The Bible: A Liberating History

(1 of 3)

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AETH

Making Connections
Earl Lectures
Pacific School of Religion

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Catherine: For the last several centuries, the church as we know it has managed to separate three elements that the ancient church held together. We are able to discuss Scripture, preaching, and liturgy as quite separate. Obviously, there are connections. We know that preaching ought to have some clear relationship to Scripture. We assume that most preaching takes place within the context of public worship. (There is evangelistic preaching that takes place outside the worshipping congregation, but here we are concerned basically with preaching that is addressed to the faithful who are gathered.) But Scripture, preaching, and liturgy are clearly separable elements—so separable that in the medieval period there could be liturgy without preaching, and in many Protestant churches in the nineteenth century, liturgy was hardly the term appropriate for the opening and closing exercises that surrounded the main event of the sermon. Even with the clearly liturgical moments of the sacraments, in many cases, baptism is a parenthesis in a service that goes on as though it had not taken place, and the Lord's Supper is an occasional appendix to an otherwise unchanged worship service. We have all heard sermons in which the link with Scripture was tangential at best—and at worst, no need was seen at all to connect the two.

We can distinguish quite clearly Scripture, sermon, and liturgy. The Bible is a book we can hold in our hand. We can read it by ourselves. For liturgy and sermon, however the two are connected, we must go to a worship service—or at least turn on the radio or TV.

For the early church, on the other hand, it was a very different matter. There was no printing press. Christians did not have private copies of the Bible. One usually had to hear Scripture read, and that meant gathering in worship. The liturgy, the Scripture, its explanation and application were all combined in a single series of events, in a single place. To the most ancient church, when Paul’s letters were read, were they viewed as Scripture? as sermon to this congregation? as part of the worship service? As all three combined? As a mix of the three, not yet defined?

We stand in a very different place. Surely, we should not give up the printed Bibles we take for granted. But it may indeed be helpful to recapture the unity of these elements or at least see the connections among them. For the early church, Scripture was indeed a powerful, liberating force. Could it have been that without the other two elements? Could preaching have had its force without liturgy? Could the liturgy have been so transforming without a particular view of Scripture? It is these connections we intend to look at in this series of lectures. Our approach will be historical, but with reference to significance and parallels in terms of the contemporary church. We begin with the Scripture.

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Justo: As we look at the early history of the church, at least as it is portrayed in the first chapters of the book of Acts, it appears that the struggle of the emerging Christian community with the religious establishment is, at least in part, a struggle over the possession of Scripture. The possession, not of the book itself, but of the history that the book portrays. This is certainly the issue in Stephen's speech before the Sanhedrin, which takes up fully 5% of the entire book of Acts. The Just One whom you have rejected, says Stephen, was announced and typified by Moses, who was also rejected by his fellow Israelites when he killed the Egyptian, and was rejected again in the desert, when they made the golden calf. (In Stephen's speech, the same is true—before Moses—of Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his brothers, as well as of the many prophets who came after Moses and who were also persecuted.) And, just as Moses was made ruler and liberator of the people, so has this Jesus now been raised to the right hand of God. Who, then, is blaspheming against Moses, asks Stephen. We, who like him, are rejected because we announce One who, like him, was rejected? Or you, the powerful of Israel, who like Joseph's brothers gave up the Just One in order to save your power? Who uses the Scriptures correctly? You who use them to persecute us, as the prophets were persecuted before, or we who, like those prophets, announce the astonishing actions of God?

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In scripture those early Christians found the power to resist the oppressive structures that would silence them.

In the next chapter in Acts after Stephen's speech, we find Philip speaking to the

Ethiopian eunuch. Here is a man condemned by the law of Scripture to remain forever an outsider, for the law clearly states that a eunuch cannot be added to the people of God. A pathetic picture. The man has come to Jerusalem to worship, but the law of the God whom he worships excludes him. But Philip and the eunuch engage in a conversation, as the text says, "beginning with this scripture”—that is, with Isaiah 53. Did they continue reading Isaiah as far as the 56th chapter? It is impossible to tell. If they did, they would have read the promise of God: "To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast to my covenant, I will give in my house and within my wall a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name which shall not be cut off.”

Whatever Scripture Philip used, Acts says that "beginning with this scripture he told him the good news of Jesus." What is the good news? That in Jesus the promises have been fulfilled, that the Reign of God, the time promised by the prophets, has been inaugurated. And so, when they come to a place where there is water, the eunuch says, "See, there is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?" According to the traditional use of Scripture, the answer was clear: Deuteronomy 23.1. But according to Philip's use of Scripture, in light of the good news of Jesus, the answer is, "nothing," and they descended into the water, and Philip baptized the eunuch.

