

Theological History, Practical Reason, and the Demands of Preaching Today

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Abstract: *The essay argues that preachers need to study the history of preaching because history is necessary for answering questions raised by renewed consciousness of pluralism. The disestablishment of dominant forms forces historical consciousness upon preachers. In particular, preachers need histories of preaching that hold together theological and empirical perspectives. Preachers need both of what H. Richard Niebuhr called “internal” and “external” histories. There can be no final, speculative resolution of the relationship between theological and empirical perspectives. But Christian preachers can begin to understand the relation between them – and the reason for holding them together – through engagement with the story of the Ascension. Borrowing resources from Michel de Certeau, I argue that the Ascension provides a way of relating theological and empirical perspectives without reducing either to the other.*

I saw that, for me, this country would always be populated with presences and absences, presences of absences, the living and the dead. The world as it is would always be a reminder of the world that was, and of the world that is to come.

Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow*

Why should preachers study histories of preaching? After all, one can be a great musician without knowing the biographies of Mozart or Ma Rainey. One can be an excellent physician without knowing the first thing about leeches. One can be an all-star basketball player without knowing how Chamique Holdsclaw changed the game or when James Naismith first nailed up peach baskets. And, more pointedly, legions of wise, faithful preachers did not study histories of preaching before they began to preach. A history of preaching should tell us this much, at least: over the centuries many people have preached, and preached well, without much conscious knowledge of the history of preaching. Learning a history of preaching has played an important role in the formation of preachers in some traditions in some eras. But it has hardly been a universal requirement. And the study of history has not marked the boundary between better and worse preaching. Why call for it now?

One could argue from the nature of preaching.² Preaching involves a bundle of practices that human beings have made and remade over time. Every part of every sermon has a history,

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² See, for instance, David D. Daniels III and Ted A. Smith, “History, Practice, and Theological Education,” in *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry*, Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 214-240; Thomas G. Long, “A New Focus for Teaching Preaching,”

whether the preacher knows that history or not. Telling a story to illustrate a point might seem so obvious as to be eternal, for instance, but it is a particular practice that has come into being over many centuries. A simple sermon illustration might contain within it traces of early Christian stories of martyrdom, medieval tales of miracles, Puritan narratives of the order of salvation, quips from *Reader's Digest*, and more. Sermons are like cities in which old buildings – some majestic, some in deep decay – mingle with new construction built on top of layer upon layer of almost forgotten projects from the past. Sermons always have history within them.

But why would a preacher need to *know* that history in order to preach? Knowing the history of a practice might even get in the way of performing it well. It is hard to respond wisely to a child's tantrum if you are mentally flipping through the history of raising children. Mastery of a practice requires something like what Pierre Bourdieu called "learned ignorance," a wisdom so thoroughly embodied that it does not operate consciously.³ Rainer Maria Rilke described a similar dynamic at work in poetry. Poetry comes only when memories "have changed into our very blood, into glance and gesture, and are nameless, no longer distinguished from ourselves..."⁴ Preaching is like that, too. A good preacher will not give long, historical commentaries on her every move, even in her head. Only when that history has been transmuted into blood, glance and gesture does it come alive. A preacher could "know" that history in her bones without ever studying it in a book. All good preachers do. *Studying* that history might even make it harder to forget in just the right way. Why run the risk of learning the history of a practice?

I want to argue that the present age has thrust historical consciousness upon us. Preachers in some times and places might have been able to preach well without knowing much history. But preachers in the global societies of the early 21st century find ourselves caught up in historical modes of thinking, whether we like it or not. The pluralism of our times demands that we think about the history of preaching.

When there is wide agreement about the process and purpose of some activity, people can engage it as if it were given, natural, part of the eternal fabric of the universe. Taken for granted, the contours of the activity become practically invisible. When an activity is so established, a person wishing to pick up that activity can get by with studying accepted techniques for excellence. A person wishing to advance the activity as a whole can refine those techniques in light of the end they already seek. Well-established sports work like this. Aspiring football players know what the purpose of the game is – to score the most points. They know what the rules are, even if those rules are always evolving. And they know what excellent performances look like. They do not need to know the history of the game in order to play it well. They can learn to play the game to the best of their abilities by learning a set of techniques. And teachers of aspiring football players do not need to wonder if the purpose is to score the most points. They need only to refine the techniques they have for the purpose they already know.

