A Theology/Philosophy of Contemporary Sermon Delivery

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1.

For the past couple of years, I have been immersed in the liturgical revolution represented by the rise of what is now generally called contemporary worship. It is too early, of course, to understand well the depth, breadth, or even the long-term significance of the contemporary worship movement. What can already be seen, however, is that, whether it is called "seeker's worship" or "digital worship" or whatever, it is rapidly spreading throughout virtually every Christian denomination and tradition, both Protestant and Roman Catholic. It holds the potential to become a truly epochal shift in Christian liturgical practice.

The problem for homileticians is that whatever preaching has been in the traditional churches, with their traditional sermons, it is not—and will not be—what goes on in the contemporary worship paradigm. The challenge to do something about this educationally is already here, though my judgment is that we as homileticians, teaching in various ways and places, are simply not ready for it yet. In short, among the new and most pressing homiletical tasks that seminaries all face are, first, how to understand what "preaching" means—and will increasingly mean—within the new contemporary worship context, and, second, how to then change our approaches to preaching education and our basic courses in order to adequately prepare those who will be responsible for "speaking" in the contemporary worship modes.

I changed the word from "preach" to "speak" because one of the first things to be learned from both their worship services and the growing literature of contemporary worship is that those at the forefront of the movement are deathly afraid of traditional preaching processes and formats. They are afraid of sermons. They truly believe that the traditional sermon is, in very large part, responsible for the alienations of the young that has given rise to the contemporary worship movement. For example, in one widely-used worship guide for contemporary liturgical leaders, one that provides full outlines for service planning, under the heading "Sermon" (apparently for those doing "cross-over" duty from traditional to contemporary services), there is this instruction: "Worship leader talks about the joy and exhilaration of being a disciple using the metaphor of a roller coaster to accentuate the story. Use the other Vacation clip in the message."[1] That is all. The worship leader does not "preach;" the worship leader "talks." In

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[1] See Fresh Out of the Box: Digital Worship Experiences for Youth Gatherings. Vol. 2. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002. 8. This is a growing literature for contemporary worship leaders, complete with CD's all ready for projecting onto overhead screens.

contemporary worship lingo, there is no "sermon;" there is instead a "message." Later, for each service, the same guide provides sometimes-detailed suggestions as to what the worship leader should say—but under the heading "Integration," not "Sermon."[2]

Does this mean that there is no "sermon" in the contemporary worship service? Decidedly not. Ironically, there is a great deal of public speaking in contemporary worship. The problem, though, is that the service is built around contemporary music which, as everyone knows, has an infectious dynamic to it. Moreover, the new service has energized movement to it, walking and waving and swaying, even dancing, which the music itself both calls out and supports. There are also usually various manifestations of media present—words on screens, video clips, and so forth.

That said, no matter how unaccustomed one is to it, there is no denying that contemporary worship has an infectious atmosphere about it. And, what those who lead the service know very well is that any "speaking" that goes on in that atmosphere must, itself, share and even enhance that infectiousness: that is the bottom line as far as anything resembling a "sermon" is concerned. There cannot be forth-five minutes of lively, bustling movement and energy, followed by twenty minutes of "dead time" known as preaching. There will be "speaking"—young people actually do love engaging, challenging public speaking—but everything that they know about traditional preaching, particularly in the mainline churches, is what they decidedly do not want in "their" worship services. It is a hard reality for homileticians to face; but face it we must.

2.

So what are we who teach preaching to do? Or, more specifically, what are we who teach those who will "speak" their "messages" in contemporary worship services to do? It is clear that, whether we like it or not, our own attitudes toward the art and craft of preaching have to change in many ways, if we are to serve the growing number of students who will "speak" regularly in contemporary worship services—a number that may soon be the majority of our students. Our understandings of preaching have to change; our sense of the role of preaching in worship has to undergo change; the nature of both what and how we teach has to be changed. In short, countless things that we "used to say" to students about sermons and sermon-making we must either not say, or say in very different ways. This is the profoundly striking reality that all of us in this Academy are faced with.

