

Vulnerable Good News: Distance & Patience in Gospel Performance

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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 potential implications of this connection. Drawing on the work of J.L. Austin and John Howard Yoder, this paper argues sermonic performance that mirrors the gospel’s nonviolent epistemology is a necessary condition for gospel speech. This paper suggests performative distance is one strategy for meeting this condition, and that such a strategy reveals the potential significance of patience as a homiletically significant virtue.

The performative implications of the gospel have been the focus of intense homiletical reflection.¹ These reflections, each in their own way, have explored avenues through which the “*what*” of the gospel shapes the “*how*” of its proclamation.² 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. In this paper I consider what possible impact the vulnerability intrinsic to the gospel, as *good news*, should have on one’s preaching performance and potential implications of this connection. In part one I consider J.L. Austin’s conception of a 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 the Gospel Epistemology of John Howard Yoder and its emphasis on vulnerability as a primary feature of the gospel, just to the extent that the gospel’s function as good news requires the possibility of its rejection by the hearer. 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 and the distance it requires in sermonic performance concretizes and reveals the potential significance of patience as a homiletical virtue.

J.L. Austin and Speech-Acts

In *How to Do Things With Words*, J.L. Austin attempts to replace the traditional distinction between utterances with a general theory of speech-acts.³ Austin’s project begins with a simple

¹ 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).

² 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).

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

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. There are utterances that do not describe, report, or constate anything at all, but participate in the action they were previously thought only to describe.⁴ This leads Austin to critique the assumption that language’s only function is to make declaratory statements regarding the facticity of a thing, and point instead to the ways language also possesses a non-literal and non-declarative function. Thus, Austin argued we should speak of two categories of utterances: those that describe something (*constatives*) and those that participate in the doing of an action (*performatives*). Where constatives 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 Constative-Performative Distinction

Yet as Austin attempted to determine the difference between a performative and a constative utterance, he realized the distinction was not as clear as some “hereby” test. For example, it is not entirely clear that performative utterances cannot also deal in qualities of “true” and “false.” It is frequently the case that performative utterances do, in fact, deal with such questions. In most cases performatives entail, imply, or presuppose something that is true or false.⁵ Thus, we are unable to separate performatives and constatives because they depend on one another for their force.⁶ In every test Austin proposed for distinguishing the performative from the constative, both classes would end as an “unhappy” utterance if the facts did not support them.⁷ 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.”⁸

Austin’s inability to properly distinguish the two categories of utterances led him to conclude there may, in fact, be no distinction between them at all. Rather than identifying a possible distinction between the two utterances, Austin demonstrated “what was supposed to be a special case of utterances (performatives) swallows the general case (constatives), which now turn out to be only certain kinds of speech acts among others.”⁹ Even when the type of speech was a descriptive statement (a supposed

⁴ 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.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 45-52.

⁶ Searle, “Austin on Locutionary and Illocutionary Acts,” 406.

⁷ “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.

⁸ Jame McClendon and James Smith, *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994), 49.

⁹ Searle, “Austin on Locutionary and Illocutionary Acts,” 406.

constative) whose primary job is to refer, it only does so effectively when the force of the utterance is made clear.¹⁰ Simply put, *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).¹¹ 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.¹² As with the constative-performative distinction, Austin also 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 are no longer dependent upon their correspondence to non-verbal objects (the "true/false" dichotomy), how are we to determine their validity?¹³ What becomes the standard for distinguishing between utterances that accomplish their action (happy) and those that do not (unhappy)? To assess the legitimacy (happiness or unhappiness) of a speech-act, Austin argues that speech acts have necessary preconditions that make possible their performative success.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ By including a speaker's feelings, thoughts, and intentions, Austin reveals the necessity of a speaker's total stance for performing a speech act.¹⁶ 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."¹⁷ 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 helps us to see that our preaching is not simply an act of "saying something about something,"

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, 98-130.

¹² 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."

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

¹⁴ White, "Introduction: Speech-Act Theory And Literary Criticism," 3.

¹⁵ "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.

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

¹⁷ McClendon and Smith, *Convictions*, 63.

but is a speaking that is also a doing.¹⁸ To proclaim and perform the gospel within 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ By demonstrating how a speech act is dependent on the speaker’s thoughts, feelings, and intentions – their stance – for its completion, Austin also shows us that we must shape our speech and performance in ways that make them coherent with the speech act we attempt to 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.²¹ 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.” This extends even to the performance of our speech-acts; just to the extent our performance of the speech act is a piece of the total stance we assume in making the utterance. 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. We must still discern what particular demands the gospel places on preaching that seeks to be gospel preaching. Or stated more simply, what “stance” does the gospel require of the preacher?

