

## Vulnerable Good News: Distance & Patience In Gospel Performance

Dr. Mason Lee

Assistant Professor of Practical Theology

Abilene Christian University Graduate School of Theology

**Abstract:** *The performative implications of the gospel have been the focus of intense homiletical reflection. These reflections explore avenues through which the “what” of the gospel shapes the “how” of its proclamation. Yet one feature of the gospel that has received little attention is the connection between the gospel’s inherent vulnerability and how that vulnerability should shape sermonic performance. This paper considers what possible impact the vulnerability intrinsic to the gospel, as good news, should have on one’s preaching performance and the potential implications of this connection. Drawing on speech-act theory and a theological understanding of the gospel as “good news,” this paper argues sermonic performance that mirrors the gospel’s nonviolent epistemology is a necessary condition for gospel speech. It suggests performative distance as one strategy for meeting this condition and that such a strategy reveals the potential significance of patience as a homiletically significant virtue.*

### Introduction

The performative implications of the gospel have long been the focus of intense homiletical reflection.<sup>1</sup> These reflections, each in their own way, have explored avenues through which the “*what*” of the Gospel shapes the “*how*” of its proclamation.<sup>2</sup> Yet one feature of the gospel that has received little attention is the connection between its inherent vulnerability and how that vulnerability should shape sermonic performance. In this article I consider what possible impact the vulnerability intrinsic to the gospel’s function as *good news* should have on one’s preaching performance and the potential implications of this connection. In part one I consider J.L. Austin’s concept of performative utterance, emphasizing the “primary condition” of a speech act in which the speaker must adopt a stance consistent with their utterance. In part two I take up an analysis of the gospel as “good news” to identify a particular “gospel epistemology” in which vulnerability is a central feature since the gospel’s function as *good news* requires the possibility of the hearer’s rejection. In part three I identify the concept of distance as a way of meeting the performative criteria for gospel proclamation. In the final section I propose that the reality of the gospel’s inherent vulnerability, the distance it requires, and the potential results of that performance reveals the significance of patience as a homiletical virtue.

### J.L. Austin and Speech-Acts

In *How to Do Things With Words*, J.L. Austin provides a general theory of speech acts.<sup>3</sup> Austin begins with a simple observation: there are statements that do more than refer or describe and so do not fit within the “constative” category of speech used by the philosophers of his day.

---

<sup>1</sup> For examples, see Evans Crawford, *The Hum: Call and Response in African American Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995); Charles Bartow, *God’s Human Speech: A Practical Theology of Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); Jana Childers and Clayton Schmit, ed., *Performance in Preaching: Bringing the Sermon to Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008); Clayton Schmit, *Too Deep for Words: A Theology of Liturgical Expression* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002); Richard Ward, *Speaking from the Heart: Preaching with Passion* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> I borrow the language of the “what” and “how” of the gospel from Fred Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel: Revised and Expanded Edition* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> John Searle, “Austin on Locutionary and Illocutionary Acts,” *The Philosophical Review* 77.4 (1968): 405.

These statements participate in the action they were previously thought only to describe.<sup>4</sup> This leads Austin to critique the assumption that language's only function is to make declaratory statements regarding the facticity of a thing and points instead to the ways language possesses a non-literal and non-declarative function. Thus, Austin argued we should speak of two categories of utterances: those that describe something (*constantives*) and those that participate in the doing of an action (*performatives*). Where constantives can be either true or false, Austin notes performatives can be either "happy" or "unhappy." In attempting to distinguish between these two categories of speech, Austin suggested the "hereby" test for identifying performative utterances: if we can place an utterance in a form that begins with "hereby" ("I hereby decree...), it is a sign that our speaking the utterance performs the action contained within it.

### *Collapsing the Constantive-Performative Distinction*

Yet as Austin differentiated between performative and constantive utterances, he realized the distinction was not as clear as a simple "hereby" test. For example, performative utterances can also deal in qualities of "true" and "false" since in most cases performatives entail, imply, or presuppose something that is true or false.<sup>5</sup> Thus, we are unable to separate performatives and constantives because they depend on one another for their force.<sup>6</sup> In every test Austin proposed for distinguishing the performative from the constantive, both classes would end as an "unhappy" utterance if the facts did not support them.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Austin found that both classes were dependent upon circumstances, the speaker, the speaker's intentions, and could occur in the same grammatical form. In short, the performative distinction "neither separated the class of utterance to which 'true/false' applied from all other classes; nor did it separate utterances that could be felicitously or infelicitously uttered from all others; nor did it divide utterances into two mutually exclusive classes of any sort."<sup>8</sup>

