

Oral Interpretation of the Bible

By

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Dedication

To my wife Glenda

For standing beside me for more than a quarter century;
For the faithfulness, loyalty, intrepid integrity, and love

It takes to walk beside someone like me for so long.

You are my best friend, my companion, and co-laborer;

You are my critic, teacher and lover,

With all my love,

And all my heart,

Thank you.

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Any mistakes, errors, accidental misreferences or other sins of publication are all my TA's fault. ☺

Oral Interpretation of The Bible

Introduction

Being able to experience with understanding and communicate with beauty, literature that captures the human condition is an essential skill for a well-educated citizen. Oral interpretation is more than reading out loud, it embodies the content and emotion of a text in a manner that communicates with an audience. Reading the Bible gives inspiration, builds community, teaches knowledge, creates traditions and provides meaning for life.

From kindergarten to college most of us have learned to read without careful reflection on the procedure. The progression of developing meaning from written words involves several processes that happen in our mind. When reading you assign provisional meanings to words that you then confirm or change according to the rest of the sentence or paragraph. Reading the

sentence “John kissed Sue” you make the judgment that John is male, Sue is female and the action of kissing took place with John instigating the action. Besides temporary meaning you also make judgments on the relationship of subjects, verbs and objects. If the context of the message is in a narrative in which Sue, John’s dog, saved him from drowning then a very different meaning will occur than if it is from the climax of a wedding ceremony. After initially assigning meaning you group the clauses and sentences together into paragraphs together into a linear whole that is constantly adjusted as more is read. These processes happen simultaneously as you read (Schertz and Yoder, 2001).

Something so simple can be complicated when reading a given text. From the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8 to the moment you are reading these words, people have a need for guidance in understanding passages of some texts. Discerning the meaning within the original text, and gaining an approximate understanding of connotations provides a foundation upon which personal and corporate experiences of reading are based.

In I Timothy 4:13 the Apostle Paul exhorts Timothy to devote himself to oral interpretation of Scripture together with preaching and teaching. As an essential part of worship and relationship building, oral interpretation leads people closer to the primary author, God. In Deuteronomy, Moses establishes oral reading as part of the Jewish Law. Ezra and Nehemiah rediscover the necessity of oral interpretation of the law when they reestablish worship.

Our study of reading out loud will be from a rhetorical perspective. That means the people involved are primary, then the meaning of the message, followed by impacts that happen as a result of the communication and finally the techniques of vocalization. Ethics and philosophy play an important role throughout this notebook. What is right and wrong, as well as the responsibilities of the reader and audience make up the ethical components. Philosophy of reading takes voice as the direction

and theology impacts reading as well as hermeneutical aspects of understanding.

This is an introduction to oral interpretation, not a Ph.D. level vocabulary cutting concepts thinner than my hair. If you are wanting to discuss the pre-oral hypostatic theanthropic union of experiential encounter impending vociferously then you will be disappointed. We are going to explore the nature of reading the Bible out loud and work to form it into a scientific art. The goal is not applause for your greatness but to speak forth God's message in a clear, understandable manner, making people want to listen.

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| Introduction..... | 5 |
| Chapter 1 Ends and Processes: Philosophy and Ethics..... | 9 |
| Chapter 2 Empathetic Communication: A Community-Shared Experience of the text | 21 |
| Chapter 3 The Reader: Ethos and Understanding..... | 37 |
| Chapter 4 Deciphering Meaning: Hermeneutical Principles..... | 51 |
| Chapter 5 Philosophical Approaches to Biblical Meaning..... | 71 |
| Chapter 6 Technique..... | 83 |
| Chapter 7 Reading the Bible..... | 99 |
| Chapter 8 Story..... | 107 |
| Chapter 9 Odd and Ends..... | 119 |
| Appendix A: Worksheet for Interpretation..... | 127 |
| Appendix B: Scoring Guide..... | 129 |
| Appendix C: Matthew 13:3-9..... | 131 |
| Appendix D: Psalm 23..... | 133 |
| Appendix E: Accentuating Sounds..... | 135 |
| Appendix F: Exercises in Emphasis..... | 138 |
| References..... | 139 |

Chapter 1

Ends and Processes: Philosophy and Ethics

*A word aptly spoken
Is like apples of gold in settings of silver*
Proverbs 25:11

In the weeks and months following the September 11th attacks the people of the United States turned to the arts of music and oral interpretation to galvanize our mourning into community and to transform our bereavement into patriotism. Perhaps most telling was the buildup to football's superbowl. Most years this would be intertwined elements that give personal

stories of the sports stars with pundits taking sides predicting who would win the big game. 2002 was different, Presidents, leading politicians, musicians, actors and actresses filled the airwaves with words read and sung because we all knew that life has more meaning than a football game. The celebratory spectacle of excess was subdued and at the same time broadened through the art of the spoken word.

