

**The Embodiment of the Word:
A Pastoral Approach to Scripture in a Digital Age**

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The purpose of this paper is to outline a new paradigm for the pastoral ministry of the proclamation of the Word in and for post-literate, digital culture. The need for this new paradigm grows out of the recognition that the present practices of proclamation of the Word were developed in and for the literate cultures of the past 2000 years and are increasingly boring for a digital generation. The degree of this problem is reflected in many evangelical Protestant liturgies that are designed to reach out to the young people of digital culture such as the “nones.” Last year for the first time in American history, those who identified their religious affiliation as “none” was the largest group. In many of the worship experiences designed to reach out to the “nones,” the reading of Scripture has been eliminated from the liturgy. In many of those liturgies, there are no Scripture readings, only contemporary music with a rock band and a sermon that may include some paraphrases of Scripture. Why? Because Scripture readings have become a dead time and a turn off for digitally sophisticated folk. To put it bluntly, the proclamation of the Word is boring for many people accustomed to highly engaging media experience. I have observed this flat line of meaning in Christian congregations across the full range of traditions, Eastern and Western. It has become a ritual tradition that is often largely meaningless for people who regularly hear highly engaging speech and storytelling in “the media.” How has it happened that the most compelling media experience of the Word for centuries has become boring in the 21st century?

Let's begin with a description of the theory, history and practices of the proclamation of the Word in the communication cultures in and for which the current tradition developed. The present conception of the Scriptures in western Christianity has been shaped in and for the communication culture of literacy and, specifically, the Enlightenment. In this culture, the Bible has been conceived as a series of texts that were read by readers alone and in silence. This concept of the

Bible has led to a disembodied, objective presentation of the Word shaped by the levels of the mastery of literacy. Thus, in Roman Catholic liturgies, the Old Testament and epistle readings can be done by a literate layperson but the Gospel is customarily read by a deacon or priest and then interpreted by a theologically literate priest. This paradigm determines the proclamation and homiletical interpretation of the Word in the liturgy, the preparation of pastors in seminary and the role of Scripture in the often hierarchical relationship between pastors and laity. Our degrees are symbols of the levels of mastery of literacy in which the most advanced is the culture of the silent reading and writing of texts.

The meaning of the biblical texts has been defined by Hans Frei in his book, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, as meaning as reference. In the hermeneutics of meaning as reference, the texts of the Bible are studied as a reference source in which a trained reader can identify two kinds of referential information. The first is the empirical meaning of the texts as a source of ostensive information about the actual historical events that are described in the texts. A wide range of ostensive meaning has been identified ranging between the spectrum of conservative and liberal biblical interpretation. On one end of the spectrum, the Bible is an inerrant, non-contradictory and literal source of the exact details of historical events such as the creation of the world, the miracles, the resurrection and the end of the world. At the other end of the spectrum, the Bible is a predominantly legendary source of some historical data mixed with a complex of myth, later theology and retrospective editing of the tradition. The search to define ostensive meaning has led to divisions between the conservative and liberal communities and movements such as, for example, the quest of the historical Jesus, the creationist museum, and the controversies around the original and perpetual virginity of Mary. The second type of meaning as reference is to study the texts as a source of ideal meaning, that is, of the ideas that are reflected in the texts. The ideal reference of the texts is their theological meaning. The ideal meanings range from a systematic theology, a single, non-contradictory system of theological doctrine in the texts to a highly complex set of theologies that are implicit in the various traditions of the biblical world.

This hermeneutical system is the source of the current practices of the proclamation of the Word in western Christianity, Catholic and Protestant. The reader stands behind a lectern, often only a head appearing above the book. Often the congregation looks at a missal, a bulletin insert, a pew Bible or sometimes at a screen where the text is projected. In more formal liturgies, the congregation stands for the reading of the Gospel. The book, often a big book, is in front of the reader. In order to do the reading well, the reader must keep the eyes fixed on the text with a slight look up on occasion if the text is learned well enough. The tone is within a relatively narrow range, sometimes a virtual monotone, and without emotion. The homilist has a much broader freedom of expression and movement. The tone can vary widely; the congregation can be addressed directly. It is even possible to invite laughter. The homilist is also free to move, sometimes even out of the pulpit and directly in front of the congregation. But the proclamation of the Word operates within a relatively strict set of limits. In as far as possible, the Word is rendered as a documentary source of referential information that can then be interpreted and made meaningful by the preacher.