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Other examples could be adduced, both from the New Testament itself and from patristic literature, but the point is that the early church has a way of reading Scripture that is liberating, not only against the powers from outside that would oppress it, but even from an understanding of Scripture itself that could be used to oppress and stifle them.

Do we today have that sense of the liberating power of scripture? Certainly, there are many Christians in our day who do have such a sense. Two years ago, we went to Central America with a group of students. What was astonishing to them was the sense of hope that Christians there had, even in the midst of terrible circumstances. Other students remained in Atlanta, in a housing project in the city. For them, there was a sense of hopelessness that permeated lives there. For many Christians in difficult situations there is hope. Yet for many of us, and certainly for many in the churches that we serve and where we worship, this sense has been lost. Why?

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Catherine: Two very basic reasons come to mind, two ways in which we approach Scripture that differ dramatically from the ways in which those who find the text particularly liberating read it. The first has to do with the individualism that is a hallmark of our culture and has been for several centuries. The printing press accentuated individualism in terms of the understanding of Scripture. It is a great gift to have Scripture available, in our hands, but it also enables us to see it primarily as a word to us, individually—even privately. I can read it alone. It gives me inspiration, direction for my life as an individual. That it comes out of a community and is addressed to a community can be completely lost to view. In fact, there are some in our culture for whom private reading of Scripture and prayer are the ultimate forms of Christian worship, and for whom, therefore, the church is a dispensable item. One does not need the community of faith for the reading or understanding of Scripture. One's own interpretation is quite sufficient. Radio and TV religious programs give an illusion of community, but their variety increases the individualism of the listener, who tunes in or out readily.

Justo: This has become an even more serious problem for English readers due to the manner in which English grammar has evolved. In modern English, there is no difference between the singular "you" and the plural "you." This creates problems even in everyday conversation. Someone calls us from California, and speaking to one of us says, "We want to invite you to come and deliver the Earl Lectures.” Somehow, the one who answers must prolong the conversation until they find out, without asking too bluntly, if “you" means "me" or "us."

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I find this particularly puzzling, because the language with which I grew up makes a very clear difference between “you” singular, and “you” plural. And precisely for that reason I am struck by the ease with which English-speaking modern readers, when coming across a “you” in Scripture, understand that they are being addressed, not only personally but individually as well.

The fact of the matter is that there are very few portions of scripture in which the reader is addressed as "you" in the singular. One clear case is the Epistle to Philemon. Two other cases are the dedication to Theophilus in Luke-Acts and Timothy and Titus in the Pastoral Epistles. But in both of these cases the singular "you" is understood by most scholars as a literary device to address a much wider, and plural, audience. And, even in these cases, as in the rest of Scripture, what gave them authority as part of the canon was not their private reading but their reading in the setting of worship.

Catherine: It may well be that the Southern expression "Y'all,” or even the New Yorkese "youse,” is a way of clarifying the English plural when it is intended! It may point to a need in our language.

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Justo: The impact of purely individualistic reading of Scripture goes far beyond what immediately comes to mind—a loss of the sense of being a community. It also obscures from us some of the dimensions of what Scripture may be saying. Take for instance the very much debated passages in Ephesians and elsewhere about wives and husbands, masters and slaves. The early church was a very mixed group. It is one thing for this to be read out loud to a mixed group in the early church, where the husbands and the masters receive their share of very sobering instruction, which the wives and the slaves are privileged to overhear, and quite another for a woman today to read it in private trying to determine how a good wife ought to behave. The author of Ephesians intended for the wives to overhear the word addressed to their husbands, "be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ,” “husbands should love their wives as their own bodies," and for slaves to overhear the masters being addressed: "Masters, do the same to them, and forbear threatening.” Granted, such public reading does not solve all the problems posed by these passages, but purely private reading does exacerbate the problems.

Catherine: Scripture is addressed to a community, and to individuals as part of that gathering. Even read privately, there is the need to see that the Word comes to us as those who are called to or are already part of the People of God. Scripture itself often calls the community of faith to remember their ancestors--either their sinfulness, so that the current People would not be so tempted, or their faith that should be continued. But that is not the way it is usually read in our culture. Even the way we tell Bible stories to our children shows a strong individualistic bias. We have the heroes who are to be models, but the stories about the community of faith may be ignored, even when the hero would not have been understood individualistically by the writers or the hearers of Scripture in past centuries.

