The Power of the Spoken Word: Performance-Based Pedagogy

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Looking Back

When I stepped into my own classroom for the first time in 1991, I faced a collection of Gen-Xers who were ready to argue with me on any point and demanded an account of the benefits of any task that I assigned. Nevertheless, for the most part the pedagogy with which I taught looked very much like the pedagogy by which I was taught. Reading required flipping pages of a book. Tiling was what one did to floors. Research began in card catalogs and periodical indexes. My task was to guide my students to a level of sophistication in their reading of the Bible and to a broad canonical approach tempered by a historical consciousness. Students arrived with a substantial collection of biblical stories in their heads that I helped them articulate into a coherent narrative. I then invited them to see the patterns and themes that comprise biblical theologies. I presented the Bible as an invitation to live into their futures in continuity with past generations who had joined the cloud of witnesses found in biblical narratives.

Nearly twenty years later, my teaching preparation has begun to look like event planning. What would my dignified Jesuit doctoral advisor think if he were to see me perform my rap version of Jeremiah, complete with a rhythm beat downloaded from the internet and gestures taught to me by my teenage nephews? I have added a set of desirable outcomes to my earlier list of objectives that have much more to do with experiencing scripture rather than with interpreting it. The following essay is my response to an anticipated accusation: Are you not pandering to the millennial generation's desire to be entertained? I hope to persuade readers that my pedagogical techniques based upon performance of scripture are appropriate to my students, many of whom consider post-biblical Christianity a viable option.

Taking Stock

Members of the church and the academy bewail growing biblical illiteracy. Diagnosing the factors that have led both to students' lack of familiarity with

what is in the Bible and to their difficulty in retaining what they read has led me to my pedagogic turn. I, therefore, begin with what I have observed about my students' knowledge and attitudes toward the Bible. Rather than a dirge, please read the following as an overture.

At the beginning of each Introduction to the Bible course at Goshen College, my colleague Paul Keim and I set two tasks for our classes of 60–80 students, the majority of whom are 18 years old. Students write a short essay entitled "My Journey with Scripture" in which they relate their memories of encounters with Bibles and scripture. They also take the supply-answer parts of their final exam: identifying 40 key people from the biblical story, organizing 40 events in chronological order, and matching the titles of 40 books with descriptions of distinctive content. Several patterns prevail (we regret that we did not organize these activities and collect data with a view to publication). The following observations are general impressions.

The students that we now face are those raised by our own generation who, on the whole, did not read the Bible to their children. We seem to have presented them with children's Bibles with the intention that they would read them for themselves. Most of my students report having read them; however, the receipt of the Bible seems to be more memorable than the content that they read.

Students who received standard translations of the Bible from their congregation report feeling at the time that the gift marked an important stage in their progress toward adulthood, but the minority who actually tried reading it tend to report feelings of frustration with both the styles of writing and the content. Many found it difficult to reconcile what they read with the theology that they had learned in Sunday school. Students who attended church regularly are able to articulate the basic creeds and doctrines of their tradition, but they tend not to be able to locate material in the Bible that supports their convictions. While there continue to be one or two students in every 50 who have read the entire Bible and can quote extensively from scripture in a way resembling the ability of our grandparents' generation, these students do not stand at one end of a continuum but rather in their own category.

Those who report that the Bible is very important to their faith are often those who also report that they have seldom read it. They are confident

that what they have been taught about God, Jesus, and salvation is in the Bible. In the last few years, we have seen an increasing number of students in this category report that they have been given passages to read to which they turn frequently for guidance. Most of these verses are key texts in the "Prosperity Gospel." Paraphrased passages, such as "For I can do everything through Christ who gives me strength" (Phil. 4:13 NLV), adopted by parachurch organizations such as the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, appear with startling frequency. Divorced from their context, these passages affirm that prayer will produce victory for athletes and financial success for entrepreneurs. For most students, reading an entire biblical chapter, let alone book, is a new experience. Last year, one student objected. "That's not the way one reads scripture," he proclaimed. "You read it a verse at a time." Verses are placed on the heart by a friend, or the Holy Spirit guides a hand as it rifles through pages and a finger as it lands upon the one verse that proves to be just what is needed.

