

## Preaching in the Subjunctive: Toward a Ritual Homiletics

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One Sunday at church, I mentioned during my homily that I'd been struggling with the lection at hand and was continuing to do so even as I preached. The rector of my church pulled me aside after the service and told me never to admit this from the pulpit. She had done the same during her own curacy, she said, but a member of her congregation – a famous retired professor of theology, divinity school dean, and renowned preacher himself – had scolded her for it. “You bear the word of God in your words,” he told her. “Whatever your struggles with the text, you must proclaim it with conviction.”

On another Sunday, at a different church, a priest and mentor of mine stopped mid-sermon to announce that he had just received a call from his daughter who'd told him she'd found a lump in her breast. He confidently proclaimed that his faith had made him fearless, and then he smiled and literally danced with confident conviction. There was no room in the pulpit for any doubt or concern, let alone some understandable terror.

Something seems wrong to me in each of these examples from my own parish life. In their important and persuasive 2008 volume *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity*, Adam B. Seligman, Robert P. Weller, Michael J. Puett, and Bennett Simon suggest what this might be. In their book, Seligman and his co-authors expose the limits of sincere conviction for both religion and in the world at large. Basically, on their account, sincerity – a mark of trustworthiness – acts as social glue in situations of ambiguity. But, as the examples above might indicate, they posit that this form of cohesion has its limitations. Against sincerity, Seligman et al. posit a social function to ritual that expands upon and critiques theoretical understandings articulated

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within the study of religion since Durkheim. In this Durkheimian tradition, ritualized actions identify what a “society holds sacred, that is . . . what we can reasonably call religious.”<sup>1</sup> For Durkheim and others in this critical tradition, the religious thus comes to be radically differentiated from, set against, the mundane or profane. Critically following the work of Catherine Bell, Seligman et al. hope to caution against this “tendency to see this working of ritual – that is, the marking off of difference – as something that exists apart from everyday affairs.”<sup>2</sup> They want to critique an idea of ritualized action that seeks to read within such differentiated action deeply referential meaning, the temptation to regard ritual “as a referent for meaning whose true essence resides only beyond the ritual action itself.”<sup>3</sup> Ritual might not refer to a real or ideal meaning behind such actions; rather, ritualized actions themselves might be seen as real, as operating in the real world towards the construction of meaningful engagements with that (fractured, trying, tragic) world. Ritualized actions operate in the field of what Seligman et al. call the subjunctive, in the construction of a possible world, rather than in the field of the sincere, that is, in the uncovering of a more authentic world. In a critical maneuver that intelligently and variously follows the work of Tomoko Masuzawa, Robert Orsi, and Talal Asad, Seligman et al. regard the Western theoretical valorization of the sincere – of the authentic belief or the “real” meaning behind ritual signs or acts – as a problematic theological inheritance of Protestant Christianity.<sup>4</sup> This focus upon the real or authentic meaning behind signs and acts, rather than the meaning constructed by them, they term sincerity. It is “in and through [sincerity’s] Protestant articulation that it has had such a pervasive and formative role in contemporary culture,” leading to the strict demarcation of secular from sacred action, and to a sociological and theoretical emphasis on inner states and essential meanings or beliefs.<sup>5</sup>

As noted, this is a well-articulated and persuasive critique, both in Seligman et al. and among the others whose suit they follow. To be sure, Protestantism has uniquely prioritized inner states of experience and has understood outward expression to be simply a sign of authentic, inward belief. Seligman et al. intelligently demonstrate how this prioritization of sincerity has impacted all sorts of Western thought and practice, beyond simply the religious. As convincing as their argument is, however, I would like to complicate this picture somewhat through a consideration of the Protestant liturgical act of preaching. Perhaps more than any other aspect of Protestant worship, preaching is conventionally understood to be an outward expression of inward belief, a referential articulation of individual authenticity, an archetypical exercise in sincerity. Indeed, Seligman et al. point to Lionel Trilling’s discussion of “the central role of Puritan ‘plain sermons’ on the developing idea of sincerity” as formative in the Western fixation on authenticity.<sup>6</sup> What I would like to argue, however, is not only that Protestant preaching might present a more complicated ritual scenario, but also that a subjunctive limit to sincerity is already implied in Protestant worship, specifically in the Protestant conception of the sacraments, and even in the ritual act of preaching itself. To be clear, although I have some reservations around Seligman et al.’s historical understanding of Protestant religion and its relation to western thought in general, I do not endeavor to articulate a historical critique of their account in this essay. Rather, I aim to describe how their ritually subjunctive sense

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actually resonates with longstanding theological commitments within the Protestant tradition, and how such commitments might contribute to our understanding of the preached word. In other words, I aim here to reconceive the conventional semantics of the sermon, to relocate where the meaning of preaching should be understood to lie. In so doing, I hope also to demonstrate how the liturgically contextualized and sacramentally situated act of Christian preaching both expresses and complicates the subjunctive/sincere duality Seligman et al. have proposed.