Reading has a special place in human life. At funerals we are not comforted by the drama of a play. In worship we are not transported into the presence of God through cinema. Words from the Bible where the audience has heard the voice of the Spirit before, are of more significance. The spoken word has power to move the spirit, and thus it is valuable beyond price. Oral interpretation is an ancient art that enables congruent communication in a captivating manner to influence the heart and mind using an approach that makes us better people.

Spiritual Philosophy of Oral Interpretation

A philosophy provides a beginning, a direction, values and importance to investigating the substance of oral interpretation. Choosing King Solomon's poetic proverb: *a word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver* (Proverbs 25:11) as the touchstone for oral interpretation of literature gives an appropriate starting point. The people and process of selecting the right words and speaking them aptly is what this book will try to teach. Well-spoken words communicated at the appropriate time are aesthetically pleasing and valuable. This is an art that can be beautiful, capturing the human experience and transporting the soul into new vicarious encounters with the ideas, emotions and characters of the cutting.

Reading is often thought of as the accurate articulation of the words while understanding the denotative definitions of the vocabulary. Reading out loud involves the precise pronunciation of the words and sentences so that the audience may clearly comprehend the words. This perspective is inadequate for

comprehending the art and science of oral interpretation. Often in Grade School, Middle School and High School classrooms the teacher has a student read a passage out loud. After the first few monotone sentences no one knows the real message. After a few more, no one cares. Minds wander and boredom takes over. Reading as oral interpretation is quite different. It is the art of discovering and presenting connotative definitions. It is the art of putting these into a comprehensive whole. It is the art of understanding with the heart, placing emotion into content. It is the art of intentionally leading the audience to experience with you the literature. Oral interpretation takes skill, time and effort.

Oral interpretation of faith literature does not mean that only sacred Scripture or prose written with direct references to spiritual things are the only sources of reading. Any writing in the spirit and character of God can be of faith. That includes many, but not nearly all secular works. Because of the complexity and importance we will focus on the Bible. From that other forms of literature are easier to read.

Oral interpretation is not primarily a performance but an experience. It is a vicariously shared event in which the artist and the audience enter into a new world together – transported through the voice into an encounter.

Definition of Oral Interpretation

Simply put, spiritual oral interpretation is the art and science of communicating faith literature to an audience in its intellectual (content), faith (spiritual), pathetic (emotional) and aesthetic (artistically attractive) entirety through the medium of the human voice in a manner that impacts people. This definition describes oral interpretation as both a vocalic art and science. Art means oral interpretation varies in beauty, competence and technique. Science means oral interpretation has specific knowledge that can be discovered and described as well as having principles that can be used to make it more effective. This definition of oral interpretation also places limitations on it of

“communicating faith literature,” “in its entirety,” “through the human voice” resulting in impacted people. This definition implies oral interpretation is restricted to literature that is being expressed out loud to an audience. Both the rhetor and the audience have to work in order to encounter what the characters live through in the literature.

Content, emotion and beauty form an organic whole rather than being separate entities. When the artist interprets faith literature in a manner that expresses the intended content, and characterization is integrated with appropriate emotion in an artistic manner, the communication is considered congruent.

Oral interpretation brings depth to literature. When a skilled interpreter discovers the content that the original author intended in writing the piece then transforming those messages into sounds is an accurate communication. Add to it appropriate emotion (pathos) and a new dimension is part of the reading. When these are expressed in a manner that is skillfully done the aesthetic dimension forms part of the whole. Thus the fullness of a performance comes with the communication of the Bible. We only have a few ways to write “no” or “yes” but through manipulating inflection, volume, rate and gestures an infinite variety of shades of meaning and intensity of meaning is available.

Perhaps a useful distinction can be made between interpretation, impersonation and acting. When an artist does an impersonation a distinct effort is made to imitate a person in the entire minutia of personality. Great liberty is taken in using all of the stage and bodily gestures to portray an individual. Exactness of voice is expected from the artist with accents and eccentricities demonstrated personally. Acting is fully portraying a character to an audience with an “aesthetic distance” between the actor and the audience. Oral interpretation generates a shared embodying of literature and when faith enters the experience a harmony of community results. Although acting, impersonation and oral interpretation use many of the same techniques of voice

and body the effect and impacts are different because of the process and intent of the artist.