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Individualism, then, is the first way in which our reading of Scripture differs from that of the early church and may be a barrier to our discovering the power it had for them. The second barrier is that we lack the sense of history that they had. There may well be a connection between individualism and the loss of the sense of history. If we need only the printed page of Scripture and not the living community of faith to bring the Bible to us, then why would we need to be concerned about the history of the community within Scripture? But the issue of history is much more complex, for the tradition of a somewhat ahistorical view of Scripture is of longer standing in the Western church than is the more recent individualism.

Justo: In the Western church, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, traditionally the most common ways to read scripture have been as law and as prophecy. As law, Scripture tells us what to do. This is related to an entire theological outlook in which God is seen as legislator and judge, sin as breaking the law, and redemption as paying the penalty for sin. From this perspective, the Bible is read as a rule book to tell us what we ought to do in a given situation.

There are many problems with this approach to Scripture. One of the most serious is that it fragments the Bible. Instead of a coherent whole, with its own movement and direction, it becomes a series of practically independent rules. What one asks when approaching the Bible is, which rule applies? Very much as a lawyer asks when approaching a case, and it is no coincidence that the technical term for this kind of interpretation is "casuistry," nor that casuistry has also developed all the negative connotations with which we are familiar. Even at its best, casuistry sees moral decision and even religious life as a series of "cases" with very little connection to each other, except where the same legal principles apply.

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Another negative consequence of this approach is that most of Scripture can be ignored. It can be ignored in any particular instance, once the appropriate law that applies has been determined; and it can be ignored in general, for most of Scripture is not legal in nature.

A second approach that has become quite common in Western tradition is prophecy. When this word is employed in everyday language, even in the church, what is meant is that the words of Scripture somehow announce something that will happen in the future. From this perspective, the significance of the Old Testament lies mostly in that it includes the writings of prophets who foretold the coming of Jesus, and the significance of at least certain books of the New Testament is that they foretell what will happen in the future or, even more frequently in our day, what is happening right now.

As with the legal approach, the main difficulty with this approach is that it effectively discounts most of Scripture, for even in the books of Isaiah and Micah, there are no more than a few words or passages that can be seen as prophetic in the sense of foretelling the future.

A second difficulty is obviously that it renders even such prophetic passages practically meaningless until they have been fulfilled, and valueless once they have been fulfilled. If Isaiah 53, for instance, is a literal prophecy referring specifically and only to the sufferings of Jesus, then it meant nothing to those who read it before the time of Jesus. And after that time, we no longer need it, for we have much more detailed descriptions of that suffering in the Gospels. Or, if the

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book of Revelation is a prophecy about our days, as some very popular books are saying, then it did not mean a thing to Christians in the time of Augustine, or of Luther, except that someday our time would come.

Clearly, these two methods of interpretation existed in the early church and have continued throughout the history of the church. Yet, also clearly, they leave much to be desired.

It is for this reason that at a relatively early date a different approach became popular. This is allegorical interpretation. Throughout history, when Christian exegetes have not liked the limitations of the legal and the prophetic approach, they have often resorted to allegory. From this perspective, everything in Scripture has a hidden meaning, if only one can find it. This is precisely the value and the attraction of this method. If one does not know what to make of what Scripture says about pigs being unclean, one can always decide that what the text really means is that we are not to be like pigs, remembering their master only when they are hungry.

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Or we can do like a student I once had who thought he was a great preacher. He was assigned to preach a sermon for Palm Sunday. As we all know, that is not an easy occasion on which to preach. But this student found a way out. He read that Jesus told the disciples to go untie the colt of the ass. From that point he took off. "We are all tied by our sins,” he said, "and we need Jesus to untie us.” All that he said was true. It just had nothing to do with the text. When he came down from the pulpit, proud of his eloquence and his creativity, I could no longer resist. "That was a very interesting sermon," I told him, "but do you realize you have just made an ass of yourself?"

Then, there was another sermon. The text was from the book of Revelation: "And the sea was no more." "Why will the sea be no more?" asked the preacher. "Because in the sea there are monsters. There are sharks, like Jaws. . . But the worst of all the monsters of the sea is the octopus. The octopus has eight tentacles, and it grabs you, and it squeezes you, and it crushes you. And so is the octopus of sin. It, too, has eight tentacles. First, there is the tentacle of pride. . . Then there is the tentacle of lust." And so, he went on and on, finally to come to his conclusion: "Therefore, let us come out of the tentacles of the octopus of sin and into the arms of Jesus!"