Epistemology and the Gospel as “Good News”

John Howard Yoder is perhaps the most well-known pacifist theologian. Writing from an Anabaptist perspective, Yoder sought to articulate the implications of one’s commitment to theological non-violence.²² Rather than serving as an ethical addition to an already established system of beliefs, Yoder argued a commitment to theological non-violence is at the heart of Christian identity and as such transforms that system of belief in profound ways. It is total way in which one lives and understands one’s place in the world. Not merely a rejection of violence, pacifism is a conviction that shapes all other convictions.²³ Pacifism is “the basic language of our human vocation, our way of understanding creation and our place in it.”²⁴ Thus, a primary aspect of Yoder’s Christian pacifism is its epistemic quality; it

¹⁸ 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.

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

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

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

²² John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1971), 9 defines pacifism as “the renunciation of the sword to which Jesus called His disciples.” In John Howard Yoder, *Nevertheless: The Varieties and Shortcomings of Religious Pacifism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992) Yoder details 29 different forms of pacifism and argues pacifism is not a single position but a wide range of views. I extend Yoder’s definition slightly to define pacifism as a commitment to the conviction that no value that could justify the use of violence takes precedence over one’s commitment to peace.

²³ Chris Huebner, *A Precarious Peace: Yoderian Explorations on Theology, Knowledge, and Identity* (Scottsdale: Paulist, 2006), 97: “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.”

²⁴ Ted Grimsrud and Christian Early, “Christian Pacifism in Brief,” in *A Pacifist Way of Knowing: John Howard Yoder’s Nonviolent Epistemology* (eds. Ted Grimsrud and Christian Early; Eugene: Cascade, 2010), 17.

shapes how a person knows. A pacifist “sees the world in a certain way, understands in a certain way.”²⁵ For Yoder, this quality of pacifism results in a unique “gospel epistemology.”

Against Imperialism and Foundationalism

Yoder develops his “gospel epistemology” against coercive ways of knowing present in both imperialist and foundationalist epistemologies.²⁶ Yoder identifies imperialist epistemologies as epistemologies of the establishment in which what counts as truth and right is the property of those in positions of power.²⁷ Ultimately, Yoder observes this imperial epistemology is inherently coercive since it leaves no room for disagreement. Such 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 for dissent. Missing from imperial epistemologies is the ability to say “no.” This form of epistemology asserts power rather than entertaining disagreement. With imperialist epistemologies Yoder groups 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.”²⁸ 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 particular sense of the self-evident, which others have a right to challenge us to provide them.²⁹ Yet what Yoder observes is this quest for foundations is actually a political and social move that attempts to avoid dependency on the assent of another. Ultimately, the quest for foundations is the quest for a “trump card” in our conversations with another to overcome our own vulnerabilities.³⁰ 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.’”³¹ Simply put,

²⁵ Ted Grimsrud, “Pacifism and Knowing: ‘Truth’ in the Theological Ethics of John Howard Yoder,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 77.3 (2203): 404.

²⁶ 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.

²⁷ 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.

²⁸ 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* (eds. Ted Grimsrud and Christian Early; Eugene: Cascade, 2010), 138.

²⁹ John Howard Yoder, “Meaning After Babble: With Jeffrey Stout beyond Relativism,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24 (1996): 136.

³⁰ “Behind all of these maneuvers there is the fear of vulnerability, a cringing before the danger that we might be told by an audience in that wider world that they do not believe us. We want what we say not only to be understandable, credible, meaningful... We want people to *have* to believe us. We hanker for patterns of argument which will not be subject to reasonable doubt. We are impressed by the power to convince which we see exercised by demonstrations in mathematics and logic, in the natural sciences, and in documented history... and we want our claims about God or morality to be similarly coercive.” John Howard Yoder, “On Not Being Ashamed of the Gospel: Particularity, Pluralism, and Validation,” *Faith and Philosophy* 9.3 (1992): 289.