Austin's inability to distinguish the two categories of utterances led him to conclude there may, in fact, be no distinction between them at all. Rather, Austin demonstrated "what was supposed to be a special case of utterances (performatives) swallows the general case (constantives), which now turn out to be only certain kinds of speech acts among others."<sup>9</sup> Even when the type of speech was a descriptive statement (a supposed constantive) whose primary job is to refer, it only does so effectively when the force of the utterance is made clear.<sup>10</sup> Simply put,

<sup>4</sup> J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 5. This kind of utterance "is, or is a part of, the doing of an action." For example, when a minister conducts a wedding and utters the statement, "I know pronounce you man and wife..." the minister is not merely describing an already-existing reality; she is performing an action through the utterance that has changed the state of affairs. A couple that had not previously been married now find themselves to be such. It was the utterance itself that performed the action. It was an utterance that *did* something.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 45-52.

<sup>6</sup> Searle, "Austin on Locutionary and Illocutionary Acts," 406.

<sup>7</sup> "Now we failed to find a grammatical criterion for performatives, but we thought that perhaps we could insist that every performative *could* be in principle put into the form of an explicit performative, and then we could make a list of performative verbs. Since then we have found, however, that it is often not easy to be sure that, even when it is apparently in explicit form, an utterance is performative or that it is not; and typically anyway, we still have utterances beginning 'I state that...' which seems to satisfy the requirements of being performative, yet which sure are the making of statements, and surely are essentially true or false." Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, 91.

<sup>8</sup> James McClendon and James Smith, *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1994), 49.

<sup>9</sup> Searle, "Austin on Locutionary and Illocutionary Acts," 406.

<sup>10</sup> For example, when an utterance is truly descriptive and not ironic. See, Hugh White, "Introduction: Speech-Act Theory And Literary Criticism," *Semeia* 41 (1988): 3.

*all* speaking is both a saying and a doing. It is only a question of the *kind* of performative speech-act that is taking place. Rather than grouping utterances into constatives or performatives, Austin classified them according to the utterance's *doing*: saying something (Locutionary act) and performing something (Illocutionary act).<sup>11</sup> Yet Austin took a further step and claimed all Locutionary acts are also necessarily Illocutionary acts, since a Locutionary act (uttering a certain sentence with a certain sense and reference) often implies a "doing" (the Illocutionary act) of its own.<sup>12</sup> As with the constative-performative distinction, Austin collapsed the locutionary-illocutionary divide.

### *Speech-Acts and the Primary Condition*

Having shown the priority of illocutionary acts, the question becomes one of assessment: If illocutionary speech acts no longer depend upon their correspondence to non-verbal objects (the "true/false" dichotomy), how do we determine their validity?<sup>13</sup> What becomes the standard for distinguishing between utterances that accomplish their action (happy) and those that do not (unhappy)? To assess a speech act's success, Austin argues that speech acts have necessary preconditions.<sup>14</sup> Even the simple act of pronouncing a man and woman husband and wife, for example, has preconditions. The minister must speak in both a common language and with proper convention. The minister must be qualified and involve the appropriate parties. Finally, the minister must maintain a position consistent with the utterance. This last condition has, since Austin, been recognized as the *primary condition* for the happy performance of a speech act. One does not perform a happy speech act if one is insincere in their utterance, does not have the requisite thoughts, or has no intention of acting as if the utterance were true.<sup>15</sup> By including a speaker's feelings, thoughts, and intentions, Austin reveals the necessity of a speaker's total stance for performing a speech act.<sup>16</sup> This stance requires "the entertaining (as true and important) of certain alleged facts, the embracing of certain pervasive theories about what matters in life, the hoping of certain hopes, the adoption of certain roles in certain communities, and the undertaking of certain patterns of behavior with regard to those facts, theories, hopes, and roles."<sup>17</sup> One's performance of a happy speech act requires one's total engagement in that speech-act; taking a stance with one's life that is consistent with the utterance.

### *Speech Acts, Primary Conditions, and Preaching*

Austin's theory of speech acts holds several implications for the practice of preaching. First, Austin shows that our preaching is not simply an act of "saying something about something," but is a speaking that is also a doing.<sup>18</sup> To proclaim and perform the gospel within

<sup>11</sup> Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, 98-130.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 98: "To perform a locutionary act is in general, we may say, also and *eo ipso* to perform an *illocutionary act*, as I propose to call it."

<sup>13</sup> Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, 151 calls this overcoming the "true/false fetish" and the "value/fact fetish."

<sup>14</sup> White, "Introduction: Speech-Act Theory And Literary Criticism," 3.

<sup>15</sup> "Where, as often, the procedure is designed for use by persons having certain thoughts, feelings, or intentions, or for the inauguration of certain consequential conduct on the part of any participant, then a person participating in and so invoking the procedure must in fact have those thoughts, feelings, or intentions, and the participants must intend so to conduct themselves." Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, 39.