If preaching was ever like football, it is not today. The purpose is endlessly contested. Should sermons bear witness to the Reign of God? Win souls for Christ? Inspire people to ministries of social justice? Connect the Bible to our lives? Explain the ways of God to

in *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice: A New Approach to Homiletical Pedagogy*, Thomas G. Long and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 3-17.

³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, transl. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 19.

⁴ Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, transl. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Random House, 1982), 20.

humankind? Express the lived Gospel of the preacher's experience? All of these purposes, and more, are claimed for preaching. Conversations about the *practices* of good preaching are at least as contentious. What rules or patterns should order good preaching? Should it feature rhetorical flourish, plain speech, or both? Should it come from a pulpit, a platform, an aisle, a street corner, or a projector? And should the preacher wear a suit, a tropical shirt, a robe, an alb, a clerical collar, a stole, or something else entirely? With such a wide range of purposes and practices, it is hard to find agreement about exemplary preachers. Who is a great preacher? It depends on whom you ask.

This kind of pluralism has marked Christian preaching in every age. If it feels new, it is because the multitude of styles has too often been obscured by the dominance of norms associated with white, male, formally-educated, mainline Protestant preachers. Those norms had enough staying power that they could accommodate within themselves what looked like dramatic change. Like the laws of physics, they could be taken for granted. The almost-natural status of these norms meant that, in many contexts, learning to preach meant learning techniques for approximating them. But now these norms no longer seem natural or universal. They look like the particular ideals of one particular tradition. They look like the work of human hands, artifacts of history. That kind of consciousness has come from many sources, including the critique of women, African-American, Korean, Catholic, and evangelical homiletics; the erosion of the institutional bases – the seminaries, congregations, denominations, small businesses, political parties, and clubs – of the old mainline; the rising power and prominence of Pentecostal and evangelical movements; the growth of a Black middle class; the entry of large numbers of women into the formal economy, and to ordained ministry in particular; the establishment of communities of immigrants with distinctive preaching traditions; and, not least, virtues of reflexive self-criticism built into the once invisibly dominant tradition. No model of preaching can be taken for granted now. Inequalities of power still exist, and they should be acknowledged. But no one tradition has the quality of second nature. Every style of preaching appears culturally specific, historically contingent, and open to question.

I do not mourn the loss of unquestioned status for the style of preaching most closely associated with white, formally educated, mainline Protestant men – preachers like myself. And I welcome the imperative of historical consciousness. Such historical consciousness has informed important works on Black preaching and feminist homiletics from the beginning. Preaching traditions made marginal by unacknowledged assumptions have never had the luxury of presenting their techniques as if they were free from particularity and obviously applicable to all. They have long had to blend description with prescription, discussions of history with proposals for technique.⁵ Now the same kind of consciousness is pressed upon those who write from traditions that once could be taken for granted. In these displacements there is, I am bound to confess, something of the hand that shattered Babel tower. And there is, I want to hope, something of the seed growing secretly, the Reign of God already given in our midst.

⁵ See, for instance, Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007); Cleophus J. LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000); Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990); Beverly A. Zink-Sawyer, *From Preachers to Suffragists: Woman's Rights and Religious Convictions in the Lives of Three Nineteenth-Century American Clergymen* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

Genetic histories and practical reasoning

The self-conscious pluralism of today opens up fresh possibilities for creative, faithful preaching. But it also renews old challenges. How is a preacher supposed to decide between the wide array of styles and purposes for preaching that are living options in the present day? The practical question is made all the more acute by historical consciousness. Institutionalized assumptions once let some methods and styles appear simply as normative, as if they were nothing more than the right applications of almost timeless methods. But if every method and style is historically particular, if all of them have emerged through contingent processes marked by power relations, how can a preacher choose between them?⁶