Given the different kinds of demands that the contemporary worship movement places upon us as homileticians, a short paper here cannot even scratch the surface of what we have ahead, as far as I can tell. I have tried to take up most of these demands in a new book that will appear from Abingdon sometime next year. Here, though, I want to concentrate on one of the most important of these changes that (again in my view) needs to take place in how we teach

[2] Fresh Out of the Box, Vol. 2, 24, 25. For an in-depth discussion of these issues, see Len Wilson and Jason Moore's, Digital Storytellers: The Art of Communicating the Gospel in Worship. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002.

homiletics. It pertains to an area that I have written fairly extensively about in the past, but one that becomes even more important as we are confronted with contemporary worship practices.[3]

This has to do with sermon delivery. This is important since it is the most pronounced issue that one finds both discussed and alluded to throughout the literature of contemporary worship. It is also, sad to say, the one dimension that has long seemed to me to be a very low priority in our preaching classes. We write and write, and talk long in our classes about "what to say" in sermons, and even how to categorize and organize our sermon materials; but we say precious little to our students about how they should deliver their sermons so that they will truly touch and change the lives of those to whom we speak. It is not surprising that among contemporary worship leaders, the criticism of "traditional preaching" is aimed most directly and vigorously at the processes of sermon delivery, rather than content.

So this is a good place to start, even though for many homileticians, it is also a very difficult place to start. The popular wisdom has been, and still is, that when we come to the section in our preaching classes where we do talk about sermon delivery—somewhere toward the end—we should explain the various options about how one can "speak publicly" and then let students "decide for themselves" which option they prefer. We let students decide if they want to write manuscripts and read them aloud, or if they want to memorize their manuscripts (which we know is unworkable), or if they want to speak from notes or even without notes. Our task, then, it is said, is to help each student become as good "at that option" as he or she can be. Some have even referred to this as letting students "find their own voice" for the pulpit—a good and valuable concept, but misapplied in this case.[4] But—when we let students make that decision, are we surprised that the majority of them opt for writing their sermon manuscripts out and then reading them—both in class and before congregations? Of course we are not surprised; we are letting students take the easy way out.

That approach to sermon delivery, however, has not—in my view—served our students or their churches well in the past; it has always made for less effective preachers than they could otherwise have been. Now, though, it is a much more serious matter.   Now we have to prepare students to deliver their sermons—to "talk" their "messages"—in contemporary worship settings in which the "requirements" for effective sermon deliver are not only much different, but far and away more demanding than they have ever been in our fairly lax traditional worship pulpits.

In contemporary worship contexts, "speakers" do not have a choice of how they would like to deliver their messages. And for us to continue to tell students in our classrooms that they have that choice, or that they can deliver their sermons however they wish when they work in contemporary worship settings, is simply not true. On the contrary, for us to enable them to

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[3] See my book, Preaching Without Notes. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001.

[4] The major criticism of my book, Preaching Without Notes, when it appeared, was that it argued against this "choice" being given to students; that there is nothing wrong with a volume that instructs students and pastors in the art of preaching their sermons without notes, but that one should dare not suggest, let along argue, that there was something profoundly wrong with reading prepared manuscripts to congregations. I still stand by the argument of that little book.

function effectively as "preachers" in the contemporary setting calls on us to know what the requirements of that setting are, and to take whatever steps are necessary in our preaching practices and our classes to get them fully ready for what is ahead.

3.

In those contemporary settings, without exception, preachers have to be dynamic, extemporaneous speakers. That is what has to be said aloud. Manuscripts read from the pulpit or platform will simply not do, no matter how well the reading is done; and if we can get prepared notes out of the speaker's hands so much the better. That is—how do we say this so that it is not misunderstood by some and offensive to others?—that is the only way, literally, that the preacher, the speaker, can summon up the same dynamic, creative energy that the worship service itself conjures up. The service, in short, cannot ride along on a high-energy level (even the quiet times are charged with expectancy and energy), and then the sermon begins and the bottom falls out. That will not work; but the only thing that will prevent that is for the sermon, the "talk," to sustain that same intense, vibrant, expectant level; and only extemporaneous speech has the power to do that.

