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RECOVERING A CLASSICALLY ORAL HOMILETIC

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty Graduate School

of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for

the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Dave T. McClellan

May 2009

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2009

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ABSTRACT

RECOVERING A CLASSICALLY ORAL HOMILETIC

By

Dave T. McClellan

May 2009

Dissertation supervised by Dr. Calvin L. Troup

Historically, the preaching of the word of God has been a synthesis of both oral and written orientations with text providing both the source and the preservation of the sermon, and orality fueling its expression. Expression preceded documentation. Scripture displays this dual nature in its revelation, expression and transmission. But with the technologizing of the word in typographic literacy, sermons became increasingly conditioned by the literate sensorium and lost many of their oral psychodynamics. Character, wisdom, dialogue, memory, responsiveness, and flexibility were exchanged for private preparation, literate structuring, and literary delivery. Sermons became disembodied, existing more reliably in externalized text.

Walter Ong provides the framework for the reappraisal of communicative history by strategically forgetting the pervasive influence of technology. Recovering the older resources of orality, Ong restores a sense of balance to the oral/literate continuum by returning to the primarily oral orientations of the Greco-Roman world of classic rhetoric, and rehabilitates rhetoric with theological and homiletic implications.

Quintilian's infinitely flexible oratory represents the richness of the communicative environment during the infancy of the church. His emphasis on depth of understanding as a prerequisite for public speaking grounds the speaker in resources beyond the pragmatics of the specific situation or topic, and can be profitably applied to contemporary homiletic praxis. Quintilian's understanding of oral composition, memory, roadmapping, and *kairos* is applicable to the kind of preparation and delivery required by an intentional move toward an orally-conditioned homiletic.

DEDICATION

To Karen. The most “present” person I know.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Without the patient support of my wife and family, the mentoring of Dr. Calvin Troup at Duquesne University, the encouragement of the Evangelical Homiletic Society, and the openness of the congregation of The Chapel at Tinkers Creek, this project would surely have stalled and died. I'm grateful to all of them, and my 1989 Jeep Wrangler for hundreds of safe trips to Pittsburgh and back in every kind of weather.

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Preface

Openings

Presuppositions

Written from the vantage point of rhetorical scholarship, this dissertation seeks to connect rhetoric with the discipline of homiletics. Starting from within the discipline of communication scholarship, we will necessarily intrude not just upon homiletics, but upon the wider field of theology and under that, ecclesiology. The older term “sacred rhetoric” (used commonly by nineteenth century scholars), demonstrates the once congenial relationship of rhetoric and preaching (Hirst 69). Any study of text and authority (especially the relationship of sacred text and sacred utterance and their blend in the crafting of a sermon) will call out theological presuppositions, presuppositions that might well be stated outright. Doing so will hopefully avoid the pitfall of feigned objectivity and the tedium of defending foundational commitments from merely imagined opponents.

I write as a theist and an orthodox Christian. This necessitates belief in the self-revelatory God who is neither silent nor uninvolved in the created order. Being revelatory by nature, God first spoke, not wrote, the universe into creation. Revelation continued through prophets and apostles, and ultimately through the Word, his Son Jesus Christ, by whom divinely propositional words were directly uttered in time and space,

“man shall not live on bread alone but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.” (Deut. 8:3, Matt. 4:4 New American Standard Bible).

I believe, then, in the existence of eternal and universal truths, or “Truth.” Platonic scholars have called this “transcendent” truth (Bizzell 81). Similar to Plato, I believe that humans do not have the right or ability to create their own truths; that we are thrown into a world not of our own making, and out of our control. If we miss this transcendent Truth, it goes on without us because it is bigger than we are and does not fret about our acceptance or rejection.

Nevertheless, like Aristotle, I believe our apprehension of Truth is flawed and, to varying degrees, imprecise. So while absolute Truth exists, we cannot escape contingency (Rhetoric 1,2,16), uncertainty, and the world of probability with its theological counterpart: faith. Furthermore, this contingency is by divine design and serves as an impetus toward faith. If ever we were able to remove all ambiguity so that Truth was patently obvious, volition would no longer play its central role in human motivation and divine consequence. God allows enough ambiguity in the world for humankind to marginalize him if they so desire. In fact, contingency is designed to reveal human core volition, and preaching is designed to affect volitional change.

To preserve his revelatory Truth, God employed language: language that was often spoken before it was written. But because he declined to re-reveal himself orally and perpetually to every generation, he also utilized the technology of literacy to preserve revelation so that the Ten Commandments, for instance, only had to be revealed once. Literary preservation would be pointless unless the process of transcription and reproduction could reliably pass down an authoritative sacred text.

Preaching today starts in this sacred text and is bound to it. The preacher is not authorized to conflate his own words with the word of God or to equate a sermon with the preserved sermon of Jeremiah or Peter. In that sense, original revelation is finished. Even though a contemporary preacher can take on a “prophetic” role or speak with “prophetic” calling, it is only to the extent that he accurately performs or unleashes the preserved-in-text word of God that he can claim to speak God’s words. Every sermon will be an admittedly confusing blend of the human and divine, with the preacher bearing the awesome and humbling responsibility of carrying the word of God.¹ “The New Testament gospel or Good News about the Word is itself likewise tied to the spoken word of man. For it is the business of all those who know this truth to make it known to all other men by use of the word in preaching, where the human word exists in a mysterious connection with the divine” (Ong PW 13). The preacher is uniquely called to honor both text and tongue, wearing the hats of both scribe and orator. If anyone should have a balanced appraisal of their relative value, it is the preacher who depends upon text for authority and tongue for expression.

Water/Ice/Water

Consider preaching via the metaphor of ice and water. God’s word as originally spoken was like living water to the generation who first heard and acted upon it. But water, while being perfect for consumption, is difficult to transport because of its

¹ The Second Helvetic Confession captures both the finished sense of the canon of Scripture (“the most complete exposition of all that pertains to a saving faith, and also to the framing of a life acceptable to God; and in this respect it is expressly commanded by God that nothing be either added to or taken from the same”) and the ongoing role of the Word of God enacted in the sermon (“Wherefore when this Word of God is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is proclaimed.”). <http://www.ccel.org/creeds/helvetic.htm>.

propensity toward leaking or evaporation. To transport water over long distances and time frames, it is expedient to freeze it in literacy.

Sacred text is like frozen revelation—well preserved, but silent and difficult to consume. Preachers, then, receive this frozen mass and have the responsibility to warm it again and serve it anew as a timeless word re-entering time. It is not our own word, but we use our own words in the melting. This metaphor can extend to the uniquely modern phenomenon of possessing or owning a duplicate of the ice block (a Bible) as individual property. While in ancient and medieval times the blocks of sacred ice were rare and “owned” by a parish or corporate body of the church, the printing press allowed virtually unlimited reproduction of the blocks of frozen text so that every individual could come to feel impoverished without a personal copy (Webb 201). Most moderns are unaware of the fact that the people of God during the vast majority of history lived their entire lives of faith without ever owning a Bible and without being able to read one for themselves. Indeed, most feel entitled to having their own block even if they lack the skill or motivation to melt it for themselves or even hear it melted by another. Perhaps possession rather than expression is the appropriately modern norm.

For this reason, Stephen Webb argues that even in modernity the best place to hear the word of God is in church (208), and that all the frozen blocks of sacred text resident in homes and libraries cannot replace the shared hearing of the word of God, the way in which the melted water of God comes simultaneously and corporately to God’s people by the carefully heated sermon and the suitably warmed preacher.

This project will proceed in the following trajectory: Chapter 1 will survey the history of preaching to assess, in various periods of history, the relative homiletic

orientation on the text/tongue continuum. It will also note a persistent erosion of classical rhetorical grounding as homiletics moves toward and through modernity. Finally, it will introduce the concept of the oral sensorium as articulated by Jesuit communication scholar Walter Ong.

Chapter 2 will more fully orient the reader toward Ong's depiction of both the oral and literate worlds. It will seek to strip away assumptions inculcated by literacy and recall some underutilized strengths of an oral orientation and the concomitant losses of an unreflective literacy made common by the massive and overwhelming influence of the printing press.

Chapter 3 will examine the role of literacy in the ancient world and the role of orality behind the written word. Surveying Moses, Jeremiah, Jesus, and Paul, it will seek to decipher how Scripture itself weighs in on the relative value of both oral and literate orientations, and how biblical writers and speakers used both orientations in complementary synthesis.

Chapter 4 will make the bridge from scripture to the classical world of Greco-Roman rhetoric. It was classic rhetorical theory that was undergirding the communicative context of the post-exilic Jewish and early Christian experience. With assistance from Augustine, chapter 4 recovers homiletic gold for the sampling from the mines of Aristotelian ethos and Ciceronian ideals of the emotionally engaged orator.

Chapter 5 will appropriate the Roman rhetor Quintilian in a detailed examination of the currency rhetoric can yield to contemporary homiletics. Quintilian's grasp of infinitely flexible oratory, balanced in both oral and literate facility, can be a model for homileticians of any period. Not content to prepare merely the speech, Quintilian is just

as concerned about preparing the speaker for a vast array of possible communicative scenarios demanding constant and unrelenting verbal agility.

Chapter 6 will summarize the practical ramifications of classical and orally-sensitive rhetoric as a ballast to an otherwise unchecked literary homiletic. Preachers who learn to be more anciently oral in their preparation and delivery will enjoy the fruits of a more balanced, passionate, confident, and organic style, even in this modern and post-modern age. Certain core competencies, gleaned from the age when speech was king, can be profitably revived today.

Chapter 1

Introduction and Historical Overview

1.1 Historical Survey of Preaching

Given the long history of the intersection of God's word and its human expression, it is necessary to survey, at least briefly, the history of major homiletic trends. Failure to understand historical context opens us to the error of announcing in ignorance a novelty well-known to our seasoned ecclesiological ancestors, and cuts us off from their insights, many of which transcend a particular moment. Wisdom requires us to know from whence we have come and to listen to those who have labored in the same fields before us.

From Prophets to Christ

From the Christian perspective, preaching a word from God started in the early prophetic period in Israel's history. Before Samuel, leadership was situated mostly in the cultic and civic areas. Neither Abraham, Isaac, nor Jacob were great orators, and even Moses' contribution was more legal and literate than oratorical, relying upon Aaron to do the speaking. "Please Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in time past, nor since You have spoken to Your servant, for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue" (Exod. 4:10). Though Moses delivers significant oratorical addresses toward the end of

his life (Deut. 32-33, for instance), summaries of his life highlight his writing of the law and his miraculous deeds.²

But with the rise of the prophetic role, the word of God was embodied and proclaimed in the world of God. Though it was not uncommon for a prophet's words to be recorded by a scribe for preservation (as we will see from Jeremiah 36 in Chapter 3), the word of God erupted from the tongue to the ear and was processed orally by the original audience. Even though the written word of God was central to revivals under pre-exilic Josiah and post-exilic Ezra, literacy was still far removed from the average Hebrew who depended, as did their New Testament heirs of their covenant, on an oral/aural reception.³ Far from passing out brochures or tidy outlines, Ezekiel (Ezek. 12) is told to dramatically enact the fall of Jerusalem right before the people and then declare to them the meaning of his strange behavior. So the prophetic sensorium, though not unacquainted with literacy, tilted toward expression of the word of God in primary orality.

Preaching in the Early Church

How did we end up with sermons as a prime feature of Christian worship? Alistair Stewart-Sykes has researched an extensive study of that specific process acknowledging the primary Jewish heritage of that first generation of Christians. Sermons, he says, started with the exercise of the prophetic gift in the household church,

² “Since that time no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face, for all the signs and wonders which the LORD sent him to perform in the land of Egypt against Pharaoh, all his servants, and all his land, and for all the mighty power and for all the great terror which Moses performed in the sight of all Israel” (Deut. 34:10-12). See also Deut. 31:19-24.

³ Chapter 3 will address the scope of literacy in the ancient world.

which was then discussed by those who heard it. There was initially no text behind the preaching. But perhaps because of Gnostic or Montanist abuses of the prophetic gift, the emphasis in the household churches shifted from a “textless” word to one textualized and governed by the growing availability of New Testament manuscripts.

This phenomenon has been called ‘scholasticization,’ a term intended to describe the process by which the loose organization of the communication of the word of God in the earliest households through prophecy, and through reactions to prophecies which are themselves prophetic, is replaced by systematic communication through the reading and interpretation of Scripture in part under the influence of preaching in the synagogue and in part as a result of the models available for delivery and discussion within the schools as the churches formed themselves along these essentially scholastic lines (271).

Stewart-Sykes’ point is that the literary governance of the sermon developed quite early in the life of the young church. But this was not to the exclusion of the orally-driven rhetoric of the age.

When the church began its spread across the Roman world, the gospel intersected with the classical world of Greek and Roman rhetoric for the first time. “By Jesus’ time, classical rhetoric formed the foundation of formal education in the Hellenistic and Roman world” (Wilson 19). The Roman tradition, under Cicero and Quintilian, had by that time been carrying on explicit rhetorical theory for over 400 years. St. Paul, like Augustine after him (Bizzell 452), both critiqued and employed rhetoric. Though both were more than suspicious of the manipulative power of mere sophistry, both were schooled in Roman rhetoric (Dargan 25) and displayed the sort of grounded spontaneity that the world of primary orality both cherished and fostered. Dargan notes this dependence on rhetoric:

Along with all that has been mentioned, we must remember that in the traditional and accepted educational system, rhetorical studies occupied the

chief place. If educated at all, a man was educated in rhetoric. As lawyer, civilist, teacher, or man of letters, one must needs have had training in oratory. So when the schools were open to Christians, without persecution or social disfavor, there was opportunity for them to receive the customary oratorical training from the best teachers. And not a few who had been trained for other service entered the ministry. The six most notable preachers of the century [Basil, the two Gregories, Chrysostom, Ambrose, and Augustine] had all received the best rhetorical culture of the schools; and there were hosts of others. (Dargan History 65).

Orality and literacy formed a sort of co-dependency in early church homiletics, with literacy providing, in sacred text, both the source of the sermon, and, when appropriate, its preservation after delivery. Between those two stages, orality conditioned the moment of expression, the embodied sermon itself, and built a bridge between the wisdom of text and the *kairos* of the audience room.

Sermons in the world of Augustine and Gregory the Great, though sourced and penetrated by sacred text, still exhibit the signs of extemporaneous delivery characteristic of orality. Of Augustine's style, Edwards summarizes:

Most of his sermons were *extempore*, growing out of no more immediate preparation than prayer or a short meditation on the biblical passages that had just been read. That was possible because his remote preparation included not only a mastery of rhetoric, but memorization of much of the Bible, theological reflection that is almost unparalleled in the history of the church, and a deep life of prayer as well. (111).

Again, "Augustine preached these sermons extemporaneously, exercising discipline and flexibility, adhering to the text yet remaining attuned to the capacities of his congregation" (Pasquarello 26).

Yet it was not ultimately rhetoric that Augustine recommends in *De Doctrina*, the closest thing we have to an ancient homiletic text. Though not simplistically anti-rhetorical, Augustine knows from personal experience the temptations of eloquence toward manipulation or mere entertainment. Pasquarello observes, "Paradoxically

preaching [for Augustine] proceeds by means of a ‘studied neglect’ in its use of the rhetorical arts, since wisdom and eloquence are cultivated by careful attention to the language and style of Scripture, which is sacramental, the inspired word of God” (25).

Rhetorical eloquence for Augustine is more the by-product than the goal.

I think there is hardly a single eloquent man who can both speak well and think of the rules of eloquence while he is speaking. And we should beware lest what should be said escape us while we are thinking of the artistry of the discourse. Moreover, in the speeches and sayings of the eloquent, the precepts of eloquence are found to have been fulfilled, although the speakers did not think of them in order to be eloquent or while they were being eloquent, and they were eloquent whether they had learned the rules, or never come in contact with them (4,3,5).

Yet despite Augustine’s caution regarding artificial or contrived rhetorical devices, he clearly demonstrates appreciation for what we might call natural eloquence. This more organic form clearly displays sensitivities consistent with orality, and Book Four of *De Doctrina* includes references to memory, natural (vs. contrived) style, reading and adapting to an audience, and spontaneous composition. Gregory also demonstrates an ease with letting the sermon evolve as it progresses, using the metaphor of a river which occasionally leaves its banks to pursue the opportunity of a low lying meadow (Pasquarello 44). Regardless of how overtly rhetorical these church fathers might have been on a given occasion, they seem to be advocates of an embodied, rather than disembodied, sermon. They seem comfortable in the orality of their day. Similarly, Chrysostom did not write out his sermons which for him “were transactions with a live congregation, not words on paper” (Edwards 81).

But as the world of antiquity waned, the influence of the rhetorically-trained church fathers gave way to a grammatical orientation pioneered by Origen who, due to his father’s martyrdom when he was only 17, was never trained as an orator, but as a

grammarian concerned first with text. “The structure of Origen’s homilies owed nothing to rhetorical theories or disposition; he confined himself to the grammarian’s task of explicating a text” (Edwards 39). His step-by-step plodding through a text set the pattern for medieval homiletics which continued for the next 800 years, and which endures well into modernity. Indeed, because the grammarian’s task more closely approximates the preacher’s (explication of a text), it is not hard to understand why homiletics continues to be influenced more by grammatical than rhetorical orientations.

Hunter concedes Origen’s lack of rhetorical training or flourish. But by that he means formal rhetorical structures. Origen’s actual delivery, on the oral/literary continuum was still a product of his primarily oral age. “Origen’s homilies were preached spontaneously, not prepared in writing” (45). He goes on to describe two incidents in which Origen had to adapt to exigencies in the very room where he was preaching and worked the anomalies into his progressing sermon. Even this great and noteworthy grammarian still delivered in orality.

Preaching in the Medieval World

Scholars of the medieval world have recently begun to turn from the extant sermon manuscript as the primary source of information about preaching in the Middle Ages. “Students of medieval sermons are now convinced that the medieval sermon must be approached as a ‘word’ (*parole*) something spoken and heard. This approach understands preaching as a medium of communication between preachers and hearers, and as social phenomenon in itself” (Thompson 15). In this sense, the relic of the sermon

manuscript fails to provide much information about the live sermon.⁴ While this observation certainly holds for medieval sermons, it would logically apply to sermons from earlier and later periods. But it is interesting to note that the textual side of the sermon did not develop until after its performance. That would suggest the predominance of the oral sensorium in medieval sermon preparation and delivery. Instead of notes fueling the sermon, it was the sermon fueling the notes.

Medieval scholar Phyllis Roberts notes this sort of change occurring toward the end of the Middle Ages. “Medieval preaching by the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries shifted its emphasis from preaching that was largely monastic and clerical to the needs of popular audiences” (44). The tone went from a plodding sort of grammatical survey to formal/rhetorical and reflected both a professionalization of the clergy and the scholasticism of the schools to produce a vast number of preaching manuals, many of them depending heavily on classic rhetoric, called *artes praedicandi* (45). In contrast to the patristic age where explication of text was the feature, medieval sermons developed the topical or thematic sermon (Kreitzer 37).

Getting the lay audience to participate in the sermon was the common and widespread result. Speaking of the style of the court preachers in Papal Avignon, Beattie summarizes, “The sermon could employ certain oral techniques, all of which were common to medieval preachers, to enhance their listener’s sense of participation in the

⁴ To illustrate this point, Thompson traces the progression of the sermon from Latin textual sources (primarily the Vulgate), to a vernacular sermon, back to Latin shorthand during the sermon event (*reportatio*), and finally to a publishable literary Latin (17). With all those steps, deciphering the historical context for the sermon is exceedingly tenuous. Thompson actually makes the move toward extra-textual sources being more helpful in sermonic research than the sermon manuscript (remarks made in passing from witnesses, letters from abbots to curates, theological treatises, even art and architecture) (27).

act of preaching” (85). Kienzle even describes how varied this participation could practically be, including “visual aids, local art, gestures, translators, emotive language, multimedia effects, miracles and even actual theatre” (123).

In the monastic world, St. Benedict’s rule prescribed the love of God and contemplation of Scripture as prior to any proclamation or teaching. But though the mendicant preaching orders of the Franciscans and Dominicans kept an oral sense to theology, preaching within the medieval parish became highly catechetical and festal (Webb 114-115). The urgency was to instruct legions of new converts and orient them to the church calendar of feasts. Individual priests were not always homiletically trained, and the emphasis was sometimes more on the visual progression of the liturgy climaxing in the presentation of the Host, rather than on the oral proclamation of the word of God. Yet despite formalizing textual and literary forces at work toward the end of the Middle Ages, evidence still shows a high degree of oral underpinnings in the medieval sermon.

From Reformation to Modernity

Reformers relied on the Spirit’s work in conviction and persuasion more than rhetorical flourish. Their *Sola Scriptura* orientation moved the pulpit from the edge to the center of the church building, and the sermon to the center of the liturgy. “The sermon, despite often being ignored in earlier scholarship, is perhaps the most significant genre of literature stemming from the Lutheran Reformation” (Kreitzer 35). Doctrinal purity became foremost as sermons took on a polemic tone (59). Though still showing signs of oral performance of Scripture, Reformation preaching moved more toward textual orientation with its accompanying strengths of precision, accuracy, and with Gutenberg’s help, “transmit-ability”. It is with the Reformation’s utilization of the

printing press, that so many reforming sermons were distributed so efficiently and sermons became commonplace as works of published literature (59).

In general we may remark that while the reformers laid more stress on the content and aim of preaching than on its form and method they did not wholly neglect these either in their example or their teaching. They seemed to take it for granted that in requiring skill and training for a proper study and proclamation of the Word of God they were demanding that the preacher should both know and know how to use the accepted and tested principles of rhetoric as these were applicable to the preparation and delivery of sermons” (Dargan 132).

Though expository in form, Calvin preached without notes, and his sermons have come down to us only by means of very adept reporting (Dargan History 381). In fact, preachers of the Reformation evidence a scholarly instinct for the written word that stops short of an entirely textual or literary approach to preparation and delivery. Consider Ford’s summary.

But such preparatory study did not prevent a degree of spontaneity and flexibility in delivery. To the contrary, both Zwingli and Calvin preached extemporaneously with the original Greek and Hebrew texts of the Bible lying open on the pulpit or in hand. Calvin, having lectured on the Bible throughout the week and publishing a number of commentaries, possessed a familiarity with the Scripture that allowed him to deliver his sermons from memory. Zwingli did not preach from a manuscript or notes because he did not want to rely on human wisdom. Perkins addressed the custom of delivering sermons by heart, advising young preachers to avoid the hazards involved in memorizing the entire sermon, and suggested helpful mnemonic techniques that would allow for a more natural delivery (77).

But besides delivering sermons from a highly oral orientation, Calvin sensed intuitively the incompatibility between a live sermon and published sermon. “Calvin was reticent to have his sermons published because he felt they were rooted in a particular time and place and could not be conveyed to a general audience” (79). Here is a sermon so sensitive to the moment that its travel to another setting is problematic.

Though Luther was known more for a grammatical approach to preaching, his colleague Melancthon wrote no less than three treatises of rhetoric and was representative of the kind of neo-classical sympathies of the day (Edwards 299). In 1535, well into the Reformation, Erasmus published his own homiletic text, *Ecclesiasticus*, with unapologetic reliance upon Cicero and Quintilian. “Erasmus not only advocates rhetorical training for the preacher, but also models its benefits in a virtuoso manner and thus reveals that for him, rhetoric is an entire epistemology, greatly superior to dialectic” (Edwards 276).

As we consider the homiletic sensorium during the period of the Reformation, we must admit that while the movement did advance toward literacy and especially the technology of publishing, that progress did not overwhelm the oral and rhetorical sensibilities of the reformers who maintained what seems to have been a healthy balance on the oral/literate continuum.

Revival Preaching

Post-reformation preaching, influenced by eighteenth century Enlightenment thinking, moved away from the detailed exegesis and “complicated divisions” (Downey 226) of Calvinistic Puritanism toward a more rational, irenic, Arminian, and plain style. Accepting pagans as valid sources of truth, these Latitudinarians employed a neo-classical orientation that allowed renewed interest in Greek and Roman rhetoric, often converting the classifications of the parts of a Roman speech over to homiletic terms. Yet their interest in rhetoric was not toward the production of extemporaneous speech, which they labeled as mere “enthusiasm”— non-conformist behavior that smacked of irrationality and passion (Webb 120).

Latitudinarians, represented most notably by Tillotson, sought a reasonable and ethical homiletic devoid of supernatural emphasis and imbued with solid and straightforward literary style. “As in all his preaching, Tillotson is solicitous to show how reasonable and beneficial Christianity can be. Mystery and sacrifice are not so much condemned as set aside as redundant. His appeal is to common sense and self-interest” (Downey 14).

But despite their cautions, the first and second Great Awakenings in North America took preaching out of pulpits and into fields and tents. Preaching with less dependence on text and notes became commonplace and preachers often found themselves preaching many times each week in a variety of settings. According to Harry Stout, it was John Wesley who rediscovered extemporaneous preaching for revivalist purposes.

Extemporaneous preaching had become an accepted innovation among the Oxford Methodists during Whitefield’s tenure there. In 1735 he discovered the method by accident, having once forgotten his notes. The ensuing extempore sermon was so powerful that he recommended it to all who could muster the courage. Sometimes the speaker would not even know his text until he rose to preach. Such preaching established a unique bond between speaker and hearer and released the full range of improvisation and inspiration (Stout 43).

George Whitefield married theatrical techniques with evangelical pietistic theology to create a highly charged environment for audience response.

This shift to an individual and emotional piety in evangelicalism has been much lamented by those who regret the loss of continuity in theological tradition and the lack of religious authority that makes that continuity possible. What needs to be stressed, however, is that this subjective turn of piety was the product of a new kind of preaching that created, in turn, a new understanding of the public role of religion (Webb 98).

Emotional preaching to emotional audiences and a call for decision/conversion provided a stark contrast to the reasonable moralizing of the Latitudinarians, and the doctrinal precision of the Reformers. “Preaching became with Whitefield what poetry would later become with Wordsworth: ‘the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.’ The carefully prepared manuscript (the Tillotson ideal) and statuesque delivery gave way to a mode of address more extemporaneous and gesticulatory. Sermons were frequently preached first, and written out later” (Downey 20).⁵ “If a minister appealed to logic or used notes or prepared his sermon, he was only standing in the way of a direct confrontation with God” (Collins 115).

But if Latitudinarians employed reason, and revivalists emotion, a third modern alternative was the intuitive/psychological approach of Romanticism. Going back to rhetoric’s classification of preaching as ceremonial/epideictic, the sermon was promoted as something other than fundamentally didactic or salvific. The new concern, starting with the rhetorical textbooks of Campbell (1776) and Whatley (1830s) was not information, but inspiration/transformation. Whatley’s student, John Henry Newman along with Frederick Robertson furthered a Romantic homiletic in Great Britain.

In America Romantic homiletics flourished under famed preachers Bushnell, Beecher, and Brooks. But because the Romantic approach was often associated with higher biblical criticism, homiletic thought in the last 100 years split into two significant

⁵ The published forms of sermons often bore scant resemblance to their original delivery. It was not unusual for scurrilous stenographers to illegitimately shorthand an extemporaneous sermon and then sell it, unauthorized, to a publisher (Downey 5). For a fuller description of the extemporaneous nature of Whitefield, Wesley and other eighteenth century British preachers, see Downey’s The Eighteenth Century Pulpit Clarendon, 1969.

camp: mainline Protestantism as heirs of the Romantic approach, and mainstream Evangelicalism which hearkened back to Reformation/Revival roots.

The Contemporary Scene

In 1870 Baptist preacher and educator John Broadus published a work that included both Revival and Romantic inclinations. Perhaps because of its broad appeal, On The Preparation and Delivery of Sermons became the most commonly consulted homiletic text for almost 100 years. Bryan Chapell's Christ-Centered Preaching (1994, 2005) is in many ways a reintroduction of Broadus' balance to the twenty-first century, arguing for the necessity of a pervasively redemptive world-view in every preacher's consciousness.

Despite the fact that the homiletic task requires both literate and oral agility, discourse between the disciplines of homiletics and communication theory was not as common in the twentieth century as it once was. Homiletics was, up through the nineteenth century, often referred to as Sacred Rhetoric, a title that betrays some connection between preaching and rhetorical theory. In 1870 it was still normative for Broadus to include references to Roman rhetoric, citing Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian repeatedly and including a multitude of rhetorical references in its bibliography. A year earlier Henry Jones Ripley published Sacred Rhetoric: On Composition and Delivery of Sermons. Like Broadus, he launches into classic rhetoric on the first page, despairing that even in his time the discipline was largely mistaken for English prose composition. Seeking to properly reclassify it, he begins, "For the purposes of theological students in particular, it will be most profitable as well as most convenient, to conform to the ancient

signification and to consider Sacred Rhetoric as appropriated to instruction on the preparation and delivery of sermons” (15).

But something happened around the turn of the century to turn homiletics away from its rhetorical heritage. Homiletic texts continued to be published, but references to rhetoric steadily declined. Charles Brown published The Art of Preaching in 1922 replete with sage advice and even rhetorical impulses, but without citing any classic rhetoricians and with only three references to rhetoric, all pejorative. In the same year Dargan published his Art of Preaching in Light of Its History which does show rhetorical familiarity. Yet Dargan’s twentieth-century scholarship actually shows greater evidence of nineteenth-century sensibilities, with the production of his major two-volume work on the History of Preaching in 1904. In 1937 G. Campbell Morgan published Preaching with just a single passing reference to Aristotle. In 1972 British homiletician Martyn Lloyd-Jones published Preaching and Preachers in which he not only fails to mention any rhetoricians, but dismisses, in a few sweeping generalizations, the entire art as mere sophistry. Fellow Brit colloquial John Stott’s influential Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the 20th Century does scarcely any better in 1982, with only two scant and secondary references to classical rhetoricians.

Catholic scholars were no exception as Walter Burghardt published Preaching: The Art and The Craft in 1987 without any classical references and with a pejorative “mere rhetoric” conception of the ancient craft. Although Sidney Greidanus included a section on rhetorical criticism as a hermeneutic technique, he shows no familiarity with rhetoric and mentions no classical rhetoricians in his 1988 The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching.

In the 1980s two major shifts in homiletic thought would simultaneously arise. From Romantic mainline roots, Craddock (As One Without Authority, 1978 and Preaching, 1985) and Buttrick (Homiletic, 1987) pioneered what has come to be called the “New Homiletic” while Haddon Robinson prompted a tectonic shift in evangelical circles with Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages in 1980. Though the two approaches are grounded and developed dissimilarly, they have in common a critique of the deductive, highly structured and outlined sermon that is exclusively or primarily didactic.