Decisions cannot be made by a “whatever works” pragmatism, for what it means for preaching to “work” is one of the things most in question. Decisions also should not be left to a “whatever’s cool” variant of *bricolage* – a little chant, a couple of icons, some hipster eyewear, and a conversational style – for this reduces the judgment of a preacher to the savvy of a shopper. And decisions cannot be made by reduction to identity – to factors like race, ethnicity, denomination, region, gender or tradition – for preachers are increasingly conscious of multiple, contested and hybrid identities in themselves and their congregations. If a preacher claimed a Methodist identity, and from that conviction sought a Methodist style of preaching, it would narrow but does not eliminate the question: *which* Methodist style? Just so, a preacher committed to working out of Black preaching traditions would find sources as diverse as Lucy Smith, Samuel DeWitt Proctor, and Tupac Shakur. Only the most essentialist – and forgetful, and constraining – account of identity could provide automatic answers for every question. Identities are given, but they are also chosen, created, and transformed.⁷ What should guide what we make of identity?

I want to argue that practical, theological histories of preaching can play a role in answering these questions. In particular, I want to argue for the need for what philosopher Charles Taylor has described as “genetic” histories of practice. A genetic history traces the journey of a practice from marginal innovation to established social fact, from the time that somebody broke the mold and tried something new until the time when this new thing was done by almost everybody and hardly anyone could imagine it being any other way. It starts from a time when things were otherwise, a time before the present practice came into being. It traces the reasons given for a practice as it emerged and the social forces with which that practice was allied. It remembers the alternatives that did not win the day, whether they survived in less prominent forms or disappeared entirely. In telling a history of what we take for granted, a genetic history lifts up for critical consideration some assumptions we use without thinking about them. And in recalling the reasons given for and against some practice, a genetic history can induct us into a rich community of argument. A good genetic history will not give us all the

⁶ Here I am describing a variation of the “exit” from the various houses of authority that John S. McClure describes in *Other-wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001). Historical consciousness helps break up the obvious, natural, and timeless qualities of each of the modes of authority that McClure describes (scripture, experience, tradition and reason).

⁷ The literature on essentialism and identity is voluminous. I have learned especially from Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay in African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1999); Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Hung Chull Jang, “Religious Cultural Hybridity in *Chudosik* (Ancestor Memorial Service/Ceremony) in Korean Protestantism,” *Journal of Religious History* 31.4 (December 2007), 403-420; Uma Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism* (London: Routledge, 1997); Sherry B. Ortner, “The Problem of ‘Women’ as an Analytic Category,” in *Making Gender: The Politics and Erotics of Culture* (Boston: Beacon, 1996), 116-138.

answers to all our questions. But it will give us some significant resources – and a wide range of conversation partners – for faithful, critical deliberation.⁸

Genetic histories are especially helpful in thinking through *practices*. By “practice,” I mean socially patterned combinations of actions and dispositions, something like what Pierre Bourdieu called the *habitus*. We need descriptions of what Bourdieu called the “regulated improvisations” of preaching, the “subjective but not individual systems of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception and action.”⁹ We need histories of practices like telling stories to illustrate points, displaying sincerity from the pulpit, exegeting Scripture, and standing at the door after a worship service to shake hands with people as they leave.¹⁰

Practices are meaningful patterns of thought, mood, and action shared by social groups. They are performed and transformed by preachers in the everyday work of preaching. The best histories of practice, then, will hug the ground of everyday preaching. Histories of homiletical theory – histories of scholarly commentary on what preaching should be – should play some role. Such commentary is always interwoven with the practice of preaching, often in the very life of the preacher-homiletician. But our primary emphasis should be on preaching itself. We need to look first not to what academics have said preaching should be, but to what preachers have actually done.

Internal and external histories

I have tried to argue that the pluralism of the present raises sharp practical questions about how to preach. The proliferation of models for preaching, coupled with social settings that loosen people’s relations to “home” traditions and bring them into contact with “other” traditions, means that most preachers face questions about which model to adopt. And the realization that each model arises from some particular social location undermines resolutions to that dilemma that depend on a method or theology whose authority depends on ignoring the history and context of its own production. The present moment demands forms of practical reasoning that work *through* history rather than trying to swerve around it. In particular, preachers facing the array of options today need *genetic* histories of *practices of preaching*.