We have to teach our preaching students to become dynamic, professional public speakers if they are to serve in contemporary worship settings—I see no substitute for that in the future of preaching. If that means we have some preaching classes for "traditional" sermons, where students can practice writing and reading their manuscripts, and some classes for "contemporary" sermons, where the students must master the disciplines of extemporaneous speaking, so be it. But if we are going to put trained and effective preachers in contemporary liturgical settings, we will have to have some variation of the latter someplace in our curricula.

4.

It seems awkward to argue in a paper on preaching that in order to be a professional speaker one has to learn the art of speaking professionally, which always means extemporaneously. What is particularly ironic is that, in my experience, virtually every professor who teaches students that they can read their manuscripts from the pulpit is herself or himself a very good extemporaneous speaker; this is borne out, not always by what they do in the pulpit, but by what they do day by day in their classrooms and lecture halls. They speak fluently, even dynamically, for an hour at a stretch, often without notes. Yet many of these same professors contend that they have to let students do as they wish in delivering their sermons since some just do not have the ability to become good extemporaneous speakers.

Those, however, who deal with students and public speaking on a regular basis almost uniformly disagree. Their viewpoint, for example, is articulated by the inimitable Charles Osgood, the acclaimed broadcaster, in his smart little book on public speaking:

> Don't make the mistake of thinking that the world is divided into those who can speak in public and those who can't. It is not a 'gift' like musical talent or being able to draw. Anybody who can speak can speak in public. Remember that! You are not being asked to do something you've never done before. It's not like

> juggling or walking a tightrope. It's easy. All you have to do is be at ease and let your mind and your mouth do what comes naturally.[5]

Actually, it's not quite that easy, but everyone and anyone can do it. It takes work, and the more one works at it the better one gets at it—just like most other things in life. I teach in a university where every undergraduate is required to take a course in public speaking; all of those courses are in my School, and no one is allowed to read a written speech. The students are in the class, in fact, in order to learn how not to do that. Students learn the disciplines of speech preparation and extemporaneous public speaking—a skill that will serve every one of them well in any profession that they choose. Indeed, some will enter professions, like ministry, that require professional public speaking—and it is hoped that the fundamentals of speaking they learn in their basic public speaking course will be utilized and built on.

Some preaching professionals say that without a manuscript being read verbatim in the pulpit mistakes are made, or at least can be made; that the precision of language will suffer. Of course mistakes are made; of course there are misstatements and slips of tongue—we live with them in all of our talking with each other. And of course extemporized speech, no matter how well prepared, suffers in its precision of language. But the fact is that when we listen to speeches and speakers, we want idea and insight, feeling and emotion more than we want precision of language. We want passionate involvement in what the speaker is talking about, no matter how awkward the words may be in which it is wrapped. We want humanness instead of exact words.

Here is what the great, and famously precise, pianist Vladimir Horowitz told the New York Times Magazine in an interview some years ago: "For me, the intellect is always the guide but not the goal of the performance. Three things have to be coordinated and not one must stick out. Not too much intellect because you become too scholastic. Not too much heart because it can become schmaltz. Not too much technique because you become a mechanic." And then this: "Always there should be a little mistake here and there—I am for it. The people who don't make mistakes are cold like ice. It takes risk to make a mistake. If you don't take risk, you are boring."[6] Charles Mudd, an eminent teacher of speech, once wrote that "Probably nothing in speaking contributes more importantly to effective delivery than a conversational style. A speaker can conceivably use bad diction or even bad grammar, yet if his [or her] delivery is spontaneous, direct, and conversational, the chances of effective communication are better than if he [or she] had beautiful diction and perfect grammar but lacked a conversational delivery."[7]

5.

Beyond that, the statement is often made that all of the great speeches of the past were carefully written out and carefully read to their audiences. Yet, as most good speech teachers

[5] Osgood on Speaking: How to Think On Your Feet Without Falling On Your Face. New York: Wm. Morrow & Co., 1988, 9.

[6] Helen Epstein, "The Grand Eccentric of the Concert Hall," The New York Times Magazine, January 8, 1978.

