

Divine and Human Action in Preaching and the Sacraments

The Biblical, Historical, and Theological Roots of Worship

Church Workers Conference
United Church of Christ in the Philippines
Silliman University Divinity School

Rev. Charles B. Hardwick, Ph.D.
Director of Theology, Formation, and Evangelism
Presbyterian Church (USA)
Louisville, Kentucky, USA
8/29/15

As we sit in worship, it is tempting to imagine that what is going on is a purely human activity, resembling theater. The minister is the actor, preaching and praying and celebrating the sacraments, and the worshipers are the audience, who watch (ideally with great interest) the real action on the chancel.

Soren Kierkegaard's parable "The Prompter," sees worship differently, however. In this brief essay, the nineteenth century Danish philosopher asks, "What goes on between the speaker and the hearer in a genuine edifying discourse?"¹ He warns us that although in worship it may seem as if the preacher is simply the actor and the congregation only the audience, something more nuanced is also going on. From Kierkegaard's perspective, the preacher is better appreciated as the prompter—the one "who sits and prompts by whispers." The worshipers are the actors, and the preacher/prompter gives them directions to know what to do before God, who in this construct is the "critical theatergoer." As Kierkegaard summarizes it, "The speaker is...the prompter, and the listener stands openly before God. The listener...is the actor, who in all truth acts before God."²

In yet another sense, it is also true that God is the actor in worship and both the preacher and the worshipers are the audience. After all, it is the triune God who speaks, listens, forgives, answers, and appears in the sacraments. In worship humanity experiences the supreme divine action of grace: unmerited favor in which God releases burdens from us, and takes them on himself.

¹ Soren Kierkegaard, "The Prompter," in *Parables of Kierkegaard*, ed. Thomas C. Oden (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 89

² *Ibid.*, 89-90.

All three of these perspectives point us to the divine and human activity in worship. In this paper, I will first explore a framework to understand the interrelationships between the divine and human activity, and then specifically seek to tease out God's role and the human roles of preaching and the celebration of the sacraments. Along the way I will draw primarily upon scholars such as Karl Barth, James F. White, and Hughes Oliphant Old.

Divine and Human Activity in Worship: A Holistic Structure

Historically, a common understanding of divine and human activity in worship can be extended from what Bernard Swain first termed the "sovereign style" of preaching ("perhaps the most basic type of pastoral leadership that developed in the history of the Church").³ Raymond Holmes' understanding of the preaching event is typical of this perspective:

The message comes from God, . . . and it is given to a [preacher] selected to be God's messenger. That [preacher] . . . must transmit the message faithfully without changing its fundamental content. It is that given message . . . that must be heard by the listeners. This fact implies an attitude of trust on the part of the listener. Just as the messenger must trust the One who . . . gave . . . the message, so the listener must trust the messenger whom God has chosen.⁴

In this model, while God is active directly with the preacher, the worshiper participates in that divine activity only through the preacher as intermediary. A logical extension of this approach is that the Spirit inspires the preacher to offer the rest of the elements of the worship service, but at no point does the Spirit actually

³ John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 31, drawing on Bernard Swain, *Liberating Leadership: Practical Styles for Pastoral Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 40.

⁴ C. Raymond Holmes, *It's a Two-Way Street* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1978), 17.

touch the worshiper directly. (This approach best approximates the first way of thinking about worship as theater, with the preacher as actor and the worshipers as audience.)

A better approach is what I call the “servant” paradigm. Here, the preacher and listeners are on equal ground, in nonhierarchical cooperative service to the Word as they participate in their respective roles in worship. Tweaking slightly the second way of thinking about worship as theater, here both the preacher and worshipers are the actors and God is the audience. At the same time, in the servant paradigm, God is the primary actor in worship—the one who indeed speaks, listens, forgives, answers, and appears, to both pastor and worshipers (just as in the third way of thinking about worship as theater).

But if God is the primary actor, then why is it important what preachers or listeners do? What motivation can there be if the Holy Spirit can characteristically be counted on to move graciously among those leading and gathered for worship?