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Obviously, the main shortcoming of this method is that Scripture is ultimately deprived of authority. We find in Scripture what we put into it, like the magician who puts a rabbit in a hat when nobody is looking and then says, "Voila!"

In ancient and medieval times, this sort of interpretation was usually associated with Platonic philosophy, and therefore exegetes found in Scripture the same eternal principles that they could have known by reading Plato and the Neoplatonists.

In more recent times, what has become most common is a sort of interpretation that also believes that the value of Scripture lies in that it points to certain essential principles and then seeks to interpret Scripture so as to find them. A typical case is the famous Liberal theology summary of the message of the Sermon on the Mount as the "Fatherhood of God, brotherhood of man, and the infinite value of the human soul.” In our own day, psychological principles are often used for the same purpose.

Quite clearly, the early church did interpret Scripture in terms of law and prophecy—even on occasion in allegorical terms. But all of this is subsumed under another form of interpretation that places history at its very heart. All of these forms of interpretation, law, prophecy, and allegory, have one thing in common: They focus on words rather than events. What is important is the actual text, almost like a magical book rather than the history of the community of faith. Over against this, the most common form of interpretation in the early church focuses on events and their patterns and connections—in other words, it focuses on history.

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In Stephen's speech before the Sanhedrin, mentioned earlier, what he is saying is not that a list of prophecies have been or are being fulfilled. What he is saying is that he, and the church, and the Sanhedrin stand within a history. This is a history that does not repeat itself, but in which certain patterns appear, and if one is to interpret Scripture faithfully it must be within the scope of that history. Joseph was sold by his brothers into slavery. Moses was betrayed by the Israelites whom he sought to save by killing the Egyptian. Jesus was betrayed and murdered by those whom he came to save. Yet Joseph was made a ruler in Egypt, and an instrument for the salvation of those who sold him. Moses was made ruler and deliverer of the people who would have delivered him to the Egyptians. And now Jesus sits at the right hand of God and offers salvation, even to those who betrayed and killed him. "His brothers sold Joseph into slavery; the Israelites betrayed Moses; the people persecuted the prophets; I know where I stand,” says Stephen; "I know where the community that follows Jesus stands; and, as a consequence, I know also where the Sanhedrin stands.”

This kind of interpretation is usually called "typological” for it speaks of events in the past as "types" or "figures" of events to come. We could as well call it "historical” in the strict sense, for what characterizes a historical perspective is precisely the conviction that, while events do not repeat themselves, and while each of them is significant in itself, there are also patterns that make the knowledge of the past worthwhile. Joseph sold by his brothers Moses rejected by the Israelites, the prophets persecuted, are all "types" or figures of Jesus. And, because he is the culmination of history, because he is both the One to whom all these types pointed and the goal to which all of history moves, he is also the archetype from which the church must draw the pattern of its life.

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This is also the manner in which Scripture interprets itself. When the prophet whom we now call Second Isaiah seeks for an interpretation of the exile and the return, he draws on the pattern of God opening the Red Sea; so that, just as God made a path in the sea, now God makes a way in the wilderness. And when the earliest evangelist seeks to interpret the "evangelion," the “good news” of what has happened in Jesus Christ, he draws on the image of the return from exile, quoting the prophet, "a voice cries in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord.” The Lord, who prepared a way in the Sea and in the desert, once again prepares the way; and the people who were pilgrims across the sea and across the desert will now again be pilgrims.

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Catherine: This typological form of Biblical interpretation is one that we have generally lost in the Western church, though it is beginning to appear again. It takes seriously the history of the People of God within which these types continue to occur, linking together generations centuries apart. It also provides a way for us to see our present experience as a part of this ongoing history. In fact, the beauty of this method is that it allows the parallels of our setting and the biblical account to come through without an intervening translation into doctrine. It does not require academic training. It requires immersion in the Biblical story and an awareness of contemporary structures of power.

Justo: At this point, it is clear that the oppressed know best how to see this dimension in Scripture. It has been said that if you wish to know how the welfare system really works, the best way is not to read the laws about it, nor to speak with those who administer it, but to speak to those who are on welfare—or who should be. Likewise, the best way to know what the Bible says within this history is not the mediation of some high-sounding hermeneutical principle or methodology. One does not even need to seek to "apply" the text politically. It happens naturally, as those who in the midst of their oppression read in Scripture a story similar to theirs. They know the real structures of power better than the rest of society, just as those in welfare know that system best.