<sup>16</sup> James McClendon and James Smith, "Religious Language After J.L. Austin," *Religious Studies* 8.1 (1972): 61-62.

<sup>17</sup> McClendon and Smith, *Convictions*, 63.

<sup>18</sup> Markus Thane, "Speech-Act Theory to Enhance Karl Barth's Homiletical Postulation of a Sermon's 'Revelatory Compliance'," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 68.2 (2015): 198.

the context of the sermon is not only to say something referentially about the gospel, but also to engage in speech acts through which we (and God) accomplish certain actions.<sup>19</sup> In short, Austin helps us see that our sermons are not just things that say, but *do*. Furthermore, Austin points to the significance of our “stance” in that saying for the doing.<sup>20</sup> By demonstrating a speech act’s dependence on the speaker’s thoughts, feelings, and intentions – their stance – for its completion, Austin also shows us that we must shape our sermonic performance in ways that align with the speech act we perform. Thus, Austin’s establishment of the “primary condition” for performative speech acts is simultaneously a demand that the preacher’s character as a preacher and their stance in the performance of the sermon is consistent with the speech of the sermon.<sup>21</sup> As preachers of the gospel, we must perform our speech acts in ways that are congruous with the gospel we seek to perform; otherwise our speech will be unintelligible and untrue. Our stance in preaching is a vital part of our preaching; the “how” must match the “what.” Yet having identified the importance between one’s speech and one’s taking a stance that is consistent with that speech, the question remains as to the conditions for a faithful gospel speech-act. The task before us is to discern what demands the gospel places on preaching that seeks to be gospel preaching. What “stance” does the gospel require of the preacher?

Perhaps a place to begin in our discernment of the “how” of gospel proclamation is with a consideration of what the gospel *is*. In some ways, beginning here seems an impossible task, since there are any number of ways preachers and homileticians can and do define the “gospel” for the purpose of their preaching.<sup>22</sup> Yet we gain traction if we think of the term “gospel” itself. Gospel, at its most simple, means the “good news.” Homileticians may differ on what this good news consists of – its specific content, its intended audience, and its implication – but across their definitions, homileticians and preachers are united in their affirmation that the gospel is fundamentally *good news*. And if we consider what it means to think of the gospel as most basically good news that someone speaks, announces, or witnesses to, then we quickly see that such a vision of the gospel carries with it an internal logic that implies a particular epistemology; a particular way of understanding and perceiving the world.

### “Good News” and the Logic of a Gospel Epistemology

For much of the Church’s history, Christians have held a commitment to non-violence and sought to articulate the implications of that commitment as a central component of Christian discipleship.<sup>23</sup> Rather than serving as an ethical addition to an already established system of beliefs, this commitment involves the total way in which one lives and understands one’s place

---

<sup>19</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>20</sup> Richard Briggs, *Words in Action: Speech Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 36.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Ward, *Speaking from the Heart: Preaching with Passion* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 65-72. Ward speaks of this unity as the *ethos* of the preacher; the congruity between their character and speech.

<sup>22</sup> André Resner, “Do You See This Woman? A Little Exercise in Homiletical Theology,” in *Theologies of the Gospel I Context: The Crux of Homiletical Theology*, ed. David Schnasa Jacobsen (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2017), 15-41.

<sup>23</sup> George Kalantzis, *Caesar and the Lamb: Early Christian Attitudes on War and Military Service* (Eugene: Cascade, 2012). See also the volume by David Cramer and Myles Werntz, *A Field Guide to Christian Nonviolence: Key Thinkers, Activists, and Movements for the Gospel of Peace* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022). Cramer and Werntz are helpful in that they point out “Christian Pacifism” is hardly a monolithic entity but has existed in many different forms.

in the world, and is not merely a rejection of violence.<sup>24</sup> Pacifism is “the basic language of our human vocation, our way of understanding creation and our place in it.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, Christian pacifism contains an epistemic quality; it shapes how a person knows so that they “see the world in a certain way, understands in a certain way.”<sup>26</sup> For those operating with a commitment to theological non-violence, this quality of pacifism results in a unique “gospel epistemology.”

### *Against Imperialism and Foundationalism*

Christian pacifists commonly develop this “gospel epistemology” in contrast to coercive ways of knowing that are present in imperialist and modernist/foundationalist epistemologies.<sup>27</sup> Imperialist epistemologies are epistemologies of the establishment order – whether it be political, gender, sexual orientation, economic, or otherwise – in which what counts as truth and right is the property of those in positions of power.<sup>28</sup> This imperial epistemology is inherently coercive because it leaves no room for disagreement since disagreement is nothing less than an attack on those who set the terms for what counts as true. This epistemology is coercive because it attempts to secure agreement through force. One either agrees with the “truth” as designated by those in power or one must face the (often violent) consequences of dissent. Absent from imperial epistemologies is the ability to say “no.” This form of epistemology asserts power rather than entertain disagreement.