How did we arrive at this point in the history of the proclamation of the Word? Some video will help me tell the story. A brief history – the proclamation of the Word in literate culture had its origins in the oral traditions of pre-literate culture, the culture of bards and storytellers. In that culture, traditions were often, even generally, chanted. The stories were told from memory and were passed down from generation to generation by oral transmission. The videos of the Turkish storyteller and the Robe.

The reading of manuscripts became the dominant practice in correlation with the evolution of the synagogue in which the liturgy was essentially a scripture reading often with multiple readers, and prayers. Internalization of the Scriptures continued in part because of the demands of early manuscripts that were essentially a list of letters without punctuation or word divisions. In the early centuries of the Church in

the manuscript culture of the ancient world, the performances of the Word developed into major media events. The proclamation of the Word was often a series of as many as six long readings that would take 30-40 minutes. In the Apostolic Constitutions of the 6th century, there is a fascinating insight into the cultural power of these performance events. It is stated there that persons are to be prohibited from leaving the service prior to the homily and the Eucharist. This prohibition was issued because people were coming to the churches to hear the proclamation of the Word and, once they had heard the readings, they weren't interested in staying for the rest of the service. The chanting of the Scriptures was normal practice for centuries in both the Eastern and Western churches and is still widely practiced in the Eastern churches including the Syrian Malabar rites. The importance of the chant in rabbinic Judaism and in the various Orthodox churches is evident in the training and ordination of cantors in Judaism and extensive programs in Byzantine chant/music at the Greek Orthodox seminary Holy Cross and at the Russian Orthodox St. Vladimir's seminary. The video of the synagogue and Orthodox.

The invention of the printing press and the much more widespread distribution of the Bible in the West had a significant effect on the proclamation of the Word and the dominant style of biblical performance gradually changed in western Christianity. Thus, for example, the King James Bible was composed in the early 17th century for public reading in an elevated tone but in a speaking tone rather than a chant. While the chanting of the Bible continued in Roman Catholic and Anglican churches for centuries even into the 20th century, reading in a more informal speaking tone became the dominant practice. In correlation with the hermeneutical revolution of the Enlightenment and meaning as reference, the tonal range of the proclamation of the Word was gradually narrowed and became more of a monotone. The editing of the manuscripts into printed documents included word divisions, a full range of punctuation, and paragraphing. This made it possible for readers to read the Scriptures aloud with minimal to no preparation. The video of the readings: Episcopal/Catholic/Methodist.

When seen in the context of the history of communication culture, the proclamation of the Word has been immensely successful in the literate cultures of human civilization. The books of the Bible have been and are the most extensively performed literature in history. The Bible has been the perennial best seller and has been more widely distributed and read than any other book. The exegetical and interpretive literature of biblical scholarship and commentary far exceeds any other literary tradition. And the proclamation of the Word in liturgy has been the most powerful and pervasive performance tradition in literate culture. But we now live in the first period of human history in which a communication system other than literacy has become the dominant system of communication and cultural formation. And the systems the Church has developed for the communication and interpretation of the Word are declining in their cultural impact.

This is then a brief history of the proclamation of the Word and the evolution of the technologies of literacy and the stages of literate culture. It is also the historical context for the pastoral ministry of the proclamation of the Word in digital culture. There is a stark contrast between the style of the proclamation of the Word in Christian liturgy and the character of digital culture. This is a random list of some of the characteristics of digital culture: highly engaging, emotionally compelling, striking and rapidly changing images, physical presence, and a wide range of tonalities. The proclamation of the Word is characterized by: no emotion, static images, no movement, minimal engagement with the audience, a very narrow range of tonalities. Therefore, we have a problem. The normative tradition is profoundly incongruent with the culture of the digital world.

II. A New Paradigm of the Scriptures

A new paradigm of the Scriptures has emerged from the recognition of the original character of biblical literature in the context of the media culture of the Hellenistic/Greco-Roman world. The study of the Bible in ancient and modern

media has revealed that biblical scholarship has read the media world of the 17-th-20th centuries back into the ancient world. We have operated with the unexamined presupposition that the Bible was originally a series of texts read by readers. The so-called “reader” is a ubiquitous description of the receivers of biblical literature in biblical monographs and commentaries. Several metaphors have been operative: 1) a group of editors editing texts of the Pentateuch or the synoptic Gospels with two or three manuscripts spread out on big tables, 2) a network of book stores selling a wide range of manuscripts for reading by literate persons, 3) readers sitting and reading manuscripts in silence.