As theologian Karl Barth states so succinctly in the *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, the only possible response to the grace the Triune God shows in worship and elsewhere is gratitude. “Grace and gratitude belong together like heaven and earth. Grace evokes gratitude like the voice an echo. Gratitude follows grace like thunder lightning. . . . If the essence of God as the God of humans is grace, then the essence of humans as God’s people, that which is proper to and demanded of them in covenant with God, is simply thanks.”⁵

⁵ Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*, vol. 4, pt. 1, *Die Lehre von der Versöhnung* (Zollikon-Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1953), 43-44.

Out of gratitude, then, worship celebrants and worshipers alike are motivated to do their best in worship. But what is their best? What is their role in preaching and in the celebration of the sacraments? More importantly, how is Christ present in these aspects of worship? It is to these aspects that we turn our attention next.

Divine and Human Action in Preaching

The preaching event includes both proclamation (how God and the human preacher are active in the crafting and delivery of sermons) and reception (how God and the human hearers are active as worshipers listen to the sermon). First, how God is at work in both proclamation and reception. Barth defines preaching in *Homiletics* as “the Word of God which he himself speaks, claiming for the purpose the interpretation of a biblical text in free human speech that is relevant to contemporaries.”⁶ A subset of proclamation, preaching happens during worship services when God speaks through a sermon on a biblical text. God is the primary Agent who in an act of free grace elects to speak through human means.

In reception, God’s divine activity of *illumination* of the Word in the listener enables the worshiper’s human work of *hearing*. According to Barth in the *Church Dogmatics* I/2, illumination [*Erhellung*] is that act of the Holy Spirit by which we become “believers and witnesses.”⁷ It is that divine activity which moves us to

⁶ Barth, *Homiletik: Wesen und Vorbereitung der Predigt*, 3d. ed. (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1986), 30. ET: Karl Barth, *Homiletics*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Donald E. Daniels (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991).

⁷ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1, pt. 2, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), 699.

embrace God's Word as our own as well as to share it with others. Calvin agrees, maintaining that without illumination, no human "words have [the] power to imbue men's minds with divine matters, unless the Lord through his Spirit gives understanding."⁸ In the Holy Spirit's illuminating work, listeners are aroused to hear God's Word in a faith-building way that would be impossible without divine activity.

Simply put, the preacher's role is that of a fellow servant (alongside the listener) who gratefully responds to God's gracious action in the preaching event by striving to prepare and deliver sermons which faithfully advocate for the Gospel. Theologically speaking, faithful sermons (1) speak about the triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; (2) speak about this triune God's acts of grace toward humanity, and (3) witness faithfully to the written Word (which in turn witnesses to Christ).⁹ In terms of a sermon's rhetoric, the preacher's role is to wrestle fully with each aspect of preaching such that their sermons will be the most effective advocates possible for the theological claim discovered in their exegesis for their particular context. Using a neo-classical approach to rhetoric (drawn from Cicero's writings) means that the faithful approach includes attention to invention (content),

⁸ John T. McNeill, ed., *The Library of Christian Classics*, vol. 20, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, by John Calvin, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 278-79 (2.2.20).

⁹ Clearly preachers could imagine a far more extensive list of theological goals for their sermons than this one. My goal in choosing these guidelines, however, is that they are general enough to apply to almost any sermon and yet still specific enough to be helpful.

arrangement (order of ideas), style (word choice), memory (preparation for delivery), and delivery (voice control and gesture).¹⁰

Because God is characteristically involved in preaching's reception among the listeners, they characteristically hear God's Word. This means trust in and submission to this Word are vital aspects of a listener's response to proclamation. Barth reminds us that "acceptance of God's Word by humans consists in the confession of and the bending to the purposes of God declared in God's Word in affirmation."¹¹ Beyond obedience, however, the listener also importantly discerns how the preacher can honor God more fully through her preaching. This means that listeners best seek to deepen their faith and knowledge of the Scriptures, so that the theological discernment offered to preachers is informed by rich devotion to Jesus Christ and a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. Specifically, theological discernment means that listeners look for sermons which reflect the same theological standards discussed above. Similarly, the listeners best consider how the preacher's rhetorical choices impacted their own ability to adhere to the claim presented in the sermon (realizing that their own preferences might not square with others').

In serving the preaching task together, the preacher and worshipers share the task of giving and receiving feedback. Preachers need to balance between obedience to the listeners' feedback (knowing that God speaks through their

¹⁰ George A. Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric and its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times*, 2d ed. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 102.