³¹ Early and Grimsrud, “John Howard Yoder on Diversity as Gift: Epistemology and Eschatology,” 138.

the search for a final and ultimate foundation is a search for the power to *require* or *force* the other to agree. There is no space within this epistemology to say “no” once one reaches the “foundation.”³²

The significance of Yoder’s descriptive exploration of imperialist and foundational epistemologies is its demonstration of how these epistemologies resort to coercive means to secure what counts as truth and knowledge within conversations. Yoder recognizes that “epistemologies, just as much as concrete political maneuvers, can be expressions of violence, especially insofar as they can underwrite attempts to secure power or to exercise forms of control over others.”³³ Whether it is the threat of force committed by those in power or threat of dismissal from the conversation on grounds of unreasonableness, both of these epistemic frameworks attempt to overcome vulnerability through coercive tactics that force agreement under threat. Because of this, both epistemologies are ultimately a quest to overcome the other’s ability to say “no,” forcing them to agree with our claims.³⁴

Toward A Gospel Epistemology

In contrast to both imperialist and foundationalist epistemologies, Yoder develops his own “gospel” epistemology. For Yoder, the “moral power of the Gospel” is that one does not have to believe. Yoder identifies vulnerability as a defining feature of the Gospel and any epistemology that would claim to be consistent with this Gospel. He arrives at this conclusion concerning the significance of vulnerability by reflecting on the internal logic of the Gospel itself. Highlighting that the most basic meaning of the word “gospel” is “good news,” Yoder explores necessary conditions for the Gospel’s function as good news. It is *news* because one who does not already know it will not know it unless a message-bearer tells them. But it is news that is *good* because “hearing it will be for them not alienation or compulsion, oppression or brainwashing, but liberation.”³⁵ What makes the Gospel *good news* is that it does not come with a demand for acceptance. In fact, if such a demand did follow, that news would cease to be the good news of the Gospel because it would then be oppression, compulsion, or brainwashing. The Gospel, according to its own internal logic, carries with it the possibility for rejection; it is inherently vulnerable.

For Yoder, 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.”³⁶ 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.³⁷ In identifying vulnerability as a fundamental characteristic of the Gospel, Yoder notes, “Because this news is only such when received as good, it can never be communicated coercively; nor can the message-bearer ever positively be assured that it will be received.”³⁸ For Yoder, the vulnerability of the Gospel means that its proclamation can never use strategies that seek to determine the results of our conversation *in advance of*

³² John Howard Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiastical and Ecumenical* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 109. Yoder identifies this as one of the primary issues with Christian “apologetics” that attempt to make it “unreasonable not to be a Christian” and so commit acts of epistemic violence.

³³ Huebner, *A Precarious Peace*, 103.

³⁴ Yoder, “Meaning After Babble,” 135: “Thus, the foundational appeal remains, after all, a mental power play to avoid my being dependent on your voluntary assent, to bypass my becoming vulnerable to your world in your otherness.”

³⁵ John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1984), 55.

³⁶ Early and Grimsrud, “John Howard Yoder on Diversity as Gift: Epistemology and Eschatology,” 139.

³⁷ Yoder, “Meaning After Babble,” 137: “The truth of our witness needs our renunciation of coercion to let its credibility show.”

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

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, just 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 the shape the conversation with the other will take. Thus, one possible outcome will always be that the other will reject our message as unpersuasive. Truly Gospel speech, therefore, will reject those strategies that strive to side step that vulnerability and secure assent prematurely. Articulating the requirements of this Gospel epistemology, Yoder writes, “It lays before us the challenge of convincing interlocutors who are not our dependents, of affirming a particular witness to be good news without being interested in showing that other people are bad.”³⁹ For Yoder, rejecting attempts to silence the dissent of the other through the establishment of a dominant method in advance of conversation creates an environment of methodological pluralism. If we cannot know in advance what form our conversation with the other will take, then it is similarly impossible to know what method we should use. Yet this methodological pluralism is not a reason for despair, but part of the good news we proclaim.

Gospel Epistemology and Preaching

Yoder’s 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. The medium or form of the good news “is an essential part of what makes it good news.”⁴⁰ Simply put, 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; means that reflect this vulnerability. Where Austin’s speech-act theory shows the necessary connection between one’s stance and one’s speech, Yoder’s 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, Yoder helps us see our stance must seek, as best as we are able, to reflect and maintain this vulnerability as a feature of our performance. If in our sermons we seek Gospel proclamation, then we must embody the vulnerability of the Gospel in that proclamation.⁴¹ This requires we reject preaching that seeks to obtain assent from the hearer through coercive means, leaving open the possibility of the hearer’s rejection. It requires respect for the agency of the hearers *as hearers*. The question now becomes, how might we embody this vulnerability in sermonic performance?

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.⁴² 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’.”⁴³ 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

³⁹ Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, 60.