Genetic histories of practice can be told through the conventions of guilds like history or sociology. Work from those guilds is essential for preachers trying to think critically about preaching. But preachers affirm, simply in taking up the task of preaching *as preaching*, that preaching is somehow caught up in God’s work of redemption. And so a history of preaching adequate to the needs of preachers will reflect twin confessions: that every sermon is a

⁸ See Charles Taylor, “Philosophy and Its History,” in *Philosophy and History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy*, ed. Richard Rorty, et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 17-30.

⁹ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 79, 86.

¹⁰ Given the prominence of Alasdair MacIntyre’s definition of practice, contrast with his use of the term might be clarifying. MacIntyre uses “practice” to describe a “coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity” formed around pursuit of “goods internal to that activity.” He means large-scale forms of life like medicine and agriculture. By MacIntyre’s definition, preaching would be a single practice. I don’t mean to reject MacIntyre’s definition. It is especially useful in thinking about the purpose of preaching, connections between preachers across centuries, and the character of preachers. I do want to argue, however, that a smaller-scale definition of practice is more useful for teaching preaching in the present time. Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. 2d ed. (London: Duckworth, 1985), 187.

For a more complete account of the notion of practice I am trying to describe here, see Ted A. Smith, “Theories of Practice,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2012), 244-254.

thoroughly human work, shot through with the taint of sin, the limits of finitude, and the temporal glory of human striving; and that preached words share, by the grace of God, in the very Word of God. Theologically adequate histories of preaching – the kind *preachers* need to know – will have a kind of double vision.

Preaching is not utterly unique in demanding this double vision. It should not be cut off from the life of the church for isolated consideration. In particular, considerations of preaching should not be separated from considerations of the sacraments. A wide spectrum of Christian traditions has insisted that Word and sacrament form an integral whole. All of these traditions, in their various ways, mark both sermons and sacraments by prayers asking that the Holy Spirit be poured out in and through the earthly action. Those of us who offer such prayers are bound by hope to see these human actions as sharing, in some way, in the life of God. Christians might even extend this gracious double vision to all church practices – to potluck suppers, choir rehearsals, the work of an altar guild, meetings of a finance committee, and more. Our confessions of the church as both Body of Christ and earthly institution invite these complex ways of seeing.

It is one thing to grasp the need for double vision with regard to preaching, sacraments, and other church practices. It is far more difficult, though, to write those double visions on the page. They strain against the conventions of established genres in both history and sociology, on the one hand, and theology, ethics, and homiletics, on the other. How could we tell genetic histories of practice that reflect the fullness of our hopes for preaching?¹¹

American theologian H. Richard Niebuhr considered a cluster of questions like this one as thoroughly as anyone in the last century. In *The Meaning of Revelation* he describes the need for what he calls “internal” and “external” histories. External histories, Niebuhr writes, consider the past from outside, from the perspective of a “non-participating observer.” They regard events, ideas, movements and people all as objects of knowledge. They tell the “outer history of things.” Internal histories, on the other hand, tell “the inner history of selves.” Internal histories are the memories of some community about itself. They are supersaturated with qualities like meaning, value, purpose, and direction. Such memories exert power in the present. “When we become members of such a community,” Niebuhr writes, “we adopt its past as our own and are thereby changed in our present existence.”¹² Just so, being willing to receive an “internal” history of preaching as one’s own history is part of what it means to become a preacher. For to be a preacher, in the fullest sense of that word, is not simply to take up some title or some bundle of techniques. It is to join in the proclamation of the Gospel, a task that began long before any living preacher was born and that will continue until the end of history. What Niebuhr called an “internal” history begins to tell that kind of story. The challenge, as Niebuhr saw, was to relate that internal, theological, history to a more external and empirical one.