Closely related to imperialist epistemologies are modernist epistemologies that in their quest for a solid ground upon which to build different and more complex forms of knowledge are thoroughly “foundationalist.” This foundationalism attempts to work its way “down” to a solid, universal ground that transcends cultures and particularity. This may at first strike us as a good thing, seeing as it recognizes a need for a “locus of validation beyond those in positions of power such that truth does not become the property of the mighty making it vulnerable to a nihilistic critique.”<sup>29</sup> It seems good that claims to knowledge and truth rest on something beyond a powerful person’s might to make it so. We reach “beyond” because we recognize the need for validation that relies on more than our own sense of the self-evident, that we want to hold views of the world that are not liable to the accusation of fideism or relativism.<sup>30</sup> Yet this quest for foundations is also a political and social move that seeks to avoid dependency on the assent of another. Ultimately, the quest for foundations is the quest for a “trump card” in our conversations

---

<sup>24</sup> “Christian pacifism is thus not to be understood merely as a conclusion to some ethical theory that legitimizes and prohibits various activities and justifies particular political structures. It is also – at the same time, in the same place – a particular style of thinking or mode of discourse. In addition to the way of life it calls for, Christian pacifism involves a corresponding epistemology, a different way of thinking about knowledge.” Chris Huebner, *A Precarious Peace: Yoderian Explorations on Theology, Knowledge, and Identity* (Scottsdale: Paulist, 2006), 97.

<sup>25</sup> Ted Grimsrud and Christian Early, “Christian Pacifism in Brief,” in *A Pacifist Way of Knowing: John Howard Yoder’s Nonviolent Epistemology*, ed. Ted Grimsrud and Christian Early (Eugene: Cascade, 2010), 17.

<sup>26</sup> Ted Grimsrud, “Pacifism and Knowing: ‘Truth’ in the Theological Ethics of John Howard Yoder,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 77.3 (2003): 404.

<sup>27</sup> Stated simply, “coercion” refers to strategies of knowledge or dialogue that seek, through any number of avenues, to force agreement or impose assent on another.

<sup>28</sup> For a detailed discussion of this epistemology and the ways it uses force to dictate and control understandings of right and truth, see Michel Foucault, “Two Lectures,” in *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*, ed. Michael Kelly (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 31-46.

<sup>29</sup> Christian Early and Ted Grimsrud, “John Howard Yoder on Diversity as Gift: Epistemology and Eschatology,” in *A Pacifist Way of Knowing: John Howard Yoder’s Nonviolent Epistemology*, ed. Ted Grimsrud and Christian Early (Eugene: Cascade, 2010), 138.

<sup>30</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 33.

with another to overcome our vulnerabilities.<sup>31</sup> Thus, foundationalism “quickly becomes another form of imperialism in which agreement is secured through socio-political coercion and persistent disagreement is marginalized (and therefore eliminated) as ‘unreasonable,’ ‘idealistic,’ or ‘sectarian’.”<sup>32</sup> Simply put, the search for a final and ultimate foundation is a search for the power to *require* or *force* the other to agree; whether through the strength of a particular argument or through the social pressure of a community. There is no space within this epistemology to say “no” once one reaches the “foundation” without the threat of violence.

Most important for our purposes in this exploration of imperialist and foundational epistemologies is the observation of how they resort to coercion to secure what counts as truth within conversations. Whether it is the threat of force committed by those in power, threat of dismissal from the conversation on grounds of unreasonableness, or the pressure a community applies to quash dissent, both of these epistemic frameworks attempt to overcome vulnerability through coercive tactics that force agreement under threat. Because of this, both epistemologies seek to overcome another’s ability to say “no,” forcing them to agree with our claims.<sup>33</sup>

### *Toward A Gospel Epistemology*

In contrast to both imperialist and foundationalist epistemologies, theological non-violence develops a conception of the gospel’s own epistemology; a way of knowing implicit in the gospel itself. The moral power of the gospel arises from the reality that one does not have to believe. Thus, there is a vulnerability inherent to the gospel that serves as one of its defining features and any epistemology that would bear the name “gospel.” To establish such a claim, Christian non-violence relies on the internal logic of the gospel itself. It is *news* because those who do not already know it will not know it unless a message-bearer tells them. But it is news that is *good* because hearing this news comes to the person as something that frees and liberates, redeems and saves. Yet this means that what makes the gospel *good news* is that it does not come with a demand for acceptance, but only an invitation.<sup>34</sup> In fact, if such a demand did follow, that news would cease to be *good* because it would then assert itself through oppression, compulsion, or brainwashing. The gospel, according to its own internal logic, carries with it the possibility for rejection; and as such is inherently vulnerable.