While Craddock championed an inductive/narrative approach and Buttrick demonstrated a phenomenological construction based on communicative “moves,” Robinson condensed exegetical work down to a sermon with one unified thought, expressed in a focused and repeated “Big Idea.”⁶ Yet even these innovators, the most influential practitioners in the last 30 years, do not mention classic rhetoric as part of their theoretical development in any of their major works, or acknowledge rhetoric’s historic connection to preaching. Though their silence on this issue does not prove their ignorance of the world of rhetoric, it does demonstrate a disconnection.

This trend has continued in recent decades as a survey of contemporary homiletic texts shows only one in nine reference preaching’s link to rhetoric. Aside from Kenton Anderson’s helpful appendix, Zondervan’s recent and imposing anthology of preaching includes no articles on the history of preaching or the overlap of homiletics and rhetorical theory. As the streams between classical rhetoric and preaching dried up last century,

⁶ Having sat enjoyably under Dr. Robinson for homiletic instruction, this author can testify that the thrust of Big Idea preaching, was to push the student beyond the confines of dry, tedious and scattered outlines toward something inspiring and memorable

homiletics was left without the grounding in orally conditioned praxis it had always enjoyed, and grew to rely increasingly on literary orientations in both preparation and delivery of sermons. What brought this distance between two such overlapping fields in which there was once fruitful discourse?

1.2 Old Friends Part

Loss of Contingency

In the first place, we find a decline in rhetorical orientations across the board from the time of the Enlightenment forward (Kinneavy 25). Classical rhetoric was always comfortable with the state of contingency necessary in almost every field of discourse. As the Sophists were quick to point out, good people can disagree on a wide variety of subjects and no final resolution will ever be made to many issues of great import. Aristotle framed rhetoric as fitting for debatable issues and perfectly designed to navigate the disagreements with probability and common consent. In modernity, following Descartes and later empirical philosophers, contingency was out and certainty was in. With overt persuasion no longer fashionable (though still practiced inescapably in disguised forms), rhetoric went through a 300-year decline from which it has only recently started to recover. Bad rhetoric has always been the worst enemy of good rhetoric, and bad rhetoric's connection with manipulation, salesmanship and grandstanding made it an easy target when held up to the ostensibly objective, rational, and scientific sentiments of the twentieth century.⁷

⁷ John O'Banion narrates rhetoric's nine-stage decline in the modern world as "1. Appearance and Reality (rhetoric is denigrated for being merely an art of appearance, failing to express reality). 2. Faith, knowledge, and the narrowing of significance (rhetoric is accused of unhealthy skepticism). 3. Print, truth, and the quest for rationality (rhetoric, rooted in orality, is judged obsolete by literate thinkers). 4. Doubt,

In theology, the older *via negativa* (Kesich), which advocated a charitable and irenic approach to theology, gave way to the theology of certainty which allowed and acknowledged no other possibility than itself. Twentieth-century believers wanted a theology of certainty not probability. But until theology and homiletics embrace the contingent nature of life, rhetoric and the seasoned approach to competing truth claims will not be in high demand. Recourse to persuasion might be seen as an abandonment of absolute or transcendent truth. But there is a difference in believing there is no transcendent truth, and believing that transcendent truth must still be held with contingency. So as the faith marketplace becomes increasingly cluttered in post-modernity, rhetoric's ability to rehabilitate persuasion for contingent situations drives up its stock price. Though rhetoric historically uses the term "proofs," it is really designed to produce plausibility which can then be embraced as truth by means of faith.

Ascendance of Technique

Michael Pasquarello's recent work, Sacred Rhetoric, points out the loss of historical/theological grounding in homiletics common in the modern world. Modernity, says Pasquarello, separated form from content, or in homiletic terms, delivery from theology. Since content was all-important, how that content came to be delivered was a matter of pragmatic technique without theological implication. Homiletics was freed to

fragmentation, and the pursuit of method (rhetoric is attacked for its reliance on traditional modes of knowledge). 5. The separation of Narration from Logic, List from Story (rhetoric is cut off from the heart of its way of thinking). 6. Past-blindness, egoism, and rule-mindedness (rhetoric is considered inappropriate for the Age of Reason). 7. Immateriality and the search for substance and method (rhetoric casts about for ways to survive). 8. Absence, despair, and cultural deterioration (rhetoric is marked by a glaring void—narration has disappeared as a way of thinking and arguing). 9. Relevance and rediscovering narrational bundles of judgment (rhetoric is reclaimed by a few, Kenneth Burke being a pioneer) (109).

incorporate whatever worked and learned to consult research and technique-oriented speech handbooks instead of mentoring scholarship from church history. Homiletics might as well be taught by any competent instructor in public speaking or by the nearest Toastmaster.⁸

Infatuation with Novelty

Besides its confidence in technique, modernity carries also a fascination with novelty. Whenever humankind are framed as moving constantly and unstoppably toward a higher level of evolutionary progression, the past will always be ignored at best and denigrated at worst. Many modern thinkers simply have no respect for pre-modern thinkers who did not even understand germ theory or basic cosmology. So what people thought about preaching 500 or 50 or even 10 years ago matters very little. The new will always eclipse.

It could well be that twentieth-century homileticians who were aware of the legacy of rhetoric in preaching simply neglected to make the connection in a salute to novelty. One gets this sense reading Spencer Kennard's Psychic Power in Preaching. Published in 1901, Kennard occasionally slips and mentions an old source like Cicero (27), yet is clearly infatuated with the then new science of psychology and how this "science" could shed new light on preaching. Though tramping through the fields of Cicero, his "scientific" map of the landscape is novel and simply more exciting.

Separation from Pagan Influence

Twentieth-century homiletics was not exempt from the modernist/fundamentalist battles of the 1920s and 30s. Fundamentalists distanced themselves from liberal theology

⁸ This is not to imply that there is no value in learning technique. The question is whether preaching is merely technique.

and adopted an increasingly separatist stance. In doing so, they found little merit in pagan thinkers old or new, preferring to take instruction entirely from within the kingdom of God and the Bible itself. This was not a novel reaction, John Chrysostom having had the same opinion in the fourth century (Wilson 43). In some cases only scholarship from a particularly narrow slice of the church pie is admissible to the classroom. This line of thought would reject Roman rhetoric not because of its antiquity, but on its pagan orientation. Many evangelical schools in modernity saw no sense of necessary continuity between classical studies and distinctively Christian curricula.

It was in the mid-twentieth century that Will Herberg was asking his Christian friends why they had ever clung to such “a thinly Christianized version of the Greek ideal of intellectual self-realization... If man’s good was the ‘life according to reason,’ as it was in the classical-humanist ideal, then a liberal education along academic lines was obviously appropriate; but how appropriate was it, indeed what sense did it make, if man’s good was what the Christian faith must hold it to be—to know and do the will of God?” (Burtchaell 821).

Ironically, if conservative homiletic scholars had ventured into classic rhetoric or rhetorical studies, they might have found worldviews more hospitable to them than to their more theologically liberal opponents. But there is scant exploration of classics by conservative homileticians. Contemporary scholarship from the world of rhetorical studies would have been viewed as similarly suspect. A separatist approach to scholarship seals off homiletics from outside influences in manner uncharacteristic of previous generations of churchmen like Melancthon (who recommended Quintilian) or St. Augustine (who both prized and critiqued pagan thinkers).

Secularization of the Academy

As the separatists moved one way, the secularists moved the other. For another factor in the dénouement of discourse is the demise of the university where

theology/divinity was a proper course of study. In a historically liberal arts orientation, every student had at least an acquaintance with theology and church life. So even if theologians were neglecting rhetoric, at least rhetoricians were yet familiar with theology. There was an overlap of awareness, an interface of both systems in the lives of actual scholars. It would have been hard to find a professor of rhetoric who was not at least familiar with the homiletic arts. But as the University became practically and without any center the Diversity, theology was banished to the seminary and modern rhetorical scholars found it not only possible, but normative to frame the world independent of theological/ecclesiological underpinnings.⁹ The avenues for discourse simply evaporated in both directions.¹⁰ The reasons for the undeniable exit of theology from the academy are detailed in narratives like George Marsden's The Soul of the American University and James Burtchaell's The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from their Christian Churches. Burtchaell notes the regrettable sense of specialization in modernity that eroded faculty love of students and interdisciplinary learning, replacing it with a consummate love of their specialized careers.

Thus in 1870 Mr. Jones might hold the professorship of mathematics, with responsibilities anywhere in the natural sciences; his son Mr. Jones, might

⁹ Sommerville, in The Decline of the Secular University (Oxford, 2006) sees this secularization as an impoverishment of not just the church, but, ironically, the academy. In trying to free itself from authority it accidentally made itself obsolete and incapable of addressing the very non-secular but still necessary concerns of society.

¹⁰ John Henry Newman, of course, is the authority here. See The Idea of the University (Yale, 1996) for a classic argument on the necessity of theology for academic integrity. "As the to the range of University teaching, certainly the very name of University is inconsistent with restrictions of any kind. Whatever was the original reason for the adoption of that term, which is unknown, I am only putting it on its popular, its recognized sense, when I say that a University should teach universal knowledge" (20). For a more contemporary articulation of Newman's thesis, see David Hassel's City of Wisdom: A Christian Vision for the American University (Loyola 1983).

be hired in 1900 as a professor of chemistry; his son, Dr. Jones, in 1930 might teach only organic chemistry; his son, Dr. Jones might specialize in polymer chemistry in 1960; and his daughter, Dr. Jones, would in 1990 be hired as a protein chemist (829).

Secularization and specialization in the academy effectively combined to push any homiletic sensitivity out of the newly formed departments of Communication, liberated as they were from any ecclesiological responsibility leftover from the bygone rhetorical tradition.

Practicality

As the demands upon seminary curriculum continue to grow, even scholars warm to historical undergirding in homiletics simply feel overwhelmed by how much must be covered in so little time. In surrender to the exigencies of the moment, one can sense Buttrick's frustration:

Once upon a time ministers were trained in rhetoric. Therefore they had at hand different rhetorical logics, strategies, tropes, and so forth. While rhetorical training could lead to insubstantial ornamentation or verbal pyrotechnics, for the most part rhetorical wisdom assisted preaching. After all, rhetoric is an ancient wisdom that under-girds all human conversation. Thus, older works on homiletics could assume rhetorical training and concentrate on matters specific to preaching. We cannot. What we can do is offer some general comments about rhetoric before providing examples of modern development (40).

That is the extent of Buttrick's use of rhetoric. Even his "general comments" are so general as to elude any sourcing. Whatever he learned or gleaned from the discipline is held close to his vest with no documentation.

So the long association of homiletics and rhetoric has gone largely neglected for over 100 years; this despite the fact that rhetoric has something to offer homiletics that it cannot gain on its own. As modernity's grip on the world loosens a bit, the congregations

and potential congregations of today's church are becoming increasingly postmodern and less impressed with the virtues of textual authority. Although the extent to which modernity has and will wane is debatable, confidence in reason, objective documentary authority, and omniscient science is eroding, while interest in mystery, tradition, contingency, and community seems to be on the rise. Some churchmen decry these tendencies as dangers against which to martial opposition, not recognizing that modernity was never a fast friend of the church. The church has outlived many ages and may need to adapt to many more.

Scholars of the medieval age, were they able to fast-forward, might recognize post-modern trends as amusingly pre-modern, when authority, tradition, mystery, faith, and community were the rule of the day. If this is true, then modern churchmen might be able to garner assistance from their ecclesiastical ancestors in order to stay current. Sometimes we must go back to be ready to go forward, and homiletics is a field that might backwardly aspire.¹¹

1.3 When Speech Was King

There was a day when the relationship between orality and literacy was much different than it is today. There was a time, before the printing press, when literacy was a tool that served rather than mastered us; when oral speech was still prior to and higher than its eventual documentation in text, when speech was generative and dynamic, the “Golden Age of Oratory.”

¹¹ For more on the relationship of homiletics to postmodernity, see John McClure's Otherwise Preaching (Chalice, 2001). McClure builds a shy, self-effacing homiletic based on the deconstruction of the self of the preacher. For a more combative stance toward postmodernity, see Graham Johnston's Preaching to a Postmodern World (Baker, 2001).

But most preachers today are ignorant of that age, even as they face their weekly quandary. The ever-looming sermon demands attention, preparation, and study. Precious hours are spent in solitude; translating, reading, composing, writing, outlining—all skills learned in the laboratory of literacy. Yet every preacher also knows that on Sunday a different set of skills will be required: speaking, exhorting, memory, and the reading of an audience as much or more than reading text.

While preachers work inescapably in both worlds, they typically have been taught to focus the bulk of their preparation in the literate world of books, paper, screens, and keyboards, while giving comparatively little attention to the oral frameworks of the sermon as an event. Indeed, the fervent hope of every preacher is that the work done in literacy will be able to make the Sunday transition to orality, that the sermon will “preach.” That hope is commonly held with a sense of mystery: that one is never quite sure what Sunday will hold.

Scholars from the discipline of Communication & Rhetoric have named these two overlapping worlds and sketched out the complex relationship between them. They have called the world of alphabet, scroll, book, paper, list, and screen that of literacy (along with the accompanying technologies of reading and writing). The older skill set of the spoken word has been called the world of orality (with its accompanying skills of listening, interpretation, articulation, memory, and adaptation). Though both orientations are based in language and represent contrasting approaches to the use of language, they operate much differently in the world of discourse.

Lately, however, there is rising interest in re-approaching homiletics from ancient perspectives. In 2000 Bruce Shields ([From the Housetops: Preaching in the Early Church](#)

and Today Chalice, 2000) argued for more attention to the oral roots of the New Testament and the oral structures of sermon development in secondary orality. Specifically citing Walter Ong's work in orality, Shields and Richard Ward (Speaking of the Holy: The Art of Communication in Preaching Chalice, 2001) plead for the practice of "performing" scripture orally to truly unleash it.

Some homileticians are unapologetically going to classical/oral roots for current praxis. William Shepherd (Without a Net CSS, 2004) goes back to Cicero to find in the canons of Roman rhetoric the solution for a listless sermon. Michael Pasquarello's anti-technical approach in Sacred Rhetoric (Eerdmans, 2005) goes back to Augustine and church fathers to uncover a disinterested homiletic saturated with oral underpinnings. Doug Pagitt goes as far as to promote dialogical preaching that is thoroughly oral in its orientation in Preaching Re-Imagined (Zondervan, 2005). Stephen Webb argues persuasively for the priority of sound over sight in theology itself in The Divine Voice: The Christian Proclamation and the Theology of Sound (Brazos, 2004).

Clearly, sound and the oral/aural world is drawing homiletic attention. Credit for the recent spate of interest must certainly be linked to Walter Ong, the Jesuit priest/scholar who labored so hard over the last 40 years to stake out the practical and theological distinctions between the world of primary orality where speech was always prior to text, and the world of literacy where speech tends to be subservient to text. Ong has the unique ability to turn back time and help us see and hear a world familiar to our forefathers but largely forgotten, even inaccessible, to us. Every technological breakthrough exacts some sort of cost. Though never intending to eliminate or even denigrate literacy, Ong is a master at showing its cost; the ways it has revolutionized our

processing of information. Though he never documented any specific homiletic applications to his scholarship, his tilling of the soil of orality has produced openings for reappraisals of homiletic praxis. There seems to be both interest and value in staking out an orally sensitive homiletic to counter-balance the near universal orientation toward literate sermonizing.

It is no coincidence that Ong's fascination with orality springs from his grounding in classic Greek and Roman rhetorical theory. Ong called it "primary orality." It was the "Golden Age" of Plato and Aristotle, Isocrates, Cicero, and Quintilian, which, though quite oral/aural, is still preserved for us, ironically, by the complement of literacy. Even though that literacy is more preservative than generative, it can recall for us a time when orality and literacy had struck a truce, or at least a working relationship.

Later on, literacy, infused with Gutenberg's steroids, would steadily overwhelm its oral counterpart, leaving it bound and gagged. But stubborn as it is, orality has found its way out and lingers today in what Walter Ong refers to as "secondary orality."¹² This project raises the question of whether a revived orality, balanced with literacy, might offer pre-modern assistance to contemporary homileticians seeking a rehabilitated role for orality and literacy working in tandem. In doing so, in putting this project on screen/paper, we will ask literacy to serve a role in documenting its own limitations, a role to which it awkwardly, but willingly, complies.

¹² Ong acknowledges that electronic broadcasting has created a resurgence of oral phenomena. But for Ong, this "secondary orality," dependent as it is upon backgrounded literacy, is a mere shadow of its former self and hardly to be admired. Citing the difference between the Lincoln-Douglas debates and a televised presidential debate of today, Ong wistfully observes, "The old-style oratory coming from primary orality is gone forever" (OL 134).

Chapter 2

An Orientation to Orality

2.1 The Oral World Up Ended

In 1891 Thomas Edison and his assistant William Dickson stunned the world with a demonstration of their revolutionary new machines: a Kinetograph to capture a rapid sequence of still photographs, and a companion Kinetoscope which enabled the viewer to see, for the first time, those still pictures dancing in what appeared to be motion (Baldwin 221). Until that point, action had always been vaporous and fleeting. As hard as it is to imagine now in the era of rewind and fast-forward, once an event occurred back then it was lost to future viewers and eternally unrepeatable. Action could occur only in the present. But Edison made the simulated action repeatable and preservable. Suddenly, sight had an archive of motion, and Edison and his technological successors changed the way we think about experienced reality which could now be captured and domesticated.

Thousands of years ago a similarly revolutionary innovation changed the way humans interacted. From the dawn of civilization, speech had always been vaporous and fleeting. Once spoken, words, unless memorized, were lost forever. But it was not the tape recorder that produced this first upheaval. It was something even more innovative, but strangely routine for us today: the alphabet, developed around 1500 BC (Ong OL 88).

Before the alphabet, sound could not be visually mapped. Though humans used language pervasively and communicated with precision and intelligence, none of the phonetic patterns of language could be captured efficiently. But as civilizations became more organized and centrally governed, documentation became necessary. Starting as scratches and then pictographs, early scribes transferred concepts onto various writing surfaces to log payments, inventories, and invoices in a contractual or juridical sense (Schokel 245). Writing started as arithmetic. But before long tiny pictures were added to the logs. These simplified pictures came to represent actual items.

Eventually they upgraded this potential, using symbols to stand for individual syllables. For example, they would combine, in modern English equivalence, a symbol for “dog” and an adjacent symbol for “mother” to forge and render the word (or more properly, phoneme) “dogma” (which has no relation to either dogs or motherhood, but is an entirely novel synthesis).¹³ Signs on paper were starting to lose their tight correspondence with actual physical items and adopt a looser, more symbolic connotation. Symbols were starting to encompass complex and abstract ideas. But the real breakthrough was yet to come: the alphabet.

Immersed as we are in literacy, we seldom think how revolutionary was the alphabet. Starting with the Semitic alphabet of consonants and expanding with the Greek addition of vowels, the tools were in place to accurately map vocal sound into discreet units of sound. In a revolutionary way, sounds could be mapped and transferred economically and accurately with phonetic rather than pictographic encoding. With a

¹³ The technical term for this use of pictographs is “rebus” writing. See chapter 4 in Ong’s *Orality and Literacy*, or Thomas Bertonneau, “Orality, Literacy, and the Tradition,” for a concise historical overview of the development of the alphabet.

wonderfully simple collection of roughly 20 alphabetic letters, almost any noise the human mouth could enunciate could be both coded and decoded. For the first time, people could mouth words they did not personally conceive. Up until that point, every speaker was an original author. Now speakers, without any memory devices, could ape the words of others, and audiences were confronted, for the first time, with secondhand (even borrowed or plagiarized) thoughts. Suddenly sound—words—had an archive, and human thought and communicative interaction would never be the same.¹⁴

Plato did a considerable amount of hand-wringing over this innovation. Although scholars have concluded that ironically Plato was responsible for a good deal of the shift toward abstract literate ways of thought, he also harbored grave misgivings about the concept of literacy.¹⁵ In a sort of double irony, we only know of these misgivings about writing because he chose to document those misgivings in writing:

Writing, Phaedrus, has this strange quality, and is very like painting; for the creatures of painting stand like living beings, but if one asks them a question they observe a solemn silence. And so it is with written words; you might think they spoke as if they had intelligence. But if you question them, wishing to know about their sayings, they always say only one and the same thing. And every word, when once it is written, is bandied about, alike among those who understand and those who have no interest in it, and it knows not whom to speak or not to speak; when ill-treated or unjustly reviled it always needs its father to help it, for it has no power to help or protect itself (Phaedrus 166).

¹⁴ As amazing as the alphabet is, Schokel points out the remaining limitations. While the alphabet can capture one facet of communication, namely diction, musical scores are actually much more sound sensitive in their ability to capture pitch, volume, and rhythm on paper (272).

¹⁵ Ong quotes Havelock extensively on the point of Plato's ironic undermining of orality even as he celebrated it (OL 79).

But despite Plato's warning, literacy and literate ways of thinking came to dominate Occidental culture from Plato onward. Indeed, the rise of modernity itself was facilitated by the ability of each generation to document their contributions to the overall accumulation of knowledge and build upon it. Literacy literally built the West.

During the 1960s, however, a growing dissatisfaction with modernity surfaced in many avenues of culture. Modernity, with its ratio-empirical orientation toward certainty and objective scientific knowledge had succeeded in delivering seemingly unstoppable technological advances. Yet two world wars testified to humanity's continued inability to negotiate life's meaning or govern the human enterprise any better than the authorities jettisoned in the move away from tradition and authority. Modernity could produce a microwaved cup of coffee, but could not deliver a person with whom to share it, or a reason for the conversation. There was unsettledness all around, and openness to revisit positions that were more natural, organic, unmediated by modernity.

In this milieu Jesuit priest Walter Ong emerged as the spokesman for a neglected era—the age before typographic culture when human speech was still primary in what he would call the human “sensorium” (PW 6). But Ong approached the subject with more than mere curiosity as a communication scholar. Sensing the theological implications of orality and literacy for the central doctrine of divine revelation (what he calls “the Word”), Ong unfolded in three volumes those implications both for our perceptions of sacred text as literacy and for our experience of God's presence in the orally spoken word.¹⁶

¹⁶ These three volumes chronologically listed include: The Presence of the Word (Yale, 1967 and abbreviated here as PW), Interfaces of the Word (Cornell, 1977 and abbreviated

Ancient Hebrews and Christians knew not only the spoken word but the alphabet as well, as their devotion to the sacred scriptures makes plain. But for them and all men of early times, the Word, even when written, was much closer to the spoken word than it normally is for twentieth-century technological man. Today we have often to labor to regain the awareness that the word is still always at root, the spoken word. Early man had no such problem: he felt the word, even when written, as primarily an event in sound (PW Preface).

In attempting this recovery Ong took on the difficult assignment of demonstrating to moderns a pre-modern understanding of the world. Turning back the clock and calendar, he attempts to peel back our unreflective reliance upon the world of sight, space, and print to reanimate the older world of sound, time, and speech. To do so, he needs to predate even Greek understandings and recover a Hebrew mindset. “The Hebrews tended to think of understanding as a kind of hearing, whereas the Greeks thought of it more as a kind of seeing” (PW 3).¹⁷

Ong postulates three stages of development in the human sensorium: The Unrecorded Word (Oral Culture), the Denatured Word (Alphabet and Print), and The Electronic Word (recorded sound and “secondary” orality) (PW 17). Central in his argument is the constant reminder of the artificial and technological nature of literacy. He repeatedly reminds us that people functioned quite well for thousands of years before literacy was commonplace. Moderns tend to think of the pen and keyboard as organic extensions of the human hand, as natural as the fingers themselves. Ong labors to overthrow this bias toward literacy equated with intelligence, reminding us that if

as IW), and Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word (1982, Routledge and abbreviated as OL).

¹⁷ From Origen on, church fathers began to emphasize seeing over hearing, shifting the sensorium toward Greek orientations (Wilken 20).

preliterate people were so dumb, how did they ever invent writing? Even naming them as “pre-literate” frames them in a deficiency they never felt themselves—similar to labeling a horse as a “pre-car.” (OL 13).

He then goes on to narrate a story of the primarily oral culture before the documentation of speech in text. By patiently rewinding the history of technology, Ong takes us back to the point where people had no way to archive sound. Every speech act was unique and contextualized, what Ong calls “unrepeatable.” It is not as if people chose not to take notes or document proceedings or write letters, but that they were unable to—they lacked that technology just as surely as they lacked a microwave oven. Yet just as surely as there was cooking before microwaves, primarily oral cultures still enjoyed theology and ethics and community and shared meaning. In what seems an almost blasphemous notion to typographic culture, Ong argues that all the essential elements of human endeavor can work without literacy, whereas a culture of literacy can never jettison orality. Indeed, of the over 3000 spoken languages today, only about 78 have produced literature (OL 7). The rest remain primarily oral.

2.2 Orality and Theology: The Cost of Unbalanced Literacy

That this concern for orality springs from a theologian is not coincidental. Ong scholar Paul Soukoup has connected Ong’s religious pre-suppositions to his scholarship in “Contexts of Faith: The Religious Foundation of Walter Ong’s Literacy and Orality.” Ong has much more in mind than merely the charming recovery of an earlier communicative age. At stake is how God’s revelation erupts among us and how we process and re-communicate that revelation. Ong is convinced that certain characteristics of orality are close to the very mouth and mind of God, and that those who purport to

carry the divine word in a merely literate box lose something of the richness and personality of “the Word.” This is not to disparage the literate nature of revelation or literacy as a gift from God (PW 314), but to balance the notable strengths of literacy with a largely forgotten and unappreciated theological orality. But exactly what has been forgotten in modernity and in modern homiletics?

Loss of Revelatory Presence

Ong has concerns that an unbalanced theological literacy forgets or neglects the intensity of God’s presence in sound. This presence boils down to the essential difference between the worlds of sight and sound. Because sight is spatial, it can freeze in time as a snapshot captures a visual image. You can study the image indefinitely. Sound is different. It cannot be frozen and must exist only in time as an ephemeral expression of personal force. “Sound signals the present use of power, since sound must be in active production in order to exist at all” (PW 112). Sounds call us to awareness of the very present “here and now” existence of another person. Ong illustrates appropriately. “A primitive hunter can see, feel, smell, and taste an elephant when the animal is quite dead. If he hears an elephant trumpeting or merely shuffling his feet, he had better watch out. Something is going on. Force is operating” (PW 112).

So if revelation remains silent and visual, it loses personal force. It becomes mere information, dead with regard to its power to inspire reverence and personal encounter with God. This explains why God was never content to do merely textual revelation. Every prophet was a speaking mouthpiece of God, not just a scribe. The Word made flesh wrote nothing, but spoke volumes. But since the inscripturated word of God today is preserved in literacy, it also has bearing on how the word of God is voiced in preaching

and worship, and whether those voicings are more characterized by the dynamics of depersonalized literacy or personalizing orality.¹⁸ “As establishing personal presence, the word has immediate religious significance, particularly in the Hebrew and Christian tradition, where so much is made of a personal, concerned God” (PW 113).

Loss of Shared Experience

Since Ong postulates sound as the sense that most fosters unity, a loss of sound in the Christian community will provoke a concomitant loss of shared space. “Thus because of the very nature of sound as such, voice has a kind of primacy in the formation of true community of men, groups of individuals constituted by shared awarenesses” (PW 124). More than the visual, tactile and olfactory senses, sound functionally pulls people together. Like smell, it surrounds and penetrates and, more capably than sight, it can carry linguistic content instead of mere perceptual data. Consider a slide show of silent, language-free images. While they might still convey an approximate message, it will necessarily lack the clarity and personality of voiced, predicated language.¹⁹

Ong continues, “Encounters with others in which no words are ever exchanged are hardly encounters at all. The written word alone will not do, for it is not sufficiently living and refreshing” (PW 125). It is not enough for people to gather together in silence.

¹⁸ Stephen Webb, in The Divine Voice calls this role of sound in worship as “Acoustemology” and considers it a relatively unexplored phenomenon. Webb also coins the word “Theo-acoustics” to address the theological nature of sound and cites Ong as follows: “Only the sense of hearing can do justice to the way God is simultaneously with us and beyond us. Put another way, the voice of God reveals God’s innermost purposes without exposing God to our objectifying gaze. Sound is the medium that best carries a supernatural message because it delivers something external without putting us in control of its source. For Ong, hearing puts us in touch with another person in an immediate and inward way while, paradoxically, preserving some distance between us” (39-40).

¹⁹ The importance of Ong’s sense of “predication” will be fully explained later in the loss of “erupted truth.”

Ong requires that to be meaningful, something must linguistically penetrate the silence. Here we start to see why sermons as public addresses have such a long and persistent role in the gathering of the church for worship. It is because meaning must be voiced if it is to be shared. A good deal of the enjoyment of an event is its articulation to others and the consequent nurture of community. This is why it is difficult to prepare a message in solitude.²⁰ Or as Ong would caution: “The scholar, isolated in his den with his books and sheets of writing paper, is plunged into words, but he is still liable to the charge of being ‘dead’” (PW 125). Though literacy can produce true content via a silent set of images on paper, silent content cannot effectively forge a sense of true community. “The Preacher sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly... But... the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body” (Eccles. 12:10, 12).

Loss of Simultaneity

Ong claims that sight comes to us in sequence, but sound comes all at once. Sight gives a slice of reality (since we can only see in one direction at a time), whereas sound comes to us in overwhelmingly simultaneous and uncontrollable ways (“there is no auditory equivalent to averting one’s face or eyes” (PW 130). Sound comes whether we want it or not, making it the communicative medium that is the hardest to suppress and manage. “Of its very nature, the sound world has depth, dimension, fullness such as the visual, despite its own distinctive beauties, can never achieve” (PW 130). A live speaker, of course, employs both the visual and the auditory senses. But even if an audience turns

²⁰ The full homiletic ramifications of this will become more apparent in chapters 5 and 6 in terms of dialogical preparation and audience-sensitive delivery.

away, or is distracted from the visual image of the speaker, spoken words roll on in unavoidable irrepressible ways, building an unrelenting sense of communicative force.

Loss of Erupted Truth

Ong is concerned not with the loss of truth, but the loss of truth erupting within time to a specific audience. Far from being merely declarative of given subject's existence, for Ong truth occurs when a speaker says something about the subject, makes a judgment, or predicates something about the subject. Not merely "the overcoat," but "the overcoat is brown." "There is only one place in the intellective or knowledge process where the question of truth or falsity directly applies: this is the point at which we form a judgment, at which we predicate something of thing, joining a subject and a predicate" (PW 151). There is a magic to this joining when it erupts from a knowing subject toward a hearer in real time. It is the vocalization of this predication that propels this in-time grasp of a truth. It is when truth rolls off a tongue originally—unmotivated by any force but personal apprehension of that truth. This is what Ong calls "the moment of truth" and we quote him here at length.