And it happens even implicitly, without the need to spell out what is meant. When the slaves in a plantation sang "Go down Moses," they knew what they were really singing. The master knew only that they were singing about the Bible. But they knew that they were singing about the Bible and about themselves. And they saw a unity between the two that most probably remained hidden to the slaveholder.

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Catherine: Let us look briefly at one Biblical narrative that has been a favorite with children: the account of David and Goliath in 1 Samuel 17. If most of us were asked to retell the story, we would probably remember that David was young, not yet old enough to be a soldier. He was sent by his father Jesse to take food to his older brothers who were in Israel's army, fighting under King Saul against the Philistines. When he got to the lines, David heard that the Philistine giant, Goliath, was taunting the army of Israel. No one in Israel would go to fight him. David, however, was sure that God would not let him be defeated. He therefore volunteered to go out after Goliath. He rejected Saul’s offer of traditional armor, choosing to take only the slingshot with which he had defended his sheep from wild animals. With one shot he killed the great giant and brought victory to Israel. The way the story is normally told, the point for young Christians is quite clear: If you have faith in God, you can overcome any odds. It doesn't matter how small or how young you are. The narrative can be used in this way. David announced his faith. He is sure that it is God's strength and not his own that matters.

But to use the account in this way is to deal with it in an individualistic manner, and it also ignores the more complex history within which the story is set. From a typological perspective, one would deal with it quite differently.

First of all, we would need to see exactly where in the history of Israel this appears. That it is David who makes a difference. David, like Moses, is treated as a type of Christ—whether in messianic prophecies looking for the one who is to come from the line of David, from the root of Jesse, or in the New Testament statements about Jesus who comes as this expected Davidic king. Furthermore, in the chapter before we find the account of Goliath, we read about Samuel, the prophet, who is commanded by God to go to the house of Jesse, to anoint the son of Jesse who had been chosen by God to be the new king of Israel. Samuel went, and after seeing all seven of the mature sons of Jesse, discovers that God has not chosen any of them—but rather the unlikely youngest son, still a child, who is out tending the sheep. David is anointed by Samuel, but though anointed, still remains a shepherd,

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waiting until the time appointed by God when Saul shall no longer be king. Yet at the moment of the anointing, we are told that the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David and also, that the same Spirit departed from Saul, even though he remained king.

Typologically, it is significant that it is not simply any youth, but the anointed one of God, upon whom God's Spirit has come, who has gone up against Goliath. It is a kingly act, in defense of his people, even though he is not yet the king.

The parallels with Jesus would have been very obvious to those Christians in the early church who heard this story. Jesus is the Anointed One—the Christ, above all others. Like David, he was an unlikely candidate to be a king—born in a stable, not the sort of beginning one would expect for royalty! Yet he was born in the little town of David, not in the city of Jerusalem. He, too, has been appointed king, yet in his lifetime he lived under another order and was not yet publicly acclaimed as king.

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Jesus, like David, went out against the giants who defied the God of Israel, bigger giants than Goliath, giants of disease, of sin, of death, of all the powers of evil. He was a king, but with an anointing that had yet to be made public, even as David was when he went up against Goliath.

David won his battle with Goliath, and that is where we usually end the story for children. But typologically, one would continue far enough to see that this victory of David, great though it was, also brought him great trouble. For Saul began to be jealous of David. And Saul was still the ruling king. He would try to kill David. That would certainly be difficult to explain to children. Why would you want to be like David if the net result is that you make powerful enemies who try to kill you? But surely, we see the full meaning of that in the life of Jesus. It is precisely his victories over sin, death, and evil—as seen, for instance, in the healing miracles—that cause the people to praise him and the leaders to seek to kill him. Being anointed by God brings both power over evil and the enmity of evil. Evil still reigns in this old order, though a new order, with a new king, has already begun.

Such an interpretation would mean that David is not simply an example that with faith in God, we can overcome all obstacles, true though that is. But David is also an example of the ambiguity of being God's anointed. Faith leads us into great danger, as well as giving us the ultimate power to conquer. Children need to know that as well. They need to see themselves as part of a community that lives out the danger as well as the victory that faith brings. The story would have even more significance if the children who heard it also knew that they had been anointed—as part of their baptismal rite—and in the early church, they would have known this. So, the account would have come to them, not as a story of a young person, long ago, but of themselves. But that takes us into the arena of liturgy, which will be our concern tomorrow night.

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