[7] Charles S. Mudd and Malcolm O. Sillars, Speech: Content and Communication. San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1962, 1969. 263.

who have studied their art know, that is simply not true. An interesting and informative example can be found in this, the 40th anniversary year of Martin Luther King's "I Have A Dream" speech; we are already able to see it as one of the great speeches in the last few hundred years. A new book on the speech itself provides both the manuscript of the speech that King took with him to the podium, along with the verbatim recording of the speech in parallel columns.[8]

King had for several days before worked meticulously on the speech and, in delivery, followed his prepared text somewhat prosaically through its first two thirds. Then, when he had finished the sentence from his manuscript that contained the words that we will not be satisfied "until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream," something happened. According to his manuscript, in two more paragraphs the speech would be over. But at that point, he realized that the speech was not having the effect on the throng that he wanted. So, abruptly, and reportedly with Mahalia Jackson hollering behind him to "tell them about the dream, Martin," he put his manuscript completely aside and began to preach. He was not, to be sure, speaking "off the cuff," just making things up as he went along. He had prepared these words, too, though they were not memorized; but they came extemporaneously out of his well-prepared and overflowing heart and not off of any page.

At that moment in the address, everything began to kick up; you can literally hear the difference in the crowd's reaction from that point on, as it goes from scattered applause to whooping and hollering the rest of the way. Without notes he delivered the words, "Go back to Mississippi; go back to Alabama; go back to South Carolina…Let us not wallow in the valley of despair…I still have a dream…I have a dream that one day…." And from that point the speech—as all who have heard it know—began to soar. But it only began to soar when he left the manuscript and for the rest of the speech conjured up an unforgettable vision that only extempore public address can muster. It is easy to contend that the most powerful and memorable section of that address, all the way from the "I have a dream" sequences through the repeated "let freedom ring" refrains, that long stretch that forever fixed the speech's place in human history, was that which was spoken when he stopped reading and extemporaneously "told 'em about the dream." What finer example could be found of how public speaking at its highest level works than that![9]

6.

So far, though, we have not moved much toward our goal of a theology or philosophy of public address, specifically of sermon delivery; and it is time to do that, if only in a cursory way

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[8] All of the following material can be found in Drew D. Hansen's book, The Dream: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Speech that Inspired a Nation. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2003. See pages 71-85.

[9] Only once, in a November 1963 interview, did King discuss why he had left his written text to add the last memorable seven plus minutes to the speech. He said: "I started out reading the speech, and I read it down to a point, and just all of a sudden, I decided—the audience response was wonderful that day, you know—and all of a sudden this thing came to me that I have used—I'd used it many times before, that thing about 'I have a dream'—and I just felt that I wanted to use it here. I don't know why. I hadn't thought about it before the speech." Quoted in Hansen, 95.

in these few pages. The best we can do for now is to ask and try to answer the question: what is there about extemporaneous public address that lets it rise to the highest, most dynamic kind of interaction between a single individual and a large crowd of people? Answering that question, though, requires that we develop a larger framework, one that can give us both a metaphor and a perspective.

The framework we need is an understanding that one person standing before a group of people, regardless of how large the group, is in a performance situation; it cannot be otherwise. This has been well recognized in recent books by Academy members, particularly Jana Childers and Richard Ward. In that sense, as they note, preaching participates in the theatrical arts. The difficulty, though, is that no one wants to see the preacher "acting." No one wants the preacher to be "on stage." In fact, in a classical stage fashion, the "fourth wall" is supposed to exist which separates the actor on stage from the audience; this enables the one "on stage" to be unaware of, or oblivious to, those who "watch" the performance. So, despite the fact that we can learn some things from the dynamics of the stage, that metaphor is still somewhat problematic.

Except, that is, for one kind of theatrical performance, which, in my judgment, provides a stronger sense of direction for the preacher—or, in our case, the "speaker" bringing the "message" in a highly interactive contemporary worship situation. That form is "improvisational" theatre, or, as TV has taught us to call it, "improv."

Improv is extemporaneous theatre, making it a very close first cousin of extemporaneous public speaking. Improv is both planned and not planned. It deliberately removes the fourth wall between the "performer" and the audience, so that the experience between them can be fully interactional. It is not stage-focused or performance-focused; it is audience focused. It is intended to be fully and openly communicational, not in the indirect sense of a staged play, but in the direct sense of words and movements skillfully and playfully handled with the particular audience that is present at that time in its sights.