Yet for those who maintain a commitment to Christian non-violence, this is where the persuasive power of the gospel lies. For one to use the gospel as any kind of move that “seeks to assure assent” would be to undercut the gospel because “such assurance only comes through coercion.”<sup>35</sup> The message-bearer’s rejection of coercive strategies in their announcement and speech is precisely that which allows the persuasive power of the gospel to shine through. Indeed, the very truth of our message depends on such a rejection. The vulnerability of the gospel means that its proclamation repudiates strategies that seek to determine the results of our

---

<sup>31</sup> On this point, see Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 23-48 and Hannah Arednt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

<sup>32</sup> Early and Grimsrud, “John Howard Yoder on Diversity as Gift: Epistemology and Eschatology,” 138.

<sup>33</sup> I once attended a church service in which the preacher was beginning an apologetic sermon series. And as he introduced the sermon series, he noted that “by the time this series is done, you’ll see that it’s actually stupid to NOT be a Christian.” One sees here the imperialist and foundationalist epistemologies at work, seeking to secure a base from which the hearer could do nothing but agree. There is simply no room for disagreement without being “stupid” or “irrational” and therefore worthy of punishment.

<sup>34</sup> Richard R. Osmer, *The Invitation: A Theology of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021), 12-13.

<sup>35</sup> In many ways, this is an affirmation and commitment to Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 2:1-5. Early and Grimsrud, “John Howard Yoder on Diversity as Gift: Epistemology and Eschatology,” 139.

conversation *in advance of having the conversation*. Such attempts to secure the outcome prior to our engagement with the other are often the sources of our acts of epistemic violence to the extent that such moves reflect our desire for invulnerability against the dissent of those with whom we engage. Yet gospel speech, *as gospel speech*, can never know in advance what shape the conversation with the other will take or the response of those to whom we bear witness. Rejection by the other as unpersuasive is always one possible outcome. True gospel speech, therefore, refuses those strategies that strive to side step that vulnerability and secure assent prematurely.

### *Gospel Epistemology and Preaching*

A non-violent emphasis on vulnerability as a fundamental component of a gospel-shaped epistemology results in a collapse of the distinction between *what* one says and *how* one says it.<sup>36</sup> The medium or form of the good news is an essential part of what makes it good news.<sup>37</sup> If vulnerability is a core aspect of what makes the gospel “good news,” then one must seek out non-coercive means of sharing such news that reflect this vulnerability. Where Austin’s speech-act theory shows the necessary connection between one’s stance and one’s speech, a nonviolent gospel epistemology shows the “stance” we must assume in gospel proclamation. By emphasizing the gospel as fundamentally vulnerable speech that *necessarily* includes within it the possibility of rejection, theological nonviolence helps us see that our stance must seek, as best as we are able, to reflect and maintain this vulnerability as a feature of our performance.<sup>38</sup>

This condition of vulnerability poses a direct challenge to much contemporary homiletical theory to the extent that much homiletical theory developed within a social imaginary of imperialist and foundationalist epistemologies and shares their assumptions.<sup>39</sup> Whether it be homiletic approaches that seek to “absorb” the world or that may compel one to celebration,<sup>40</sup> many of our current homiletical frames can easily fall into coercive performative strategies that actually seek to overcome the gospel’s intrinsic vulnerability. Thus, a commitment to gospel speech and performance requires that we leave open the possibility of the hearer’s rejection. This requires we reject preaching that seeks to obtain assent from the hearer through coercive means. It requires respect for the agency of the hearers *as hearers* at an intellectual, emotional, and communal level. The question now becomes, how might we embody this vulnerability in sermonic performance?

---

<sup>36</sup> While not an explicitly theological resource, Marshall Rosenberg has also explored the way in which a commitment to non-violence should inform even our use of language. See, Marshall Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* (Encinitas, CA: Puddledancer Press, 2015).

<sup>37</sup> Charles Bartow, *God’s Human Speech: A Practical Theology of Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 3.

<sup>38</sup> “It is not to be assumed that the gospel provides religious and moral constraints on what we say but leaves how we say it to be governed solely by practical considerations of effectiveness... There is such a thing as Christian style, a method of communicating congenial to the nature of the Christian faith.” Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel*, 12.

<sup>39</sup> Jacob Myers, *Preaching Must Die: Troubling Homiletical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 4. For an important analysis of this point as it relates to African American preaching and the experience of African American women preachers, see Lisa Thompson, *Ingenuity: Preaching as an Outsider* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), 16-19. On the notion of “social imaginaries,” see Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>40</sup> On approaches to preaching that view “absorbing” as their aim, see Michael Brothers, *Distance in Preaching: Room to Speak, Space to Listen* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 88-132. On the potentially coercive aspect of celebration, see Cleophus LaRue, *Rethinking Celebration: From Rhetoric to Praise in African American Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 1-6.