The difference between external and internal history cannot be reduced to the difference between truth and wishful thinking. “There are true and false appeals to memory as well as true and false external descriptions, but only uncritical dogmatism will affirm that the truth is the prerogative of one of the points of view” (46-7). The two are distinguished not by whether they are capable of being true or false, but by how claims to truth might be justified. The truth of external history can be justified by consulting other objective histories. And the truth of internal

¹¹ For an especially thoughtful example of an attempt to write this write parallax on the page, see Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹² H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1941), 46- 47, 52. Page numbers in parentheses denote subsequent references to *The Meaning of Revelation*.

history can be justified in conversation between members of the community. One can test the vision of the Book of Isaiah, for instance, not by looking at its empirical referents, but by seeing *with* it and consulting with others who also try to see from inside similar visions. Niebuhr grants that such internal history can only be confessed, and so has an “esoteric” quality. But that quality leaves open the possibility of justification, and even of truth.

The whole truth, Niebuhr argues, requires both internal and external histories. Neither can be reduced to the other (49). They must be “allied” (56). Niebuhr names the need to hold internal and external histories together, but he refuses to offer a program for doing so. There is no “speculative escape” from this dilemma, Niebuhr writes (61). “It is but another form of the two-world thinking in which Christianity is forever involved and we need not expect that in thinking about history we shall be able to escape the dilemma that confronts us in every other sphere” (60-61). A metaphysical resolution would undo the paradox and so lose the truth of it. But if Niebuhr refuses speculative resolutions to this dilemma, he prescribes practical responses to it. Christians need to listen to how others see them. They need to hear external histories of themselves. Christians also need to describe the work of God beyond the institutional boundaries of Christianity. They need to tell internal histories not only of themselves, but also of others. And finally, Niebuhr writes, Christians need to tell external histories of their own beliefs, practices, and institutions (61-65).

Niebuhr was right to seek practical implications of the “two-world” nature of the church rather than a theoretical account that could hold these two natures together. And his practical implications might have been right for the time he wrote these words, in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Niebuhr was responding to Christian histories that tended, with more and less sophistication, to narrate the smooth unfolding of God’s will in the progress of churches, denominations, or Christianity as a whole. The scientific study of religion was not yet institutionalized. Niebuhr could count on Christians to write internal histories of Christianity, and so he called them to just about everything else: to listen to the external histories of Christianity offered by others, to tell internal histories of others, and to tell external histories of themselves. If those practical prescriptions named the needs of Niebuhr’s times, they name sites of surplus in ours. The intellectual and institutional separation of theology and history has left us with few internal histories of church practice. Even more, we lack histories of Christian practice that can hold internal and external perspectives together.

Niebuhr offers only hints of help for that task. He makes a convincing case for the need for both kinds of history. He describes the relationship between internal and external history as a “paradox.” And he offers a tantalizing analogy from the philosophy of David Hume. Citing Hume’s epistemology, Niebuhr writes that the relationship between internal and external history “is something like that of animal faith in the existence of an external world to the data of sense experience ... Without this animal faith in a dependable external world we literally would not live as bodies, for if we were true skeptics we would be errant fools to eat food made up of sense-data only, to breath an unsubstantial air with unreal lungs, to walk with unreal feet upon a non-existent earth toward imaginary goals” (58). By this analogy, external history does not drive towards theological conclusions. History does not prove or demand a particular theological interpretation. By the same token, internal history does not give a few more points of empirical data that can complete external history. Instead it works like the “animal faith” without which the data of external history could not be assimilated into anything like an intelligible life. This analogy from Hume ties internal and external history tightly together. Neither could exist without the other. The distinction between them cannot be lost, but they cannot be separated.

Preaching in the wake of the Ascension

A theologically adequate history of preaching – the kind preachers need – would include both internal and external histories of preaching. It would resist temptations to break internal and external perspectives completely apart as well as temptations to dissolve them into one another. How, then, should internal and external histories relate to one another in a preacher’s history of preaching? Niebuhr was right to warn against speculative attempts to resolve the question of the relationship between internal and external histories. Speculative resolutions of the tension between internal and external histories have tended to lose one pole or the other. But in the absence of a compelling reason to hold the two together, the gravity of established genres and institutions tends to pull them apart or dissolve them into one another. We need *some* way of thinking about the relationship between internal and external histories of preaching, between the kinds of empirical accounts a sociologist or historian might offer and the opaque, allusive narratives of signs and wonders (and desolation, and despair) a theologian might tell. That is, we need a mode of telling history that is adequate to a church Christians confess to be both the Body of Christ and an all-to-earthly community.