Improv is also unique, however, in that it is a combination of several aspects of the human personality; in a sense, this is the secret of its communicative power. In describing both this creative and communicative sense of improv, Viola Spolin, the twentieth century's great improv teacher, identifies these aspects of personality unleashed in a "performance" as the intellectual, the physical, and the intuitive.[10] Of the three, she says, "the intuitive, most vital to the learning situation, is neglected." Spolin writes that the intuitive is "often thought to be an endowment or a mystical force enjoyed by the gifted alone." Yet "all of us have known moments when the right answer 'just came' or we did 'exactly the right thing without thinking.'" That "intuition" she is describing is exactly what we see when Martin Luther King sensed that something was missing in his speech, when he set the text aside, and began drawing on countless things that he had worked on before—words that, at that moment, needed to be called on, and when he called

[10] The material that follows here is drawn from Viola Spolin's classic book, Improvisation for the Theater (Third Edition). Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999. While most of the book is comprised of her famous improvisational exercises and games, the opening twenty pages are worth the price of the work—even for the preacher.

on them, the speech took off. That was the intuition of "improv." That speech, remarkably, turned into an epoch-making improv performance.

The second set of improv tools, the "physical" ones, means that every aspect of one's body plays large in the communicative process of the "performance." Sometimes that means moving freely around the stage or platform—or not, since a stationary position with the emphasis on facial movements or gestures can also dominate the attention. But the body is never still, however subtle its movements. One works to make sure that the audience's eyes are drawn to and see everything that goes on, however subtle or sweeping the body movements. Good extemporaneous speakers know that very well, too—and practice the physical arts of improv as well.

Third, the improv performer uses all of his or her "intellectual" powers in carrying out the "performance." He or she knows the audience or has made preparations by gauging the audience's mood or sense of place and situation. The improv performer has built up a store of information, a repertoire of material on which he or she can draw at any time. Drew Hanson, the author of the new book that analyzes the King speech, carefully points out that King had cultivated a reprertoire of what he called "set pieces" on which he could extemporaneously draw—and that both the "I have a dream" and the "Let freedom ring" sequences to which he turned when he put the manuscript aside were among his "set pieces," delivered extemporaneously. In addition, the improv performer has a developed "plan" for a given performance; he or she knows, in a sense, where to go with the material in this particular performance. This is the intellectual dimension of improv, and speaker, preparation. It sets up the way that the improv performer, or extemporaneous speaker, prepares to speak.

7.

Finally, we need to get to the bottom line: What is there about improv theatre that so richly informs the task of "improvisational public address?" For now, we will focus on three great characteristics that both improv performance and extemporaneous public speaking share. The first of these is "spontaneity." Spontaneity is riveting—it cannot not be. Nothing drives and compels human interest, involvement, and response like spontaneity. Spolin ties spontaneity directly to the nature of intuition. "The intuitive," she says, "can only respond in immediacy—right now. It comes bearing its gifts in the moment of spontaneity, the moment when we are freed to relate and act, involving ourselves in the moving, changing world around us." Further:

> Through spontaneity we are re-formed into ourselves. It creates an explosion that for the moment frees us from handed-down frames of reference, memory choked with old facts and information and undigested theories and techniques of other people's findings. Sponteneity is the moment of personal freedom when we are faced with a reality and see it, explore it and act accordingly. In this reality the bits and pieces of ourselves function as an organic whole. It is the time of discovery, of experiencing, of creative expression.[11]

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[11] Spolin, 4.

Spolin's words certainly go beyond our usual conceptions of spontaneity. One must marvel, however, at the way her words catch the whole spirit of the spontaneous nature of King's great speech. Spontaneous words, rising passionately from the great spirit of a speaker, do have an explosive power to let us see in new ways and experience things we have never experienced before. We will have a prepared "message"—outlined, learned, and ready to present. And, as in good improv where the words are free flowing and unexpected, we will speak it spontaneously as we have prepared it. But our spontaneity will go beyond that: we will stay open to what the occasion, and the inner spirit working within us, calls forth from us as we speak.