Ethics of Oral Interpretation

Oral communication of the Bible is a shared experience, with the work of art itself and with the audience. When the audience notices the voice, gestures and ability of the performer, then the experience has fallen short. Oral interpretation is to have the audience encounter the text through the artist.

Oral interpretation has ethical implications. When an artist appropriates or becomes another's voice he or she stands in the author's place. This means that we represent or stand for them in communication together with the audience. We have ethical responsibilities to God, the author, the audience, and to ourselves.

A first ethical element is accurate representation. Telling the truth through the literature is an important aspect of ethical communication. Yes, sometimes someone in the text lies to people about people, sometimes the characters in the texts do unethical things, sometimes the text says something we would rather it not say. When we communicate the original meaning faithfully in a manner that lets the audience understand the emotional and cognitive whole then the work of art is ethical in content.

A second ethical element is respect of the source. Often the attitude of the artist gets in the way of the experience. When the reader doesn't want to be reading this text, does not believe the text to be true, does not want to be part of the faith community or perhaps reading at all, the communicated message becomes incongruent. This ethical element becomes even greater when reading the Bible. God is considered the ultimate author, the original human authors usually speak the text orally to a faith community, then the inspired human author writes to a second original audience, then other faith audiences interpret the text in community and finally this becomes the reader's responsibility to

communicate meaning to a current audience. Without respect of the process of authorship and the reception of texts in faith communities, oral interpretation becomes a flat exercise in attempted understanding.

A third ethical element is to respect the audience. The people of an audience do not simply exist as props to the vocalics of the speaker; communicating with them is the purpose of the reading. Oral interpretation will move the reader in an experience of communion with the author, but it is primarily the joining of an audience with the text through the ability of the artist. "Audience" involves the individuals who are gathered as well as the community of people addressed in the fullness of their unity and diversity of time, space, culture, beliefs or ethnicity. The concept of audience goes beyond those gathered, to those with whom they will in turn communicate and ultimately to humanity as a whole or the universal audience. Respecting people as they are individually, collectively and universally will enable the oral interpreter to interact in a manner that captures the human condition of the literature and vicariously experience it with others. The best oral interpretation moves beyond respect, to the decisive act of loving others with a burning desire to communicate the message of God.

A fourth ethical element is to do the hard work of interpretation. Historical, contextual, literary, and rhetorical analysis is not easy. Developing a full understanding of the text before it is presented is essential to the process of communication. What does the text say and what does it mean by what it says? Meaning must be considered for the original author to the original audience and from the author to you and finally for you to your audience. This hermeneutic cycle of meaning should be carefully thought through prior to a reading. The primary concern is to convey the total effects, emotional and cognitive, as a literary and oral work of art. Just because the process may seem daunting, this does not give an excuse for the interpreter to do careless work.

A final ethical element is to congruently communicate to the best of our ability. Being true to yourself as a reader is also an ethical responsibility. You are being entrusted with content that can and will impact other people's lives. Every encounter with the Bible will become part of your life as well as the audience's, therefore artists have an ethical responsibility.

Why Oral Interpretation?

We began considering the approach or philosophy of oral interpretation, then the definition or what is the art and science, moving to moral responsibilities of right and wrong we come to the final introductory concern of reason or rationale for the art of oral interpretation of the Bible. Reading from the fullness of a story where the reader has experienced with the characters the action involved and leading others through the process of an organic understanding is fulfilling in and of itself. When an artist presents a rich blending of the words of the text on the basis of the author's intent leading to a message discovered in the communal experience of reading those present will be influenced, impacted and enriched to a degree beyond individual silent reading.

Moving outside of myself and into the lives of others through an empathetic experience of understanding also builds character. The stories we hear orally do far more to move us to faith and action than the propositions we believe to be true. The poetry we hear impacts our emotions in a manner printed words silently considered cannot. The nonverbal and verbal congruency builds a whole that surpasses the technical elements of literature and vocalics leading to empathetic understanding of ourselves in relationship with others. When, in the words of sacred literature we encounter the living God the spiritual experience galvanizes faith and community. We will consider the unifying, corporate aspects of oral interpretation for the church in detail later.

Moving outside of myself and into the lives of others is not a simple or easy task. Looking at the world through someone