What we have called the taste of truth appears to have no real duration. I possess the truth, savor it, test it, know it as truth and not falsity, in the judgment, "This is an overcoat," not simply when the concepts represented by these words pass through my consciousness but more properly at the instant, the "moment of truth," when I experience the juncture of subject and predicate, the moment when (after sensing the meaning of the judgment, if you want, in advance), I actually taste its meaning, when the statement comes alive and flashes into consciousness so that I sense that it signifies, that it says something, so that I can "tell" it is true or false. This moment of truth is hard to pin down exactly. It is after I say "This" and probably before I quite finish "overcoat" (PW 154).

If all this seems a lot of blather about a simple statement about an overcoat, let us remember that although we harbor in our minds all kinds of information about everything

from American geography to germ theory to theological categories like sin and salvation, what we normally mean by “know” is that we can recall necessary facts. But this is far different from really knowing. “In the strict sense we actually know to the full what we are actually ‘judging’ here and now for its truth or falsity. We know in the strict sense, that is, by a kind of transit through time” (PW 154).

Ong is saying nothing less than we know via speaking, and not just any kind of speaking but rather a “tasting” of words in a kind of internal, intimate, and unreflective dialogue.

Speaking and hearing are not simple operations. Each exhibits a dialectical structure that mirrors the mysterious depths of a man’s psyche. As he composes his thoughts in words, a speaker or writer hears these words echoing within himself and thereby follows his own thought, as though he were another person. Conversely, a hearer or reader repeats within himself the words he hears and thereby understands them, as though he were himself two individuals (*Voice as Summons for Belief in An Ong Reader* 261).

Speaking one’s own unpremeditated thoughts is epistemological. It builds, not just expresses, belief. In contrast, reading out loud, while a form of speaking, is motivated not by a firsthand connection of subject and predicate, but by the parroting of another’s prior predication. In consequence, there is no composition going on, no flash of understanding, no eruption of truth from tongue. A reader may be a good reader, but can never match the communicative intensity of an orator discovering out loud. This is why the more reliant a speaker is upon literate prompts, the less true “knowing” (in this Ongian sense) is actually going on and the less anyone is compelled to listen. Yet speakers and preachers have been commonly trained to document all their thoughts in silence, and well in advance of delivery, violating the very ways that discourse operates

naturally between people. Who jots down notes to say to their children before tucking them in at night?²¹ To speak well, the speaker needs to be in a sort of discovery mode, which is categorically different than a reporting mode. Here we think of different genres of speech, each of which possesses distinct characteristics. A sermon in discovery mode is of a different speech genre, operating by its own rules of composition and expression.

2.3 Speech Genres

The prominent theorist in speech genres is none other than Russian linguist and literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin has, more than anyone since ancient times, reflected upon the nuances of interpersonal communication in a multi-faceted world. We have different styles or genres for varying purposes and diverse environments. The unconscious rules for a cell phone call are distinct from those for a wedding toast or a board meeting. Speech genres work silently, behind the scenes as they condition our expression. “We speak only in definite speech genres, that is, all our utterances have definite and relatively stable typical forms of construction of the whole. Our repertoire of oral (and written) speech genres is rich. We use them confidently and skillfully in practice, and it is quite possible for us not even to suspect their existence in theory” (78).

Just as we brush our teeth according to certain unconscious rhythmic/kinetic patterns, we communicate not randomly, but in accordance with unwritten rules of generic expression. “These utterances reflect the specific conditions and goals of each area not only through their content (thematic) and linguistic style, that is, the selection of lexical, phraseological, and grammatical resources of language, but above all through

²¹ If this connection between a sermon and bedtime chatter seems inappropriate, Bakhtin continually and repeatedly makes recourse to “everyday” communicative rejoinders as the sort of bedrock of organic relational competence (77, 78, 79, 83, 89, 92, 94, 95, 96, 98, etc.)

their compositional structure” (60). Bakhtin is saying that how an utterance is composed, the “compositional structure” will be the primary factor in producing a sort of distinct speech genre. How do we learn compositional structure? “We know our native language—its lexical composition and grammatical structure—not from dictionaries and grammars but from concrete utterances that we hear and that we ourselves reproduce in live communication with people around us” (78). So we learn to compose our actual speech organically, without conscious effort. We mimic what we have experienced. Homiletically, we tend to create sermon genres which imitate the compositional style of sermons we have for years experienced. We move automatically into “sermon” genre.

But what if the sermons we have experienced are what Bakhtin called “objectively neutral”? What if they are composed without regard to the room? What if they are deeply monological not just in presentation, but also in structure? “Objectively neutral styles presuppose something like the identity of the addressee and the speaker, a unity of their viewpoints, but this identity and unity are purchases at the price of almost complete forfeiture of expression” (98). The result would be something like a reporting genre instead of a discovery genre.

In discovery mode, the preacher is not just simulating the coining of words in the moment, but actually is composing words in that moment and the audience senses the difference. This enacts an entirely different speech genre than can be produced out of literacy. Actual vocabulary choice, verb parsings, and syntax are being forged instantly in that inimitable connection of mind and tongue. What Ong has called a “flash” of understanding, Bakhtin calls a “spark” (87). “When we construct our speech, we are always aware of the whole of our utterance: both in the form of a particular generic

[genre] plan, and in the form of an individual speech plan. We do not string together words smoothly and we do not proceed from word to word; rather, it is though we fill in the whole with the necessary words” (86).

Though the value of this immediacy, this spontaneity, seems palpable enough, the genre of discovery seems, at first, incompatible with at least two homiletic features: preparation and exhortation. First, how could one “discover” things one already knows and has prepared? Second, would not this recourse to delivery in the moment erode the sense of authority necessary for exhortation? Is not the message a word from God and not a mere product of the room and its people?

Let us consider the first objection. In the genre of discovery, what would be the precise relationship between preparation and delivery? Preparation is no enemy to the discovery genre. On the contrary, adequate preparation is absolutely essential for discovery. Discovery mode should never be pitted against preparation since it is none other than preparation that builds steady and deep understanding and consequent natural fluency. The ideas themselves are well prepared, just not their specific or precise formulation. They are in memory, but at the onset of temporal delivery, inanimate or hibernating. By strategically suspending animation prior to delivery, the speaker allows the moment to supply not the idea, but the syntax as the idea is reanimated in discovery. The preacher is not discovering truth, but its most suitable and winsome expression for that specific moment.

This requires a confidence in the capacity of memory so that the preacher, in simultaneity with the congregation, is able to rediscover the truths he technically already knows. It is that rediscovery that animates the sermon and makes it shared experience,

dialogical instead of a monologue, unfolding instead of finished, eruptive rather than calculated. But this dialogical aspect also raises the question of authority. If it is dialogue that is being produced, what is the precise relationship between the interlocutors? Does receptive dialogue preclude hortatory imperatives? Is God reduced to a conversation partner while humans are inappropriately elevated to the role of co-composing their own divine revelation?

Bakhtin cannot overstress how strongly a conscious sense of the audience can and should impact a speech. “As we know, the role of the others for whom the utterance is constructed is extremely great. We have already said that the role of these others, for whom my thought becomes actual thought for the first time (and thus also for my own self as well), is not that of passive listeners, but of active participants of speech communication” (94). Notice how the crafting of words on another’s behalf produces “actual thought for the first time” for both the speaker and the audience. This is the same sense of live oral composition that Ong has described where chosen words, while admittedly affected by prior preparation, are nevertheless specifically selected in that very moment for that exact set of listeners.

Yet this process need not and cannot compromise divine authority in sermonic expression. It is God himself who graciously consents to invite dialogue. In the middle of a passage replete with divine authority it is God who invites, “Come now, and let us reason together,” says the LORD, “Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool” (Isa. 1:18). The spoken word from God is a dialogue, but not between equals.

Here we run into that amorphous overlap of word, preacher, and people. The sermonic dialogue has lines connecting all three parties. It is this sense of participatory dialogue that discovery engenders. Yet it is an entirely risky scenario since it precludes choosing all the right words ahead of time, a safety crutch which creates precision but extinguishes discovery and what Bakhtin calls “dialogical overtones”.²² These overtones are extinguished if the preacher already “knows” too much too soon and functionally and compositionally, if not technically, ignores the others in the room. There is no discovery left, nothing to move us off our previously composed script. This, says Ong, is the by-product of over-dependence on the tools of literacy and an unwitting negligence of an earlier dynamic mode of communication.

2.4 Psychodynamics of Orality

Ong does much more than describe what has been lost in the move from primary orality toward literacy. He also recreates what he calls the “psychodynamics” of orality. To grasp the world of orality in fullness, we are continually challenged to stop knowing what it seems we have always known. Ong asks us to imagine, with some difficulty, a world with no writing, and more importantly, no knowledge of the possibility of writing. In such a setting every word would be a sound and only a sound. When we hear the phoneme “door” we can barely hear or pronounce it without its complementary semiotic partner, the alphabetic sequence of a “d” two “os” and an “r,” coming to mind. But that

²² Dialogical overtones are what Bakhtin describes as a sense of dialogue, of give and take, of responsiveness, within what appears to be a mere monologue (92). For Bakhtin a sermon should recognize not just the present audience, but the entire older and longer conversation to which the sermon is responding. No sermon starts from scratch, even as it is bound to a previously delivered scriptural text. For an analysis of Bakhtin’s sense of dialogical overtones in Scripture itself see Walter Reed’s Dialogues of the Word: The Bible as Literature According to Bakhtin (Oxford, 1993).

connection, Ong tells us, is learned and artificial. It would be possible and indeed was commonplace, to link the sound “door” only to its physical reality. Early efforts to capture the concept “door” in text resorted to pictographic representations—a tiny door on paper. But one can quickly spot the inefficiency of the pictographic system that requires as many pictographs as there are things (as well as the inconvenience of trying to configure non-material concepts like fear or loyalty).

The genius of the alphabet was that it mapped sound with amazing economy by reducing every sound to a combination of symbols evoking a particular noise. Add all the separate noises together and speed them up phonetically, and you have a spoken word captured. Then learn to associate visually the sequence of written letters (“door”) with the actual door on its hinges, and you have, in two steps, invented a work-around for audible communication. This work-around, which initially must have seemed virtually miraculous, became so commonplace that it feels normal, even native to us. But Ong asks us to imagine a culture where nobody has ever looked anything up. “In a primary oral culture, the expression ‘to look something up’ is an empty phrase: it would have no conceivable meaning. Without writing, words as such have no visual presence, even when the objects they represent are visual ... They have no focus and no trace ... They are occurrences, events” (OL 31).

Shedding what you already know is difficult, especially when you are shedding literacy, and using literacy in the process of attempting to shed it. Part of this stepping back could be accomplished better orally, yet Ong characteristically uses whatever technology is available. In his summary work Orality and Literacy, he documents nine characteristics of oral communication, many of which will be applicable to homiletics in

the crafting of a sermon that is as orally adept as it is textually grounded. Interestingly enough, though Ong applies orality scholarship to various disciplines including Literary History, Formalism, Structuralism, Deconstructionism, Speech-Act & Reader-Response Theory, Social Science, Philosophy, and Biblical Studies, (OL 157-70) he stops short of making any explicit connections between orality and homiletics—despite the fact that as a priest he would have regularly practiced the homiletic art. Later we will unpack the homiletic utility in the following oral categories, but for now we will use them to remember a world largely forgotten in modernity: the world in which God’s word was originally delivered, the world of the apostles and prophets.

Additive Rather Than Subordinative

By “additive” Ong means the way that oral discourse falls out in awkward syntax that does not clearly explicate relationships between clauses. Speech tends to connect phrases with simple “ands” instead of organizational “nexts, because, or thens.” This is because the live context often supplies the sequence or causality in such a way that it is not necessary to state. Real speech is full of interruptions, unfinished clauses, interjections, amplifications and other things the literate world considers clumsy. Writing irons out all the clumsiness and seeks to orient each sentence and clause smoothly.

Ong cites the opening narrative of Genesis to illustrate this phenomenon (37). In the original Hebrew (as well as the orally conditioned Douay translation of 1610), only one word provides all the connections between clauses. The Hebrew *wa* or *we* does all the work, being translated by the English “and.” But modern translations read into the simple additives a correlative or causal sense, rendering them as “and,” “when,” “then,” “thus,” or “while.”

In homiletics, the manuscript or printed sermon typically includes no interjections, running sentences, or awkward fragments for they are almost impossible to anticipate and document being naturally produced in the moment. If the preacher excludes those from the sermon, the effect is fluid and smooth, but it moves the sermon out of the genre of discovery and into the world of reporting. There is a requisite price to pay either way. The unpolished speech replete with relative oral clumsiness might suffer a lack of precision or authority or credibility with certain audiences.²³ But the polished sermon suffers a distance from the audience that can cripple it in another direction.

Aggregative Rather Than Analytic

Ong here refers to an accumulation of oral word “clusters” that seem to travel discourse intact. We find this in English when certain words are used almost always with other partner words. If someone says “nigh unto” we know the next word is likely either “death” or “impossible.” There are phonological patterns engrained in speech that the mind expects to hear.

In Israel, oral liturgical resources such as the Shema worked this way. Once the oral pattern started, (“Hear O Israel...”) there was no doubt as to the outcome. In the New Testament Jesus employed a variety of oral formulas including “Truly, truly I say to you,” “He who has ears to hear, let him hear,” and “The kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Theologically this occurs in the church when oral formulas are used to reinforce theological concepts. When we refer to things like “eternal life” or the “blessed hope” or the “last days” we invoke familiar patterns of speech that conjure up more to the audience

²³ The framing of orality as “unpolished” and “clumsy” anticipates the bias of literacy against aggregation. From an older perspective, one might just as well call literacy “artificial,” “detached” or “lifeless.”

than the sum of the individual words. There is a formulaic sense to them that is shared and traditional and can be either powerful or trite or alienating, depending on how they are utilized. Commonly utilized recitations like the Lord's Prayer or the Twenty-Third Psalm have formulaic patterns and the more liturgical the church, the more oral patterns recur in worship. Though oral formulas can become routine, even mundane, orally oriented preachers recognize the power of formulaic expressions, even in the midst of a sermon, tapping into the sound sequence of shared key words to build community.

Redundant or Copious

Redundancy, normally a taboo in written culture, is necessary in orality. Even Ong's own categories of these very psychodynamics bear this sense of overlap and repetition. Ong explains that a reader can always go back at her own discretion to reread something missed (OL 40). So the writer moves ahead with dispatch. The speaker has no such luxury since the audience cannot "backloop" at will. It is incumbent upon the speaker to repeat artfully what has already been said so as to allow the listener another chance to grasp something first missed. Ong also notes how the speaker can utilize repetition to give his own mind a chance to think forward even as his mouth is still in the present. Oral rhythms require a constant pace; and pauses, unless strategic and contextual, kill momentum.

Ecclesiastes, which was likely spoken before it was written, exhibits this oral repetition: the themes of the brevity of life, the futility of wealth, the value of work and accountability to the Creator come up not once but in regularly repeating cycles.²⁴

²⁴ From its title (literally "The Preacher") to its themes, to its composition, Ecclesiastes bears many of these hallmarks of oral culture.

Preachers looking for a systematic approach to the book are no doubt frustrated by this oversight in organizational structure.

Homiletically speaking, the oral impulse allows the preacher to loop through the same content repeatedly and does not require each thought to be spoken only once. Redundancy is utilized, even celebrated. This opens the door for a speaker to “read” the room and repeat or reinforce as needed until there is a sense of shared understanding. Conversely, a literate sermon will tend to rely on a concise outline that proceeds in orderly fashion at a pace determined by the preformed content, not the audience. One might object that if the outline is published either on paper or screen, the listener can “backloop” as necessary, and the point must be granted. But this raises the prospect of an audience’s discursive attention wandering all around the room and only coincidentally melding with the speaker in the moment. It seems less than strategic to invite your audience to check in and out of the sermon at will, virtually governing their own independent experience of the sermon with a literate “remote control.”

Conservative/Traditionalist

Although the idea of an orally driven sermon might seem innovative, Ong argues that an oral culture is more traditional and conservative than a literate culture. This not a political or economic conservatism, but an communal impulse toward preservation of a long-standing set of values. If text works well to preserve oral expression, orality works to house and preserve values in human receptacles. “By storing knowledge outside the mind, writing and, even more, print downgrades the figures of the wise old man and wise old woman, repeaters of the past, in favor of younger discoverers of something new” (OL

41). Oral culture not only values the past, but feels a duty to pass it down, even as in Proverbs the father agonizes to see his son embrace the traditional values of wisdom.²⁵

Theologically we can see the oral impulse in much of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. Literature documents the oral tradition of the elders or the master teacher (Queheleth of Ecclesiastes). This previews what we will see in Chapter 3 regarding the interplay of text and tongue in Scripture itself. Since in classic Greek rhetoric the sermon falls into the ceremonial or epideictic category of praise and blame, we see the natural affinity between rhetoric and orality.²⁶ Praise and blame are simply the reinforcement of community values. While in literacy the sermon is often configured with a didactic/informative purpose, in orality the sermon does not inform as much as it does inspire the congregation to uphold and act out already-held and shared beliefs.

Close to the Human Life World

Oral cultures are phenomenological in the sense that they do not concern themselves with theoretical or hypothetical knowledge. It is contextualized knowledge that belongs in a particular place, with and to a particular people. They do not talk about fishing in a universal sense (as in what does all fishing have in common, or what might be the timeless principles of fishing). If they talk about fishing, it is fishing in this pond by this person to catch this kind of fish on this day.

It is striking that the revelation of God is in this same way so close to the human life world. A good portion of the New Testament revelation is comprised of epistles

²⁵ The first five chapters of Proverbs set up this traditionalist approach to wisdom from an oral perspective. Wisdom “calls out” to the young man and warns him repeatedly to “listen” to the experience of the elders.

²⁶ The other two classical categories are judicial (courtroom proceedings) and deliberative (legislative).

written to actual churches or individuals. For the most part the Apostles did not write to some imagined church universal, but to specific congregations whose lives and context they knew well. Twenty-one centuries later we still read, in Paul's last letter to his son in the faith, his very earthy request for scrolls and a coat he had forgotten at Troas with Carpus (2 Timothy 4:13); hardly a generic, de-contextualized revelation.

Homiletically, the oral sermon cannot escape universal and timeless Truth, nor should it try. But it can approach that truth in the context of an actual congregation in an actual town facing actually known issues.²⁷ In this sense, the sermon is addressed to that congregation in specific, and could not be dropped into another congregation in another town without consequence or a slippage in meaning. Today it is fashionable to treat sermons as universals that can be broadcast or downloaded or exported to any congregation in America in an almost generic sense. But if the same sermon can go anywhere, to what extent did it consider the actual flock in residence? To what extent should it be "their" sermon?

Agonistically Toned

Oral cultures frame themselves in heroic struggles against common foes. Life is an uphill battle that must be seriously engaged. Public speech is like a report from the front lines of the battle, a combination of pep rally and challenge. African-American sermons typically embody this kind of joint-struggle metaphor. "The distinctly black experience of marginalization and struggle is crucial to understanding what gives depth

²⁷ The scriptural letters of Paul are simultaneously specific and universal; addressed to the whole world, but also to specific recipients; timeless, yet still very temporal. Though temporal expressions can have eternal relevance, the original audience undoubtedly gets the most pungent expression. In oral composition the concrete audience not only has the front row seat, but also exerts a participatory influence, keeping the expression phenomenologically grounded.

and dimension to black preaching” (LaRue 121). But highly literate cultures move away from the cooperative struggle to the private. “As literary narrative moves toward the serious novel, it eventually pulls the focus of action more and more to interior crises and away from purely exterior crises” (Ong OL 44).

We can see this agonistic tone pervasively in places like Psalm 105 and 106. Both chronicle the corporate struggles of Israel against very exterior foes. The Psalms, an oral resource of shared hymns, often frame Israel in a multi-generational struggle to maintain community faithfulness to the covenant. The mindset is “we” and “us” and “our God.” The prophets make similar appeals to national as opposed to individual righteousness.²⁸

Empathetic and Participatory

Oral cultures have a different self-concept. They define themselves as part of a people. Their individual boats rise and fall with the community tide. “The objectivity which Homer and other oral performers do have is that enforced by formulaic expression: the individual’s reaction is not expressed as simply individual or ‘subjective’ but rather as encased in the communal reaction, the ‘communal soul’” (OL 46).

As in many of the previous characteristics of oral culture, the issue of community is unavoidable. Literacy typically builds the individual and promotes individual interests and concepts of self, even as a text can be read silently to oneself. Orality always builds community and a corporate sense of self since texts have to be read out loud to a common audience. We only need ask ourselves which orientation lines up more closely to the

²⁸ Examples of this are too numerous to cite. But take for instance Jeremiah’s opening salvo in his indictment of Israel and notice the corporate sense of sin. “For My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, to hew for themselves cisterns: broken cisterns that can hold no water” (2:13).

church as defined by the New Testament. That alone is reason enough to seriously consider rehabilitating the resources of orality for homiletics. If orality is communal, what excuse do we have for trafficking entirely in literacy to bolster the individual fortunes of individual worshippers or make exclusively individual applications of our texts? If we have been disproportionately oriented toward literacy in preaching, is it any wonder we have trouble building and sustaining a healthy community?

Every preacher has to choose how to apply the sermon: to individuals or to the corporate body. Since modernized literate Americans are highly individual, most sermons, at least in Caucasian churches, are applied to individuals. You, as an individual, should or could do this or that. Your individual relationship to God needs this or that. Your individual struggle against cancer or doubt or gossip means this or that. Very rarely do we apply a text of scripture to the whole congregation in the “we” sense. “We need to do this.” “We have neglected this or that.” This despite the fact that the epistles we preach almost always formulate imperatives with plural pronouns and verb conjugations, surely suggesting that the Apostles conceived of the reading/listening church more as a corporate body and less a collection of self-interested individuals.

Homeostatic

By “homeostatic” Ong refers to the sense in which the community maintains its identity by means of selective reinforcement. It tends to be self-perpetuating and, as previously described, conservative. The community does not attempt to be disinterested and equally address all potential options, but is interested and openly so. It is not neutral, but committed to maintaining a certain community image and neglecting evidence that does not support that image. “Oral societies live very much in a present which keeps

itself in equilibrium or homeostasis by sloughing off memories which no longer have present relevance” (OL 46).

Perhaps the best biblical illustrations are the imprecatory Psalms. In these we clearly see the partisan orientation of this oral culture. The enemies of Israel are the enemies of God and their destiny is not contemplated with civility. There is no fair and balanced appraisal in an imprecatory Psalm, but rather a deliberate framing of the situation toward Israel’s vindication.²⁹

You cannot very well lead a pep rally by presenting a fair and balanced analysis of both teams on the field. Pep rallies are partisan and unapologetically so. LaRue cites David Kelsey’s analysis of communal interpretive schemes to illustrate the way a preacher or theologian tends to bring to the scriptural text a pre-conceived understanding of what it needs to mean in order to bolster the community. “Kelsey claims that our decisions about how to construe and use scripture are not made solely on the basis of close study of biblical texts but on the basis of a prior decision in which we try to gather together in a single, synoptic judgment what Christianity is all about” (17).

The oral preacher is a partisan of the church in both its universal and localized settings, and the sermon is in some respects, accomplishing the same purpose as a pep rally. This does not mean the preacher would not address difficult topics or even failures of the believing community. Being interested does not mean ignoring or avoiding

²⁹ See Psalm 69 for an extended example:

“For they have persecuted him whom You Yourself have smitten,
And they tell of the pain of those whom You have wounded.
Add iniquity to their iniquity,
And may they not come into Your righteousness.
May they be blotted out of the book of life
And may they not be recorded with the righteous” (vv. 26-28).

problems. But it does interpret the problem through a certain established grid, and prescribe correctives from that same perspective. Simply put, homeostatic preaching is loyal to the church, defends her from other interested opponents, and seeks the welfare of the church even as it addresses internal problems. The outcome is never in doubt.

Situational Rather Than Abstract

Oral people tend to start with a narrative structure and see truth in the context of story. Their imperatives are not the consequence of abstract rational principles, but of the wisdom of actual lived experience. We can see this in Jesus' heavy reliance upon parables and story in his teaching.³⁰ It is not as if the story has no universal application, but that the universal application flows out of a specific event/activity as opposed to isolated theoretical reflection. In the former, there is no separation of truth and life application. There could not be. In the latter, abstract truth comes first and then is applied to life in a secondary process.

This difference in actual thinking patterns of oral and literate people is palpable, and Ong uses it to begin to point out how literacy actually "restructures consciousness." In other words, once the abstraction of literacy is learned, it is impossible to go back, because certain modes of thinking (situational) are lost to a theoretical orientation. Once we learn to see knowledge disembodied on page, it becomes difficult to erase that notion and return to what Ong conceives as a state of oral innocence. Ong may be overstating his case for effect, but there is no denying that literacy changes how we think about knowledge. With literacy knowledge acquires a slipperiness and transmutability

³⁰ Matthew cannot state this strongly enough. "All these things Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables, and He did not speak to them without a parable." (13:34).

alarming to an oral community. It becomes not only universal, but generic. It can escape and travel without permission from the originating author.

So what are we to make of the disembodied, abstract sermon? There was a time when no one would have said, “My sermon is there on the table” because “for any literary work to be what it really is, words must move in sequence, one after another, in someone’s consciousness. The work must be read or heard, re-created in terms of communication touching an existent person or persons over a stretch of time” (Ong *Voice as Summons for Belief* in Ong Reader 263). Literacy allows sermons to move out on their own, to all kinds of new contexts. But literacy also finishes a sermon and closes it down at the same time. It can no longer respond to a room or a particular time and place. Erase the name of the author and it can be completely anonymous: written by no one in particular, to anyone, for anywhere. Ong would suggest that the best conception of a sermon is the live event where it is uttered by a person to persons in a specific context and shared space. In that sense, while a record of the sermon may survive (as we now have transcripts of over 500 of St. Augustine’s sermons), the actual sermon was and is unrepeatable.

This is not to say that Ong was hostile to literacy. Ong never denigrates the strategic use of literacy, and never wishes nostalgically to try to live without it. As a scholar of unbelievable breadth, his work survives today only because of the strengths of literacy. His call was never for the elimination of literacy, but for its balance with the strengths of earlier oral resources. This is important as we anticipate an orally agile homiletic that, like the process of revelation itself, utilizes the strengths of both orality and literacy without allowing hegemony either way.

2.5 Ong's Real Grievance Against Literacy

A thorough reading of Ong leaves one with the impression that his real concern is not the mere invention of writing and the potential damage it has done, but the exploitation and massive extrapolation of writing by mechanical means. It was not the invention of alphabet and the chirographic (handwritten) eventuality of being able to map sound with a simple collection of 20 or so consonants and vowels. Indeed that achievement came about 1500 BC and made possible crucial documentation of history and theology. Chirographic culture was literacy for the specially educated and designated preservers of a culture. Text was not generative, but preservative of already-spoken words or events. It was tool for scribes, priests and diplomats, but the high cost and advanced education it required placed a governor on its radicalizing influence within an older oral culture.

The average Israelite farmer, Greek soldier, first-century Christian slave, or medieval serf, while reverencing text as valuable or even sacred, could not have imagined owning his own library or reading bedtime stories to his children, much less writing his own letters or journals. Even medieval monks who spent a good portion of their lives copying manuscripts still lived in community with tremendous oral residue, so much so that they reportedly operated only in semi-literacy even as they produced vast amounts of artistically charged chirographic literature (Burton-Christie 208). Reading in chirographic culture was commonly out loud to an audience; a shared experience, not a private one. Indeed, as long as writing was utilized as a preserve of speech, it maintained sensorial balance since the composition itself was still orally generated and structured. This will be an important feature of a bilingual sermon; one that is shaped by text and potentially

preserved in text, but one whose structure is a product of voice and dialogue instead of silent reflection.

Even as I write these words, I find it impossible not to voice them and even structure their syntax with sound in mind. This is consistent with either an early literacy, or a later literacy stretching intentionally backward.

Early written poetry everywhere, it seems, is at first necessarily a mimicking in script of oral performance. The mind has initially no properly chirographic resources. You scratch out on a surface words you image yourself saying aloud in some realizable oral setting. Only very gradually does writing become compositional writing, a kind discourse—poetic or otherwise—that is put together without a feeling that the one writing is actually speaking aloud (as early writers may well have done in composing) (OL 26).

2.6 The Printing Press and Hyper-literacy.

All that was to change with the invention of the printing press. Ong's mentor and friend, Marshall McLuhan published the Gutenberg Galaxy in 1962, just about the time Ong was ruminating over the oral/literate duality and a change in consciousness during the sixteenth century. Ong repeatedly makes clear his dependence on McLuhan, the noted Canadian sociologist. "His [McLuhan's] gnomic saying, 'The medium is the message,' registered his acute awareness of the importance of the shift from orality through literacy and print to electronic media. Few people have had so stimulating an effect as Marshall McLuhan on so many diverse minds, including those who disagreed with him, or thought they did" (OL 29).

McLuhan's book, like much of Ong's work, is a paradox itself. There is always irony in writing about writing, but McLuhan has the especially awkward task of using print culture to critique print culture. Ong explains this by saying that whenever a

technology has been thoroughly infused into the sensorium of a culture, all critiques of that latest technology are forced to employ it to attack itself. What other option is there besides sitting on the sidelines and wringing one's hands?

There is a sort of quiet mutiny, though, even in the printing of The Gutenberg Galaxy. Lacking any breakdown of chapters, headings or subtitles, the book proceeds at a breathless pace looping backward and forward through centuries of diverse scholarship. McLuhan's authorship is more like a narration, embodying, as no accident, a more oral than literate structure. With only one chapter, McLuhan defies the reader to break him into discreet units, chart and graph him. It is as if he "says" with his format, "either hear the whole story, or hear nothing at all." The one exception might be the callouts that hover on every page, calling attention to a particular and nearby point. But even his use of callouts defies the norm. Typically callouts summarize and sound-bite an author, making it easy to digest him quickly. McLuhan's callouts do not make sense by themselves, serving only to tease the reader into the rest of the story. Take this for example from page 201, "The oral polyphony of the prose Nashe offends against lineal and literary decorum." In an ingenious literary double-crossing, the reader is deprived of discreet content and forced back into the narration for context.

McLuhan's use of space and format in the print of the book perfectly illustrates his major point: mediums are not neutral. Knowledge is not information that can be inconsequently packaged for any medium. The medium, be it print, voice, film, or Web page will substantially shape the message. His long polemic against the excesses of print culture is embodied in the physical book itself, which on any bookshelf, stands defiantly

in rebuke of its neighbors. Ong's analysis of print culture is easier to follow and digest. Though not as agitated, it has almost all the features of McLuhan's main concerns.