## Distance in Preaching

Within the fields of speech, interpretation, and performance studies, the concept of distance denotes a complex dynamic between the performer, “text,” and audience.<sup>41</sup> Speaking of the concept generally, Wallace Bacon defines “esthetic distance” as pointing “to the relationship between work and audience in terms of the work’s degree of ‘objectivity’ and hence the audience’s degree of ‘detachment’.”<sup>42</sup> For Bacon, the concept of distance speaks to the listener or reader’s involvement in the work. Yet he also notes that while distance may at first appear to have negative connotations such as withdrawal or detachment, the opposite is actually the case. For Bacon and others, “distance does not refer to the strength of impact of a literary work on the audience; it refers to the nature and quality of it. Esthetic distance affects the audience’s perspective.”<sup>43</sup> While distance speaks to many “relationships” within the performative act (reader-text, text-audience, character-character, etc.), I focus my discussion on the relationship between performer and audience (preacher and congregation), and specifically the possibilities it opens for listener participation. Thus, by “distance” I speak of the creation of space between performance and listener that allows the listener room to hear, discern, and respond.<sup>44</sup> As an aspect of performance, distance helps listeners maintain integrity and makes possible their free response.

### *Distance, Space, and Integrity*

A core function of performative distance is the creation of space and in many ways this function is a practical one.<sup>45</sup> For instance, physical distance in the form of a raised stage or pulpit makes possible the audience’s unobstructed view of the performer. While the creation of literal, physical space between performer and audience may seem a simple thing, it significantly impacts the audience’s reception of a work, facilitating a particular kind of relationship between the performer or preacher and the audience.<sup>46</sup> Consider, for example, the effect it would have on an audience if the speaker, rather than standing behind a lectern or at a distance on a raised platform, stood directly next to a person in the audience, spoke directly to that person, or at various points touched or “singled out” others in the audience. The resulting awkwardness and discomfort of the audience would be the outcome of the speaker’s violation of space. The audience came with expectations about what they would see and hear, implying also an expectation of appropriate distance. When the speaker violates that expectation, it has a direct impact on the audience’s ability to receive and respond to the performance. Thus, physical distance also creates “psychological or spiritual space.”<sup>47</sup> This spiritual or psychological space affords the listener the critical distance to evaluate whether and how to participate and respond. Distance and the space it creates is a means of protecting the integrity of everyone involved in the “aesthetic transaction.”<sup>48</sup> In terms of the speaker and work, aesthetic distance maintains an

---

<sup>41</sup> For a survey and history of this concept, see Brothers, *Distance in Preaching*, 11-46.

<sup>42</sup> Wallace Bacon, *The Art of Interpretation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1972), 474.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 474.

<sup>44</sup> For my use of “distance,” “space,” and “room,” I am indebted to Brothers, *Distance in Preaching*.

<sup>45</sup> Jana Childers, *Performing the Word: Preaching as Theatre* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 45.

<sup>46</sup> Bacon, *The Art of Interpretation*, 62-68.

<sup>47</sup> “The line of demarcation that separates the preacher and the congregation makes it possible for the person in the pew to have her own experience. Literal space makes figurative space possible.” Childers, *Performing the Word*, 46.

<sup>48</sup> Ronald Pelias, *Performance Studies: The Interpretation of Aesthetic Texts* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 107.



“otherness” that prevents both speaker and text from being dominated and absorbed by the audience. The speaker, while possibly coming from the audience, in their role as speaker is “other” than the audience and addresses them. Likewise, the “text” of the performance is other than the audience and not reducible to the audience’s reception or impression.<sup>49</sup> Distance also maintains the integrity of the audience. By respecting the audience’s otherness, the performer does not assimilate them into the performance. Rather, aesthetic distance maintains freedom in the performance for each participant to freely react.

### *Distance and Response*

The creation of space and protection of integrity that distance makes possible also provides the audience with the freedom to respond as they see fit. In short, it is this aesthetic distance in performance that makes audience response possible. Where a lack of distance or a violation of appropriate distance can lead to a domination of the listener that attempts to force a particular response upon them, an appropriate distance actually *increases* the participation of listeners and allows them to respond in their own, unique way.<sup>50</sup> Without distance, it becomes impossible for the audience to respond to the performance to the extent that the loss of distance means the listener’s loss of agency and results in their simply becoming part of the performance.<sup>51</sup> Respecting their integrity and agency, distance makes possible the freedom of genuine reaction in which listeners evaluate and respond for themselves. Furthermore, a performance, *as performance*, depends on such a response for actualization in the present. “Texts” may exist independently of their readers and hearers, but they are equally dependent on the reader and hearer to bring them into the present day.<sup>52</sup> The listener’s ability to respond in freedom to the performance becomes a vital aspect of the performance’s existence. Thus, questions concerning the integrity and freedom of the listener are important not only for their impact on how we think about the place and agency of the audience, but also for the very nature of performance.