For centuries Christians have gone to the story of Jesus’ ascension in their attempts to talk about the ways Christ is and is not present in the Eucharist. I see our questions about preaching as intimately related to these questions of sacramental theology, and so I think it makes sense to set out on this well-worn path – not to seek a speculative resolution of the relationship between internal and external history, but to grope our way towards a narrative sense that can help us think presence and absence together, and so nourish the double vision church practices require.

Christians seem to have differed in their accounts of the Ascension for as long as they have been giving accounts of the Ascension. But whatever else those accounts affirm, and whatever form they take, they agree on this much: at some point the body of Jesus of Nazareth is no longer with his followers. The Gospel of Luke says that Jesus “withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven” (24:51). The Book of Acts riffs on that story line, filling out Luke’s terse phrase with clouds, angels, and additional dialogue. And John’s Gospel remembers Jesus saying that he must “go away” (14:28) and then telling Mary, in the garden, not to hold on to him because he had not ascended (20:17). Subsequent accounts develop with different emphases and innovations. But whatever the fresh details, the old, blunt affirmation holds. The body of Jesus is gone.

At the same time, the Ascension opens up some new way in which Jesus is present in, through, and to the community gathered in his name. Christian accounts of this presence have varied, but not without significant common ground. The Book of Acts moves directly from the Ascension to the pouring out of the Holy Spirit in Pentecost – a sequence that orders the liturgical year. The Gospel of John emphasizes again and again that in “going away” Jesus is “coming to you” (14:28). The world will no longer see him, Jesus tells the disciples. His body will be gone. But *they* will see him. And because he lives, they will live (14:18-19). The letter to the church at Ephesus moves along similar lines of thought, saying that Jesus “ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things” (4:10). Reformer John Calvin cited passages like these as he tried to describe the presence and absence of Christ in the wake of the Ascension. “Carried up into heaven,” Calvin writes, “he withdrew his bodily presence from our sight, not to cease to be present with believers still on their earthly pilgrimage, but to rule heaven

and earth with more immediate power.”¹³ The absence of Jesus’ body brings with it a new mode of presence, a mode that reverses our usual assumptions about the locations of body and spirit. Jesus’ body ascends to heaven, and his spirit is poured out on the earth. This pouring out constitutes the church. “The very existence of the Church,” Orthodox theologian Georges Florovsky writes, “is the fruit of the Ascension.”¹⁴ Calvin and Florovsky might have very different understandings of the church, but they both understand it as sustained by the presence of Christ given with the departure of the body of Jesus.

While the gift of the Holy Spirit makes Christ present with new power, that presence does not undo the absence of the body of Jesus. “Pentecost does not *resolve* the problem of the presence and the absence,” contemporary theologian Douglas Farrow writes. “It *creates* it, by adding a presence which discloses the absence.”¹⁵ The absence of the body of Jesus becomes meaningful, a real loss, only as the Holy Spirit gives us ears to hear the echoes of that absence. The Holy Spirit does not sate the longings of disciples for the body of Jesus, but whets them. It is in the Spirit that we groan with all creation for redemption (Romans 8:28). And it is with the Spirit that the church, the bride of Christ, prays, “Come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:17). The presence of the Holy Spirit only quickens our sense of the absence of the body of Jesus. And it is in dwelling in the depths opened up by that absent body, and praying for that body’s return, that we find ourselves most closely joined to the presence of God with us.