At the beginning of the course, very few students are able to identify more than 20 percent of the biblical personalities correctly. They tend to know the people in the Hebrew Bible better than those in the New Testament. Familiarity with characters tends to be grounded in viewing movies such as *The Prince of Egypt* or participating in productions like *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. The one character from the New Testament whom virtually every student identifies correctly – for many it is the only person they know with certainty – is Judas Iscariot. The name Judas has become synonymous with his presumed role as betrayer. Their knowledge of the contents of the Bible can be described as a kaleidoscope of cultural references composed of lines from Veggie Tales and lyrics from popular songs.

Both the students who want to move on to a post-biblical faith and those who wish to place the physical book in a shrine are frustrated by doctrinal debates about the meaning of scripture. When I began teaching, students tended to mine scripture to shore up their positions. Now, both sides seem more content to leave the text unread. Liberal students seek a community of like-minded friends as their church. Conservative students put their trust in an authoritative pastor's mediation and interpretation of scripture. They often dismiss the study of the Bible because people cannot

agree upon what it means.

There are aspects of the current youth culture that facilitate engaging in performance-based pedagogy. Students love to work in groups. They tend to trust that learning outcomes will be achieved by doing assigned activities; therefore, they are willing to invest their energy. Knowing that the product of their labor will be a performance adjudicated by their peers with applause rather than a grade provides a strong incentive to strive for good results.

Performance-Based Pedagogy

These observations have led me to focus upon the role that my students will take in the transmission of scripture. I no longer seek to train them to do what I do but rather to be what the church needs them to be: good story-tellers. Rather than their becoming squinty-eyed readers, I am gradually shifting the focus to their being engaged listeners. I have sought a pedagogy that opens up space for shared experiences of scripture and that allows for differences without falling into divisive doctrinal debates or accusations about the lack of faith or reason. My pedagogy has been informed by insights about oral traditions in books by Walter Ong and Werner Kelber, and the work of members of the Bible in Ancient and Modern Media section of the Society of Biblical Literature who have come to call what they do "performance criticism."[1]

In my introductory Bible course, each student prepares one episode in a cycle of stories for retelling in a small group. They conduct the same sort of research required to prepare a thesis paper, but the goal is to seek information and insights from historical studies, narrative, form, genre, social science, and rhetorical criticism which allow them to amplify their retelling so that their audience can make good sense of what they hear. Commentaries, journals devoted to biblical studies, concordances, specialized dictionaries, and encyclopedias become helpful reference works for the laity and not just specialists. They discover that they must situate their story within the broader narrative and fit it into patterns such as covenantal promise and fulfillment. They find themselves making decisions about where they will put emphasis and what interpretation their retelling will promote. The recognition that there are multiple possibilities becomes less alarming when students locate them in their reading rather than seeing them as a problem with the indeterminacy of the text.

As they rehearse and perform, they begin to experience what David M. Rhoads calls the emotive and kinetic dimensions of the text.[2] They begin to see the meaning and significance of a story in its reception rather than in abstract ideas encoded in the ink on the page.

Some students begin the process fearful that they will not be able to complete the assignment because they cannot understand the story they have read. I encourage them to paraphrase the story but not to abridge it. Students frequently find that when it comes time to tell the story they revert to the actual wording of the translation they have studied, but they now speak as the knowing narrator rather than from rote memory without comprehension. With only a cue card in hand, students may forget a few details, but with very few exceptions their audience reports listening to lively and coherent stories.

I require the introductory class to memorize the promises to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3), the Shema (Deut. 6:4-9), Psalm 23, the Lord's Prayer, and the Christ Hymn (Phil. 2:5-11). When scripture becomes passages to recite, students come to understand that the Bible is not a source for doctrine so much as a worship resource book. With a clip from the film *X-Men United* (Bryan Singer, 2003) I illustrate how reciting Psalm 23 can help us find words of comfort when emotions leave us speechless. I tell them that I habitually recite the Lord's Prayer when I feel anxious when flying, because I want the last words from my lips to be a confession of faith rather than some expletive that expresses anger or fear or doubt in God's faithfulness.

Performing scripture helps students recognize that different genres must be read in different ways. In my course on Jesus and the Gospels, students recite parts or all of the Sermon on the Mount. As they listen to each other, they recognize where they are being indicted, cajoled, and invited. At the end of the introductory course, we read an abbreviated version of the Revelation of John together, with individuals or groups reading the various voices. In the discussion that follows, students make observations about the importance of worship within the book, how the various voices praise God for what he has done and will do. They recognize refrains from familiar hymns and praise songs. They note how they as the audience receive divine blessings and words of comfort within the context of trials and tribulations. Each reading provokes different observations based upon the strengths of

individual readers and the dynamic arising between different voices.

