or printed or processed word, but the *spoken* word. And though it changes its aspect faster than any Proteus, hiding now in letter shapes and now in magnetic emulation, it remains. It still has the power to lay us bare.²⁰

The primary biblical text, of course, comes from the prophetic voice of Isaiah:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth

¹⁷ WP, 143.

¹⁸ These observations derive from a perusal of the published sermons of the several preachers.

¹⁹ Emily Dickinson, *Complete Poems* (1924), Part One: Life LXXXIX.

²⁰ Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1994), 150.

and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isa 55:10–11)

This emphasis on the power of the word means that the sermon must be “alive,” not static, stale, or stolen. A preacher dare never lie in the pulpit, neither big lies nor small ones. Actually, even a “pulpit tone” may be considered a form of lying. Bonhoeffer recognized this when he wrote: “Our speaking must take place in complete truthfulness and factuality with the humility that is appropriate to the Word of God.”²¹ In the same vein, Bonhoeffer warns against the use of “sepulchral tones” and “false dramatization.” “This approach is the victim of the false notion that by the use of artistic speech techniques we can add a little something extra to preaching.”²²

This emphasis on the power of the word means that the sermon must be “alive,” not static, stale, or stolen. A preacher dare never lie in the pulpit, neither big lies nor small ones. Actually, even a “pulpit tone” may be considered a form of lying.

Words have power. In fact, words that are called “performative” not only describe reality but change it; they create something altogether new. For example:

“I now pronounce you husband and wife.”

“The jury finds you guilty.”

“War is declared.”

Or biblically: “Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light” (Gen 1:3).

There are words that simply cannot be called back. What they said has been done, or will be. For example, when Jacob stole the blessing from Esau, that blessing was done and could not be repeated (Gen 27:19–38). Or when the priests objected to Pilate’s inscription, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” Pilate responded, “What I have written I have written” (John 19:19–22).

Words are so efficacious, they seem to be alive, and in fact they are just that in the biblical record:

Your all-powerful word leaped from heaven, from the royal throne, into the midst of the land that was doomed, a stern warrior. (Wisdom of Solomon 18:15).

The Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1).

²¹ WP, 141.

²² WP, 139.

German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer coined the term “*Wirkungsgeschichte*” to describe the influence of a text that continues well beyond the historical sense itself. *Wirkungsgeschichte* will often add new and inventive interpretations of an original text. Many Christians, for example, now update Paul’s words in Galatians 3:28 (“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female” [NIV]) to include also “neither black nor white” and, for some, “neither gay nor straight.” Not all will go there, of course, including an elderly pastor at a pastoral conference in Texas who announced, “That text doesn’t say a damn thing about n----s.” In a strictly literal sense, of course, he was right, but that racist pastor denied the effect of the biblical message. Though one might not like a particular direction of *Wirkungsgeschichte*, the phenomenon itself is inevitable.

PREPARING TO PREACH

According to Bonhoeffer, preparing to preach requires both prayer and meditation.

In our meditation we read the text given to us on the strength of the promise that it has something quite personal to say to us for this day and for our standing as Christians—it is not only God’s Word for the community of faith, but also God’s Word for me personally. We expose ourselves to the particular sentence and Word until we personally are affected by it. When we do that, we are doing nothing but what the simplest, most unlearned Christian does every day. We are reading the Word of God as God’s Word for us.²³

Or, “No one can interpret the Bible from the pulpit who has not dealt with it in study and in prayer.”²⁴

When Karl Barth criticized Bonhoeffer’s meditation process at Finkenwalde Seminary as “legalism,” Bonhoeffer responded:

You can hardly imagine how empty, how completely burnt out, most of the brothers are when they come to the seminary. Empty not only as regards theological insights and still more as regards knowledge of the Bible, but as regards their personal life. . . . It is, though, certain that both theological work and real pastoral fellowship can only grow in a life which is governed by gathering around the Word morning and evening and by fixed times of prayer. . . . What is there legalistic in a Christian setting to learn what prayer is and in one’s spending a good deal of one’s time in this learning? . . . The questions that are seriously

²³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. Gerhard Ludwig Müller and Albrecht Schönherr, in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 5 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 87.

²⁴ WP, 116.

put to us today by young theologians are: How do I learn to pray? How do I learn to read the Bible?²⁵

Or even Barth himself:

If specific individuals undertake the exposition of scripture, they must themselves have been listening previously to scripture, and they must listen to it over and over again, and do so in a very personal repentance and thankfulness before God. . . . Standing before the mystery of the gracious God, we confess that it is not in our power that our human word should be God's Word. Preaching, then, must become prayer.²⁶

PREACHER AS TEACHER

Preaching and teaching are not the same thing, of course, but they are certainly related. For example, in his lectures at Hamburg University, Helmut Thielicke, another professor/preacher of the same era, sounded typically academic, but his sermons at St. Michaelis Church were another matter. He preached to congregations of several thousand people, each time filling the largest church in normally non-churchgoing Hamburg. To modern issues and problems within the context of his sermons, he sought to answer the question "Is there any word from the Lord?" (Alas, in these sermons, Thielicke no doubt sinned against Bonhoeffer's insistence that sermons eschew artistic embellishment.)

Though both Barth and Bonhoeffer always insisted that the sermon be bound to a text, they also spoke of the preacher's "free speech":

Their speech is "free" speech in the sense that it is their own. It does not consist of reading or exegesis. They speak the scriptural word that they have heard, as their own independent word. The task of preachers is like that of the apostles, though on a different level. In a limited sense they, too, have a "prophetic office."²⁷

A prophetic office, as always, entails risk, as Bonhoeffer noted: "The proclamation of the gospel must risk saying controversial things."²⁸

Or as Thielicke said, more strikingly:

He who simply repeats the old phrases takes no risks; it is easy to remain orthodox and hew to the old line. . . . *Only he who risks heresies can gain the truth.* . . . The safest advice to give to the man who wants to get through unscathed is to tell him to stick to conventional preaching.

²⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Letter to Karl Barth (September 19, 1936)," in *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1995), 431–32.

²⁶ Barth, *Homiletics*, 89–90.

²⁷ Barth, *Homiletics*, 45.

²⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 200.

Boredom paralyzes people, but it does not make them angry. And finally even the demons fall asleep. . . . Nobody is ever shocked by lukewarm drip from the pulpit, but that temperature may make him sick enough to retch.²⁹

So, following Barth, Bonhoeffer, and Thielicke, we and our hearers need sermons that are prophetic, that take risks. Why? Because as Sven Birkerts wrote, “In the beginning was the Word—not the written or printed or processed word, but the *spoken* word. . . . It still has the power to lay us bare.”³⁰

Back to the beginning of this article: Yes, times have changed since the period and the authors considered here, and that might well require different ways to think about preaching. Though in their own time, the preachers considered in this essay rejected “embellishment,” rhetoric, or artistry, for the sake of the primacy of the Word alone, the same concern for preaching the gospel today might require the return of just those elements. But, artistry or not, Bonhoeffer and his colleagues were right in their insistence that a sermon must always be Christ-centered and text-based. I think Mark Throntveit would agree. ⊕

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²⁹ Helmut Thielicke, *The Trouble with the Church: A Call for Renewal* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 40–41. (emphasis is the author's).

³⁰ See note 20.