⁴⁰ Early and Grimsrud, “John Howard Yoder on Diversity as Gift: Epistemology and Eschatology,” 139.

⁴¹ “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.

⁴² For a survey and history of this concept, see Michael Brothers, *Distance in Preaching: Room to Speak, Space to Listen* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 11-46.

⁴³ Wallace Bacon, *The Art of Interpretation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1972), 474.

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."⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵ As an aspect of performance, distance maintains integrity and makes response possible.

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.⁴⁶ 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 is incredibly significant for the audience's reception of a work, facilitating a particular kind of relationship between the performer or preacher and the audience.⁴⁷ 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."⁴⁸ 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."⁴⁹ In terms of the speaker and work, aesthetic distance maintains an "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.⁵⁰ 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 react freely.

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 the listener and allows them to respond in

⁴⁴ Ibid., 474.

⁴⁵ For my use of "distance," "space," and "room," I am indebted to Brothers, *Distance in Preaching*.

⁴⁶ Jana Childers, *Performing the Word: Preaching as Theatre* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 45.

⁴⁷ Bacon, *The Art of Interpretation*, 62-68.

⁴⁸ "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.

⁴⁹ Ronald Peltas, *Performance Studies: The Interpretation of Aesthetic Texts* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 107.

⁵⁰ Bacon, *The Art of Interpretation*, 172-173.

their own, unique way.⁵¹ Without distance, it becomes impossible for the audience to respond to the performance just to the extent the loss of distance means the listener's loss of agency that results in their simply becoming part of the performance.⁵² Respecting their integrity and agency, distance makes possible the freedom for a 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.⁵³ 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 in the Christian message."⁵⁴ 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 a way that maintains 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.⁵⁵ 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 seems 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

⁵¹ Pelias, *Performance Studies*, 107-109.

⁵² "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.

⁵³ Bacon, *The Art of Interpretation*, 173-174.

⁵⁴ Brothers, *Distance in Preaching*, 74.

⁵⁵ 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'."

the practice of preaching, generally. In the sermon's performance, distance's embodiment of the vulnerability of the Gospel is fundamentally one concrete manifestation of homiletical patience.

Vulnerability and Divine Patience

The vulnerability intrinsic to the Gospel as not an end in itself – vulnerability for vulnerability's sake – but reflects a larger theological reality about the God who is the source and aim of this Gospel. The vulnerability that Yoder argues (convincingly, I believe) 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.⁵⁶ To speak of divine patience is to speak of God's action towards humanity as God's giving us the space and time to live out our own freedom and existence.⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸ 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.⁵⁹ 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.⁶⁰ It is this aspect of God's nature that is, at 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 towards 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

Embodying and sustaining the vulnerability that is at the heart of Gospel proclamation, in turn, calls for the preacher's own exercise of patience. In any sermon the preacher, to greater or lesser degrees, experiences the temptation Resisting the urge to force the hearer into any particular response, the preacher's proper exercise of performative patience ensures the vulnerability of the Gospel is manifested in their proclamation, providing the time and space for the hearer to respond with their own initiative and independence. Within this theological conception of the sermon performative distance, then, becomes a means through which the preacher exercises patience in the performance of the Word. Performative patience guards the preacher against the temptation to force the hearer into any particular response, trusting instead in God's promise to speak.⁶¹ 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 responses from the listener that were beyond their imagination. It is possible, for example, that the preacher's employment of patience in the sermon – giving the hearer time and space while refusing to impose a predetermined response – could result in the listener's responding in a more favorable or faithful way than the preacher had initially hoped for. Furthermore, it could also be the case that the preacher's embodied patience in performance deepens that preacher's engagement in

⁵⁶ For a fuller treatment of patience, see Matthew Pianalto, *On Patience: Reclaiming a Foundational Virtue* (New York: Lexington Books, 2016).

⁵⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols, II/1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956-1975), 409-410.

⁵⁸ Paul Dafydd Jones, "On Patience: Thinking With and Beyond Karl Barth," *SJT* 68.3 (2015): 278.

⁵⁹ Paul Dafydd Jones, "Patience: A theological experiment," *TT* 72.1 (2015): 17.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Barth, "The Need and Promise of Christian Proclamation," 122-125.

the sermon, making their performance more faithful to the gospel they proclaim. Thus, performative patience exercises a double function, both 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 I 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. And this act of patience had 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, it seems that preaching that seeks to be gospel proclamation calls for performative patience on the part of the preacher. And 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.