While I cannot prescribe what students will learn from these activities in the same way that lecture notes identify what I consider most important, I find that exam results indicate greater familiarity with the content and significance of the biblical books that have been the focus of performance-based activities rather than silent readings or lectures. Not only does the performance create a space for discussion and observation, the text becomes much more memorable and meaningful.

Having students perform scripture or receiving it through audition rather than silent reading may strike those raised in the 20th century as a second-best way of receiving the text. In a recent National Public Radio piece in which novelist Neil Gaiman sang the praises of audio books, he quoted the dissenting voice of Harold Bloom, who argued that deep reading demands that one have the text in front of one and noted that people when asked if they have read a book will apologetically say, "Well, I've listened to it."[3] Such comments suggest that silent reading is the intended way of receiving a book.

With over a billion print runs, most Christians either own a copy of the Bible or have easy access to one. As a result, we have come to see private devotional reading as a principal means by which the Bible is received. Moreover, with paper and pens or keyboards ready at hand, we have come to see writing as a substitute for memory. In antiquity, writing served as a substitute for speech. Silent reading was not normative. When the literate passers-by read the sign on the cross, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" (John 19:19), the largely illiterate crowd were the audience to oration. The reading of the sign became a proclamation, hence the high priests' objection. Given the expense of reproducing a gospel and the low literacy rate in the first century – perhaps as low as 1.5 percent in Judea and the Galilee – the vast majority of Christians heard, rather than read, a gospel.[4]

Understanding that the Bible was written for oral transmission and then listening to it can invigorate my students' reception. Read silently, the repetitive material in the prophets or the Gospel of John strikes them as superfluous and tedious. But when scripture becomes a performance text, the repetition becomes a refrain that the audience can anticipate and speak. Silent readers of the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego tend to skip

over lines like "when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble, you are to fall down and worship the golden statue that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up" (Dan. 3:5, 7, 10, 15), but in oration the one who speaks them and those who hear them participate in the ridicule of idolatry.

Living in an oral culture no doubt sharpened the listening skills of the Bible's first audiences, and they retained far more of what they heard than a modern audience does. But when we consider how quickly youth learn the lyrics to songs and recall the plots and names of characters from films, we have reason to suppose they will remember scripture heard more than scripture read. This, in part, is why I encourage translation of various biblical genres into more familiar forms. When students translate the minor prophets into rap, they begin to find the ancient forms more accessible. They begin to look for the distinctive language and messages that run through a book and to find the rhetorical features that must be replicated in their transposed versions so their audience can respond appropriately.

There is a debate among those who study orality and the publication of the gospels in antiquity about whether texts were memorized and then recited or whether they were read. Given my own experience of reading scripture from the pulpit and sitting in the congregation, as well as what I know about public readings of Greco-Roman literature in private homes, I suspect that the latter was often the case. By encouraging my students to perform scripture with the use of a cue card rather than reading the text aloud, I seek to prepare future worship leaders and teachers to preserve the place of the Bible within the church. In congregations where scripture is recited or read more effectively, perhaps more of it will be read and homiletic preaching may once more gain popularity. (An aside: if I were to identify factors accounting for the decline in biblical literacy, I would place the reduction of scripture heard from the pulpit or lectern at the top of the list.)

Assessment

When the final product of an activity is a performance or presentation, I examine the process of preparing. In the first-year course, I evaluate the documentation of the students' research and a written version of their

amplified story rather than the performance, although I do recognize outstanding story-telling with comical awards. The purpose of the oration is to build confidence in their capacity to perform the text. In upper-level courses, students submit an account of their avenues of research, including blind alleys. I have them provide their own assessment prior to receiving mine, so that I do not stress what they already recognize and can instead suggest ways of improving what they are most self-conscious about, because this is where they are most likely to grow. I allow them to learn from performances rather than to demonstrate their learning in performances. I use a grading rubric to expedite the feedback process. I invest more time in hanging around the reference room of the library and in e-mail exchanges to lend assistance while a project is in process than in writing comments on the finished product. My role is that of director or producer rather than that of a critic.