Ong's concerns with print culture center on the finished sense that print gives to any author's material. In a manuscript culture the text was still a record of primary sound and the underlying assumption was that it required a vocalist to reanimate the sound. A manuscript was viewed as we might view a CD today. We know the sound is "on there," but it takes a CD player to unleash it. The auditor/reader was like the CD player. We would not think of an "unplayed" CD as having any value. But print culture eventually fostered silent reading, equivalent in early literacy to putting a CD up to your head and "getting" the song (or perhaps the move from shared music played out loud to isolated music played only through private headphones). Or to continue the musical metaphor one might imagine the typical silent library as the verbal equivalent of a concert hall where people gather to quietly peruse sheet music instead of actually playing music. Songs would no longer have to be played because they could be silently perceived, albeit at great communicative cost.

While silent reading was hypothetically possible in manuscript culture, it was the printing press with its unprecedented legibility, affordable production, visual control/appeal that launched silent reading on a massive scale. "Typographic control typically impresses more by its tidiness and inevitability: the lines perfectly regular, all justified on the right side, everything coming out even visually, and without the aid of guidelines or borders that often occur in manuscripts. This is an insistent world of cold, non-human, facts" (OL120). This visual orderliness, this sense of standardization, an almost mechanical nature, is a significant mediation between people and their reception

of the word of God. While we are not saying that mass printing of the Bible has had a negative affect, it surely has had a marked effect and one worth contemplation by anyone seeking to promulgate God's word today. In Chapter 3 we will probe more deeply into the experience of the word of God in both oral and literate environments.

Print also invented the word as a thing. Even in manuscript culture, replete with alphabet, the letters did not exist anywhere except in the mind of the writer and in context as scrawled on an actual page as part of a specific word. Print created letter blocks that lived in three-dimensional space and time without context of any word. Words were letter blocks bound together giving the sense that words are things instead of sounds (OL 116) existing independently of any context. They can live on their own without an author and develop generic meaning. Hence, dictionaries are needed to catalog all the words as things and define them. Their meaning will be de-contextualized, "genericized," and cataloged, something unnecessary in oral culture when words were sounds that needed surrounding sounds and situation to establish meaning.

The modern reader finds odd the diverse spellings of words in manuscript and early typographic culture. Certainly these were intelligent people. Why can they not spell correctly or at least uniformly? As long as words were maps of sound, the phonetic was the only important standard. Their visual appearance was inconsequential. But as words took on an increasingly visual sense, standardization and precision in both spelling and grammar became inevitable. Literate language rose to a level of precision never valued in oral culture. As McLuhan observes, "Typography extended its character to the regulation and fixation of languages" (GG 229) and "Print altered not only the spelling

and grammar but the accentuation and inflection of languages, and made bad grammar possible” (GG 231).

Not only did words become things, but books became repositories of knowledge “which contained information, scientific, fictional or other, rather than, as earlier, a recorded utterance” (OL 124). Two books of the same printing were not only similar as in manuscript culture but identical, indeed, indistinguishable. This along with a rising capitalism and merchant class led to the book as a commodity for mass marketing. With profit motive authors and publishers could now compose texts specifically for print with the intent to sell the product as a commodity. So the mass audience instead of a situated audience came to exert influence over what was published.

2.6 Conclusion

In summary, the technology of the printing press moved text from a preservative to a generative role. That move produced a new typographic literacy radically distinct from its earlier chirographic ancestor. When we speak of “literacy” today we must be clear about the variety to which we refer. For chirographic preservative literacy, the literacy of the prophets and apostles we will survey in Chapter 3, has more in common with orality than it does with the hyper-textuality of typographic literacy. Early scribal literacy represented a technological breakthrough, to be sure. But as long as it functioned in partnership with a primarily oral composition, the relationship was complementary and quite civil. It was only when literacy took over the role of composition that our cultural sensorium was so radically altered and ideas became disembodied on a massive scale.³¹

³¹ Ong is famous for his essay describing how, bereft of an actual audience, writers must fabricate a functioning substitute audience in order to know how and what to write. But

As in the commonly taught approach to sermon preparation, authors now penned ideas that had never been articulated—a radical thought at one point. In the oral world, a speaker or author was joining a conversation that had started before him and would last beyond him. Because of the communal and contextual sense in orality, the ideas were not personally owned and conveyed no illusions of pure originality. Print culture, with the ownership of words, invented the sense of plagiarism as an affront to originality and private possession of words. “Print culture gave birth to the romantic notions of ‘originality’ and ‘creativity,’ which set apart an individual work from other works even more, seeing its origins and meaning as independent of outside influence, at least ideally” (OL 131). Knowledge and eventually sermons could now be silent, generic, disembodied, and owned to a level unimaginable to a truly oral culture. Our understanding of this state of affairs owes an immense debt to the unassuming, yet brilliant scholarship of Walter Ong.

Ironically, it is another Jesuit, Father Laforgue who in the 1991 film Black Robe uncovers many of the same psychodynamics as Ong. Set in colonial French Quebec, it tells the story of a Jesuit priest who is sent into French Canada in 1650 as a missionary to the Algonquin and Huron Indians. Thrust into a primitive culture he neither understands nor appreciates, Father Laforgue seeks to impress the Indians with the nascent technologies of the then modern world. One day while jotting some notes on a pad, one of the native guides notices and inquires about the strange practice of scratching paper with a stick. The priest replies that he is making words. “But your mouth not move,” came the orally conditioned reply. “I will show you,” says Laforgue. “Tell me

this audience is passive and fictional, a mere extension of the author’s ego. See *The Writer’s Audience is Always a Fiction* in An Ong Reader.

something I do not know. Anything.” The old Indian elder pauses, thinks, and then muses, “My wife’s mother died last year in the snows.” Laforgue quickly jots down the event on paper and then calls across the camp to another Frenchman. Showing him the pad, he asks his literate partner to read it out loud. Confused, the friend nevertheless complies: “His wife’s mother died last year in the snow?” Shocked, the old chief grabs the pad and studies it carefully, mystified as to how such knowledge could live there on that white surface. One of the other Indians leans over and whispers suspiciously, “He has a demon.”

Oral cultures consistently express confusion bordering on contempt when they sense the dislocating power of the written word. Yet despite this pattern, the Hebrew peoples of the second millennium BC fostered a reverence and appreciation for mysteries of literacy even as they operated day-to-day in primary orality. Their sacred texts, which we hold now as Scripture, demonstrate oral roots even in their literate form. But what does Scripture itself say about this oral/literate continuum? In the next chapter we’ll examine the extent to which Scripture privileges one over the other, and how both orientations are represented.

Chapter 3

Orality and Literacy in Scripture

3.1 General Literacy in the Ancient World

According to our way of thinking you would think the Lord would at least have put off being born until after the invention of printing, that until then there had been no fullness of time, and that he would have secured for himself a few high-speed presses.³² —Soren Kierkegaard (527).

Regardless of denominational context, contemporary church life is inextricably linked to Scripture. It is almost impossible to image a church setting today without the presence of the text of the Bible in liturgy, doctrinal formulations, and preaching. Since literacy's connection with modernity is so entrenched, this omnipresence of sacred text seems commonplace, indeed indispensable. Since 1611 at least, the Textus Receptus and its vernacular descendents have staked a claim to the interior real estate and service order of all manifestations of the church. Indeed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Bible took its place along with other books on the shelves of European parishes and personal households in a way unimaginable even a hundred years before when only the

³² Soren Kierkegaard: Papers and Journals: A Selection, (Penguin, 1996).

wealthiest could have acquired a personal manuscript.³³ This had an individualizing effect on the reader who now “owned” the text in more ways than one. McLuhan observes, “The portability of the book, like that of the easel-painting, added much to the new cult of individualism” (GG 206).

What followed was a desacralization of text that was a necessary concomitant to mass production. Quoting Febvre and Martin’s L’Apparition du Livre, McLuhan underscores this secularization. “Moreover, thanks to printing and the multiplication of texts, the book ceased to seem to be a precious object to be consulted in a library: there was more and more need to be able to carry it about readily in order to refer to it or to read it anywhere at any time” (207). Thus, we have the birth of the portable book and the portable, personal Bible. But this was not until some 16 centuries after Christ and some 36 centuries after Abraham. For approximately 90 % of the timeline of God’s people, there were no personal sacred texts feasibly owned by commoners.³⁴

Consider the obstacles to a medieval tanner who, curious about the Bible he heard recited on Sunday, wanted to have a look for himself.³⁵ First, there was the geographic

³³ Make no mistake. Early printed Bibles, though more commonly available after Gutenberg, were still not acquired on whimsy. Greenslade likens the resulting sense of sacrifice to buying a car instead of buying a house (424).

³⁴ This distinction between elite and commoner is essential when contemplating ancient literacy. Though it is not difficult to find widespread references to literacy among the ruling class in Greece from 700 BC onward, the literacy level among commoners is an entirely different question (William Harris 231). Harris finds theological literacy among commoners far from essential in the Late Republic and High Roman Empire. “It was not necessary for an ordinary Christian to read any text for himself, although the real enthusiast might of course do so” (221).

³⁵ The choice of a medieval example is important here as most scholars attest to a general decline of literacy in the Late Empire with the barbarian invasions (Harris 321,

obstacle. The tanner would first have to travel to a point where a copy of the text was housed. The most likely location would have surely been the local parish or regional monastery, or at least the location most hospitable to such a humble inquiry. Should he be able to make the trip and secure the attention of the parish priest or monk, he could next encounter a procedural obstacle. The priest would surely not hand over a rare and costly text to a tanner untrained in the careful handling of such delicacies. Handwritten manuscripts had to last for decades if not longer and could be maintained only with special attention and reverence. But suppose the priest was kind enough to grant at least a supervised visit. He would lead the tanner to the place of safekeeping and open the massive codex.³⁶

There the tanner would encounter for the first time the sensory stimulus offered by the smell and texture of the written word. But he would also encounter a conceptual barrier, as his own illiteracy would render the scratchings on the page unintelligible. Yet suppose the priest was extraordinarily gracious, and offered to regularly tutor the tanner to the point where he could, with expert coaching, begin to sound out the phonemes of the revered Vulgate. He would then face the linguistic barrier since, while some of the words had a familiar liturgical ring, they would have been largely incomprehensible to the tanner accustomed to Medieval French or Old English.

Greenslade 491). Literacy's low ebb seems to have been between approximately AD 500 and AD 1200.

³⁶ Harris describes the Christian's peculiar preference for the codex over the scroll in late antiquity, perhaps because printing on both sides of the parchment was economical, and because Christians acquired an early propensity toward polemic citations, a task made infinitely easier with the codex over the scroll (295).

These obstacles, either alone or in combination, kept the sacred text inaccessible for countless generations of Jews and Christians before the arrival of print, vernacular translations, and the push toward mass literacy. “In these circumstances it seems perfectly natural that nothing like mass literacy ever came into being in antiquity” (Harris 327). Most of the people of God, for most of sacred history, have had to get along in the faith without the benefit of a personal Bible or any sustained and systematic obligation to read it for themselves. Somehow common folk were converted, prayed, parented, served, evangelized, learned Biblical content, and activated their faith in the world using only the oral/aural reception of the word of God that they heard articulated from the synagogue or parish lectern. “For the ordinary Christian, though the authority of the written word was in the background, there was no need for personal reading ... The church’s leaders recognized that if Christian writings were to have much effect on the masses, they would have to be transmitted orally. In the second century, the scriptures were normally heard” (Harris 305).

This is not to say we should seek a return to a lost oral innocence by abandoning personal copies of the Bible or personal Bible reading. Ong himself points out the naivety and futility of such a longing (OL 171). But it does say something about our modes of reception of the word of God, what Ong called our “sensorium,” and might bring into question whether the stockpiles of personal Bibles that surround us in ever-expanding versions and colors actually make us better Christians than our forefathers bereft of such opportunity. It says something about the oral/aural power of the word of God as experienced in shared community and the consequent homiletic obligations. If congregations are actually designed to hear the word of God, and if that is exactly how

the vast majority of our spiritual ancestors carried on in the faith, how should preaching attempt to honor and accommodate that design? How does history teach us about human capacity to process and assimilate both oral and written revelation? Before we proceed with pragmatic answers to that question, we need to examine what Scripture says about itself, lest we invent a praxis alienated from the written and authoritative medium that has come down to us.

3.2 Oral and Literate Synthesis

Since historically speaking we must admit that the Bible had to be received orally for centuries before it was textually commonplace, and since Ong labors hard to distinguish oral from literary structuring, could it be that the Bible itself is orally generated and designed, even in its textuality, to be heard first? Or to put it another way, in what ratio does the Bible reflect both oral and literate impulses? Ong himself maintains we are conditioned to overlook orality in ancient texts because we are so accustomed to wearing the spectacles of literacy when we read. “The same disability has interfered with our understanding of the nature of the Bible with its massive oral underpinnings, and that of the nature of language itself” (PW 21).³⁷

A thoroughgoing survey of every Biblical text that informs this question would be way beyond the scope of this project. For practicality, we will focus our efforts on four

³⁷ Susan Niditch has done an important work here uncovering the behind-the-scenes interplay between orality and literacy that erupt in the Old Testament Scriptures. Central to her thesis is the idea that we have largely ignored the oral underpinnings of Scripture because of the assumptions fostered by largely literate presuppositions. Niditch documents not only the sound patterns embedded in sacred text, but also the mysterious and magical power granted to literacy by illiterates and how that respect contributes to a sense of textual authority bordering on veneration. Following the oral interpretive pattern, Bruce Shields (From the Housetops Chalice, 2000) unmask oral patterns in Luke, Acts, and the Epistles.

episodes of revelatory activity and attempt to discern underlying orientations whether oral, literate or a combination. We will survey the period of Moses and the Law, the prophetic oracles of Jeremiah, the teaching and practice of Jesus, and the epistles of Paul to discern how Scripture itself frames the delicate balance of orality and literacy. We will be consulting Scripture directly from the New American Standard Bible because of its close adherence to the syntax of the original Greek and Hebrew texts and its relative lack of translational interpretation, consulting the original languages where appropriate.

3.3 Scriptural Transmission

With a keen grasp of the obvious we first observe that the Scriptures we seek to consult on these issues are themselves textual. So perhaps the inquiry is hopelessly biased in favor of literacy. But if we recall that the present form of Scripture is, in form, distinguishable from its original articulation, then we can see behind the present literacy traces of latent orality. All this is dependent upon the often underappreciated role of the amanuensis, or secretary.

Look, for instance, at one of the stalwart New Testament passages about prophetic authority and transmission. “Know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (2 Pet. 1:20-21). The text clearly states that when God inspired the prophets, they spoke. “Another series of facts indicate that part of the biblical literature had a prehistory in which it existed in oral form. The basic task of the prophets was that of proclaiming the word, and we see this in the accounts they leave of their vocation and descriptions such as that of the ‘evangelist’ or

herald of good news in Isaiah 40:9, who is bidden to ‘cry out at the top of your voice’” (Schokel 247).

Yet most commentaries overlook this phenomenon and refer perpetually to the prophets as mere writers of scripture. That some of the prophets, and many of the historians of the Bible wrote, is indisputable. But that many of them used secretaries (as Jeremiah and Paul did explicitly) is also beyond dispute.³⁸ Even when the text says that Isaiah or Jeremiah wrote on a book or scroll (Is. 30:8 or Jer. 30:2), it no more guarantees they actually handled the stylus than Solomon’s building of the temple guarantees he wielded the stonemason’s hammer himself. In biblical terms the authorization of an activity by an authority is often phrased as if that authority was personally and literally involved. The larger point in citing their penmanship is that Isaiah and Jeremiah were intimately wrapped up in the production of the text in both oral and literate ratios.

So we can see and hear that the transmission of Scripture is a confusingly beautiful blend of oral and literate sources. Niditch proposes four etiologies of the written text and admits there may be more.³⁹ At any rate, to avoid reading our literate selves back upon the original performers and authors, we must come to hear and recognize oral underpinnings in our received text. Simply put, even the Scripture under examination in this chapter is perforated with this symbiosis and so will require newly

³⁸ For a scholarly overview of the pervasive role of the secretary in first century literacy and in Paul’s letters in specific, see Ernest Richards’ The Secretary in the Letters of Paul, (J.C.B. Mohr, 1988). Richards documents evidence of a secretary in virtually all of Paul’s letters, and especially Romans (which he conceives to have been dictated live), Galatians, and 1 Corinthians (172).

³⁹ 1) Oral performance dictated and copied. 2) Oral narrative documented for the purpose of reoralization. 3) Literary composition imitating an oral style. 4) Written sources for written compositions (117-29).

attenuated ears to coax out the often overlooked orality.⁴⁰ “In a culture in which writing is already prevalent and predominant, there is a danger that some authors will lose awareness and feeling for the primary reality of the spoken word. They think in terms of letters, rather than in terms of sound, and they imagine that others near them or far from them in time or distance think, or thought, as they do” (Schokel 242). This is the imbalance we now seek to avoid in our more detailed probe of the sacred text.

3.4 Moses and the Law

In only the third sentence of Moses’ Law, we hear the creative power of the voice of God. “Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light” (Gen. 1:3). It is God’s voice that continues through each successive day of creation. It is not a sound that started with creation, but one which, via the creation of a universe with means of perception, can for the first time be heard. Calvin reasons: “For because something begins to be manifested at a certain time, we ought not therefore to gather that it never existed before. Indeed, I conclude far otherwise: the Word had existed long before God said, ‘Let there be light’” (1:131).

This is the power of the primordial word of God. It is sound rather than sight that first entered the universe. Sound creates the world of sight. God is a God who has sounded his existence, a priority that must not be trivialized. “Theologically construed, speaking is not a trait projected upon God by analogy to human experience. We do not speak first, and then think about God as speaking too. On the contrary, we can speak only because God created us to be hearer’s of God’s word” (Webb 15).

⁴⁰ Schokel recognizes this interplay even in his description of inspiration which he classifies with three simultaneous orders: “inspiration in the order of knowledge–cognitive; inspiration in the order of speech–prophetic; inspiration in the order of writing–hagiographical” (239).

God's voice begins all new revelation. We are so accustomed to seeing the Ten Commandments in text, that it is hard for us to remember they were not originally delivered via text, but by God's own voice as a direct and unmediated encounter.⁴¹ Before he ever wrote them, he spoke them audibly as the record in Exodus 20:1 clearly shows ("Then God spoke all these words saying ...). The people, hearing God's voice, are understandably alarmed and beg Moses not to make them hear such a thing ever again. It is clear they would rather have Moses engage Yahweh personally. The LORD concurs but not without a stern reminder; "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, "You yourselves have seen that I have spoken to you from heaven" (Exod. 20:22).

Moses is then called up to the mountain where God again speaks, expanding the seminal Ten Commandments into a fuller civil covenant. Moses returns and orally delivers this fuller sense of the Law to the people. After hearing it, the people announce their willingness to obey. It is only then that Moses writes down "all the words of the LORD" (Exod. 24:4). But it is significant to note that their first two exposures to the Law were oral and spoken. The written only comes afterward as a preservative element. From Chapter 24 to 31 God calls Moses up again to the mountain and for the third time speaks yet another expansion of the Law. Every revelation of the law was spoken first. At the end of this third disclosure, God makes a preservative move: "When He had finished speaking with him upon Mount Sinai, He gave Moses the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written by the finger of God" (31:18).

⁴¹ Though both Moses and angels are often connected to the giving of the Law, Aquinas makes this unmediated nature clear and significant. "It seems that the Old Law was not given through the angels, but immediately by God ... But the Old Law is related to have been given by the Lord: for it is written (Ex. 20:1): 'And the Lord spoke . . . these words'" (Summa Theologiae, Question 98).

There are only a few times in the entire Bible when God himself writes. There is this occurrence, and the subsequent second round where God replaces the tablets that Moses shatters. The only other instance is the mysterious hand on the wall at Belshazzar's feast in the book of Daniel. But even when God does write, it is preceded by the spoken word with text in a preservative role. This is consistent with the overall role of literacy in the ancient world.

At the beginning of the next chapter Moses and God both refer to a book of God's. "But now, if You will, forgive their sin—and if not, please blot me out from Your book which You have written!" The LORD said to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him out of My book" (Exod. 32:32-33). Although the reference is cryptic, it seems that at least in a metaphorical sense, God was keeping some kind of record or archive of faithfulness of which they are mutually aware. The book serves a documentary, archiving role, not the locus of new thought or discourse or revelation. References to books and scrolls and annals are commonplace throughout the Old Testament, uniformly placing literacy as the locus for information that should not be forgotten and might need to be authenticated. Written words have a sort of legal sense to them. So when a man wants to initiate a divorce he must get it drawn up to garner the legal sense of permanence (Deut. 24).

Consider the instance in Numbers 5:22-24 where a woman is suspected of adultery. The priest is instructed to write the curses on a scroll, and then wash the ink of the words into water that the woman then drinks. The ink carries the legal sense of the curse into the water and the water into the woman. This is reminiscent of similar events when a prophet is told to eat a scroll, moving the words of the text from the exterior to

the interior of the person. The text, or in this case the ink, has a binding, permanent, material, and official sense that contrasts sharply with the evanescent nature of oral speech which while equally authoritative is difficult to capture and hold.

In Deuteronomy 6:4-9, the famous Shema of Israel, we see an interesting blend of the oral and the written.

Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

The initial call is from orality: “Hear,” not “Read, O Israel!” It is the ear that receives revelation. From the ear it moves to a place “on your heart.” This is an acceptance or interiorization of the word. From the heart it goes back to the mouth as the commands are orally taught in the normal discourse of shared community life. Then the move is toward preservation as they become “tied” and “bound” with visual symbols and “written” on the doorposts and gates. Again revelation starts in orality and then is captured by literacy.⁴²

⁴² This sort of progression is difficult to document from typical exegetical research methods. Aquinas and Augustine cite this passage voluminously, linked as it usually is, with Trinitarian controversy. But the entire point for most scholars is what follows the familiar “Hear, O Israel!” The actual oral sense of the calling is not therefore pertinent and goes unnoted. Older commentators comfortable in orality do not typically call attention to oral/aural underpinnings possibly because it would seem to them a keen grasp of the obvious. Modern commentators ensconced in literacy tend to conflate oral and literate renditions of the word of God into a generic sense of revelation. Commentators of all ages tend to focus on the content of the revelation rather than on its medium or the concomitant sensorium. In short, massive amounts of biblical orality go unnoticed.

Another preservative role for literacy is in the training of kings. Yahweh required that every king be literate enough have firsthand acquaintance with the Law. “Now it shall come about when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this law on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests. It shall be with him and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, by carefully observing all the words of this law and these statutes” (Deut. 17:18-19). The king here is reduced to scribe or copyist. He is not generating new information or discovering creative writing, but using the strengths of literacy to perpetuate already-given revelation and his personal connection to it.

At the end of Moses’ life, as Deuteronomy comes to a close, documentation is pervasive. There is the sense, long before the book ends, that with Moses’ death an era is passing. The spokesman of God will no longer be on the scene. There is a need to preserve, and literacy rises to the challenge. Moses, or his scribe, writes about his own writing and preservation of the Law. But since the bulk of the people are still not going to have access to the Law, two different vehicles are invented to perpetuate their continued but illiterate access to the Law: hearing and singing.

Then Moses commanded them: "At the end of every seven years, at the time of the year of remission of debts, at the Feast of Booths, when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God at the place which He will choose, you shall read this law in front of all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people, the men and the women and children and the alien who is in your town, so that they may hear and learn and fear the LORD your God, and be careful to observe all the words of this law. Their children, who have not known, will hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, as long as you live on the land which you are about to cross the Jordan to possess" (Exod. 31:10-13).

At least every seven years the assembly, during the year of Jubilee, the entire assembly was to hear the Law. One might wonder if once every seven years was

adequate exposure since a person might only hear the word at the most ten times their entire life, assuming the year of Jubilee was faithfully observed (there is precious little mention of it outside this reference).

But there were other ways that ancient cultures preserved on a widespread and oral level what was officially documented in literacy. The same chapter has the LORD commanding the use of a communal and oral resource.

Now therefore, write this song for yourselves, and teach it to the sons of Israel; put it on their lips, so that this song may be a witness for Me against the sons of Israel ... Then it shall come about, when many evils and troubles have come upon them, that this song will testify before them as a witness (for it shall not be forgotten from the lips of their descendants); for I know their intent which they are developing today, before I have brought them into the land which I swore. So Moses wrote this song the same day, and taught it to the sons of Israel” (Deut. 31:19-22).

Chapter 32 records the song that could be used to perpetuate, in shared memory, direct revelation. The song itself is disquieting, a prediction of unfaithfulness and punishment and defeat. It may not be pleasant to be asked to sing their own failures, but it is the kind of oral resource that gave the community strength when it had no widespread or predictable or commonplace access to textual Law. Chapter 32 is a strong prescription in the communal medicine chest, but it is not the only one.

Chapter 33 is also an extended song, albeit a more optimistic outlook.

Indeed, He loves the people;
All Your holy ones are in Your hand,
And they followed in Your steps;
Everyone receives of Your words.
Moses charged us with a law,
A possession for the assembly of Jacob (vv. 3-4).

Notice the Law is the “possession of the assembly.” The notion of private ownership of the Law would have been foreign indeed. The song then celebrates some aspect of each tribe. About Levi he says:

They shall teach Your ordinances to Jacob,
And Your law to Israel
They shall put incense before You,
And whole burnt offerings on Your altar (v. 10).

This is the paradigmatic role of the Levites: maintaining the sacrificial system, and instructing the people in the Law. If we conceive of the task from the modern perspective of literacy we think immediately of textual resources. But how would they teach such a vast illiterate throng? Certainly the oral resources of poetry and song would have been helpful. Besides the entire songbook of Psalms, songs are scattered throughout the Old Testament, often recounting salvation history in memorable sequence.

During the post-exilic revival under Ezra and Nehemiah, the Levitical didactic role is explicit, moving from text to recitation to oral commentary.

The Levites ... Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, and Pelaiah, the Levites, explained the law to the people while the people remained in their place. They read from the book, from of the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading (Neh. 8:7-9).

Notice their role encompassed both oral and literate tasks: reading from the Law and also providing explanation and application along with translation. The auditory role of public reading is familiar and typical of how people experienced the word of God. The explanatory role, though previously implied in Levitical purview, is listed here explicitly as part of the Levites’ responsibility and is the closest approximation of the modern preaching event we get anywhere in the Old Testament. The Levites started with

silent text, reanimated it audibly, and then made application and comment to the congregation. From the divinely creative word, to the delivery of the Law, to its reception and application, the Pentateuch gives a consistent sequence: generative sound first, followed by preservation in text.

3.5 Jeremiah and Baruch

Approximately 100 years before the exile, Jeremiah spoke to Judah during the waning days of the Southern Kingdom. An episode from chapter 36 gives us insight into the ways that orality and textuality worked in revelation and preaching. During the reign of King Jehoiakim, the kingdom continued its deterioration. While there had been a literacy-driven revival under Jehoiakim's father Josiah, who found the long lost Book of the Law, Jehoiakim was a puppet king installed by Pharaoh Neco and had none of the theological sensitivities of his father. Jeremiah is told by God to write down all the words he had been speaking to the prophet for at least the last four years, probably more. Jeremiah complies by securing a scribe named Baruch to take dictation and produce a written record. So the pattern from Moses continues: revelation starts in the spoken word, and then is recorded for a specific documentary purpose.

In this case the specific purpose is the portability of the literate word. Jeremiah, either because of personal threat or a type of restraining order, was forbidden to approach the temple in Jerusalem. Yet with the miracle of literacy his words, carried and reanimated by Baruch, could. Baruch follows the instructions and goes to the temple to read to the assembly. It happens that Micaiah, son of the current secretary and grandson of Shaphan (the secretary who had found and read the law under Josiah in the previous generation), overheard Baruch's public reading and reported it immediately to the palace

officials. Micaiah is typical of the professional scribe, elevated above commoners and nobles alike by his proficiency in literacy.

They promptly summon Baruch and request a more private, yet still audible reading. Baruch complies and once again intones the text to them. Alarmed, they recognize either Jeremiah's content or style or both. Upon inquiry, Baruch admits Jeremiah as source, which furthers the probe. Suspecting the king might take retaliatory action, they instruct Baruch to take Jeremiah and hide, and then inform the king of the presence of the scroll. The king then calls for yet another reading of the confiscated scroll.

Now the king was sitting in the winter house in the ninth month, with a fire burning in the brazier before him. When Jehudi had read three or four columns, the king cut it with a scribe's knife and threw it into the fire that was in the brazier, until all the scroll was consumed in the fire that was in the brazier. Yet the king and all his servants who heard all these words were not afraid, nor did they rend their garments (Jer. 36:22-24).

What is supposed to be striking is the apparent carelessness with which Jehoiakim dismisses and then destroys the scroll. He is the entirely profane man who not only ignores the words of the Lord, but also proceeds to destroy them ceremoniously. But just when it seems he has successfully thwarted the plan of God, we are reminded that God has hidden his prophet and his scribe.

Then the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah after the king had burned the scroll and the words which Baruch had written at the dictation of Jeremiah, saying "Take again another scroll and write on it all the former words that were on the first scroll which Jehoiakim the king of Judah burned ... Then Jeremiah took another scroll and gave it to Baruch the son of Neriah, the scribe, and he wrote on it at the dictation of Jeremiah all the words of the book which Jehoiakim king of Judah had burned in the fire; and many similar words were added to them (Jer. 36: 27-28, 32).

Despite the king's irreverence and power, God's revelation could not be destroyed because it lived first in Jeremiah before it was ever expelled to Baruch and the scroll. "The oral world presents itself as letters or annals read aloud or as in the case of Jeremiah 36, when the best preserver of an oracle turns out to be not the written text that is destroyed but the memory and capacity orally to recreate the message" (Niditch 133). Now the LORD could have as easily protected the scroll as he protected Jeremiah, but the priority of the prophet over the scroll seems to be the point. Revelation is generated orally and preserved in literacy. If the literacy were to be somehow compromised, it is only a small impediment for Jeremiah to restore it. In fact, the second scroll ends up longer and better than the first, a feature familiar to anyone who has lost a file and had to start from scratch rebuilding it.

So we see an image of Jeremiah often overlooked in a literary framing. He is a preacher demonstrably more than he is a writer. In fact it is doubtful, given the explicit role of Baruch, that Jeremiah wrote anything. Consider his summary calling in 1:9, "Then the LORD stretched out His hand and touched my mouth, and the LORD said to me, 'Behold, I have put My words in your mouth.'" The divine initiative is clear along with its medium. God called prophets to speak first and foremost. "Thus saith the LORD" means enunciated sound, and prophets are God's tool to make a sounding into his created order.