Preaching as we know it emerges from this dialectic of presence and absence. The absence of the body of Jesus makes preaching necessary. While the Word made flesh walked among them, the disciples had no need for words about the Word. They might have told people to come and see, but their words were really just so many ways of pointing: “Over there! He’s over there!” With the Ascension, though, preaching takes on a new burden. Now the disciples’ words must somehow – in and in spite of their poverty – make manifest the Word they proclaim. The Ascension imposes that burden, but also provides the grace to carry it. It is linked again and again to some kind of proclamation. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the disciples find themselves able to preach words that are caught up in the redeeming work of God. In Acts the Ascension is joined immediately to the Pentecost gift of gospel speech (Acts 1-2). In John, Jesus tells Mary to release him so that he can ascend and she can tell the good news of his rising (John 20:17). The ascension of Jesus makes preaching both necessary and possible.

Jesuit historian Michel de Certeau describes this dynamic when he writes that, “The Christian language begins with the disappearance of its ‘author.’ That is to say that Jesus *effaces himself* to give faithful witness to the Father who authorizes him, and to ‘give rise’ to different but faithful communities which he makes possible. There is a close bond between the absence of Jesus (dead and not present) and the birth of the Christian language (objective and faithful testimony to his survival).” Faithful testimonies “never repeat the gospel,” Certeau writes, “but they would be impossible without the gospel.”¹⁶ Even the most faithful words about God are not identical to the Word of God in the way that a body is identical to itself from the point of view of external history. Even the most faithful words are not what we might call *simply* identical to the Word of God. But they are impossible without that Word as their author.

¹³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, transl. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) II.16.14 (vol. 1, p. 523).

¹⁴ Georges Florovsky, “And Ascended Into Heaven,” *St. Vladimir’s Seminary Quarterly* 2.3 (Spring 1954), 27.

¹⁵ Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 271, n. 59

¹⁶ Michel de Certeau, “How is Christianity Thinkable Today?” *Theology Digest*, 19.4 (Winter 1971), 336.

Theologically adequate histories of preaching will remember the words made possible by the absence of the Word-made-flesh. And they will remember them in ways that acknowledge the Word's authorship – without ever presuming to find the Word as some kind of historical factoid within the narrative. They will not say, "See! Here, on this day, these words just *were* the Word of God." Naming words about God as simply identical to the Word of God is another way of denying the ascension of the body of Christ. But that Word can be known, indirectly, as a very present absence in the community of words and actions it makes possible.¹⁷ The challenge is to tell histories of church practice that make their authorship clear, but without ever confusing the practice and its author.

Faithful histories of preaching must remember the meaningful gap between sermons and the Word of God. They must also remember the gap between *themselves* and the Word of God. Historical narratives about preaching are not of a different order than the sermons they describe. They cannot attain a position from which they can measure the distance between various sermons and the Word of God, for that would be to contain the Word of God within themselves. And they cannot tell a story that becomes identical in a simple way with the story of the Word of God – like a dollar-store version of Hegel – for this would make the tellers of the tale into the authors of the Word. Just the opposite is the case. The Word is the author, in Certeau's sense, of whatever is true. And so our histories must be written in ways that acknowledge the same dialectic of presence and absence within themselves that is at work in the sermons they describe.

If the Word of God cannot appear as a point of data in a history of preaching, it nonetheless gives rise to the fact of every sermon and to any narrative that can make sense of the history of sermons. In Certeau's words, "The anchoring of the narrative conveys everywhere a tacit relation to something which cannot have a place in history – an originary non-place – without which, however, there would be no historiography. Writing disperses through its chronological staging the reference of the entire narrative to something unspoken that is its postulate."¹⁸ The inaugural event for Christian preaching – the Word-made-flesh that authors and authorizes every true word – cannot be captured by an external history of that which it makes possible. It cannot even be rendered as the first event in a sequence, for that fails to acknowledge its difference from the sequence. But the Word is a very present absence in these stories, even as the ascended body of Jesus is a very present absence in the church. This is not an idle analogy. The nature of Christ's presence in the church means that after the Ascension we cannot make the Word of God the object of our history. But we can write histories of practice in ways that display *in their operations* the Word that is the origin and hope of all Christian preaching.¹⁹

Altar Calls

In this essay I have tried to describe the ways that historical consciousness is forced upon preachers today. I have argued that practical reasoning about preaching will involve historical forms. And I have tried to describe the kind of history that can do that work: genetic histories that hold together empirical and theological accounts of practices of preaching. I have suggested that we might understand the relationship between these theological and empirical accounts as

¹⁷ I have borrowed language of the "present absence" especially from Hugh T. Kerr, "The Presence of the Absence," *Theology Today*, 43.1 (April 1986), 104.