Assessment of the effectiveness of these pedagogies is not limited to graded assignments and tests. In April 2009 I had the opportunity to listen to a performance of "Seeds – The Kingdom of Heaven," a song composed by senior Jesse Miles Landis-Eigsti for the Goshen College baccalaureate service. In the fall of 2008 Jesse was a student in Jesus and the Gospels. In the study of parables, students created short dramas or pieces of performance art to capture Jesus' subversion of ancient social structures, such as honor and shame, that served the interests of the powerful and maintained the status quo. Discussion of the fact that in antiquity mustard was an uncontrollable weed rather than the source for a tasty condiment was part of the preparatory introduction to the activity. What Jesse learned found its way into his composition. The choir sings that Jesus taught "the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that grows into the tallest tree," and then a solo voice leads the response "but some people say we know these seeds, they only produce vile unwanted weeds. Give us things we grow like potted ferns, bonsai trees, and chita pets. Things where we can predict how they will grow." Then another voice responds, "But Jesus said…."[5] Jesse made the transition from one who receives the gospel to one who proclaims the gospel.

When I asked Jesse to reconstruct some of the influences (authors, sermons, classroom experiences etc.) that went into his composition, he sent a lengthy reply. It confirmed the role of principles informing many

pedagogies employed by my colleagues at Goshen and other Mennonite schools: emphasis upon learning from other cultures (Jesse named the chorus of Greek drama and the Soweto Gospel Choir); articulating the narrative structure of thought, particularly theology; finding the most effective forms for communicating one's ideas; and encouraging transformation that honors what is good and true about the past while not being a slave to it.

As I continue to refine my use of performance, I will ask students to conduct similar reflections as a way of assessing the effectiveness of activities and of adding writing to the process. While Cicero stresses the importance of speech, he reminds us that when one turns away from the practice of writing one ends up with an unchanging style (*De or*. 33.152).

Looking Ahead

While performing scripture has become one of the central pedagogies in my classroom and I am constantly looking for ways to improve preparation activities, skill development, and assessment rubrics, I have not ignored the importance of written communication skills. When I have a class of fewer than 20 students, I often focus on process writing and composition of persuasive arguments substantiated with solid evidence and based on sound reasoning. Recently, I have begun to attend to the role that writing plays within our contemporary culture as a substitute for speech, and the subcultures and media for which my students write. The generation dubbed the Millennials writes far more casual prose compositions than my generation did in their undergraduate years: they blog, they twitter, they chat, they post. Writing has become essential to relationships maintained and sometimes formed on web-based social platforms such as Facebook.

While leading a study and service term last summer, I fell into the habit of following the very public written discourse of my students on the web. I began to notice several aspects of compositions that are both disturbing and exciting. The subculture of much of this discourse encourages complaining and cynical voices, and I have begun to call my students' attention to this fact. There is a difference between thought or speech and writing. The former are ephemeral; the latter is fixed. Writing is a way of working out our thoughts and giving them a form. It is as if my ideas come into being or at least full expression as I write them out. I only know what I think when

I revisit what I have written. As I read my students' blogs, it became clear that they were compositing identities for themselves. They were writing themselves into being.

This generation has been accused of being chameleons without stable identities. I do not stand in judgment of this. But if these forms of writing shape who students are, my pedagogies ought to tap into the potential of their writing to shape their faith and to enhance their capacity to communicate their faith identity to their reading audience, an audience much broader than they suspect. The people with whom they are connected through the web will not necessarily worship with them or go to Sunday school or be in class with them. As the social patterns that have sustained the centrality of the Bible to Christianity are becoming less important to many of my students, my pedagogies must strive to inform how and what they write, so that the scripture finds its way into these new forms of discourse.

Notes

[1] Werner Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983); Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1988). The Lutheran School of Theology of Chicago hosts a Biblical Performance Criticism web site at www.biblicalperformancecriticism.org.

[2] David M. Rhoads, "Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Biblical Studies," *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005): www.sbl-site.org/Meetings/AMseminarpapers.aspx.

[3] Neil Gaiman, "Neil Gaiman Asks: Heard Any Good Books Lately?" NPR Morning Edition (November 30, 2009).

[4] Meir Bar-Ilan, "Illiteracy in the Land of Israel in the First Centuries C.E." in *Essays in the Social Scientific Study of Judaism and Jewish Society Vol. 2,* edited by S. Fishbane, S. Schoenfeld, and A. Goldschlaeger (New York: Ktav, 1992), 46–61.

[5] The entire performance can be heard and seen on YouTube: "Seeds: The Kingdom of Heaven - Goshen College Baccalaureate Service 2009" www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsp6_Pg62qc

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