Yet since we only read that calling to preach via text on a page, it is easy to conflate the two media and frame Jeremiah and his prophetic colleagues as authors first, bent faithfully in candlelight over a well-worn desk with stacks of requisite papyri lying about. There is some indication that Jeremiah did write something himself on a scroll as

his last ceremonial act. His instructions to Seraiah reveal his own understanding of the role of literacy. “So Jeremiah wrote in a single scroll all the calamity which would come upon Babylon, that is, all these words which have been written concerning Babylon. He said to Seraiah, ‘As soon as you come, then see that you read all these words aloud’” (51:60-61).⁴³ Literacy, for Jeremiah, was the safe encoding of prior sound; an encoding that was stalled until it became reanimated back into the aural world.

The message from Jeremiah about interplay of text and tongue is consistent: while sound is prior, the visual properties of text also serve Yahweh’s purpose. Sound and sight work cooperatively. The scroll had portability that Jeremiah lacked. But Jeremiah had generative and regenerative power impossible for the scroll. God seems to use each for its role and in many cases uses both simultaneously. In the end, the scroll gets the last word because it can endure reliably even down to this day, while Jeremiah’s life ended some time ago.

3.6 Jesus on Text and Tongue

When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at his teaching—St. Matthew.⁴⁴

And all were speaking well of Him, and wondering at the gracious words which were falling from His lips—St. Luke.⁴⁵

The officers answered, "Never has a man spoken the way this man speaks."⁴⁶ ...

As He spoke these things, many came to believe in Him—St. John.⁴⁷

⁴³ Given his typical employment of a scribe, it is difficult to determine whether this phrasing requires Jeremiah to have inscribed this message himself, or whether a scribe is assumed.

⁴⁴ 22:33

⁴⁵ 4:22

Jesus on Literacy

Summary statements like these project the spoken words of Jesus as significantly central, even emblematic, to his ministry. Even though the world had changed in seismic ways from Jeremiah to Christ, the oral sensorium was still primary. Moving from the sixth century BC to the time of Christ, how much movement toward literacy actually occurred? The issue is debatable and far from precise. While many scholars have made optimistically generous estimates of widespread literacy, we have seen that William Harris' thorough and authoritative analysis is not nearly as idealized. Recognizing that literacy itself is better charted on a continuum than as a litmus test, Harris estimates that only about 10 % of the population of ancient Greece was literate in the sense we think of today, and that figure does not seem to change appreciably up through Roman world of the first century AD. (61, 173). Even though the elites of Greco-Roman culture were able to use literacy pervasively, they still relied on what Ong calls "oral residue" for the bulk of their social interaction, suggesting a tasteful blend of overlapping orality and literacy on the ancient palate. "They frequently dictated letters instead of writing them for themselves; they listened to political news rather than reading it; they attended recitations and performances, or heard slaves reading, without having to read literary texts for themselves" (Harris 36).

But how about Jesus himself as he functioned in that ancient sensorium? Where would his explicit statements and actual praxis place him on the oral/literate continuum? Toward literacy we see him granting a high level of honor to the Law and the Prophets.

⁴⁶ 7:46

⁴⁷ 8:30

“Not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law.”⁴⁸ Yet the fact that he quotes them easily in the midst of everyday life shows a high value for oral facility without dependence on an actual scroll. This is consistent with the attribution of his unique style in Matthew 7:29: “For he was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.” Scribal authority was based in text and inter-textual expertise, including predictable sourcing of a given interpretation to the corresponding authoritative rabbi. Scribes were accountants and compilers of outside information.⁴⁹ Jesus did not operate on that level since his teaching was “author”-itative, characteristic of an author not a compiler of others’ thoughts.⁵⁰

He reads the scroll of Isaiah in his hometown synagogue (Luke 4), and then moves smoothly into oral commentary on the reading. His parables embedded in everyday life have all the features of orality (Matthew 13), yet he never penned a word himself (save possibly that scratching in the dirt when the woman was caught in adultery). By today’s literate standards, it might seem odd that he left the writing to others, but it made perfect sense in his day particularly as a respected rabbi. In fact it is because he was so respected, that writing, the province of mere scribes, would have been beneath him. This is why it never seems to strike his disciples or the early church as odd that they held no text from his hand. “It is in the light of Hajnal’s presentation of medieval writing that we can make more sense of the view of Aquinas that Socrates and

⁴⁸ Matt. 5:18

⁴⁹ See Aaron Demsky on the role of scribes in Judaism.

⁵⁰ The Greek word for authority is *exousian* with the root meaning related to “power of choice” or “liberty of doing as one pleases” (Thayer’s Lexicon).
<http://www.greekbiblestudy.org/gnt/greekWordStudy.do?id=488989&greek=true>

Christ, being teachers, did not commit their works to writing” (GG 98). McLuhan goes on to cite a lengthy passage from Aquinas explaining why Jesus did not write, “First, on account of his own dignity; for the more excellent the teacher, the more excellent his manner of teaching ought to be. And therefore it was fitting that Christ, as the most excellent of teachers, should adopt that manner of teaching whereby his teaching would be imprinted on the hearts of his hearers.”

But despite the fact he chose not to write anything himself, he clearly expected the educated with whom he disputed to be textually informed. In no less than 6 instances on at least 4 different occasions in Matthew alone, Jesus queries his interlocutors with the probing phrase, “Have you never read?” He constantly appealed to Scripture as a body of knowledge that was authoritative and available to this educated upper class of priests, teachers of the law, and Pharisees. It was, indeed, the repository of truth. Matthew 22:29-32 is typical. “But Jesus answered and said to them, ‘You are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. But regarding the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God: “I AM THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, AND THE GOD OF ISAAC, AND THE GOD OF JACOB”? He is not the God of the dead but of the living.’”

Here is not just an expectation of literacy, but an argument based on the tense of two verbs.⁵¹ This is precision literacy. This expectation of literacy is confined, however, to his discourse with the authorities and he nowhere demonstrates any such expectation of common folk. Indeed his expectation of them was confined to the oral/aural

⁵¹ *ego eimi* (I myself am) and *est in* (he is), both present active.

sensorium as he begins five sequential sections of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount with the observation: "You have heard that it was said ... but I say to you." Clearly their perception of the word of God had been distorted by the literate minority who served as its gatekeepers. Jesus bypasses their conventional hermeneutics with confidence that commoners, though illiterate, were nevertheless capable of receiving an unmediated word from God.

Jesus on Orality

Yet despite the fact that Jesus displays both literate and oral sensibilities, the weight of his teaching and practice tilts toward the oral reception of the word of God. Consider the assumptions behind the hugely significant summary in Matthew 4, itself an orally discharged quotation of the then textual Deuteronomy 8:3. "Man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of God." It is not the pen of God nor even the scroll of God. Revelation rolls off the divine tongue and through the divine lips. It is a categorical statement establishing a priority and sequence to revelation.

If it is God who speaks, it is we who are to hear even as he says ten times in the gospels, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." Granted, there are a few occurrences of sight playing a parallel role with hearing in reception as in Matthew 13:16 where he explains, "But blessed are your eyes because they see; and your ears because they hear." Yet while sometimes sight occurs with hearing, it never occurs alone as the sole medium of revelation; whereas hearing is commonly depicted in that lone role in phrases such as Matthew 7:26. "Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand."

Or consider the manner of reception coming out of his Parable of the Sower in Luke 8:18. The seed he describes as the word of God and the soil is the hearer. "So take care how you listen; for whoever has, to him more shall be given; and whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has shall be taken away from him." It is in the listening process that the word of God either finds root or is discarded. It is through the ear that the word of God seeks a place to grow and Jesus cautions the hearer to think about the manner of listening.

This is consonant with the sheep/shepherd metaphor in John 10.

But he who enters by the door is a shepherd of the sheep. To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he puts forth all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. A stranger they simply will not follow, but will flee from him, because they do not know the voice of strangers (vv. 2-5).

Notice the sheep do not watch the shepherd and follow his example or scrutinize his appearance. Four times in a row the listening process is described as crucial to correctly identifying the Good Shepherd. There is a recognition of tone and texture of voice.⁵² The sound of the voice carries personality even more than physical appearance that can vary with exterior conditions. It is not uncommon to misidentify a friend in darkness or in disguise whereas we almost never mistake the voice of someone we know well. Jesus describes the ear as the most reliable authentication process in determining identity.

This privileging of ear over eye to reveal character and personality is consistent with Jesus' other teaching about the importance of words in Luke 6:45. "The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the

⁵² *Phonene*, literally "sound" or "noise."

evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart.” The mouth reliably reveals the heart. There is a connection between mouth and heart that cannot be as easily established in the world of literacy. We can pen all kinds of words we do not actually mean because the page removes the live context, effectively buffering and disguising the heart from its live expression. We can sign a card, “Love, Dad” insincerely, but who can avoid detection if the same phrase were to be voiced in duplicity?

Jesus everywhere equated his ministry with his spoken words. They were not just the expression of who he was; they were his substance even as he bore the name “The Word.” In the beginning of his ministry he prioritizes his words, “Let us go somewhere else to the towns nearby, so that I may preach there also; for that is what I came for.”⁵³ At the end of his life his public teaching summarizes his time on earth: “I have spoken openly to the world; I always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together; and I spoke nothing in secret.”⁵⁴ Significant portions of the gospels are nothing more than his actual words, often in prolonged discourses of several chapters.⁵⁵ But not only did Jesus place high value on his own words, he expected the same sort of communicative dynamic from his apostles.

Consider his exhortation before sending out the twelve in Matthew 10. Words were to play a prominent role in their ministry. They were to preach, give greetings and blessings, testify under persecution, and proclaim things from the rooftops. Clearly their

⁵³ Mark 1:38.

⁵⁴ Jn. 18:20.

⁵⁵ Matt. 23-25 and Jn. 14-17, for example.

ministry was to be orally driven. They are never told to read or write anything, not even a single word. In what could be called the closest thing to homiletic theory Jesus ever offered he summarizes, “you will even be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. But when they hand you over, do not worry about how or what you are to say; for it will be given you in that hour what you are to say. For it is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.”

Note the oral dynamic at play. Their speech would not be a product of their own research or preparation or anxiety. It would be given as a gift, in the moment when it would be needed. It would come out as the Spirit led and would be the farthest thing from anything textual or rehearsed or “owned.” It would be, in short, oral.⁵⁶ Jesus’ commitment to the oral tradition is evidenced by his own lack of written legacy. Yet he advocates not an unbridled, purely expressive and evanescent orality, but one grounded in prior prophetic text and later divine guidance even as the promised Spirit would “guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13).⁵⁷

3.7 Paul on Text and Tongue

The epistles of Paul echo the same blend of literacy and orality we have seen so far. On the one hand, Paul has a great deal of confidence in the function of the written word to establish a binding and documented archive of truth. Commenting on the Old

⁵⁶ Augustine comments in Part 4 of On Christian Doctrine on this balance between preparation and speaking *extempore*. “And for this reason, he who would both know and teach should learn everything which should be taught and acquire a skill in speaking appropriate to an ecclesiastic, but at the time of the speech itself he should think that which the Lord says more suitable to good thought: ‘Take no thought how or what to speak; for it shall be given you in that hour’” (140). For Augustine, there is a time to prepare and a time to forget about preparing.

Testament in Romans 15, “For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” The abiding sense of the written word can live beyond any single generation and provide continuity and comfort. Again in 1 Corinthians 10, “Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.” Warnings need a sense of permanence that literacy can provide even as every “No Trespassing” sign also includes the word “Posted” before it as if that fact was not already obvious. But posting that it is indeed “posted” adds to the sense of official accountability as if the sign anticipates the offender’s excuse, “It was not written down anywhere.”

That Paul considered the sacred texts of Judaism authoritative is patently obvious by his frequent (31 times) use of the phrase, “It is written in reference to the Old Testament.”⁵⁸ The written record was a functional repository of timeless truth that could be cited as evidence. For Paul, the prophets had not merely a hortatory authority, but also a predictive one as can be seen in 1 Corinthians 15:54. “But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, ‘DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP in victory.’” This role of text here is itself an old blend of oral and literate where the “saying” becomes “written” as the seer or prophet takes up the pen. But, consistent with the pattern, the saying precedes the writing.

⁵⁸ *Gegraptai*, perfect passive participle, emphasizing completed action with enduring effects. The existing texts of Scripture are almost always referenced in the New Testament in this perfect tense emphasizing their ongoing authority.

Of course the very fact that Paul's letters were themselves written and delivered in text forces Paul's hand toward the salute of literacy as he comments regularly to his recipients about his use of literate tool. 1 Corinthians 5:9 is typical. "I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people." It is not uncommon at all for Paul to write about his writing, perhaps reflecting a conscious need to address the limitations of literacy. Indeed, in 2 Corinthians 10 he complains loudly, if a pen can be considered loud, about the misunderstandings fostered by letter writing. "For I do not wish to seem as if I would terrify you by my letters. For they say, 'His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive and his speech contemptible.' Let such a person consider this, that what we are in word by letters when absent, such persons we are also in deed when present." Preferring to be present, Paul nevertheless understands that a letter while imperfect is better than nothing, and that misperceptions will be eventually cleared up in the context of face-to-face communication.

This discomfort with literacy is not limited to its potential for misunderstanding, but also for its potential for abuse. For Paul, literacy and legal codes were the outward manifestations of what needed to be internal realities. "But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God" (Rom. 2:29). Outward signs were vulnerable to forgery. Anyone could be circumcised in the flesh without any change in heart. The outward, written code was weak in this sense. Again in Romans 7:6, "But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter." Crossing off the requirements of the written code was easier and more measurable, yet also easier to

counterfeit, than internal change. This caused Paul to be cautious about outward conformity and to privilege inward renaissance. Outward imposters are often linked to literacy in Paul's mind as the extended section of 2 Corinthians 3 demonstrates.

You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life (vv. 2-6).

Notice the priority of what Paul calls the spirit over the letter. For Paul the "letter" symbolizes mere outward compliance and regulation. The letter of recommendation to which he alludes was a kind of resume or referral. But despite the fact that things written have a connotation of reliability (a sense that Paul himself supports in other places), in this case the letter of reference is unreliable when compared to the kind of credibility evoked by a live person. Paul would rather use, as his letter of reference a live person over a dead piece of paper. The paper, while official, can lose its link to lived reality and become a misleading formality, whereas the live person can speak and testify with skin on. If "the letter kills," exactly what does it kill? It kills personal credibility and substitutes it with documentary credibility; precise, preserved, yet potentially hollow in comparison.⁵⁹

In many ways Paul's concern here echoes that of Plato some 400 years earlier when he described a written document as an orphan lacking fatherly protection. The next

⁵⁹ The contrast is between *gramma* and *pneuma*. Writing kills by freezing in place something that is intended to move. In contrast, *pneuma*, with its connection to breath, animates and sustains life.

chapter will select some influential Greek and Roman rhetorical theorists in search of their posture toward the orality/literacy continuum. But for now it is sufficient to conclude that a close read of Scripture from four periods in the history of God's people demonstrates a consistent respect and valid role for both the spoken word and for written text.⁶⁰ But the priority proceeds from speech in its generative role toward text in its preservative role. One can see that duality reflected in Paul's closing admonition to the Thessalonians: "So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us" (2 Thess. 2:15).

While general capacities can be noted, there seems to be no neat separation of the roles of both orality and literacy in the development of sacred text. Niditch observes, "At the same time, however, writing offers the opportunity to preserve orally created and employed compositions. Aspects of the literate end of the continuum clearly shape and influence oral works as well. Written works, in turn, may be reoralized and the new works then written down, and so on" (133). That mutual and reciprocal influence produced scripture whose origins are sometimes nearly impossible to parse. But an understanding of the oral contribution in an oral culture can be a positive corrective to a modern world disproportionately relying on literate foundations in both hermeneutics and, as we have seen, homiletics.

⁶⁰ Here biblical scholars sensitive to orality might protest literate bias even in this uncovering of oral foundations. To maintain a feasible scope, the analysis in this chapter was entirely textual/visual/content-based and strategically neglected the sound patterns, oral formulas, epithets, and repetitions that strongly suggest an oral composition for much of Scripture. For a more "sonic" exemplary analysis of the words of the text see Susan Niditch's Oral World and Written World (Westminster John Knox, 1996) and Horsley's Performing the Gospel (Fortress, 2006).

Chapter 4

Greek and Roman Oratorical Excellence

In our analysis of Walter Ong's expansive scholarship in Chapter two, we concluded that the printing press changed the world by proliferating the typographical literacy that pushed the Western sensorium way down the oral/literate continuum. We also signaled many of the weaknesses of this kind of hyper-literacy and the numbing, depersonalizing effect literacy can have when it steps outside of its preservative role and starts silently and privately building its own knowledge base without regard for community, tradition, and context.

We then surveyed how literacy worked in the ancient world and in its role as a preserver of sacred text. We saw the theological priority of sound in revelation and how much confidence God places in the oral sensorium and our human capacity to hear divine revelation. We concluded that God intends for his word to be heard and not just contemplated in silent literate reflection. We observed that throughout church history the sermon, while utilizing text as both source and the means to record a live event, nevertheless, at least in some cases, retained its bearings in oral orientation even after the printing press lured it toward typographic imbalance.

But we also saw a palpable turn in the twentieth century away from rhetorical roots toward an increasingly literary structuring of the sermon. That is, it began to take on many of the hallmarks of a typographic literacy: conceived, drawn up, presented, and published from a literate perspective. As evidence of this we observed the ways the sermon has become detached from the character of the speaker and disembodied in print. The outline and the manuscript gained universal acceptance surpassed only by Powerpoint's relentless exposure and skewering of the biblical text. We have uncovered both the need and potential for a backward turn to prepare us to move forward. But where would we go for such homiletic assistance? If our contemporary homiletics texts are, understandably and to a great degree products of their literary age, where would we go for a distinctively oral homiletic? One solution might be to the African-American church with its oral intuitions still highly resistant to typography.⁶¹ Certainly we could learn a lot in that and other primarily oral contexts (perhaps the Indian or South American church). Yet because black preaching is distinctively styled and grounded in a suffering and marginalized American experience, many preachers not from that background would have trouble attempting an inauthentic emulation.

Some might be surprised to find within our own Western philosophic and rhetorical tradition the same oral underpinnings that are still common in Africa and the African-American church. But these rhetorical theorists are culturally closer to the majority of non-white American churches. Going back to Greco-Roman rhetoric seems

⁶¹ This author has found immediate consonance with black preachers when discussing oral homiletics. Though their impulses are not typically grounded in classical rhetoric (at least not the more published exponents), the oral sensorium is unmistakable. For the black preaching perspective see Henry Mitchell's Celebration and Experience in Preaching (Abingdon, 1990), James Harris' The Word Made Plain (Augsburg, 2004), or Cleophus LaRue's The Heart of Black Preaching (Westminster John Knox, 2000).

the perfect backward aspiration and is consistent with Ong's own instincts. For Ong was not merely a contemporary research scholar in orality, but also a classics scholar. In the 549-page An Ong Reader: Challenges for Further Inquiry Ong cites Aristotle 34 times, Cicero 17 times, Plato 24 times, Homer 24 times, and Quintilian 14 times. Clearly Ong knew where to go to find what has been neglected. In classical rhetoric we go back, not to an age of illiteracy, (which would offer little assistance, ensconced as we are in inescapable literacy), but to an age where both orality and literacy worked in conjunction, each employing its notable and distinctive competencies.

4.1 Understanding Classic Rhetorical Context

“What is truth?” Besides being a hotly contested question today, it is also Pilate's irritated reply to Jesus' seeming preoccupation with the word. At first glance it seems to be simply the nervous maneuvering of a scared tyrant. But perhaps there is more to his conversation-ending question. Pilate was a well-educated Roman procurator grounded in the grammar and rhetoric of both classic Greece and Hellenized Rome (Enos 69). Just a generation before him the politician and orator Cicero had demonstrated and documented the training in rhetoric that Pilate had no doubt studied back in Rome.

Pilate, then, would likely have had more than just cursory knowledge of Aristotelian and Ciceronian rhetoric. When he asks “What is truth?” he is not just stalling. He is opening the can of worms that had been brewing for centuries in the ancient world. On the one side he was familiar with Plato's Philosopher-King who loves the truth and only the truth despising all efforts to massage or distort it. On the other hand he knows the arguments of Plato's detractors, the Sophists, who point out the difficulty in ascertaining a universal truth. The Sophists recognized that “truth” is

articulated from a particular point-of-view, and those with varying points-of-view both claim to have “truth” on their side. For the Sophist it is pointless to seek universal truth since all truth is situational and based in perception rather than reality.

So when Jesus tries to challenge him to “The Truth,” Pilate knows his escape. Adopting a sophistic outlook, he reasons his way out as if to say: “Is the truth really so simple, Jesus? Is there only one truth? Would not your accusers also have their ‘truth?’ Doesn’t truth depend on where one stands at any given moment? You quiz me as if there exists some obvious Truth when in actuality, the world is a lot messier than that.”

His tactic is to paint Jesus as simplistic and stuck in Plato’s bygone era. “Any educated man knows,” he might have told himself, “that an appeal to universal truth is impossible, delusional, and dangerous. No wonder that he has culled such trouble. This is how you get yourself killed. You take an absolutist minority position against an absolutist majority. I cannot help a man who will not help himself.”

Pilate, often portrayed as flimsily paranoid, rarely gets credit for thinking on a philosophical level. We have a truncated version of him pulled from the Scriptural text, but uninformed by any broader context. So Pilate becomes a caricature of himself, opening the door for hermeneutic/homiletic Darwinism where we assume we must be smarter because we are further down the line, and that our contemporary situation is unprecedented. Pilate’s question to Jesus is a marvelous bridging of the ancient world with the worlds of modernity and postmodernity. But to catch it, we must have some sense of first century rhetoric. Then we can see that some things never change and our so-called “new” issues are really quite old—a healthy antidote for our addiction to novelty.

But study of the ancient world also reveals some differences. Because they utilized different technologies, they processed information differently. While reading and writing were certainly not rare skills in the first century AD, we have seen they were implemented more for the preservation and not the production of knowledge. Communication was primarily oral with literacy serving in a backup role. To a large degree those tables have turned. We now think of generating sermons in literacy and then converting to some form of orality on Sunday. So if we unreflectively read contemporary practice back onto ancient times, we miss the dynamic ways orality worked in the ancient world and how the revealed word originally was spoken.

Kathleen Welch cautions against this kind of simplistic equating of all ages in The Contemporary Reception of Classical Rhetoric: Appropriations of Ancient Discourse. Dividing modern appropriations of rhetoric into two basic schools of thought, she sees the “Heritage School” guilty of a cut and paste mentality in approaching the ancient theorists (9), assuming a one-to-one correspondence between their “keywords” and ours, and an unreflective acceptance of the complex process that preserved ancient insights.

Over against the Heritage school, Welch describes the Dialectical approach of scholars of orality such as Walter Ong, Eric Havelock, and others who have sought to understand the psychodynamics of the oral world before making any contemporary application. Indeed, Welch sees a direct link between the work of Ong and hermeneutically sensitive appropriations of classical rhetoric. “Ong, in Orality and Literacy, takes account of contextuality by establishing the fluidity and therefore the vitality of classical rhetoric. He moves in many directions to convey dialectics of mind, language and consciousness.” (28).

If indeed there is a natural bridge between Ong's treatment of primary orality and fruitful and sensitive appropriation of classic rhetors, the remainder of this chapter will seek exactly that kind of appropriation, avoiding scholarship based on shallow "nostalgia and elitism." (Welch 30). It is that kind of shallow understanding of the ancient world which contributed to the abandonment of classical rhetoric by homiletics. It would seem there is valid work to do since, while Welch finds fertile ground for old rhetoric in many communicative fields, homiletics does not appear to be so favored.

4.2 Augustine on Pagans

Thankfully we do not have to be the first to attempt the task of connecting rhetoric with homiletics. Augustine faced this same issue in the transition between the classical world and the emerging Christian culture. To what extent can the church appropriate insights from classical rhetoric? Augustine answers that question in On Christian Doctrine. "As a rhetor himself, he knew the advantages that his training conferred, but he also rejected the applause-seeking artificiality that he thought characterized many of his contemporaries" (Schaeffer 1136). Though not slavishly bound to rhetoric and well aware of its propensity for manipulation and deceit (he taught rhetoric professionally before his conversion), he nonetheless recognizes its value in defending and propagating the faith as well, quoting as easily from Cicero and Virgil as from Scripture.⁶² Here his famous classification of all truth as divine provides a particularly fitting analysis.

⁶² Augustine was not alone in this dual intellectual agility. "In Clement there are more references to Greek literature, to Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Euripides, Chryssipus, Plutarch and other Greek authors than to the Bible. Yet there is a difference. Clement cites Greek literature to illustrate a point, to give flourish to an argument, to delight and amuse his readers. When he cites Scripture, there is a sense of discovery, that something

But we should not think that we ought not to learn literature because Mercury is said to be its inventor, nor that because the pagans dedicated temples to Justice and Virtue, and adored in stones what should be performed in the heart, we should therefore avoid justice and virtue. Rather, every good and true Christian should understand that wherever he may find truth, it is his Lord's. (2.18.28)

In saying all truth is the Lord's, Augustine, while privileging Scriptural content over pagan, seems oddly at home in the world, and unthreatened by what might be discovered therein. Where it helps, let it help.

Nor is Augustine the only one to set such precedent. When facing radical critics of universities proliferating in Cromwell's England, Harvard president Charles Chauncy justified the appropriation of pagan scholars in his commencement sermon of 1655.

Marsden summarizes:

If, said Chauncy, the [radical critics] meant by "humane learning," which they condemned, simply any study of the arts and science, their position was absurd, since the Bible itself taught principles of ethics, politics, economics, rhetoric, and astronomy, as well as ancient languages. If, on the other hand, by "humane learning" critics meant "all that learning that the heathen Authors or philosophers have delivered in their writing," then the critics had failed to note that the Scriptures occasionally cite such human authors ... Chauncy was appealing to the familiar Calvinist principle of common grace, which tempered the radical biblicism of their movement (43).

Chauncy's point is well crafted. If we are to reject all learning not from Scripture, we have started down a slippery slope and just where would we draw the line? Does not common grace provide all people with certain resources for observation and discovery? Familiarity with classical rhetoric does help the preacher in a variety of ways. Whether or not we agree with Cicero or Quintilian is, at this point, beside the point. Approve or disapprove, pagan theorists demonstrate explicitly how communication actually worked

extraordinary is to be learned from its pages, that it is not one book among many" (Wilken 57).

in the ancient world. It is precisely that communicative context and no other that produced the speech, preserved by writing, that became Scripture. Peeling back our exclusively literate orientation we can see the oral foundations to the written word of God and perhaps “hear” and “speak” from it as we might not otherwise.

Contemporary homiletics cannot help but be influenced by the pervasive, sometimes dominant, role of literacy in modernity. Try as we might it is difficult to forget what we already know and change what we already do. But by listening to the insights from classical rhetoricians, we gain otherwise impossible access to a world where tongue and text worked in complementary fashion, and where the word of God came to the church of God with all the fervor of an orally-conditioned setting.

4.3 Aristotle: Credibility That Persuades

As author of the systematic Rhetoric in 335 BC, Aristotle stands uncontested as the foremost authority on Greek classical rhetoric. At first exposure, Aristotle seems to adopt a fairly pragmatic approach to truth and persuasion, allowing the rhetor a remarkably free hand at influencing an audience. He does not deny transcendent truth, referring to it quite freely. “Things that are true and things that are just have a natural tendency to prevail over their opposites” (1355a: 22). But he seems to evidence less than stunning confidence in our ability to access it accurately. Indeed, he categorizes persuasion in the field of art, not science. (1359b:12). For Aristotle, most of the things we discuss and dispute cannot be held with scientific precision. They have a debatable, or contingent nature. The rhetor’s task is to build plausibility, not absolute proof. “Most of the things about which we make decisions, and into which therefore we inquire, present us with alternative possibilities. For it is about our actions that we deliberate and

inquire, and all our actions have a contingent character; hardly any of them are determined by necessity” (1357a: 24).

This seems to be the ground of homiletics as well. Our sermons are about transcendent, universal truths. Truths that are bigger than we are, and truths we cannot control or create. Truths that go on, with or without our consent. Yet our access to those truths is not with scientific precision, and that by divine design. What Aristotle calls contingency, we could call faith. God intentionally leaves things muddy enough that it requires some stepping beyond empirical knowledge to participate. Faith and rhetoric go hand in glove, for rhetoric is most at home in the world of probability, the world of contingency.

With Aristotle we concede that our limited access to transcendent truth will always force us back to world of probability and faith. Borrowing from these premoderns equips us to handle challenges from both relativists who say there is no “big-T” truth, and hip-pocket apologists who try to prove the “unprovable.” With Aristotle we say that since theology cannot be demonstrated empirically, it falls into the realm of art more than science and can benefit by being openly rhetorical.⁶³ A sermon therefore, does not have to pretend to be sourced from a scientifically driven, objective standpoint. It admits it is committed to a cause and philosophically “interested.” Rather than preach “Was Jesus the Savior of the World?: Evidence For and Against,” it can declare, “Christ: The Only Savior of the World.” This orientation toward declaration is still attempting to bring an audience to the point of judgment and as such is still persuasive. But it is in

⁶³ This is not to imply that the empirically observable is more ontologically “real.” For more on the complex relationship of science and theology including a defense of theology’s non-empirical ontology see Cambridge physicist John Polkinghorne’s Exploring Reality: The Intertwining of Science and Theology (Yale, 2006).

close consonance with what the Apostle Paul describes as his rhetorical method in 1 Corinthians 2:1-4.

And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.

Persuasion is central for Aristotle's rhetoric since he defines rhetoric as "observing in any given case the available means of persuasion." (1355b:26). Yet persuasion works differently in different communicative settings. Aristotle's means are summarized in three categories (*logos*, *pathos*, *ethos*) and for three different communicative contexts (forensic/legal, deliberative/legislative, and epideictic/ceremonial). If we attempt to appropriate Aristotle in the homiletic realm, it makes sense to focus on *ethos* and the ceremonial realm; the ceremonial because it most closely approximates a congregation gathered on Sunday, and *ethos* because it is more closely linked to the preacher than the other two (*logos* being linked to the speech and *pathos* to the audience).

It is only a few pages into Book I of *The Rhetoric* that we encounter Aristotle's first mention of *ethos*. Predictably, it is listed along with its two counterparts: *pathos* and *logos*, but listed first among the three: "The first kind depends on the personal character of the speaker, the second on putting the audience into a certain frame of mind, the third on the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself" (1356a:2).