¹¹ Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*, vol. 1, pt. 1, *Die Lehre Vom Worte Gottes* (Zollikon-Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1952), 214-15.

listeners) and discernment (knowing that fidelity to God is much more important than popularity among listeners) as they receive input. Worshipers, on the other hand, best give feedback from a space of gratitude for the preacher's work, speaking the truth in love, with specificity and justification for their comments.

Divine and Human Action in Baptism

As James F. White forcefully puts it, “any satisfactory understanding of the sacraments must start with the belief that *God acts in the sacraments*...Sacraments, as Calvin saw so clearly, are God's idea, designed by God to lead us to God.”¹² In baptism, White identifies five New Testament metaphors, each of which describes God's divine action on our behalf. The first is that in baptism, the Holy Spirit unites us with Christ Jesus (Romans 6:3-5; Colossians 2:12). (As worship scholar Hughes Old notes, this union is primarily in Christ's death and resurrection.)¹³ Secondly, and very closely related, in baptism the Spirit incorporates us into the church, Christ's Body (1 Corinthians 12:13, Gal 3:27-28). Third, by grace in baptism God gives us new birth—we are new creations in Christ Jesus, having put our past behind us (Titus 3:5). Fourth, out of love God forgives our sins in baptism, represented by the cleansing action of water (Acts 22:16, 1 Corinthians 6:11). Finally, in baptism we receive the Holy Spirit, who comes to us (Acts 2:38).¹⁴ None of these images is complete unto itself; the full range of images helps us gain a rich understanding of what God is doing in this sacrament of Christian initiation.

¹² James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, 3d ed., Revised and Expanded (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 196. Emphasis present in original text.

¹³ Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship: Reformed According to Scripture*, Revised and Expanded Edition (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2002), 10.

¹⁴ James F. White, 218-220.

More than anything else, perhaps, however, God acts in baptism toward us in grace, as captured most beautifully in this portion of the French baptismal liturgy,

For you, little one, the Spirit of God moved over the waters at creation,
and the Lord God made covenants with his people.
It was for you that the Word of God became flesh and lived among us, full
of grace and truth.
For you, [name], Jesus Christ suffered death crying out at the end, "It is
finished!"
For you Christ triumphed over death, rose in newness of life, and
ascended to rule over all.
All of this was done for you, little one, though you do not know any of this
yet. But we will continue to tell you this good news
until it becomes your own.
And so the promise of the gospel is fulfilled:
"We love because God first loved us."¹⁵

Out of gratitude for all God is doing in baptism, preachers seek to celebrate this sacrament reverently and joyfully. As White states, "no detail is insignificant if it heightens the sign value of what we do in the sacraments. . . . This places a heavy responsibility on those leading worship to be fully sensitive to all they communicate by voice and body."¹⁶ Moreover, pastors have the responsibility of faithful teaching of what God is doing, both to the baptizand and/or parents, and to the congregation. Because of baptism's communal nature (and similar to the prior discussion about preaching), these latter parties also play important roles. The baptizand and parents have the responsibility to examine themselves and repent, considering carefully the reasons for seeking out the sacrament. The congregation, meanwhile, has the joyful task of welcoming those sealed in the faith and making God's self-giving love visible in the years, decades, and generations to come.

¹⁵ Adapted from Église Réformée de France, *Liturgie* (Paris: Editions Berger-Levrault, 1955), p. 202.

¹⁶ James F. White, 194.

Divine and Human Action in the Eucharist

In 1982, the World Council of Churches published *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, a consensus statement on the sacraments. Among its affirmations was the core Christian belief that the Lord's Supper is an "arena for the action of the Spirit."¹⁷ John Calvin believed this was so, arguing that in the sacrament the Spirit graciously uses outward signs to counter our sin and inability to see God in other ways. In this sacrament, the Holy Spirit raises our souls up into heaven, so that we can feed on Christ. "For what sharper goal could there be to arouse mutual love among us than when Christ, giving himself to us, not only invites us by his own example to pledge and give ourselves to one another, but inasmuch as he makes himself common to all, also makes all of us one in himself."¹⁸ At table, Jesus Christ offers his body and blood to us, and as at Emmaus, opens our eyes so that we can see him fully. He receives our sacrifice of praise. He unites us to himself in his sacrificial death (1 Corinthians 10:16). These things are only possible, of course, if Christ is present in a spiritual, yet very real and true, sense. The divine activity in holy communion is substantial, primary, and, of course, utterly grace-filled.