The study of the media world of antiquity has made it clear that these assumptions are an anachronistic reading back into the ancient world of a much later communication culture. Current estimates are that only 3-5% of persons in rural areas to 10%-15% of persons in urban were literate. Manuscript production involved laborious copying by hand and was on a small scale. Manuscripts were available in a small network of stores but were expensive. Silent reading was rare; public and private reading was reading aloud. The great majority of persons were only able to experience biblical literature by hearing the manuscripts read aloud to audiences of illiterates. Memory was a central dimension of education and manuscripts were often recited from memory. In the ancient world, the Bible was a series of compositions of sound that were performed for audiences. The predominant sensorium, to use Walter Ong's term, of ancient audiences was the sensory system of hearing with the ears rather than reading with the sensory system of the eyes. These ancient performances were a continuation of the styles of performance in oral culture: highly emotional, wide range of tonalities, constant engagement of the audience, physically demonstrative and expressive.

Thus, biblical scholarship has been engaged in a massive media anachronism in which the media culture of the Enlightenment has been read back into the ancient world. This is also the case with what has become standard practice in the proclamation of the Word. We have assumed that the disembodied, emotionally

detached, and static reading with no engagement of memory or audience interaction reflects the original character of the Word.

A brief engagement with a particular story may help to show the difference it makes. I have just published (Summer, 2015) a (450 pages) detailed commentary on Mark's passion and resurrection narrative as a story told to audiences that were predominantly Israelite but included the enemy Gentiles in the immediate aftermath of the Jewish-Roman war. The book's title is *The Messiah of Peace: A Performance-Criticism Commentary on Mark's Passion-Resurrection Narrative*. The discovery of the resurrection by three women is the ending of the Gospel in the best ancient manuscripts. Let me read it for you in the current mode. . . . When experienced as a text read by readers, the ending is a puzzle and many readers over the centuries have concluded that it either was not or should not be the ending. Textual copyists added two endings that are often included in contemporary texts as you can see here. Until the study of the stories as stories, the majority of scholars concluded that this could not have been the original ending. Various explanations for the lost ending have been proposed. The most widely accepted is that the original manuscript was mutilated and the last page was lost. Others have been that the original copyist either fell asleep or forgot or that the original appearance narrative was left out of an early manuscript that became the most authoritative manuscript.

When studied as a story that was told to audiences, several elements of the story are notable. The women are grieving and that tone is present from the beginning. The stone rolled back is a major surprise and is loud. The discovery of the young man in "the tomb" is an even bigger surprise, variously alarming/terrifying. The announcement of the resurrection is very short: one word in Greek. The whole announcement and specifically the command to "Go, tell" is addressed to the audience. The women's response of fearful flight and is surprising since it is a violation of the command but completely understandable in light of their feelings. The colas of the story get shorter and shorter, which is a typical Markan way of

building a climax. The impact of the story invites the audience to reflect on their response: to tell or to remain silent and say nothing are the implicit options.

I'll tell you the story so you can experience the difference. And let me show you a video of another embodied proclamation of the resurrection appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene in the Gospel of John.

The way in which Mark's story is proclaimed makes a difference in the way in which it is perceived. And it literally doesn't make sense when read in the traditional manner.

What is the difference? What has happened in the course of the history of the proclamation of the Word? The proposal here is that the process of the media history of the Word in literate culture has led to the disembodiment of the Word. There are several dimensions of bodily expression: emotion, vocal range in volume and tone, movement, clothing, furniture, the text, and relationship to the audience. The emotional range of the proclamation has been steadily reduced to virtually none. The reader is encouraged to regard any emotional expression as alien to the Word. The vocal range has been narrowed until it is often a straight-line monotone. I associate the sound with computer speech or a flat-line heart or brain monitor. There is no movement or gesture, no physical move of feet, hands, or often even the head. Covering the reader's body with a robe or hiding the body behind a lectern emphasizes this disembodiment. Sometimes the only part of the body that is visible is a head peeking out from behind the lectern. The lectern itself creates emotional distance. The presence of the text also creates distance. And perhaps most important, the implicit dialogue between the reader and the audience is virtually eliminated. The audience is not addressed by the reader and is not invited to engage with the Word directly. As a result of all these factors, there is a multifaceted disembodiment of the presence of the Word in the performance. The experience of the Word is reduced to the theological ideas that may be communicated in the

proclamation. And when all of this is experienced in the context of digital culture, the degree of psychological and physical distance is increased.