Isn't it true that there is not a one of us who has not at some time had the experience of lecturing (or even preaching) extemporaneously only to hear ourselves saying things we had not planned to say—things that, in retrospect, are quite above and beyond what we were actually capable of preparing in advance? It is by the power of the spontaneous spirit itself that we had insights that come to us "in a moment," "in the present." Only in extemporaneous speaking does that happen, or can it happen.

The second source of improv's power—as well as the source of extemporaneous public speaker's great power—is audience "contact." Contact, in this sense, is interactive in every conceivable way. Far and away the most powerful and dynamic form of this interactive contact is eye contact. Nothing must be allowed to get in the way of eye contact.

Every improv performer knows that often the difference between powerful communication with an audience, and something less than that, will rest on the quality of the eye contact that is exchanged. The reasons are easy to grasp. When eye contact is steady and well apportioned around the entire audience, that audience's concentration on the speaker and the speech is maintained at the highest level. When speakers do not maintain persistent and consistent eye contact, audience members do not make any effect to maintain eye contact with the one speaking—or with what they are saying. In addition, the better the eye contact of speaker with audience, the higher is the audience's confidence in the speaker. Remember that we all tend to be suspicious of people who cannot, or do not, look much at us; people who are too caught up in themselves and what they are saying to care about us in the audience. It is a law of public address. Finally, audiences have ways of responding to a speaker throughout the speech itself—and it is only with intensive eye contact that a speaker can keep close track of that ongoing response, and even respond—spontaneously—to it. The improv artist knows all about the power of eye contact; the speaker in contemporary worship has to know and practice the same art.

The third quality of successful improv performance is, for want of a better word, enthusiasm or passion; actually the best term is "energy." The improv artist knows that what draws and holds people is energy, an energy force or field—and that only the "performer" can create that energy field. Moreover, one creates it in one way and one way only, and that is by being, himself or herself, genuinely energetic or passionate. Once the energy is generated, however, everyone in the audience, the field, is pulled into it. It becomes the "audience solidarity" that Spolin describes as "experiencing and playing together." This energy is built of expectancy, whether its expression is loud or soft. It is built of intensity, which can only rise from the depths of the human soul, and which can only flow out when there are no impediments to it.

Musicians with their music know this; they can feel it when they are on and into their music. Improv performers with their words and movements know this; they know that pure, unadulterated energy, controlled and channeled, can hold a crowd spellbound. Great, even good, speakers know this, too, when they put their written pages and their notes aside and just begin to "speak from their hearts." What invariably happens is that that situation becomes charged with energy, passion, enthusiasm, fire—all with someone just "speaking." It is something we all know and have experienced. It is something that all of us can do—and our task is to teach our students how to accomplish it on a regular basis in contemporary worship.

8.

There are numerous other dimensions to the revolution in contemporary worship that impact preaching and the "sermon," the "message," which are beyond the scope of this short paper. There is the complex matter of preaching with projected words and visuals, of clips and lyrics and power point outlines and so forth; new skills for preaching in this area are badly needed already. There is the matter of dealing with episodic speaking; of having a sermon broken up into several parts, all of which must somehow come together to "integrate" the entire worship experience. That is much more difficult than it appears to be. Then there is the new and expanded role of things like "metaphor" in sermon content itelf. And so on.

I was one of those who in the 1960s was a close student of Marshall McLuhan, whose work and insights were a lot more complex and extensive than just the aphorisms he left us. But those aphorisms did sum up important ideas that are generally accepted, if still not well understood. The most important of those aphorisms was that "the medium is the message," meaning that "how" one says something is every bit as important, if not more important, as "what" one says. Since then, researchers have worked on making that aphorism more precise and empirical. No less eminent a communications researcher than Ray Birdwhistell has concluded that more than 65 per cent of a message's social-emotional meaning is communicated by its nonverbal content, leaving 35 per cent of what "gets through" to the verbal message.[12] We need to think about that. And then realize what that says about our usual scant attention to sermon delivery, that nonverbal part; unless that changes, it is hard to see a bright future for preaching in the world of contemporary worship forms.

[12] Ray Birdwhistell, Kinetics and Context. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970. See also Albert Mehrabian, Silent Messages. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Press, 1971).