¹⁸ Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, transl. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 90-91.

¹⁹ I am trying to do something like this in Ted A. Smith, *The New Measures: A Theological History of Democratic Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

something like the relation between the risen body of Christ and the very earthly story of the church that claims to be that body.

The best “internal history” of preaching, then, will not be a pious little section of an external, empirical history. And it will not be a long fideistic narrative that runs in parallel to external history. It will instead be the unspoken reality that makes sense of all that is spoken. Discerning that internal history involves not the collection of some new species of sacred data but the acknowledgment of the claims the history makes upon us.

History becomes internal for us when we acknowledge it to be, in some sense, *ours* – when we acknowledge that, like it or not, the people in these stories are people to whom we are connected who are trying to do things to which we too are called. That moment of assent brings certain imperatives. It demands gratitude, for we acknowledge ourselves to be part of what Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams called “a whole immeasurable exchange of gifts, known and unknown, by which particular Christian lives are built up, an exchange no less vital and important for being frequently an exchange between living and dead.” Being part of such a body means acknowledging that, “I do not know, theologically speaking, where my *debts* begin and end.”²⁰

The debts incurred run not only to those who have given us excellent things but also to those who have been harmed by people and practices we acknowledge as our own. Receiving a history of preaching as internal history therefore calls us not only to gratitude, but also to penitence. Our debts run in many directions, and they run deep. To acknowledge the sin in an *internal* history is to accept it as our own. It is to recognize ourselves as bound by and implicated in history, and in ways that go much deeper than what we ourselves might have intended. But to acknowledge the sin as internal *history* is to mark it as belonging to the past. It is to gain a measure of self-conscious distance from it, and so to find a concrete, gospel freedom in relation to it. A memory of “lack,” Certeau writes, “introduces the rift of a future.”²¹

The deepest expressions of penitence will wade through that rift with hopes of preaching on the other side. They will not be content with mumbling apologies, but will seek whatever transformation is possible in this world. Theologian Johann-Baptist Metz described “dangerous memories” of the suffering particular cultural formations must repress in order to sustain themselves. Remembering that suffering – through something like the genetic histories I propose here – demands that we take action. “This subversive tradition,” Metz writes, “resists any attempt to sublimate it by means of a purely affirmative attitude to the past (as, for example, in hermeneutical theories) and by means of a wholly critical attitude to the past (as, for instance, in ideology criticism). The ‘mediation’ of the memory of suffering is always practical.”²²

As it is for suffering, so it is for joy. Both gratitude and penitence call for practical response. Histories of preaching call those of us who receive them as internal to take the practice up, give thanks, confess sin, and mend the practice as best we can in the work of preaching. When we are reading an external history, we can stand at a distance as we condemn or admire the people and performances in that history. We can even regard them without judgment of any kind, for external histories leave room for a merely antiquarian interest in the subject at hand. But receiving a history of preaching as internal history – as a sacred history of what “we” do –

²⁰ Rowan Williams, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church* (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 27.

²¹ Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 85.

²² Johann-Baptist Metz, “The Future in the Memory of Suffering,” in Johann-Baptist Metz and Jürgen Moltmann, *Faith and the Future: Essays on Theology, Solidarity, and Modernity* (Maryknoll, NY: Concilium, 1995), 8.

means assenting to the call implicit in the direction of the story. It means, as Rowan Williams says, reading a sometimes sordid history and asking, “To what call is this a response – faithful, unfaithful, uncomprehending, transfiguring? Can we acknowledge it as our call too? And more to the point, can we see that our immersion in the ways in which *they* responded becomes part of the way we actually hear the call ourselves in more and more diverse and more and more complete ways?”²³ Receiving a history of preaching as our own calls us to recognize these connections in and beyond history. It calls us to give thanks, confess our too-long alliance with sin, groan with all creation, and work towards transformation. Most of all, it calls us to preach.

²³ Williams, 30.