### *Distance and Gospel Epistemology*

By connecting performative distance with our previous discussions of a gospel epistemology, we see that distance provides us with a resource for respecting the listener’s freedom and agency and embodying the vulnerability of the gospel within sermon performance. As a means of preserving and protecting the integrity of the listener and providing them the freedom to respond, distance leaves the sermon open to the hearer’s rejection. Sermons that incorporate distance will not attempt to overcome the will of the listener through strategies of “absorption,” but reflect the vulnerability of “good news” by leaving open the possibility of critique and rejection by the hearer. Sermons that employ distancing devices and techniques give the hearer “room or space, to consider a message without being lured, pressured, manipulated, or coerced by means of direct confrontation. The result of maintaining distance is free participation

---

<sup>49</sup> Bacon, *The Art of Interpretation*, 172-173.

<sup>50</sup> Pelias, *Performance Studies*, 107-109.

<sup>51</sup> “Distance encourages and protects the responses of the hearer (emotions, criticism, passions, thoughts, judgments, rejections, and acceptances) as integral to the performance. As the reader is not passively absorbed into the text, neither is the hearer passively absorbed into the text (or a sermon). A transactional approach to performance transcends the text/reader-performer/hearer dichotomy whereby distance fosters not absorption but engagement.” Brothers, *Distance in Preaching*, 44.

<sup>52</sup> Bacon, *The Art of Interpretation*, 173-174.

in the Christian message.”<sup>53</sup> In contrast to the foundationalist epistemologies Yoder critiques, distance rejects the need for such closure, giving the other space to respond. Through its use of performative distance, the sermon proclaims the gospel in ways that maintain its integrity as good news. It is a technique or approach to the performance of the sermon that does not force agreement or assent but accepts vulnerability as fundamental to gospel speech and ensures the listener the freedom to respond.<sup>54</sup> As such, performative distance has a vital role in sermons that claim to be gospel speech.

### **Gospel Vulnerability, Distance, and Homiletical Patience**

To this point I have explored the connection between gospel vulnerability and the place of distance in sermonic performance as a matter of “proper fit,” arguing that performative distance “fits” gospel proclamation’s requirement of vulnerability. Yet it may also be the case that this connection between the gospel’s vulnerability and performative distance speaks to a deeper reality with larger implications for the practice of preaching. Mainly, this connection and its manifestation in sermonic performance seem to reveal the place of the virtue of patience in our homiletical practice and may signal the possible significance of thinking of patience as a particularly important homiletical virtue for the practice of preaching in general. In the sermon’s performance, distance’s embodiment of the vulnerability of the gospel is fundamentally one concrete manifestation of homiletical patience.

#### *Vulnerability and Patience*

The vulnerability intrinsic to the gospel is not an end in itself – vulnerability for vulnerability’s sake – but reflects a larger theological reality both about the God who is the source and aim of this gospel and what it means to inhabit the divine reality as creatures in the world. The vulnerability that is central to an understanding of the gospel as good news is a manifestation of a larger theological reality: the reality of God as one who is patient.<sup>55</sup> To speak of divine patience is to speak of God’s action toward humanity as God’s giving us the space and time to live out our own freedom and existence.<sup>56</sup> In God’s patience, God chooses not to act toward us in a manner that imposes or removes from us the independent existence God has given God’s creation. Instead, God’s patience accords God’s creatures their own integrity and capacity for free action.<sup>57</sup> God’s patience helps us to dispatch vulgar construals of divine governance that depict God as a control freak, ultimate micromanager, or master puppeteer under which creation does nothing other than follow God’s irresistible will.<sup>58</sup> Instead, God’s patience reveals that one of God’s primary purposes for the world is to grant humanity the time and space needed to live into the diverse futures that God graciously offers.<sup>59</sup> It is this aspect of God’s nature that is, at

---

<sup>53</sup> Brothers, *Distance in Preaching*, 74.

<sup>54</sup> Charles Bartow, *The Preaching Moment: A Guide to Sermon Delivery* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980), 64: “But the conversational preacher will lead the listening with sensitivity to the fact that what is said may not immediately ‘ring true’ among those who hear it, and as H.H. Farmer has put it so well, the preacher will leave the listeners free to respond on the basis of their own ‘insight and sense of the truth’.”