He then elaborates on what he means by personal character which he admits "may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses" (1356a:13). First

he stresses that *ethos* is working while the speech is spoken so as to “make us think him credible.” Strictly speaking, it matters not whether the speaker is actually credible (from the perspective of factually verifiable standards outside the speech). The crucial dynamic Aristotle seeks to isolate is what the audience perceives coming from the actual speech event. Outside *ethos* is typically not accessible to the audience or is greatly overshadowed by what is happening in the present.

Consider the difference between the following rhetorical strategies. In one case a speaker exhorts his audience to be honest at all times and extols, with great passion, the virtue and necessity of being honest. In another case the speaker says very little about honesty, yet discloses a fault about himself, say, his tendency to be lazy or to lose his temper. In the first case, the subject is honesty. But in the second case, the speech actually is itself honest. The audience can sense the difference and will grant *ethos* to the second speaker more readily than the first (who will be perceived as merely stating the obvious).

This acknowledgement of the power of personal character in the midst of speaking distinguishes Aristotle’s definition from later depictions (most notably, Quintilian) of *ethos* that flows from the moral character of the person, outside the speech. In contrast Aristotle makes it clear that at least for the point under discussion he is only referring to the persuasive *ethos* that is “achieved by what the speaker says, not by what people think of this character before he begins to speak” (1356a:9). But how would credibility emerge from the speech event itself? How does a preacher build credibility in the midst of the sermon? The answer to that question is in the epideictic environment itself.

Aristotle talks far less about the epideictic environment than he does the other two. So as we examine *ethos* in the epideictic, we are looking at the least-discussed mode of proof operating in the least-discussed rhetorical environment. Sullivan finds, in this peculiar matching, some natural aptness. “Since epideictic is about character and *ethos* is the portrayal of character, there is a natural link between the two” (118).

Sullivan delineates this “constellation of purposes” as “preservation, education, celebration, and aesthetic creation.” Sullivan concludes, “Epideictic rhetoric creates a situation that magnifies the importance of *ethos* over *logos* primarily because it does not argue to win a particular debate” (117). Epideictic is not seeking to win the argument. Rather, since its audience is the already converted, the epideictic orator seeks to buttress the community with a reaffirmation of its shared values in time of communal reflection whether somber or ecstatic.

4.4 Homiletic Ethos

Armed with the definition of *ethos* as the by-product of an audience’s positive intuition, we have to conclude that the only accessible *ethos* a speaker ever has, is that granted to him by the situation of the audience in their shared space.⁶⁴ In terms of “live” *ethos*, every speech starts at ground zero and must build from scratch. We must take that kind of *ethos* into the epideictic sermon environment and ask what it looks like there, and what, if anything, can be done to foster it. Sullivan offers some help here, distilling epideictic *ethos* down to five factors: reputation, vision, authority, good reasons, and consubstantiality. All five have some bearing upon the preacher.

⁶⁴ Aristotle is not denying a person’s reputation outside the speech can affect *ethos*. But that kind of reputation is not working as an artistic proof from within the speech. He is concerned with *ethos* produced by the speech event.

Reputation

Although Sullivan includes the idea of a portable reputation that exists outside the speech, we will confine our questions to Aristotle's unfolding sense of reputation artistically constructed during the speech act. Pertinent questions might include: Is my thinking about a topic, like charity, limited to the words I say about that topic or does the speech itself "seem" charitable? If I speak uncharitably about charity, Aristotelian ethos will be short-circuited. What kind of reputation flows from my actual words and demeanor? Do I consider both the "what" and the "how" of a speech?

Vision

Here Sullivan elaborates, "On a purely naturalistic level, this vision might be called insight, but the epideictic tradition has roots in the religious ceremonies and sacred poetry of ancient Greece. And there is a sense in which the epideictic rhetor is perceived as a seer, a prophet with supernatural vision" (126). So the logical questions that follow might be: Do I have anything to say that is sourced in something other than myself? Do I evidence any connection to divine wisdom and direction? Do I have any authentic message from God? Am I putting my own words in God's mouth? Vision is remembering that the message preached comes from outside of the speaker. The event is not an opportunity to declare an entirely original message so that the speaker is perceived as the source of the message. The seer, the prophet, the preacher brings a herald from another place. Remembering this serves as a safeguard against the hubris of public speaking as grandstanding. Hear Paul on this perspective: "And he has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore we are ambassadors on for Christ, as if God were making an appeal through us. We beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God"

(2 Cor. 5:19-20).

More specifically, we might wonder if the Holy Spirit might contribute toward a sense of homiletic ethos. Recall Jesus' prediction in Matthew 10: "But when they hand you over, do not worry about how or what you are to say; for it will be given you in that hour what you are to say. For it is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you." Paul also alludes to a sense of the Holy Spirit's intercessory role in prayer where the Spirit supplies a nonverbal sense of presence in "groanings too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26). Without claiming to be verbally inspired, is there not a sense whereby the Holy Spirit brings a sense of credibility and pertinence to a preacher? Could not the Holy Spirit lend a pneumatic ethos to the preacher that elevates the legitimately prophetic sense of the sermon?

Authority

It is broadly acknowledged that epideictic speakers, in addressing the "converted," are not required to demonstrate exacting detail. Sullivan, quoting Weaver, calls this a sense of "spaciousness" that is granted to an epideictic speaker. "The audience brings to the discourse a willingness to accept the speaker's assertions because of the speaker's generally perceived ethos. This openness allows the speaker to draw upon his or her own authority, rather than the authority derived through citing others or evidence" (123).

This brings up an interesting complication to homiletic ethos. Does the role of the preacher as mediator of God's message through Scripture bring with it automatic ethos? To what extent can the preacher's credibility simply ride the coattails of Scriptural authority? Here the preacher is walking a tightrope between self-generated authority and

secondary “borrowed” authority. On the one hand there is the ethos flowing from the “word as being spoken” (Schrag 161), and on the other hand there is the Scriptural ethos of the “spoken word.” This is the blend of prior language with present speech. Schrag contends that all communication has this element of past and present going on simultaneously. “Although distinguishable, they are interwoven. Whenever I am engaged in speaking I make use of words that have already undergone institutionalization, either explicitly or implicitly. The spoken word is present in the word as spoken” (161). In the case of the preacher, the ethos of Scripture becomes inseparably bound up with his or her own, in a sobering blend of the human and divine. While the preacher’s authority is of a different nature than that of the text, it becomes difficult to substantiate where one stops and the other begins.

This brings up various pertinent questions: How much personal authority do I claim? How do I honor the authority of Scripture? Is it legitimate for people to believe things just because I say them? How should I honor that kind of trust? How could I betray it? Should I distinguish, when preaching, where God’s word stops and my own opinions start?

Good Reasons

The ethos of the speaker is energized by the ethical arguments of the discourse. The passion demonstrated for moral purpose seems to transfer, in the audience’s mind, from the argument to the speaker himself, with the assumption that only a highly moral person would argue so strongly for morality. Sullivan, referring to George Yoos and his four ethical qualities (A—seeking agreement, R—rational autonomy of audience, E—equality with audience, and V—shared values), takes good reasons a step further. “Thus,

rhetors displaying these qualities are like teachers who, though they have the authority simply to tell students the way things are— may choose to [...] support generalizations with good reasons out of respect for the students' rationality" (125). Pertinent questions for the preacher include: Do I show respect for the audience's thoughts? Do I present myself as "above" them in any way? Would I be persuaded by my own arguments?

Creation of Consubstantiality

This last point is Sullivan's foremost and favorite. For it speaks of a shared timelessness between audience and speaker. "Things that are consubstantial share substance, and if in some metaphysical sense, we can say that those who share a common mental or spiritual space also share a common substance, we begin to experience ethos as consubstantiality" (127). This is not too far a departure from Aristotle's own description of the epideictic as concerned with the present (as opposed to the past or the future). Indeed, in epideictic part of the fodder for discourse is the room itself.⁶⁵ This is not so with forensic or deliberative rhetoric which are always concerned with issues "out there." The unique capacity of the epideictic moment is that the audience and the speaker, and their very present "in here, right now," experience can become part of the celebration or contemplation. This is the synthetic realm unique to epideictic ethos. Preaching, in this sense, is phenomenological. A 10-minute sermon can be "long," while a 40-minute sermon can be "short." It is not about actual time, but consubstantial time.

Pertinent questions for preachers include: Do I address the present tense? Do I make the audience part of the sermon? Does the sermon adapt to the *kairos* of the room?

⁶⁵ The concept of *kairos* is endemic to the oral environment and will be addressed more specifically in Chapters 5 and 6.

Is there a timelessness in the room, or are people glancing at their watches? Have we, in any sense, lost track of time?

In conclusion, Sullivan's description of epideictic ethos takes us right to the doorway of the church. We can see how the depth of Aristotle's rhetorical theory, though millennia old, has immediate currency in homiletics. This is the fruit of the oral world and of listening to those who are at home in it. Sullivan's outline is so pertinent to homiletics, it almost gives the impression he has dressed up the experience of a good sermon in rhetorical terms. Consider his summary: "One can almost call such a place sacred, for it is the place where the educative and celebratory functions of epideictic take place, the place where the continuing ideology of an orthodoxy is given birth in a new generation and rebirth in those who already dwell within the tradition" (130).

4.5 Cicero: The Fuel of Authentic Emotion

Moving forward several hundred years to the first century BC, Cicero opens the field of Roman rhetoric with his adaptation and extension of the Aristotelian model. Indeed, Aristotle and Cicero taken together represent two giants of rhetorical theory, one Greek and the other Roman. Cicero's work on the subject includes seven volumes and in general carries forward the idea that the ideal orator must be widely grounded in all fields and disciplines, able to thoroughly understand the subjects in dispute. Like Plato, he believed that good speaking starts with good thinking that is also expansive and exhaustive. Though admittedly a daunting challenge, Cicero refused to confine oratory to simple rhetorical handbooks that emphasized technique over originality. Cicero depicts a flexible and well-grounded oratory that can adapt "on the fly" to new circumstances or twists in the debate.

Like Aristotle, he also granted emotion a sweeping role in persuasion. But ever the moralist, he decried false or trumped up emotion that is merely theatrical. The following excerpt from Book II of De Oratore captures it well.

In fact it is impossible for the hearer to grieve, to hate, to envy, to become frightened at anything, to be driven to tears and pity, unless the self-same emotions the orator wants to apply to the juror seem to be imprinted and branded on the orator himself ... For oratory that aims at stirring the hearts of others, will, by its very nature, stir the orator himself even more strongly than it will any member of his audience ... For this reason, Sulpicius, I am teaching you two this (being of course a good and learned teacher): to be able to get angry when you are speaking, and to grieve, and to weep. (Book II 185-196).

The homiletic application is so obvious here, no additional comment is needed. Though this fails to even scratch the surface of Cicero's expansive thought, just this single citation gives us a taste of the kind of speech modeled by classical orators; the kind of speech that is both authentic and emotional. Classical rhetors understood the role of passion in speech and were unapologetic about unleashing it upon an audience. In an earlier section one of the interlocutors is summarizing the passionate display he saw exuded from a friend.

But I swear, Crassus, that on my part, I always shudder when you handle these matters in your cases: such mental vigor, such energy, such passion always show from your eyes, your face your gestures, even from your finger; so overwhelming is the flow of the best and most impressive words; and so sincere are your thoughts, so true, so novel and so devoid of immature frills, that it seems to me that you are not just setting the jurors on fire, but are ablaze yourself. (Book II, 188).

Of course Cicero and after him Augustine were also measured in how they authorized emotional expression.⁶⁶ Any sense of feigned emotion slips dangerously toward sophistic manipulation. Fjelstad summarizes Cicero's posture on emotion. "In

⁶⁶ See Fjelstad for a comparison of Cicero and Augustine on their posture toward strong emotion.

other words, Cicero's theory makes a case for verbal exuberance, even theatrical pyrotechnics, as long as those flashes of emotional performance also are supported and contextualized by more measured and steady discourse" (47). The preacher can provide the spark but it is the audience who must sustain an emotional response to the word.

It is sad to say that many contemporary preachers would have trouble ever living up to Cicero's description. We can hear a sense of it in Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees in Matthew 23, in the early sermons of Peter after Pentecost, and in Paul's farewell to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20. But where today? And why so rare? Why has conventional homiletics succeeded in producing so many scribes and so few orators? If Crassus could be so caught up in a court case, cannot we, entrusted as we are, with the oracles of God? Preaching that aspires to more than mere education or transfer of knowledge must uncover the path to deep emotion and the self-forgetfulness that allows it.

Of course the danger is using emotion for utility. If we know that emotion in the speaker transfers to emotion in the audience, the temptation will be toward the production of inauthentic pathos and melodrama. But that is not what Cicero has in mind. His call is not for the production of emotion, but the expression of emotion already felt.

4.6 Conclusion

Clearly these classical theorists have thought through oratory at a level deeper than most homiletic textbooks from today's literate orientation. Being immersed in a primarily oral culture gives them an indisputable advantage in the speech arts. Just these samplings demonstrate their commitment and comfort in thoroughly oral speech forms; the kind of forms where the best sermons thrive. For just because all sermons are oral,

does not mean they were prepared orally. Indeed most sermons today are merely oral literature, prepared and delivered from the presuppositions of the literate world.

We have demonstrated how classical authors give us an older and yet still relevant methodology for homiletics. The Aristotelian ethos and Ciceronian pathos are products of an oral orientation. Neither can be well generated with the resources of literacy since they flow from a speaker caught up in something larger than adherence to a pre-prepared outline. Both are products of the room and the moment and a speaker who is agile and adaptive. This is oratory as it was practiced by the masters of this early pre-typographic world. As such, they are uniquely qualified to train preachers. This is not because they are devout. Their devotion or lack of it is irrelevant. Their advantage lies in their historical context. They simply lived and theorized at a time when speech was preeminent. Those who love words and the power of words ignore them to their own peril.

In the next chapter we will delve even deeper into the relationship between classic rhetoric and contemporary homiletics. Our subject will take us from Aristotle and Cicero to the classical theorist who wrote and lectured during the first century AD. By thoroughly dissecting Quintilian's rhetorical theory, we will gain insights into the communicative environment faced by the apostles themselves as they labored to responsibly fulfill the communicative obligation of the Great Commission. What insights can this renowned yet retiring Roman educator offer preachers today?

Chapter 5

Quintilian's Infinitely Flexible Oratory

5.1 Introduction

In 1855, Cardinal Newman wrote his expansive The Idea of the University in defense of a holistic application of the liberal arts. In many ways he echoes expectations from the earlier era of Cicero and Quintilian. All three argued that the accomplished speaker should know something about everything. So it is not surprising that tucked into the back of that volume is an essay on homiletics, and not just preaching in general. At issue is the question of bringing literate prompts into the pulpit, a practice that in 1855 was called preaching “with book.” Newman weighs in on this issue demonstrating the incontrovertible link between an adequately grounded preacher and a concomitant oral style. “I think it no extravagance to say that a very inferior sermon, delivered without book, answers the purposes for which all sermons are delivered more perfectly than one of great merit, if it be written and read” (Newman 384).

Newman is not contesting the superior strength of precision in the written genre, nor the value of becoming a competent writer. He is saying that precision and polish are not the appropriate metrics of a sermon. Indeed, his metrics have more to do with a sense of “life” in the present moment “Nothing that is anonymous will preach; nothing that is dead and gone; nothing even which is of yesterday, however religious in itself and useful.

Thought and word are one in the Eternal Logos, and must not be separate in those who are his shadows on earth. They must issue fresh, as from the preacher's mouth, so from his breast, if they are to be 'spirit and life' to the hearts of his hearers" (383).

In this chapter we will examine the methodology championed by Marcus Fabius Quintilianus to produce this kind of flexibly grounded homiletic praxis; a homiletic so prepared that can it adapt to the surrounding terrain.

The art of speaking depends on great labor, constant study, varied exercise, repeated trials, the deepest sagacity, and the readiest judgment. But it is assisted by rules, provided that they point out a fair road and not one single wheel-rut, from which he who thinks it unlawful to decline must be contented with the slow progress of those who walk on ropes. Accordingly, we often quit the main road (which has been formed perhaps by the labor of an army), being attracted by a shorter path, or if bridges, broken down by torrents, have intersected the direct way, we are compelled to go round about. And if the gate is stopped up by flames, we shall have to force a way through the wall. (2.13.15)

Early in Quintilian's exhaustive Institutes of Oratory he conjures this image of the speech event as a sort of journey traversed by a speaker who must encounter along the way all sorts of unforeseen obstacles, and must, to continue the journey with any sense of adventure, adjust to the exigencies of the roadway as it unfolds. It is a simultaneous introduction and summary of how this ancient Roman educational theorist envisioned a skilled speech progressing, and the benchmark of a well-educated and truly competent speaker. This in contrast to the speaker who, though well prepared, lacks the resources to be able to adapt to what the moment presents. Such will necessarily be confined to the "single-wheel rut" of the main road. But exactly how is this facility, flexibility, and confidence inculcated in an aspiring speaker? Quintilian will answer that question in a

way that demonstrates the depth at which he contemplated, in an unprecedented way, the speech event from both audience and speaker perspectives.⁶⁷

Having sampled some cursory homiletic applications from other classical theorists, this chapter will focus on a more in-depth analysis of Quintilian's ancient, but engaging rhetorical theory and his resulting oratorical praxis. Contextually sensitive excerpts from virtually each of his 12 Books will provide an overview of what lies beneath and behind the skilled speaker.

5.2 Translation

Given the amount of work to be done in the primary texts, a word on translation is appropriate. We will be using Lee Honeycutt's edited English version of Rev. John Selby Watson's original 1856 translation from Latin. This choice is based on the synthetic value afforded by Honeycutt's careful study both of Watson and Donald Russell's (2001) more recent translation for the Loeb Classical Library.⁶⁸ This emendation of Watson provides an accurate and readable English version that carries the

⁶⁷ Watson has high regard for Quintilian's breadth and depth crediting him with more solid contribution than even other eminent rhetoricians in antiquity. "The great merit of Quintilian's treatise on oratory, above all works of the kind that had preceded it, was its superior copiousness of matter and felicity of embellishment. It does not offer a mere dry list of rules, but illustrates them with an abundance of examples from writers of all kinds, interspersed with observations that must interest not only the orator, but readers of every class. It embraces a far wider field than the *De Oratore* of Cicero and treats of all that concerns eloquence with far greater minuteness. The orator conducts his pupil from the cradle to the utmost heights of the oratorical art." <http://honeyl.public.iastate.edu/quintilian/bio.html>

⁶⁸ For a detailed genealogy, see Honeycutt's summary of all Latin and English renditions of the text including the rediscovery of a full text version in 1416 after hundreds of years of limited access (perhaps explaining the wane of Quintilian's influence in the medieval world). <http://honeyl.public.iastate.edu/quintilian/history.html>

strength, wit, and energy of the original and assists the modern reader in making contemporary connections.⁶⁹

5.3 Biography

Quintilian was born a Roman citizen in Spain in the first century AD. In the interest of comparative ecclesiastical context, at the time Quintilian was born in roughly AD 40, the Apostle Paul was preparing, with Barnabas, to take his first missionary journey on behalf of the burgeoning early church headquartered in Antioch. Although we know little of his upbringing, Quintilian was called from Spain to Rome in AD 68 by the Emperor Galba to establish a school of rhetoric. Ironically enough, Paul also spent time in Spain in the late 60s where the two could have feasibly had contact, Paul also having been called to Rome in 68, albeit as a condemned prisoner instead of a professor. In another ironic twist, both Paul (Acts 25-26) and Quintilian (4.2.19) pled cases before the Jewish Queen Bernice. Quintilian, however, lived to perhaps AD 118, well past Paul, writing his Institutes in AD 90-95 just about the time the Apostle John was finishing his gospel.

This contextualization of Quintilian's life places his development in tandem with that of the early church. Though he never mentions Christianity explicitly his orientation to life, learning, and communication reflects the soil in which the church grew, spread, suffered, and matured.⁷⁰ Quintilian spent the majority of his life teaching eloquence and

⁶⁹ For a fairly exhaustive topical index to Quintilian's Institutes see Michael Cobin's "An Oral Interpreter's Index to Quintilian" (QJS).

⁷⁰ Scholars such as Colson and Edwards have discerned similarities between Chapter 1 of the Institutes and the Gospel of Mark, suggesting that Quintilian was familiar with early Christian metaphors via his discourse with the Christian parents of two of his students (Edwards 8).

arguing cases in Rome before retiring to document his approach in his only surviving extant work, Institutes of Oratory which he composed in his 50s⁷¹. Arguably the most influential educational theorist in Western civilization, Quintilian has long been appropriated by Christians arguing for a liberal arts orientation. “Given Quintilian’s part in the establishment and promotion of the liberal arts tradition, his probable friendship with Christians of his day, and historical influence upon Christian scholars and teachers—nonwithstanding his pedagogical contributions to the formation of virtuous students—proponents of Christian liberal arts have a clear and natural rationale for appropriating Quintilian’s ideas” (Davis 78).

Some have debated whether Quintilian has contributed anything original to rhetorical theory, classifying him more as a recycler of earlier theorists than an innovator.⁷² If this charge were to prove true, Quintilian himself would be the most perturbed since he clearly sought to make novel advances.

If I thought it sufficient merely to adhere to the precepts that have been delivered, I should do enough for this part of my work by omitting nothing at all reasonable, that I have read or learned on the subject, but it is my intention to open the deepest recesses of the topic on which we have entered and to set forth what I have acquired, not from any teacher, but from my own experience and under the guidance of nature herself.
(6.2.25)

⁷¹ Quintilian’s life was difficult, surviving the loss of a very young wife and losing two sons while they were still young boys. These losses are mentioned explicitly in his works, demonstrating the freedom felt by ancients to blend personal life and scholarship.

⁷² John Logie stakes out the various positions here, documenting both the standard view of Quintilian’s role as a mere compiler (Butler, Kennedy, Barilli, and Bizzell & Herzberg) and his and Murphy’s contrasting opinion regarding Quintilian’s role as an original author. Logie cites Book 12 (“The Character of the Orator”) of the Institutes as his most original contribution, but certainly the attention Quintilian devotes to extemporaneous speech is also unprecedented.

While acknowledging a common road, he was careful not to tread “merely in other men's footsteps” (Preface 3). His rhetorical theory is systematic and methodical, sometimes overwhelmingly so. Yet with modest effort, modern readers decipher both a brilliant intellect and savvy insight into human nature. He starts with generalities about the nature of knowledge itself and the relationship of knowledge to wise expression and builds on that foundation a detailed survey of every aspect of skilled oratory.

Quintilian’s emphasis is necessarily different from Cicero’s. By the time of Quintilian, the Roman Republic was a distant memory replaced by the iron fist of the Empire. No longer were legislative issues debated in the public square. Yet the courts were still open and still demanded pleaders. Epideictic rhetoric still played a role in reinforcing community values. We will conduct our survey under two headlines: the foundational task of preparing the speaker and the resulting task of preparing the actual speech.

5.4 Preparing the Speaker

Vir Bonus

Vir Bonus, a good man, is the foundation for this structure and perhaps the feature for which Quintilian is best known. For Quintilian, there is no separation of core identity and expression. Who a person is will irrepressibly leak into what he says.⁷³

We are to form, then, the perfect orator, who cannot exist unless as a good man, and we require in him, therefore, not only consummate ability in speaking, but every excellence of mind. For I cannot admit that the principles of moral and honorable conduct are, as some have thought, to be left to the philosophers; since the man who can duly sustain his

⁷³ One cannot help but think of the consonance with the Apostle James’ teaching on the power of the tongue, “Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water? Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh” (Jas. 3:11-12).

character as a citizen, ... can certainly be nothing else but an orator.
(Preface 10)

For Quintilian an orator is drawing deeply upon something as he speaks. That something is not the external brute facts of a given case or matter, but the essential interrelatedness of all things. The well from which he draws is internal and personal. “I am convinced that no one can be an orator who is not a good man, and even if anyone could, I should be unwilling that he should be” (1.2.3). An unprincipled speaker simply cannot draw deeply enough from appropriate internal resources to be able to react to the moment authentically. He simply does not possess the essential connections.

This metaphor of deep resources comes straight from Quintilian’s own pen. “I pass on to my second proposition, that no man will ever be thoroughly accomplished in eloquence who has not gained a deep insight into the impulses of human nature and formed his moral character on the precepts of others and on his own reflection” (12.2.4). Here again, “Also, in many passages both of his books and of his letters, Cicero remarks that the power of eloquence is to be derived from the deepest sources of wisdom, and that accordingly the same persons were for a considerable time the teachers at once of eloquence and of morality” (12.2.6).

It is important to note the non-utility celebrated here.⁷⁴ It is not as if the teacher of morality (whether philosopher or rhetor) gained that morality *for* something, as a means to some sophistic oratorical end. Quintilian has nothing but contempt for those rhetorical artisans who use eloquence for mere utility.

⁷⁴ This understanding of the *Vir Bonus* is taken directly from a close read of Quintilian and not from an abstract understanding of “the good” from exterior sources (such as Ernest Brandenburg’s meandering attempt to define it from disconnected sociological analysis in “Quintilian and the Good Orator”).

We shroud our own indolence under the pretext of difficulty, for we have no real love of our work; nor is eloquence ever sought by us, because it is the most honorable and noble of attainments or for its own sake; but we apply ourselves to labor only with mean views and for sordid gain... I would not wish to have even for a reader of this work a man who would compute what returns his studies will bring him (1.12.16).

What Quintilian extols instead is the non-utilitarian pursuit of the good. This reflective morality has to be acquired as an end in itself which pays serendipitous, rather than calculated dividends. Brinton observes, "For Plato the telos is something beyond the activity of speaking itself; for Quintilian speaking well is itself the telos" (Brinton 180). Quintilian summarizes, "With this character of it, the definition that oratory is the science of speaking well agrees excellently, for it embraces all the virtues of oratory at once and includes also the character of the true orator, as he cannot speak well unless he be a good man" (2.15.34).

Knowing Everything

Since this kind of grounding is not merely subject-specific research for the case at hand, Quintilian's model for education requires mastery of every subject, not just those applicable to the current situation.

Mute insects, too, compose the exquisite flavor of honey, inimitable by human reason, of various sorts of flowers and juices. Shall we wonder that eloquence, nothing more excellent than which the providence of the gods has given to men, requires the aid of many arts, which, even though they may not appear or put themselves forward in the course of a speech, yet contribute to it a secret power and are silently felt? "People have been eloquent," someone may say, "without these arts"; but I want a perfect orator" (1.10.8).

Of course this extensive range of necessary subjects will prove disheartening to the utilitarian speaker interested only in what he needs to know today.^{75 76} Quintilian chides that kind of sloth in learning. “If I seem to my reader to require a great deal, let him consider that it is an orator that is to be educated ... There is need of constant study, the most excellent teachers, and a variety of mental exercises” (1.1.10).

Reading and Writing as Imitation

Following this model (preparing the speaker well before preparing the speech), Quintilian lays out patterns of language acquisition and deployment fueled by constant reading, writing, and imitation of worthy exemplars. Of reading he recommends, “Reading remains to be considered. Only practice can teach a boy to know when to take breath, where to divide a verse, where the sense is concluded, where it begins, when the voice is to be raised or lowered, what is to be uttered with any particular inflection of sound, or what is to be pronounced with greater slowness or rapidity, with greater animation or gentleness than other passages” (1.8.1).

Notice the oral/aural nature of this kind of preparatory reading. It is not the silent reading we often imagine today, but closer to a declamation or oral interpretation of the literature. Reading out loud not only focuses the student on the content at hand, but also toward its oral expression, inflection and pace. Indeed, one gets the sense that silent

⁷⁵ Quintilian provides the basis for the western liberal arts education when he advocates devotion to subjects as impractical as music and geometry (1.10.34).

⁷⁶ Walter Ong traces this utilitarian role for rhetoric to the sixteenth century attacks of Peter Ramus on all classical rhetoric including, most notably, Quintilian. “Quintilian’s is a holistic idea of the sort that lay at the heart of the Renaissance revival of rhetoric where the revival was most powerful. Rhetoric was of a piece with human existence, moral, civil, and eloquent: it called for human interaction at its peak. For Ramus, rhetoric was rather simply the art of verbal style and delivery” (242).

reading fairly misses the whole point if one expects such reading to facilitate fluent use of language. But audibly reading good syntax slowly but steadily builds syntactical competence.

Closely allied with reading is the discipline of writing.

We must write, therefore, as carefully and as much as we can, for as the ground, by being dug to a great depth, becomes more fitted for fructifying and nourishing seeds, so improvement of the mind, acquired from more than mere superficial cultivation, pours forth the fruits of study in richer abundance and retains them with greater fidelity. For without this precaution, the very faculty of speaking extempore will but furnish us with empty loquacity and words born on the lips. In writing are the roots; in writing are the foundations of eloquence (10.3.2).

Note this is not the writing of the speech itself. This is writing as the inculcation of fluency in oral composition. It is writing that forms the foundation for extemporary eloquence. As with many arts, competence in fundamentals must be internally mastered before one can safely leave them for more creative ground. We learn the rules so that we can change the rules (Sullivan 77). “The accomplishment of writing well and expeditiously, which is commonly disregarded by people of quality, is by no means an indifferent matter. Writing itself is the principal thing in our studies, and by it alone sure proficiency, resting on the deepest roots, is secured” (1.1.28).

This facility in reading and writing becomes a sort of imitation whereby the mind is indelibly imprinted with speech patterns. “From these authors and others worthy to be read, a stock of words, a variety of figures, and the art of composition must be acquired. Our minds must be directed to the imitation of all their excellences, for it cannot be doubted that a great portion of art consists in imitation, since, though to invent was first in order of time and holds the first place in merit, it is of advantage to copy what has been invented with success” (10.2.1). This imitation should not be confused with modern

notions of plagiarism. It is not exact content or specific expressions that are imitated, but general fluency under construction.

Verbal Sparring

Quintilian imagines the school setting as the environment in which emerging verbal skills are honed and refined. This requires not only audible reading, but also the beginnings of an audience to whom such reading is directed.

But as soon as it shall be proper for him to read orations and when he shall be able to perceive their beauties, then, I would say, let some attentive and skillful tutor attend him who may not only form his style by reading, but oblige him to learn select portions of speeches by heart and to deliver them standing, with a loud voice, and exactly as he will have to plead so that he may consequently exercise by pronunciation both his voice and memory (1.11.13).