What shall the celebrant do in response to this grace? Out of gratitude for how God will use her, the pastor seeks to embody the grace as fully as possible. As James White explains, this means that she communicates as clearly as she can, by what she says and by how she gestures.

¹⁷ World Council of Churches Faith and Order Paper 111, 1982, quoted in Susan J. White, *Foundations of Christian Worship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 105.

¹⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes IV*, xvii, 38, *Library of Christian Classics 21* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), 1415-16, quoted in Susan J. White, 256.

At the Lord's Table, we understand how completely God knows and loves people as full human beings. The glory and majesty of God's being is accommodated to our humble human capacity. Thus what we do with our hands, bodies, and voices in leading the eucharist is a vital ministry that demands sensitivity to how humans relate and communicate. There is a body language as well as a vocal one, and we must learn to speak both with eloquence.¹⁹

With respect to the most faithful way for worshipers to respond to God's gracious acts at the Lord's table, the *Sursum Corda* ("Lift up your hearts!" "We lift them to the Lord." "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God." "It is right to give our thanks and praise.") suggests an attitude of praise and worship oriented heavenward towards the God who comes to us at the table. When we taste Christ's presence by the power of the Holy Spirit, we become overwhelmed with gratitude and we give the triune God our thanks and praise. As we are united with Jesus at the table, "we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26). To Calvin, whether we preside over the table or worship at it, joining with Christ there "has profound ethical and moral implications. . . . The Lord's Supper [is] both an invitation to the rich banquet of the grace of God and a call to the righteousness and justice of Christ's kingdom."²⁰

Just as God's divine activity is not limited by the table, our human response is not limited to our encounter with Christ there. Our encounter shapes our lives, changing us more and more into Jesus' likeness. In the same way, the Lord who claims us in baptism does not choose to restrict divine activity to the moment when the water touches us. The Spirit catapults us forward from that moment, and we join in, participating in what our baptisms mean each day as we increasingly

¹⁹ James F. White, 261.

²⁰ Old, 133.

understand the prior and predominant love that came to us at this sacrament of initiation. Part of this understanding, of course, happens repeatedly when God speaks to us and illumines our hearing during the preaching event, where Jesus characteristically and uniquely, but not solely, appears. In the sacraments and in the preaching event, the God who loves us in Jesus Christ and who is made known by the Holy Spirit reaches out to us graciously—and in quiet yet world-changing gratitude, we respond. Thanks be to God!

Bibliography

- “Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry.” World Council of Churches Faith and Order Paper 111. Geneva, Switzerland, 1982.
- Barth, Karl. *The Doctrine of the Word of God*. Translated by G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight. vol. 1, pt. 2. Church Dogmatics, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956.
- _____. *Die Lehre Vom Worte Gottes*. vol. 1, pt. 1. Die Kirchliche Dogmatik. Zollikon-Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1952.
- _____. *Die Lehre Von Der Versöhnung*. vol. 4, pt. 1. Die Kirchliche Dogmatik. Zollikon-Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1953.
- _____. *Homiletics*. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Donald E. Daniels. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991.
- _____. *Homiletik: Wesen Und Vorbereitung Der Predigt*. 3d. ed. Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1986.
- Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles. vol. 20 and 21. The Library of Christian Classics, ed. John T. McNeill. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960.
- Église Réformée de France. *Liturgie*. Paris: Editions Berger-Levrault, 1955.
- Holmes, C. Raymond. *It's a Two-Way Street*. Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1978.
- Kennedy, George A. *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times*. 2d ed. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1999.
- Kierkegaard, Soren. “The Prompter.” in *Parables of Kierkegaard*, ed. Thomas C. Oden, 89-90. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978.
- McClure, John S. *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995.
- Old, Hughes Oliphant. *Worship: Reformed According to Scripture*. Revised and expanded ed. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2002.
- Swain, Bernard. *Liberating Leadership: Practical Styles for Pastoral Ministry*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986.

White, James F. *Introduction to Christian Worship*. 3d ed. Revised and Expanded. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000.

White, Susan J. *Foundations of Christian Worship*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.