III. The Pastoral Possibilities of the Embodiment of the Word.

This reconception of the Scriptures as interactive embodied communication between God and human beings opens a new range of pastoral possibilities for the proclamation of the Word. These new possibilities emerge from the close connection between the word in oral culture and the word what Walter Ong called the “secondary orality” of post-literate, digital culture. At the center of the proclamation of the Word in the ancient world and now is the internalization of the Word. Internalization involves memory but it is more than memory. The phrase, “by heart,” is indicative of this difference. The Word is invited to dwell in all of the interior spaces of a person. As expressed in the Deuteronomist’s injunction of the love of God, internalization of the Word is the love of God with all of the heart, the soul, the mind, and the strength, that is, the physical muscles and bones of the body. It is diametrically different than the rote recital of the surfaces of a printed document. Memory is a central dimension of internalization. But memorization is often associated with mindless rote repetition of a set of printed words. That kind of memorization is about surfaces and the superficial mastery of sounds. Internalization is deep knowledge grounded in vivid experience and intellectual engagement. The role of the documentary record of the original sounds of the Word is to open a door into an experience of God. The mastery of musical manuscripts is a helpful analogy. A pianist who is learning, say, Rachmaninoff’s Second Piano Concerto begins with learning the notes but from the beginning this learning involves muscle memory, visual connections, deep listening, and the discovery of emotional dynamics. If anything, the embodiment of the Word is more comprehensive in its engagement of the various dimensions of a person. The embodiment of the Word is then a spiritual discipline, a spiritual exercise, and a spiritual adventure of dynamic relationship with God.

This foundation of embodied internalization of the Word lays the ground for the building of new possibilities for the proclamation of the Word in and for digital culture. First, liturgical proclamation of the Word as performance creates a dynamic equivalent experience of the impact of the original composition for contemporary congregations. Rather than the meaning of the biblical composition being limited to the theological ideas implicit in the text, embodied proclamation of the Word makes present a more comprehensive range of the dynamics of the original experience.

This approach also introduces a partnership model of shared preparation between lay lectors and pastors in which the common experience of the impact and emotion of the Scripture can generate energy for the homily and the Eucharist. This partnership involves mutual engagement with the Scriptures that leads to more energetic and grounded liturgy.

The experience of Scripture as embodied performance also transforms the relationship between the congregation and the Word. Rather than detached reflection on the printed text, sometimes made available in a missal, pew bible or on a screen, the congregation is enabled to enter into a dialogical engagement with the Word as a wholistic experience.

The proclamation of the Word as internalized experience opens the possibility of moving out from behind the lectern and a printed text into an open space without distancing barriers. Either with or without a text between the lector/priest and the congregation, the presence of the body introduces the vital role of internalization of the Word in the life of the congregation.

Finally, the proclamation of the Word as vital experience invites the full utilization of digital images and music as an integral dimension of the liturgy.

To conclude, Walter Ong titled his Yale lectures on communication and theology “the presence of the Word.” This title was a description of the dynamic relationship

between the prevalent communication system, the psychological dynamic of the communicator in each communication culture, and the character of the Word. Ong's enduring contribution is the identification of the dynamic and changing relationship between the word and communication culture. In each new communication culture, the word becomes present in a different way. Ong only dealt peripherally with the presence of the Word in digital culture. The purpose of this paper has been to identify a constructive approach to the proclamation of the Word in the context of the most radical change in communication culture since the emergence of literate culture in the Hellenistic world of the 5th-1st centuries before Jesus' life. The thesis here is that the dynamic presence of the Word in digital culture depends on an equally radical change in the proclamation of the Word in the liturgical practice of the Church. The suggestion is that we move from the disembodiment of the Word to the embodiment of the Word in a fully present proclamation.