There is a social sense to this kind of public speech play. It is best formed among peers and is not harmed by a mild sense of competition. “It is of advantage, therefore, for a boy to have schoolfellows whom he may first imitate and afterwards try to surpass. Thus will he gradually conceive hope of higher excellence” (1.2.29). This verbal sparring can include declamations (narrations, refutations, confirmations, praise of good characters, censure of evil, commonplaces, theses, comparisons, fictitious cases as in 2.4) and also imitation of actual proceedings (2.10.12). Verbal sparring turns out to be the best predictor of success as a student. “I will venture to say that this sort of diligent exercise will contribute more to the improvement of students than all the treatises of all the rhetoricians that ever wrote” (2.5.14). The entire enterprise needs the soil of social interaction as the soil for germinating speech. The laboratory of oratory is necessarily public and cannot be conducted in privacy.

First of all, let him who is to be an orator and who must live amidst the greatest publicity and in the full daylight of public affairs, accustom

himself, from his boyhood, not to be abashed at the sight of men, nor pine in a solitary and, as it were, recluse way of life ... Besides, when his acquirements are to be displayed in public, he is blinded at the light of the sun and stumbles at every new object, as having learned in solitude that which is to be done in public (1.2.18-19).

For Quintilian, private preparation gives a false sense of competence and readiness. But the speaker trained in public, even competitive, environments will naturally develop oral confidence.⁷⁷

5.5 Preparing the Speech

Until now we have been discussing the preparation of the speaker as the foundation for the speech. It is Quintilian's own insistence on their connection that justifies such extensive theory unrelated to the actual task of preparing a specific speech. Nevertheless, while we acknowledge with him the artifice in separation, we must now proceed toward the speech itself utilizing the five rhetorical canons of invention, arrangement, style, memory and delivery as the framework.

Invention/Status

Invention is the stage of speech preparation where the actual content of a speech starts to take shape. But before that shape emerges, and specific points or arguments are advanced, Quintilian, consistent with his desire to grasp things at their most essential levels, wants to turn a case or situation inside-out to determine every possibility, to grasp it at foundational and causal levels. Notice the care with which he approaches a subject. "But with regard to the divisions which I have made, it is not to be understood that that

⁷⁷ Michael Mendelson ("Quintilian and the Pedagogy of Argument") documents Quintilian's use of *controversia* as a pedagogical technique which needs revival in today's schools. Calling it "inherently dialogical" Mendelson aspires to a role for rhetoric that is truly epistemic in its formation of beliefs in the midst of competing truth claims.

which is to be delivered first is necessarily to be contemplated first, for we ought to consider, before everything else, of what nature the cause is; what is the question in it; what may profit or injure it; next, what is to be maintained or refuted; and then, how the statement of facts should be made” (3.9.5).

The temptation, he says, is to move too quickly and efficiently toward formulating an arrangement before the subject is properly contemplated and every eventuality explored. Quintilian summarizes the categorical range of thought whereby any situation or topic is dissected.

To sum up the whole in a few words, then, arguments are drawn from persons, causes, places, time (of which we distinguished three parts: the preceding, the coincident, and the subsequent), manner (that is, how a thing has been done), means (under which we included instruments), definition, genus, species, differences, peculiarities, removal, division, beginning, increase, completion, similarity, dissimilarity, contraries, consequences, causes, effects, issues, connection, and comparison, each of which is divided into several species (5.10.94).

There is a thorough and tested process by which we can analyze a case, and the rhetor is not grounded in it until the situation has been parsed out from its roots.

This kind of homework in a case may seem irrelevant or unnecessary to a speaker content to simply advance an idea in neutral territory. But Quintilian is not preparing for neutral reception. As a lawyer arguing a case, he knows that every point will be contested in the heat of courtroom scrutiny. To be ready, requires time spent dissembling and reassembling ideas. “For rhetoric would be a very easy and small matter if it could be included in one short body of rules, but rules must generally be altered to suit the nature of each individual case, the time, the occasion, and necessity itself; consequently, one great quality in an orator is discretion, because he must turn his thoughts in various

directions according to the different bearings of his subject” (2.13.2). Having thought about all possibilities, the situation will suggest lines of reasoning and argumentation as the labor of reflection yields the fruit of composition.⁷⁸ “Training in argumentation and proof should become second nature and proofs suggest themselves naturally in the course of a speech” (5.10.125). For Quintilian there is a “natural” unfolding of argumentation that is rooted in thorough dissection and cohesive grasp of a subject (Sullivan 77).

Arrangement Via Roadmapping

In Invention, the content of the speech is analyzed and pondered. In Arrangement attention shifts toward order and sequence. How will the speech progress—toward what destination and in what trajectory? The speech must be arranged.

There remains then only the arrangement of parts, and in the parts themselves there must be some one thought first, another second, another third, and so on. We must take care that these thoughts are not merely placed in a certain order, but that they are also connected one with another, cohering so closely that no joining may appear between them, so that they may form a body and not a mere collection of members ... Thus different things will not seem hurried together from distant parts, all strangers one to another, but will unite themselves in a sure bond and alliance with those that precede and those that follow; and our speech will appear not merely a combination of phrases, but all of a piece (7.10.16-17)

Quintilian’s sense of arrangement bears a narrative structure. The sequence is crucial, as ingredients must build toward something other than a long list. Construction of long enumerated lists is the misapplication of Invention and temptation of Arrangement. For since ingredients can be arranged sequentially, it might seem obvious that those ingredients should be explicitly enumerated. But listen to the caution: “For, in general,

⁷⁸ For this kind of practical over theoretical role for *topoi* in rhetorical argumentation see Michael Leff’s “Up From Theory: Or I Fought the Topoi and the Topoi Won.” Leff sees Quintilian as the model for Invention based in actual cases and not abstract theory.

those bare treatises on art, through too much affectation of subtlety, break and cut down whatever is noble in eloquence, drink up as it were all the blood of thought, and lay bare the bones, which, while they ought to exist and to be united by their ligaments, ought still to be covered with flesh” (Preface 24).

That there are “bones” (individually discernible ingredients) in a speech is necessary and evidence of good arrangement. That people should see or hear those bones directs the attention to the wrong place; to the parts instead of the whole; to the trees instead of the forest. Indeed, exposing the bones of the speech via numbered points also kills some of the power of novelty in “the moment.” “There are other reasons why we should not always adopt a partition (enumeration), first, because most observations please better when they appear to be conceived on the moment, and not to be brought from home, but to spring from the subject itself as we are discussing it” (4.5.4).

Quintilian insists repeatedly that the speech should be conceived as one thing, not many, and that the one thing must never be forgotten either in composition or in delivery. He returns to the metaphor of a journey or roadmap to illustrate this orientation toward speaking.

[Vision] (Phantasiai) by the Greeks, must be carefully cherished in our minds, and everything on which we intend to speak, every person and every question, and all the hopes and fears likely to be attendant on them, must be kept full before our view, and admitted as it were into our hearts ... Our attention must also be fixed, not merely on any single object, but on several in connection, just as, when we cast our eye along a straight road, we see everything that is on it and about it, commanding a view of not only the end, but the whole way to the end (10.7.14-16).

Quintilian is describing a sort of visually memorable map or pattern that, though comprised of many parts, can be kept in the mind’s eye as a single entity. This single organizing vision can take many forms. “What I have specified as being done with

regard to a dwelling house may also be done with regard to public buildings or a long road, or the walls of a city, or pictures, or we may even conceive imaginary places for ourselves” (11.2.21).⁷⁹ The point is to find a visual way to conceive of a single, unified body that holds together multiple parts in a logical order and sequence. “For if we but speak as we ought, there will be certain points, as well in the treatment as in the distribution of the different questions in our speech, that will naturally be first, second, and so on, and the whole concatenation of the parts will be so manifestly coherent that nothing can be omitted or inserted in it without being at once perceived” (11.2.37).

Composition via Meditation

Once the “whole” has been visualized, the roadmap set, Quintilian recommends a stage of Invention variously called meditation or sometimes “premeditation.” At this stage, the mind begins to repeatedly rehearse the terrain of the speech until the mental unfolding is natural and unavoidable. “Nor does it only arrange within its circle the order of things (which would itself be a great assistance to us), but forms an array of words and connects together the whole texture of speech, with such effect that nothing is wanting but to write it down. Indeed, in general, ideas are more firmly fixed in the memory if our attention does not relax its hold on them by trusting too securely to writing” (10.6.2). At first it might seem as if a written speech is the necessary outcome of premeditation. But if we look more closely, we see Quintilian is not requiring actual documentation of the speech, but a mental state of readiness that could, if required, spill the speech onto paper without incident. Actually, there is a compositional caution against writing out a speech. Once done, the writing can actually release the creative mental tension necessary to

⁷⁹ For a diagram of how the Gospel of Mark could have been composed and structured to fit the pillars of an ancient edifice, see Chapter 9 in Horsley’s [Performing the Gospel](#).

propel a speech forward (as when we cannot sleep until we unload mental tension by writing something down).⁸⁰

How does premeditation work? By gradual but steady accretion of ideas toward a completed whole. “A habit of thinking must then be gradually gained by embracing in our minds a few particulars at first, in such a way that they may be faithfully repeated. Next, by additions so moderate that our task may scarcely feel itself increased, our power of conception must be enlarged and sustained by plenty of exercise” (10.6.3).

Premeditation, since it is done mentally and internally, has infinite flexibility. It facilitates speech preparation in times and places impractical to the limitations of literacy, requiring neither light, nor tools of pen and paper, nor hospitable external conditions. “There is also another kind of exercise, that of meditating upon whole subjects and going through them in silent thought (yet so as to speak as it were within ourselves), an exercise which may be pursued at all times and in all places, when we are not actually engaged in any other occupation” (10.7.25). Premeditation trains the mind for fluent delivery by mentally cementing the sequence of the speech and the connections between sequential points.

But premeditation, though sustained by memory, should not be confused with memorization. Memorization, says Quintilian, will only produce stress since the mind will be engaged on recollection and not on the necessary skill of looking forward, down the mental “road.”

⁸⁰ Quintilian here alludes to Plato’s concern with the damage writing does to authentic knowledge, “Yet I find it said indeed by Plato that the use of letters is a detriment to memory, because, as he intimates, what we have committed to writing we cease, in some degree, to guard, and lose it through mere neglect” (11.2.9).

Let our premeditation, therefore, be made with such care that fortune, while she is unable to disappoint, may have it in her power to assist us. But it will depend on the strength of our memory, whether what we have embraced in our minds flows forth easily and does not prevent us, while we are anxious and looking back, and relying on no hope but that of recollection, from casting a glance in advance. (10.6.6).

When premeditation crosses over into memorization, something is lost that cannot be recovered. So instead of writing out the premeditated speech, Quintilian advocates moving not from mind to paper, but from mind to mouth. “Thus, training the student's reason involves teaching the rules and precepts of an art, but it also involves intense and repetitive practice, not only in the topics but also in reading and writing narratives, creating over time a personality or ethos that habitually and spontaneously sees the appropriate lines of argument in a given case” (Sullivan 78).

Composition via Speaking

“But the cause of the fluency is evident, for strongly conceived thoughts and images rising fresh in the mind bear us along with uninterrupted rapidity, when they would sometimes, if retarded by the slowness of writing, grow cool and, if put off, would never return” (10.7.14). Without a doubt, Quintilian advocates writing. But his advocacy is more linked to the construction of general verbal competence than it is the production of a specific speech. The caution here is that written composition, being slower and more deliberate, cuts off the speaker from expressions forged in the energy of the moment, and that the comparative tedium of writing will translate into an undesirable tedium of speech.

In his nomination of Quintilian as a postmodern pedagogist Macke contrasts speaking and writing: “It is not that I am somehow less rational when I speak, or that my writing requires more of my ‘IQ.’ It is that I inhabit a body when I write that is different

from the one with which I speak, and this is precisely because the site, the topos, of my perception and expression produce a fundamentally different calculus of order and relations” (17). Writing is for comprehension before the speech and preservation after it. But writing is not equipped to handle the moment.

Oral composition, what we might call “pre-hearsing” a speech, will allow the oral world to condition it. “The great judge of composition is the ear, which is sensible of what fills it, misses something in whatever is defective, is offended with what is harsh, soothed with what is gentle, startled by what is distorted, approves what is compact, marks what is lame, and dislikes whatever is redundant and superfluous. Hence, while the learned understand the art of composition, the unlearned enjoy pleasure from it” (9.4.116). Quintilian is aware that what sounds best to the ear may be different from what looks best on paper. If one is forced to go one way or the other, it is the ear that should decide the compositional issue. The only way the ear can weigh in on that decision is to begin speaking the speech long before its intended venue.

Style

Having invented and arranged a speech, the next issue under consideration is the issue of style. What should be the tone of the speech? What style of expression? Here Quintilian seems to the casual observer to contradict himself. For on the one hand he argues hard for a spontaneous style that is apparently free from structure and planning or what Quintilian calls “artifice.” “We must especially avoid, therefore, in this part of our speech, all suspicion of artifice (for nowhere is the judge more on his guard) so that nothing may appear fictitious or studied, but that all may be thought to emanate rather from the cause than from the advocate. But this manner our modern pleaders cannot

tolerate; we think that our art is lost if it is not seen, whereas art, if it is seen, ceases to be art” (4.2.126-7). Quintilian wants the arguments of the speech to spring up from the event itself. Again he stresses, “But a good memory gains us credit even for readiness of wit, as we appear not to have brought what we utter from home, but to have conceived it on the instant, an opinion which is of great service both to the speaker and to his cause, for a judge admires more and distrusts less that which he regards as not having been preconcerted to mislead him” (11.2.47). Appearing to conceive things “on the instant” has great rhetorical power.⁸¹

Yet this is only half the story. It is also not hard to find him advocating a very prepared style that smacks of literate preparation. “Our style must be so formed by much and diligent composition that even what is poured forth by us unpremeditatedly may present the appearance of having been previously written, so that after having written much, we shall have the power of speaking copiously” (10.7.7).

So which is it? How can a speaker appear to be simultaneously prepared and unprepared in delivery? The key is in disguising our preparation. Preparation for Quintilian always resides below the surface of the speech as bones are hidden under flesh. Preparation is not an ostentatious show of organizational skill but the engine which quietly but powerfully drives a speech that appears to be unfolding in that instant. Writing skills are not to produce great speeches but to train the mind and mouth toward

⁸¹ In this sense Quintilian is a proponent for natural style as opposed to anything that smacks of the theatrical or exaggerated. “It is not even every gesture or motion that is to be adopted from the actor, for though the orator ought to regulate both to a certain degree, yet he will be far from appearing in a theatrical character and will exhibit nothing extravagant either in his looks, or the movements of his hands, or his walk. If there is any art used by speakers in these points, the first object of it should be that it may not appear to be art” (1.11.3).

mastery of syntax and vocabulary so that even spontaneous speech bears the mark of a prepared mind. In short Quintilian is arguing for prepared speeches that appear unprepared and in a crisis, impromptu speeches that yet bear the marks of steady preparation. But this level of preparation exacts as much effort as literary methods and should never be construed as a time saving measure. An oral style, though extemporaneous and flexible, is not random nor haphazard.

Extemporaneous Delivery via Memory

Having done the adequate preparation, Quintilian finishes with the last two of the five elements of the rhetorical canon: memory and delivery. There is no doubt that all the preparation that goes into the speech is intended to build to the point of what he calls “extemporaneous” delivery.⁸² “But the richest fruit of all our study, and the most ample recompense for the extent of our labor, is the faculty of speaking extempore, and he who has not succeeded in acquiring it will do well, in my opinion, to renounce the occupations of the forum and devote his solitary talent of writing to some other employment” (10.7.1).

Quintilian is very clear on this. If one cannot master extemporaneous speech, one might as well retire from speaking. This is what distinguishes an orator from a speaker, a prophet from a scribe. This is the standard to which all rhetors should aspire. But having come this far we should also know enough not to confuse extemporaneous with spontaneous or unplanned speeches (properly called “impromptu”). Although there are

⁸² For an extended analysis of Quintilian’s advocacy of extemporaneous speech see Chris Holcomb’s *“The Crown of All Our Study”: Improvisation in Quintilian’s Institutio Oratoria*. Holcomb contends it is the defining and typically overlooked feature in Quintilian’s theory as he sought to distinguish his artful spontaneity from the artless variety practiced by the “delatores” (informers working in the service of the Emperors) and, more important, to the theory of rhetoric implicit in their oratorical practice” (55).

times when no planning is possible—“By writing, resources are stored up, as it were, in a sacred repository, from where they may be drawn forth for sudden emergencies or as circumstances require” (10.3.3)—the general rule is that extemporaneous speech only looks spontaneous. Underneath is the grueling work of good invention and arrangement and style, but not to the extent that the actual vocabulary and syntax are predetermined.

When Quintilian gets to delivery, he unlike theorists before him who separate the two combines it with memory and links it in Book 11 to *kairos* (the right time as suggested by a live event). Indeed it is memory (not memorization) that fuels delivery. “Accordingly, memory is called, not without reason, the treasury of eloquence” (11.2.1). The memory serves as a sort of storehouse, larder, and pantry. It can be stocked with fine things which can be recalled as necessary in the *kairos* of the moment. “And Jesus said to them, ‘Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a head of a household, who brings out of his treasure things new and old’” (Matthew 13:52). This process of building the treasury of the memory is lifelong and starts in childhood. Referring to boys that have been long exposed to good examples he summarizes:

They will have at command, moreover, an abundance of the best words, phrases, and figures, not sought for the occasion, but offering themselves spontaneously, as it were, from a store treasured within them. To this is added the power of quoting the happy expressions of any author, which is agreeable in common conversation and useful in pleading, for phrases which are not coined for the sake of the cause in hand have the greater weight and often gain us more applause than if they were our own (2.7.2).

The memory in this sense is not fixed but fluid. It is a place from which to draw things necessary to the situation at hand. “While Quintilian views this treasure-chest (thesaurus) of expression and thought as important to any oratorical endeavor, it is

especially crucial when improvising since it will help the orator secure fluency and facility of speech and forestall any loss of confidence or anxiety resulting from drying up mid-oration” (Holcomb 61). Those without such memory are forced to rely solely upon things prepared in advance and can miss opportunities of the moment.⁸³ This is where the overly literate character of a speech can limit its own rhetorical power. Written notes, though reassuring, are a poor substitute for the properly prepared force of an incisive memory.

Under this head, I express my full approbation of short notes and of small memorandum books which may be held in the hand and on which we may occasionally glance. But I do not like the method which Laenas recommends, of reducing what we have written into summaries or into short notes and head, for our very dependence on these summaries begets negligence in committing our matter to memory and disconnects and disfigures our speech. I even think that we should not write at all what we design to deliver from memory, for if we do so, it generally happens that our thoughts fix us to the studied portions of our speech and do not allow us to try the fortune of the moment. Thus the mind hangs in suspense and perplexity between the two, having lost sight of what was written, and yet not being at liberty to imagine anything new (10.7.32).

It is as if the natural unfolding of a speech demands the speaker to be “all there” in the room, in the *kairos* of the moment. Every recourse to written prompts pulls the speaker back into another world from which he must continually extricate himself to re-enter the speech. The mind is pulled in too many directions. “It will be far safer for him, after treasuring up his matter in his mind, to leave himself at liberty to deliver it as he

⁸³ Quintilian sees such unimaginative speakers as woefully disabled to handle a case. “For what can such men produce appropriate to particular causes of which the aspect is perpetually varied and new? How can they reply to questions propounded by the opposite party? How can they at once meet objections or interrogate a witness, when, even on topics of the commonest kind, such as are handled in most causes, they are unable to pursue the most ordinary thoughts in any words but those which they have long before prepared (2.4.27)?

pleases, for a speaker never loses a single word that he has chosen, without regret, and cannot easily put another in its place while he is trying to recollect the very one that he had written” (11.2.48). Again, the speaker is wasting too much energy trying to remember every written word rather than relying on the moment itself to suggest a fitting course.

Instead of being torn between notes and the present moment, the mind should be ranging from where the speech is toward where it should go next.

The ability of speaking extempore seems to me to depend on no other faculty of the mind than this, for while we are uttering one thought, we have to consider what we are to say next, and thus, while the mind is constantly looking forward beyond its immediate object, whatever it finds in the meantime it deposits in the keeping, as it were, of the memory, which, receiving it from the conception, transmits it, as an instrument of intercommunication, to the delivery (11.2.3).

Quintilian is laying out here the magic of extemporaneous delivery. The speech progresses on a premeditated route while simultaneously scanning the moment and the treasury of memory for supplemental material that might be appropriate. This allows the planned course of the speech to adapt to the moment and even contain elements that were not conceived prior to the live speech event. “Such moments come to the orator as sudden and brilliant flashes of thought (*extemporales colores*), and should they occur, the orator must be willing and ready to seize the opportunity they present, transitioning seamlessly from the text of his prepared oration into an improvisational mode and back again” (Holcomb 66). It is this balance of both preparation and spontaneity that Quintilian upholds as our standard.

5.6 A Word of Caution

Admittedly, this standard is open to misunderstanding and abuse. Some will think it relies purely on the moment and will overlook the amount of work under girding an extemporaneous speech. They might be tempted to rely too much on natural ability and the ability to think on their feet. Quintilian derides such arrogance and predicts it will ultimately backfire. “Yet a perverse kind of ambition moves some of our declaimers to profess themselves ready to speak as soon as a case is laid before them, and what is the most vain and theatrical of all their practices, they even ask for a word with which they may commence. But Eloquence, in her turn, derides those who thus insult her, and those who wish to appear learned to fools are decidedly pronounced fools by the learned” (10.7.21). One cannot stress enough the difference between extemporaneous and spontaneous speech. Quintilian aims clearly for the former over the latter, as we would do well to emulate.

5.7 A Word of Encouragement

Yet while eschewing arrogant eloquence, Quintilian is realistic enough to note the role of praise as motivation for a speaker. Because not everything can be planned or anticipated in extemporaneous speech, there is a sense of unavoidable excitement and fear that actually supplies a positive emotional force to the event.

The fear of failure, moreover, and the expectation of praise for what we shall say gives a spur to our exertions, and it may seem strange that though the pen delights in seclusion and shrinks from the presence of a witness, extemporal oratory is excited by a crowd of listeners, as the soldier by the mustering of the standards. For the necessity of speaking expels and urges forth our thoughts, however difficult to be expressed, and the desire to please increases our efforts. So much does everything look to reward that even eloquence, though it has the highest pleasure in the exercise of its own powers, is yet greatly incited by the enjoyment of praise and reputation. (10.7.17)

Quintilian's infinitely flexible oratory is admittedly stressful. There are safer, more predictable models. Some preachers looking at the risk and demands of preaching extemporaneously might conclude the risks outweigh the rewards. For such a person Quintilian offers an appropriate concluding anecdote designed as a sort of pressure relief valve to the aspiring preacher. He speaks of a certain youth brought to the point of grief and despair over his inability to produce even the introduction to his speech (a condition not far from any preacher faced with demands of a weekly sermon). "Florus immediately replied with a smile, 'Do you wish to write better than you can?' Such is the whole truth of the matter. We must endeavor to speak with as much ability as we can, but we must speak according to our ability. For improvement, there is need of application, but not of vexation with ourselves" (10.3.14-15). The next chapter will, with a minimum of vexation, attempt to apply principles of orality uncovered this far to actual praxis of weekly sermon preparation.

Chapter 6

Theory to Praxis

6.1 Another Sixth Canon

Having followed Quintilian's treatment of the five classic canons of rhetoric, we come now to this final sixth chapter on homiletic praxis; one which will attempt a conscious move from theory to practice and make specific applications from rhetorical theory to homiletic praxis. There is some precedent for using the term "6th Canon" whenever a rhetorician attempts to cover ground not neatly assignable to any of the classic five. Russell Hirst has so moved in "The Sixth Canon of Sacred Rhetoric: Inspiration in Nineteenth-Century Homiletic Theory," and so has Barbara Warnick in The Sixth Canon: Belletristic Rhetorical Theory and Its French Antecedent. While this chapter will not focus directly on either Hirst's well-documented look at the blend of the human and divine in nineteenth-century homiletic theory, nor on Warnick's psychological/aesthetic analysis, it does have overlap with both of these authors' concerns.

Having sampled the orality native to the classical world, along with Walter Ong's modern analysis of the oral/literate communicative continuum, some applications can be suggested for contemporary homiletics. The joining of Quintilian and Ong may seem arbitrary at first until we see how often Ong went back to classical rhetoric in general and

Quintilian in particular. Ong's sympathetic defense and reclamation of Quintilian is expressed succinctly in his review of the work of an influential educational reformer of the sixteenth century, Frenchman Peter Ramus. It is Ramus, Ong argues, who moved the modern academy away from rich discursive thinking toward a narrow-minded privileging of dialectic. Ramus was not shy about this agenda as can be seen from one of his titles, Arguments in Rhetoric Against Quintilian. Ong credits Ramus for creating the kind of environment in which dialogue decays and logic dominates.⁸⁴ This kind of logic functions practically as "mono-logic," and is expressed fittingly in monologues. Listen to Ong's excellent summary:

Quintilian differs from Ramus in holding a far more urbane, discursively developed, larger view of rhetoric as the complete education of the citizen-orator involving the total human person and total human relationships. Quintilian's is a holistic idea, of the sort that lay at the heart of the Renaissance revival of rhetoric where this revival was most powerful. Rhetoric was of a piece with human existence, moral, civil and eloquent: it called for human interaction at peak. For Ramus, rhetoric was rather simply the art of verbal style and delivery, to be mingled with other disjunct arts (grammar, logic, arithmetic and the like) only in the students' exercise or "use," not in explanations of the art itself (Review 243).

If modernity really did erode dialogue and narrative structure, as Ong and others have argued, the premise that homiletics has grown incrementally more logical and literary logically follows. We documented this trend in homiletic textbooks in Chapter 1. But it remains for this chapter to bring explicit applications from both Ong and Quintilian

⁸⁴ This is the same concern and historical trajectory narrated by John O'Banion in Reorienting Rhetoric: A Dialectic of List and Story. Neither Ong nor O'Banion seek the elimination of Logic/List, but the rebalancing of List with Story. O'Banion also rediscovers classical rhetoric, spending an entire chapter on Quintilian's sense of *narratio* as the key to keeping order and sequence to a speech, i.e., a natural unfolding (78). O'Banion relies heavily on the work of American rhetorician Kenneth Burke since in Burke's Dramatism, he finds this same recovery of narration as the central engine of persuasion.

to the homiletic table. We will organize these observations in three progressive and overlapping phases: preparing the preacher, preparing the sermon, and delivering the sermon.

Our approach will be suggestive rather than prescriptive, selective rather than exhaustive, irenic rather than exclusive, yet distinctive in its consistently oral/aural conditioning. One obvious question at this point relates to the extent to which other homileticians have already made these applications. Or in spite of the fact that twentieth-century homiletics lost its rhetorical partner, to what extent have oral groundings stubbornly resurfaced? In answering that, five categories of recently published homiletic textbooks come to the surface.

6.2 Five Categories of Current Homiletic Praxis

Standard Literary Approaches

The vast majority of homiletic texts, because they are not grounded in classic rhetoric or in orality, come from a more literary orientation.⁸⁵ By that we mean they conceive of the sermon as something outside the preacher, something compiled mostly by private research of textual materials, something that can be documented and adequately summarized in outline or manuscript form, and something that is not significantly shaped

⁸⁵ If homiletics is slow to embrace orality, so, according to Holly Hearon, are biblical studies, a field also dominated by the literary residue of form criticism. “Despite growing interest, these studies have yet to make a significant impact on the biblical field. The challenge for scholars in the twenty-first century is to effect a shift in the study of biblical texts away from the heavy, indeed almost exclusive, emphasis on the literary nature of these texts to the study of the texts as sound maps intended to be heard in a rhetorical culture that emphasized the persuasive power of the spoken word” (*The Implications of Orality Studies for Studies of the Biblical Text* in Performing the Gospel Fortress, 2006 3). Orality Studies are steadily forging their way into Biblical Studies as evidenced by the 2009 publication of The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media (Wifp and Stock). Editors Hearon and Ruge-Jones have compiled an impressive list of scholars exploring the oral dimensions of hermeneutics and the sound world of the early church.

by the immediacy of the actual room and audience. Those are the hallmarks of a literary approach to preaching and that approach has dominated homiletic praxis for roughly 300 years. It is unnecessary to cite these texts again since we have referenced the dominant approaches as well as recent developments in Chapter 1. However, when we turn to specific praxis, it would be likewise foolish not to acknowledge the homileticians who have moved consciously toward at least basic oral sensitivities. These can be divided into theorists who are historically grounded in church history, those influenced by contemporary communication scholarship, those classically grounded in rhetoric, and those who move in oral directions on an intuitive/pragmatic level without rhetorical grounding.

Orality Based on Intuition and/or Evolved Practice

Intuition toward orality springs up in places not consciously grounded in any rhetorical approach. Any preacher who faces the challenge of the sermon event must necessarily dabble weekly in orality. Some have through trial and error or mere observation discovered the value of an oral impulse. An example is the very recent Preaching On Your Feet (2008) by Fred Lybrand. Lybrand echoes many of the themes of an orally conditioned homiletic, yet references not a single scholar from the world of rhetoric or orality studies. This is not surprising since Augustine himself observed that some of the best preachers were naturally gifted in oral forms without any formal training. Sometimes these people even write about their approaches, usually citing other homileticians or other influences from other disciplines.⁸⁶ So the summary here is not

⁸⁶ Examples of this include African-American preaching which is oral in deliberate and obvious ways, but often does not ground itself in rhetorical theory. For more on this see LaRue's Power in the Pulpit: How American's Most Effective Black Preachers Prepare

intended to exhaustively categorize those who are writing about oral preaching, but to limit the survey to those who are, from some theoretical base, writing about preaching.

Orality Based on Church History

Of the over 30 praxis-oriented homiletic texts consulted for this project, only one contemporary work makes a serious historical appraisal. Michael Pasquarello is distinguished by the extent to which he pulls non-utilitarian praxis from historical precedent. Though not particularly concerned with classical rhetoric or with contemporary rhetorical studies, Pasquarello's conclusion overlaps with both. His concern that preachers focus first on content and character before technique echoes concerns that go all the way back to Cicero and Quintilian, and for that reason his recommendations taken from the most noteworthy preachers of church history deserve recognition even as they unapologetically fail to provide technical guidance. His historical voice is a valuable and underrepresented voice in the homiletic dialogue.

Orality Based on Classical Rhetoric

Many homiletic texts salute classical rhetoric in some sort of obligatory way. Those that do, feel compelled to mention Aristotle's three proofs (*logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos*). Beyond that, references are few and far between. Paul Scott Wilson (*Broken Words: Reflections on the Craft of Preaching*, 2004) titles a chapter *Learning From Classical Rhetoric* but only manages a four-page overview. In contrast, William Shepherd admirably unites Ciceronian rhetoric with homiletic praxis in *Without a Net:*

Their Sermons (Westminster, 2002). Charles Cosgrove and Dow Edgerton recently published *In Other Words: Incarnational Translation for Preaching* (Eerdmans, 2007) to document how Scripture can be orally translated from one era to the next with power and passion. But their theoretical grounding comes from disciplines as diverse as poetry, narrative, law, wisdom literature, and translation theory.