<sup>55</sup> For a fuller treatment of patience, see Matthew Pianta, *On Patience: Reclaiming a Foundational Virtue* (New York: Lexington Books, 2016).

<sup>56</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols, II/1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956-1975), 409-410.

<sup>57</sup> Paul Dafydd Jones, “On Patience: Thinking With and Beyond Karl Barth,” *Scottish Journal Of Theology* 68, no. 3 (2015): 278.

<sup>58</sup> Paul Dafydd Jones, “Patience: A theological experiment,” *Theology Today* 72, no. 1 (2015): 17.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

least in part, the reason behind the gospel's intrinsic vulnerability. In leaving open the possibility for the hearer to reject the message, the gospel respects the independent existence of the hearer, manifesting God's divine patience toward God's creation. This is not to say the gospel does not call for a decision (and hope for a positive response), but it does mean that just as God is patient with humanity, so the gospel proclaimed will not seek to dominate the hearer by forcing or coercing them into a pre-determined response.

### *Distance and Performative Patience*

This understanding of patience extends itself to the level of the creature. Human, or more particularly Christian, patience is that virtue which enables persons to rightly endure the sorrows of this life. It is simply the case that much in this life either happens to us, is beyond our ability to solve, or cannot be solved quickly enough to alleviate all suffering. In such instances, the virtue of patience rightly orders our sorrowing, enabling us to continue in our pursuit of justice and shalom. It is because patience empowers this "right responding" that we can take another step toward justice and reconciliation.<sup>60</sup>

Embodying and sustaining the vulnerability that is at the heart of gospel proclamation calls for the preacher's own exercise of patience. In any sermon, the preacher, to greater or lesser degree, experiences the temptation to force the hearer into a particular response. In those moments, the preacher's proper exercise of performative patience serves a double function. First, it ensures both that the vulnerability of the gospel is manifested in their proclamation, providing time and space for hearers to respond with their own initiative and independence. Second, it also sustains the preacher in the face of any subsequent rejection that may occur. Sustained and empowered to sorrowing without despair, patience empowers responses that enable us to both embrace the message of the gospel and endure the rejection of those whom we desire to persuade or convert.<sup>61</sup>

Within this theological conception of the sermon, performative distance becomes a means through which the preacher exercises patience in the performance of the Word. Performative patience guards the preacher both against the temptation to force the hearer into any particular response and to endure rejection that may follow. But there is also a positive dimension to the preacher's exercise of performative patience. In refusing to "box in" or coerce the hearer into any particular response, the preacher leaves open the possibility of responses from the listener that were beyond the preacher's own imagination. Furthermore, it could also be the case that patience in performance deepens that preacher's engagement in the sermon, making their performance more faithful to the gospel they proclaim. Thus, patience exercises a double function, both

---

<sup>60</sup> This is an important point because it reveals that patience, as a virtue, is concerned with our passionate responses rather than actions themselves. Or stated differently, because patience relates to our passions, emotions, and desires, it would be incorrect to think of specific actions as "acts of patience." Rather, what patience does is to help our passionate responses be rightly ordered so that those virtues who do take acts as their aims can function well. On this important distinction, see John Bowlin, *Tolerance Among the Virtues* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 106-159.

<sup>61</sup> This double function of patience is perhaps more necessary now than ever, in a season of turmoil over the systemic racism that saturates every aspect of our society and cultures and the threats faced by those in the LGBTQ community. In such a time, we intensely desire the confrontation and conversion of those who hold up these systems of oppression and violence. And because of this desire we might be tempted to "shortcut" conversation, seeking other ways to force those to whom we speak to agree. Or, perhaps despair is ever close at hand, as those to whom we proclaim the message of a liberating Gospel dismiss that message as "social justice" or "left wing." In either case, the virtue of patience is that virtue which can help sustain those called to preach in tumultuous times.

preventing forms of rhetorical, physical, and epistemic violence and deepening gospel engagement.

*Patience as a Homiletical Virtue*

The connection between gospel vulnerability, faithful sermon performance, and performative patience serves as one specific manifestation within the practice of preaching that may point to the homiletical significance of patience more generally. As noted above, performative distance is one of the ways that patience is exercised in the sermon's performance, giving the hearer time and space to respond. This act of patience has an impact not only in securing the hearer's independence but also in potentially deepening the preacher's homiletical engagement, leading to more faithful practice. In short, preaching that seeks to be gospel proclamation calls for performative patience on the part of the preacher. The degree to which the preacher exercises this patience opens possibilities for response from the hearer and engagement in the preacher that enriches every aspect of the performance. If this is the case in one aspect of homiletical practice, it may be fruitful to consider the implications of patience on the practice of preaching more broadly, and patience's potential standing as a homiletical virtue, the possession of which deepens and strengthens one's preaching practice.