Preaching in the Paperless Pulpit (2004). Far from a mere salute, Shepherd uses Cicero to flesh out a bold yet approachable homiletic praxis based on perceived spontaneity disguising aurally written composition (143). Shepherd approximates with Cicero what Chapter 5 attempts here with Quintilian.

Orality Based on Recent Trends

It appears that orality studies are working their way into the homiletic dialogue at an increasing pace. Eight texts published in the last seven years have some mention of Walter Ong or orality. It seems almost requisite to make some acknowledgment.

Paul Scott Wilson, who revised his The Practice of Preaching in 2007, includes a chapter on *Speaking for the Ear* in which he not only mentions Ong, but also lists seven “Oral Practices” which can be attempted (202). Dennis Cahill (The Shape of Preaching: Theory and Practice in Sermon Design, 2007) gives Ong a paragraph (71), but does not mention any specifically oral applications. Kenton Anderson (Choosing to Preach, 2006) summarizes Ong in a page, and offers “Adopting an Oral Style” (116) as one of four ways to preach with “Affective Style.” Michael Quicke allots seven pages to orality in 360 Degree Preaching (2003), but does not make any specific oral recommendations. Keith Wilhite (Preaching With Relevance Without Dumbing Down, 2001) makes a quick reference to orality without any specific application. Jeff Arthurs (Preaching With Variety 2007) clearly understands orality and mentions three applications. From the African-American tradition James Henry Harris (The Word Made Plain: The Power and Promise of Preaching, 2004) makes a passing reference to Ong, but relies much more heavily on the African-American preaching experience. “Oral” even makes a brief half-

page appearance in John McClure's recent Preaching Words: 144 Key Terms in Homiletics (2007).

Clyde Fant deserves mention for his patient approach to oral homiletics in Preaching For Today. Originally published in 1975 and then revised in 1987, Fant argues for the construction of an "Oral Manuscript" (165) that bypasses some of the literate steps of preparation. Fant is intriguing since his oral impulses come neither from classic rhetoric nor from Ong's orality scholarship. Although he does cite some contemporary research in orality/literacy (including McLuhan), most of his grounding comes from the discipline of theology. Fant starts with the Incarnation and ends with orally conditioned Incarnational Preaching (69).

Finally, as referenced in Chapter 1, Bruce Shields (From the Housetops: Preaching in the Early Church and Today, 2000) makes a compelling case for the underlying orality of the New Testament and cites Ong repeatedly but makes suggestions that do not seem connected to the heart of orality. In conclusion it seems that while many homileticians are talking about orality, most have added it on to an already existing homiletic framework as an intriguing experimental option. None espouse a theoretically and historically grounded approach to an oral homiletic that is willing to jettison literary assumptions, a procedure we will now attempt relying upon both Quintilian and Ong.

6.3 Preparing The Preacher

Character Development

Quintilian's concept of the *Vir Bonus*, the person of character before anything else, has contemporary application. Though seminary curricula do not neglect the character development and spiritual formation of students, the direct link to homiletics is

not typically underscored. Preaching classes do not typically start with personal integrity, though from Quintilian's perspective they should. Practically this means that while homiletic instructors may not choose to spend their limited time in counseling and discipleship, they should make it clear that preaching will always be both limited and accentuated by personal character.

From the preacher's perspective any work in the area of personal character development is also, unavoidably, work in homiletics. As we become better people we become better preachers because part of the energy behind expression is a personal connection to the topic. If we are not, ourselves, grappling with fear, our expression on that topic will be stiff and hypothetical—not the kind of preaching that draws others in. Our ethos generated from the sermon is compromised and diluted to a palpable degree.

Practically this means that a lot of the scope of a pastor's life and work is homiletic to the extent that everything we do, view, hear, and experience goes into building the kind of people we actually are and the pantry from which we draw during the act of preaching (Ong, OL 60). Sermon preparation is not separated from the rest of life and so becomes difficult to clock and chart. How many hours are spent in preparation? The question assumes a quantifiable answer based in literate preparation.

Becoming a Theologian

Michael Pasquarello calls for the reintroduction of the privileging of theology over homiletics in Sacred Rhetoric. The best preachers in the history of the church, he argues, were theologians before they were preachers.⁸⁷ One did not study in order to

⁸⁷ Pasquarello surveys Augustine, Gregory the Great, St. Benedict, Bernard of Clairvaux, Bonaventure, Aquinas, Erasmus, Latimer, Calvin and Luther looking for homiletic grounding uninfluenced by contemporary practice.

preach. Study was inherently good and necessary, regardless of outcome or expression. That the study made its way “out” in grounded sermons was natural and fitting, but not the stimulus for the labor involved. Pasquarello calls us to study for the love of God and truth, not for what will preach. In a world of pragmatic preparation and shoddy theological grounding, his non-utilitarian call sounds oddly inefficient and out of place. Quintilian may not have advocated theology proper but he did expect the rhetor to know something about everything, assuming the interconnectedness of a theological worldview.⁸⁸ Deep grounding in theology and lifelong learning will prove to be an integral part of any oral homiletic worthy of emulation.

Reading and Writing

Preparing ourselves as preachers starts with who we are, moves to what we know, and translates naturally to how we communicate. Quintilian advises the constant attention to reading and writing as a sort of mimesis that builds verbal facility (10.2.1). It is not reading in search of sermon fodder or writing a sermon. This is reading for the love of reading and for exposure to masters of vocabulary and syntax. It has no tangible connection to any particular sermon being, like the two previous pursuits, expressly non-utilitarian. It is the recognition that our minds, pens, and tongues are influenced by the exposure we give them. Besides content, we also glean verbal style. To preach in the moment we need the confidence that if we begin a sentence, we possess also the necessary verbal resources to finish it. Lacking that assurance, we will resort

⁸⁸ Quintilian’s similar term would be “morality” indicating that the perfect speaker was not merely the pragmatist who knew how to coin a phrase, but someone who was deeply rooted in ethics (12.2.6).

instinctively to the safety of a textual orientation and literate prompts. Verbal confidence builds via exposure to excellent communicators.

Approaching Scripture

Preachers differ from other public speakers in their reliance upon a source text. While politicians and lawyers may make reference to revised legal code, they are not faced with the grammarian's task of actually representing an ancient text to a contemporary audience. This is one of the reasons that preaching retains such a strong connection to literacy. Without text there would be no authoritative preaching, only the opinions of one person over against another.

One of the strengths of text is its permanence and documentary authority, what Ong calls closure (OL 129). When a sermon is prepared in literacy, a literate preacher approaches the pulpit with two texts: the sacred and the scrawled. Though they are related, prominence tends to be accorded to the one most recently penned, and the literate preacher may phenomenologically focus on his own "text" first. This can accidentally put Scripture in a subservient role so that the essence of the message, while touching on Scripture, is actually drawn more from the preacher and his notes. The flow of thought in the sacred text is sacrificed to the needs of the preacher's outline.

The oral preacher relates to sacred text differently. When approaching the pulpit there is only one authoritative text, and that text is binding upon the preacher and the congregation. The preacher's task, clearly, is to orally explicate that text not his own. There is only one authority. The oral sermon then is more likely to follow the flow of thought actually in the passage and not to construct outlines alien to it.

This is where Scriptural context becomes important. If the sermon is to reflect original thought, that thought has to be hermeneutically derived from the context of the entire book. If it is John or Isaiah's message more than his own, he needs to understand John and Isaiah in context. He needs to "hear" and hear well this ancient author. This is why an oral preacher will always preach with sensitivity to Scriptural context and often directly through a book of Scripture. The structure of an oral sermon will respect the flow of thought in the source text instead of inventing an entirely novel structure. Though it is possible to preach topically in an oral style and to preach expositionally in a literate style, there is a natural connection between orality and exposition of Scripture. The oral preacher is an oral herald of a written text. The literate preacher is an oral herald of a literate outline of a written text. That extra layer adds complexity to the otherwise simple and clean relationship of text and tongue.

Internalization of Scripture

Just as sermons can remain "outside" us in notes or on a screen, the word of God can similarly remain outside us if we only refer to it in text. Scripture itself is replete with examples of the prophets eating the scroll as the word of God internalized. Jesus framed the word of God as essential food to be taken in (Matthew 4:4). This seems to have been a hallmark of earlier ages when clergy seemed to evidence more internalization of Scripture. When we read any of Augustine's sermons and attempt to count the number of Scriptural references, it immediately becomes clear that Augustine had so much Scripture internalized that it came out in all sorts of quotes, references, and even subtle allusions. At times it is hard to decipher where Augustine's words stop and Scripture begins. This is not because Augustine memorized the sermon. He internalized

the scripture that then leaked extemporaneously into the sermon and advocated the internalization of Scripture to provide infinitely flexible fodder for unfolding sermons. “If the preacher is to rhapsodize on a topic, drawing from a copia informed by the reading of scripture, then scripture and its wisdom are obviously not outside the speaker, but interiorized” (Schaeffer 1139). This interiorized standard of homiletic preparation, gleaned from Quintilian’s antiquity (2.7.2) and gutted by modernity, might yet offer assistance today.

Most preachers can sense the difference in audience response when they shift into a Scriptural quotation right in the middle of a sermon. There is a different, more authoritative sound. The congregation can sense it and so can the preacher. Unfortunately most preachers do not have a large reservoir of internalized Scripture to draw upon. This no doubt has multiple causes, not the least of which is the lazy memory produced by textuality. Why, many preachers conclude, would we memorize what we can easily access on paper?

Related is multiplication of new translations. For better or for worse, when one standard English version was established, all ears became tuned to that phonetic reflex. Now it is as if no one knows what Scripture “should” sound like because we all hear it in its multiplicity, with higher and higher levels of vernacularization. But if Stephen Webb is right about the theology of sound, we must find a way to release Scripture for its audible reception. Whether in oral readings of Scripture, oral interpretation of Scripture, Scriptural songs, or Scripture embedded in sermons, it must rise off the silent page, into our hearts and minds and out of our mouths. It must become internal.

6.4 Preparing the Sermon

Status Dissection and Analysis

Quintilian's outline of status theory (3.9.5) during Invention has direct application to the way a sermon is prepared. In fact, the concept of Invention might be homiletically rediscovered to our great benefit. Typically the preparation moves from hermeneutics to homiletics with inappropriate efficiency. Once we think we understand the gist of a text, we want to start composing the sermon. But status theory asks us to dissect the idea first. Grasp it from the ground up. Get the "why" before the "what." Find the link between this idea and the theological family of related ideas to which it corresponds.

Take, for instance, Jesus' exhortation at the end of the Sermon on the Mount to be "perfect" or, perhaps, "complete." Before preaching that, we must ask: what does he mean by complete? What is the opposite of complete? What would keep a person incomplete? Does he say how to become complete? What are the implications of being complete? Being incomplete? What are the obstacles? What hazards? What rewards or benefits? What does culture at large think of completion? Buddhists? Pagans? Old people? Young? How would completion or maturity be recognized in oneself? In others? By others? Why do we persist in remaining immature or incomplete? Does completion mean sinless perfection? If not, how is it different? What are counterfeits of completion? What confusions does the concept arouse? Why did Jesus conclude his sermon with that command?

This is a sample of the kinds of questions that must be answered in status theory. The goal is to gain a mental and verbal comfort level with every aspect of the subject so

that vital connections are made between the idea and actual lived experience. The preacher discovers why this idea needs to be preached. But the preacher concerned with efficiency will view that list of questions as just a lot of work to be skipped. Why know all that when there is no time to cover all that? Because we are not in the business of mouthing parrot-like admonitions regarding realities we have never understood much less experienced. And, precisely because this kind of “deep” understanding, as Quintilian described it, will fuel an oratory that can sustain the connection between mind and mouth, demonstrate credible ethos, and provide resources and the grounding for adaptation to unanticipated contingencies.

But there are no shortcuts—no cutting and pasting. The idea must be grasped at an elemental level with all the appropriate connections to a sound anthropology, soteriology, and ecclesiology. It must rise up and exert ownership over the preacher and the sermon so that it speaks from beyond the mere moment of its incarnation in this particular sermon. The preacher has to grasp a true universal before finding anything worth breaking a sweat over. Once grasped, one cannot help but speak. Too often preachers attempt to pronounce to others the glories of things they, in all honesty, do not understand at an integrated level. Shortcutting status theory leaves us disconnected from the essence of our word.

Dialogical Invention

Using partners in dialogue is hardly a new idea, nor in itself, even a product of an oral orientation. Many homileticians have advised it as helpful tool. Yet the most common understanding of dialogical sermon preparation has been in the area of content analysis. Behind this advice is the common sense notion that two or three or four heads

are better than one. More minds thinking through the hermeneutical issues of a particular passage can provide greater understanding both in meaning of the text, and the implications for that text upon potential hearers. On top of that, the brainstorming is just plain fun. All that must be admitted and celebrated as a natural benefit of the dialogical process and recommended in contrast to the isolation of a totally private preparatory model where the preacher labors in silence and seclusion before emerging with the anointed words.

Yet orally conditioned preachers have more expectations for dialogue than just a better understanding of the text. Mere collaboration could be accomplished with a silent online discussion group where preachers textually “discuss” a text. The oral preacher has a different ambition: building fluency long before Sunday by beginning the process of oral composition. Because live dialogue cannot be conducted in silence, the process forces the preacher to begin to articulate the ideas of the text, distilling mental abstractions down to concrete verbalizations. Quintilian holds up frequent discourse on all varieties of topics as the best form of general preparation (2.2.5). We come to discover what we mean as we begin to speak it. As our ears hear the activity of our mouths, a connection starts to develop between mind and mouth, and fluency on the topic starts steadily and cumulatively rising.

This is accomplished more organically than through technique. There is no set number of dialogical partners, or length of time, or exact sequence of steps to bring it about. One does not “eavesdrop” on the sound of one’s own words, scanning them for something to repeat or annotate for the sermon. Similarly, the dialogical partners are not for the preacher’s utility. They are not “used” for a utilitarian end or the process will

begin to break down. The dialogue itself must be inherently valued and valuable regardless of whether any measurable quip or turn of the phrase can be harvested. But a good session of dialogue will not fail to increase general fluency in tangible (if not measurable) ways, and not infrequently offer a serendipitous verbal metaphor or phrase that finds its way later into the sermon. The key here is verbal activity early in the week, long before Sunday arrives. The notion that a sermon can jump effortlessly and seamlessly from paper to tongue between Saturday night and Sunday morning seems naïvely presumptive at best and irresponsible at worst.

Dialogical Structure

Besides using dialogue for understanding and fluency during preparation, dialogue can also make its way into the actual sermon. Some recent homileticians have decided this dialogue must be overt and have called for the conversion of sermon from monologue to “multi-logue.” They picture the preacher as a sort of host or facilitator among multiple voices, calling out and addressing questions in a live discussion format.⁸⁹ They see the monologic sermon as inherently driven by power and illegitimate authority and are seeking a more democratic alternative.

This seems to be a needless and potentially dangerous overcorrection. In terms of teaching, these thinkers have a valid point. Teaching can and should be interactive. The good teacher will engage and spar with learners even as Jesus and Socrates demonstrate repeatedly. Yet Jesus also spoke authoritatively on Scripture without apology and employs the monologue without hesitation. The apostles, though interactive in some contexts, also never shrank from extended monologues. Church history with its volumes

⁸⁹ See Doug Pagitt’s Preaching Reimagined (Zondervan, 2005).

of collected sermons suggests that sermons have been predominantly monological since Pentecost. For his part, Quintilian demonstrates monological sensibilities when oration is underway. Yet the audience is highly influential in the crafting and progression of the speech. “For we are not as yet admitted to full freedom of speech, and the attention of the audience, being still fresh, keeps us under restraint, but when their minds are propitiated and warmed, greater liberty will be tolerated” (4.1.57).

One compromise position is the crafting of dialogical structures within the monologue. That is, while a preacher may not choose to turn the sermon into an actual large discussion, rhetorical dialogic openings can still be present within the monologue. This involves rhetoric at its most basic levels of persuasion. If indeed a preacher is attempting to persuade at any level, there must be an imagined interlocutor to persuade. In that sense the preacher must imagine and anticipate the audience’s possible reactions to the point under discussion. There is the preacher on one side, and the audience serving as an aggregated discussion partner on the other. So it becomes natural to adopt a dialogical tone with statements like, “Now I know some of you are thinking...” or “Now here’s the problem with what I just said.” As we articulate the natural objections or reservations that might reside in the audience, we not only bolster our case, but we achieve a respectful tone that is squarely within the rhetorical tradition of being openly yet charitably persuasive. We are bringing them along step by step.

Roadmapping

Outlines maintain a suffocating hegemony in the homiletic world. Sermons are typically pressured to conform to the skeletonly “cold-blooded” (Ong OL 132) enumeration that outlines provide. Outlines do not necessarily kill a sermon, but neither

are they the sole method of its framing. Sequence is important here since we have seen that a sermon is not merely randomly delivered points on the same topic. The unfolding must be continuous and contiguous. This is what Ong calls a narrative “story line” with “episodic” structure (138). Things fall into other things and expand them before their synthesis falls again into something else. Building a structure block by block might be a better visual metaphor. The ingredients cannot be thrown up in random sequence.

Storytelling is another genre where sequence is important, and sermons can be structured and meditated as unfolding stories. In fact a narrative structure is central to an oral sermon inasmuch as most preachers can retell a compelling story, even one of long duration, by memory even as they feel convinced they could never preach without literate prompts. But if the sermon were just a long story, episodic in structure ... who knows?

Particularly pertinent is Quintilian’s metaphor of the sermon as journey and the various moves or structures of a sermon like different points on the map. With this orientation, the preacher is able to maintain the entire sermon’s *theoria* even as individual parts can also be identified (10.7.14-16). In actual homiletic practice the roadmap can be drawn on paper or screen just like an outline. But instead of a textual mooring the map is entirely visual allowing the preacher to keep five or six different “stops” along the journey clearly in mind. In this sense, each “block” of the sermon (which can be a story, illustration, quote, application, explanation of the text, photograph, or visual prop) is drawn on the sermon map. Potential detours and optional routes can also be depicted.

A map maintains the organizing power of an outline, adds the sequencing of narrative structure, and employs the visual power of a graphic interface. The preacher can actually picture the integrated sermon on one page much faster than he could

artificially memorize the numbered points and sub-points of an outline.⁹⁰ This praxis plumbs the vast powers of memory that have atrophied through centuries of textual laziness. The oral ancients saw memory (not memorization) as a powerful tool in knowledge retention and delivery. It is memory that creates the possibility for the next suggestion.

6.5 Delivering the Oral Sermon

Obsolescence of Literate Prompts

Like using dialogue in preparation, preaching without notes is not a new idea either. Many homiletic theorists have argued for less dependence upon notes and manuscripts. Some try to wean themselves completely away from them via memorization. But merely preaching without notes fails to define truly oral preaching. In actuality, such a preacher may just be reciting oral literature, which is much different than what Quintilian had in mind.

Ironically simply getting rid of notes without restructuring the method of preparation only brings more stress and less true ethos to the sermon. The task of memorization siphons off necessary mental energy from the content and the audience to monitoring of the relative precision of recall. In other words some portion of the brain must be allocated toward measuring the accuracy and progress of the words coming forth, resulting in an incremental removal of the speaker from the *kairos* of the moment. Even at best and with tedious hours of work, Quintilian warns how memorization has a

⁹⁰ Clyde Fant attempts something similar with his oral “Sermon Brief” (170), which contains textual summaries of thought “blocks” and key transitioning sentences. His Sermon Brief, however, looks suspiciously like an outline, and most new users would consider the difference hair-splitting. The innovation of the Roadmap is the visual and iconic sense to the thought blocks that portrays a sense of destination toward a specific end, and the resultant ease of transfer to memory.

tendency to paralyze a speaker (10.7.32). A memorizing preacher can be only 90 % “there.”

The simpler way to escape from notes is to never foster the original dependence. This is an intentional move back to Ongian orality before typographic literacy decided that all ideas must be captured and externalized. Ong found that learning to read and write “disables the oral poet ... it introduces into his mind the idea of a text as a controlling narrative and thereby interferes with the oral composing processes” (OL 59). To regain our oral competence we have to consciously jettison our trained recourse to textual priority. If the preacher never becomes dependent on notes, there is no need for the pain of withdrawal. While using certain organizational and visual tools such as the story or roadmap, the oral preacher never “needs” those tools to start speaking. Starting with end in mind, the oral preacher uses oral composition to map out natural oral patterns. He learns to organize his speaking instead of speaking his organization. In Ong’s depiction that reversal makes a profound difference inasmuch as one starts orally and only uses literate prompts as organizational tools. Orality, or what Ong calls the “utterance” (OL 165) is native and the primary mode for composition. On the other hand “logocentrism” always starts silently in text and cognition and must be converted, usually at the last minute, to a fumbling or mechanical orality.

Learning to preach without memorization or literate prompts frees the eyes to make contact with the audience. Eye contact is a powerful element in ethos. Eyes that engage an audience hold an audience. Every time a preacher looks down at notes or up at a screen, eye contact is lost and subtle permission is given for minds to wander. It also sends the not-so-subtle message that whatever is being said is “outside” the preacher and

must be prompted back to the preacher's attention. If the point is that inconsequential for the preacher, why should the audience care? We all know intuitively that we do not tend to forget things that are most important. Why would a preacher want to repeatedly telegraph the message, "This is so vital, so critical for you to grasp, that I cannot remember it myself and must look down here to figure out where I am."

Moving from manuscripts or notes to large screen projection of an outline scarcely helps the situation. In either case the audience is constantly diverted from the eyes of the preacher, which despite all the bells and whistles of technology are still the seat of personal rhetorical force, to all kinds of other focal points that cannot help but dilute true oratory. The persuasive power of a fully engaged speaker, properly prepared, mentally agile, and personally committed remains yet unsurpassed by any technological communicative caddy.

Adaptation to *Kairos*

Native orality frees a preacher to depart from the path or respond to a moment. Quintilian's use of *kairos* is translated to English as "propriety."⁹¹ *Kairos* navigates the mental map that is available as a guide and a plan. That mental map has been premeditated to the extent that if prompted a preacher could quickly summarize the flow of thought of the sermon in less than five minutes by moving from "place" to "place" on a mental roadmap. It is all there, stored up, prepared, even "pre-hearsed" out loud.⁹² But that particular congregation on that particular morning drives the actual outpouring of the

⁹¹ "It cannot be too earnestly inculcated that no one can speak with aptitude and propriety unless he considers not only what is to the purpose, but also what is becoming" (11.1.8)

⁹² Quintilian advocates pre-hearsing a speech out loud but also cautions against over-rehearsing which tends to accidentally remove some of the creative angst needed to keep a preacher "in the moment."

prepared sequence. This suggests a shared ethos between preacher and congregation where the preacher actually crafts specific words “on the fly.” It is the actual audience that is pulling those words out; engaging specific people in a specific place who need this message.

Walter Ong is famous for saying that for a writer, the reader is fiction. That is, one cannot write for nobody or anybody. Since the writers are alone, they must imagine a readership before they can decide what to write (OL 100). The same is true for the preacher with one distinct advantage. The preacher does not need to imagine an audience because there is a real one sitting right there. While an audience may have needed to be imagined during preparation, that imagined audience dissolves on Sunday into the real thing. It is those faces looking back—pained, bewildered, skeptical, and sympathetic—it is those faces and no others that will call forth the specific words that should be uttered from the reservoir of preparation. The preacher who can preach to those faces, with words drawn from those faces, will convey an inimitable sense of rapport, or what rhetoric calls ethos. This journey with real people toward a destination lends the aura of discovery we found in Chapter 5.

This kind of “empathetic and participatory” experience is precisely what Walter Ong identifies as one of the psychodynamics of orality (OL 45). For a congregation unaccustomed to this level of reciprocity, the change could be at first confusing. Being suddenly part of the sermon instead of its “victim” takes some getting used to for both preacher and people. But there is no greater respect paid to a flock than to address them from within the immediacy of a given Sunday and that respect will be summarily reciprocated.

When the preacher can actually read the room mid-sermon, all sorts of possibilities present themselves: adding an illustration without great hazard, skipping a point on the map and moving more quickly toward the destination, or tying in some unexpected intrusion (a chair falling over, or a thunderstorm outside). People are also there in the room and, with necessary discretion, can be referred to personally and spontaneously in the sermon (“Greg has to do this. He has to watch his words every time he enters the courtroom as an attorney”). In every case, the overwhelming sense builds that the preacher is here, with us, and nowhere else. This is in stark contrast to the increasingly popular technology of beaming sermons from centralized master preachers to satellite congregations.⁹³ While the efficiency is obvious, something is lost when we reduce a congregation to eavesdroppers on a generic sermon simultaneously attempting to cover a dozen different venues. As McLuhan is so famous for reminding us, the medium really can dominate the message.

6.6 What Oral Preaching Is Not

Not Impromptu

Since we have defined an oral homiletic positively, it might add clarity to also enunciate what oral preaching is not. Oral homiletics is not impromptu speech. While there will be unavoidable occasions that require unplanned addresses, an oral homiletic is well-planned. Consequently oral preaching eschews “winging it.” While there have been church traditions that have consciously downplayed sermon preparation as a humanly

⁹³ Ong contrasts the physically exhausting personal confrontations of the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858 with the sterile and concocted electronically governed debates of today. “The audience is absent, invisible, inaudible” (OL 135).

contrived substitute for divine guidance, oral homiletics is not kin to those perspectives.⁹⁴ Preaching orally still requires as much or more time in preparation than conventional literate methods. Although an unfortunate rendering of 1 Corinthians 1:18 in the KJV might suggest that Paul's act of preaching was foolish and unorganized, newer translations make it clear that it is the message of the cross that was perceived as foolish, not the conduct of the preacher.⁹⁵

Not Faster

So preaching from oral grounding is not faster and those who seek a more efficient method should return to downloading preprinted sermons. This is not to say there may not be efficiencies in the development of a strong memory and a rich pantry from which material can be continually and adeptly drawn. Over years of practice, the oral preacher may be able to achieve a level of verbal agility grounded in wisdom that affords great and comfortable freedom of expression. But no one should pursue an oral homiletic to save time.

⁹⁴ Early Quakers are typical of this orientation to spontaneous delivery. Early Quakers like Thomas Clarkson are quick to quote Francis Lambert, who, though writing before the Quaker movement, embodied their homiletic as early as 1516, "Beware that thou determine not precisely to speak what before thou hast meditated whatsoever it be; for though it be lawful to determine the text which thou art to expound, yet not at all the interpretation; lest if thou doest so, thou takest from the Holy Spirit that which is his, namely to direct thy speech that thou mayest speak in the name of the Lord void of all learning, meditation and experience; and as if thou hadst studied nothing at all" (Tract 5 *Of Prophecy*, Chapter 3 quoted by Clarkson's "Portraiture of Quakerism" in Friends Intelligencer, 1866).

⁹⁵ *Ho logos gar ho tou staurou*, "the word of the cross" vs. "the preaching of the cross." Paul in no place advocates a foolish homiletic or a careless homiletic. Closer to this sense would be Jesus' admonition not to worry about what to say when arrested in Matthew 10:19. But even in that case it is not preparation, but anxiety that is prohibited.

Homileticians differ on the amount of time necessary to devote to preaching. All must acknowledge that the same level of readiness might require 10 hours from one preacher and 15 from another. There is no uniform standard, especially when considering that homiletic preparation occurs throughout the week in a variety of activities. Whatever the total, oral homiletics suggests a reallocation of time on the oral/literate continuum. While a certain amount of research and preparation will always be necessarily literate, the shift toward orality must occur early in the week so that a higher percentage of preparation hours are spent in that environment. Instead of 90 % in study and 10 % in verbalization, the ratio might be closer to 40/60. A preacher with 10 hours to spend might invest 4 in text and 6 in orality (including an evolving combination of status research, dialogue, oral composition, roadmapping, meditation, and/or pre-hearsal). The total time in preparation does not change, just the allocation.

Not Preservative

As soon as one finishes a sermon, prepared in privacy and delivered in literacy, the natural impulse is to save it. Capture it. Preserve it. Print it. Archive it. Upload it. It lives outside of any event. It has a life of its own and can go beyond the confines of the original context of creation and be reanimated years later by the magic of tidy filing. In short we need archives to hold our precious finished literacy, replicating in many senses the work involved in preserving scripture. We have our own sacred microtexts to slavishly adore and preserve.

But if one sees a sermon as primarily oral then whatever literate tools are used for organization are merely representative of internalized thoughts. “Written words are residue. Oral tradition has no such residue or deposit. When an often-told oral story is

not actually being told, all that exists of it is the potential in certain human beings to tell it” (OL 11). The sermon actually lives in the preacher, not in externalized mediums. Furthermore if the roadmap is constructed properly it can, after some seasoning in orality, be disposed of before delivery. Which leaves open the question, “What do we save from an oral sermon?” The answer is nothing. There is nothing that needs to be saved. The real sermon was the live event. That event is unrepeatable because those circumstances of time and place will never be reconstructed in the same manner again (OL 138). Even if an oral preacher preaches the same sermon twice or three times on a Sunday, or to a different audience the next week, the sermon will evolve with each place and time it is spoken. It must. So when the event of a sermon is over, the sermon is over and should be allowed to die a quiet death and not be mummified for future use.

So many preachers work hard to preserve sermons thinking they will come back and use them a second time or third time. In the first place, this rarely ever happens. If we attempt such a thing, we usually encounter difficulty following our own thinking years later. Or if we do, we might not agree with ourselves. Or if we still agree, we will perhaps perpetuate the same heresy we were advocating five years ago?

In any case, saving a sermon outline or manuscript with the goal of saving preparation time later is ill advised. The best and deepest preparation we did, the habitation in the ground of an idea, will go with us to the next sermon anyway whether we file it or not. It becomes part of how we think. Other kinds of preparation (illustrations and anecdotes) become dated and obsolete quickly, and are hardly worth preserving. So why not enjoy the freedom of letting go of each completed sermon and starting each new sermon with a fresh look at the text, devoid of previous baggage?

Giving up sermon archiving reminds us that our sermons live within us, are flawed and not final, need an audience to be completed, and need not be “word-smithed” up to imagined standards of high literacy.

For in the end, the compositional metric for a sermon is not its literacy, but its fluency. Does it speak? Does it lift the word of God off a silent page and into the ears and hearts of real people? Has the water of the word been melted from its glaciation in text and been poured freely for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness? If not, perhaps we should look not to the charms of the next breakthrough technology, but back to the ancients who loved the word spoken.

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