### *The Subjunctive and the Sincere*

As noted above, Seligman et al.'s account of the subjunctive and sincere is cogent and compelling, even if its description of the Protestant tradition might invite some further articulation. Before elaborating the implications of their argument, therefore, allow me first to articulate it broadly. According to Seligman et al., the root of the Christian over-emphasis upon sincerity begins as early as Augustine, with the Augustinian understanding of the sacraments expressing this privileging of the sincere in an exemplary way.

The famous understanding of the Eucharist as the “visible sign of invisible grace,” although it long predates the Reformation, has become the mode through which much of ritual has been understood. In such a view, the “thing itself” always resides beyond the ritual, and the ritual act is only its instrument. To be sure, this understanding has led to important exegesis of ritual’s symbolism, but it also led to an emphasis on inner states like sincerity or belief that may not always be relevant to the social and cognitive contents of ritual action.<sup>7</sup>

The sacramental action for Augustine, according to Seligman et al., is really meaningful not in itself but rather in relation to the reality to which it refers. Sacrament on this account is to be understood fundamentally as referential, and so the analysis of sacramental ritual must be about discerning and interpreting the real meanings lying behind these ritual acts. Thus the theological privileging of the Christian (and especially Protestant) West, of the deeper reality hiding behind ritualized signs and actions, is secretly smuggled into theoretical analyses of ritual in the study of religion. Scholars of religion, unaware of the influence of their own Protestant Christian sensibilities, have typically suffered “from an overly subjectivist and individualist emphasis on meaning and interaction. Such a view sees the ‘essential’ or constitutive arena of action (often read as intention) as something within the social actor or actors, with the external, formal ritual seen as but the marker of these internal processes.”<sup>8</sup> For Protestant theologians and secular scholars of religion alike, the essential significance of ritual actions usually has to do with interior meanings and intentions. This focus upon interiority and authenticity in general, and as the veiled object of ritual study in particular, Seligman and his co-authors call a privileging of the sincere.

Against interiority, these authors posit what they will call the subjunctive function of ritual. Ritualized actions, they contend, do not “say” – that is, refer to – anything; they do not point to deeper or more authentic meanings. Rather, they construct coherently meaningful engagements within an incoherent, fragmented world. “Ritual,” they argue, “is about *doing* more than about

saying something.” It is about lending significance to, rather than borrowing from, the surrounding world.<sup>9</sup> Rather than circumscribe static, interior meanings, ritual creates “a subjunctive, an ‘as if’ or ‘could be’ universe” that “recognizes the inherent ambiguity built into social life and its relationships.”<sup>10</sup> Seligman and his co-authors seek to emphasize “the incongruity between the world of enacted ritual and the participants’ experience of lived reality, and . . . thus focus on the work that ritual accomplishes.”<sup>11</sup> Importantly, Seligman et al. do not deny a differentiation between ritual action and lived experience. In this sense they follow Durkheim, as summarized above. What they do want to emphasize, however, is that this differentiated ritual action actually *works* in an everyday sense, that it accomplishes real ends in the real world.

An everyday example from what they identify as ritual activity in family life easily illustrates their account:

Imagine a family of five, two parents and three children – all love and care for each other, and any major event . . . will mobilize all of them to help or support or praise . . . the member in question. But in daily life there is often much pushing, screaming, grabbing of hairbrushes, not helping with the dinner or feeding the dog, and so on. The parents then decide that everyone has to treat each other with a bit more respect, more civility, more use of please and thank you . . . Ratcheting up the amount of love everyone feels . . . is not the way to make life more pleasant in the household. There is no need, and it is not even possible. Everyone loves the others. That is not the point. Instead, the problem is to get everyone to act *as if* they love one another. More real love (whatever that may be) is not needed.<sup>12</sup>

The quotidian rituals of please and thank you, of doing the dishes or feeding the dog, of politeness, generosity, and gratitude, create a shared subjunctive space that can expose the emptiness, or at least the superfluity, of the sincere. As Seligman and his fellow authors ask, what is ‘real’ (or sincere) love, anyway? No member of this family fears abandonment in times of crisis. They don’t feel unloved in any deep sense. What the family members need each day is not to feel love but to behave *as if* they feel love. And it turns out that such behavior is not just play-acting; there is not some deeply felt love in the background waiting to be expressed by these actions. The outward, ritualized expression is the realization of love. The subjunctive affects the real. “It does not matter how you feel” about the ritual in question. “What you *are* is what you *are in the doing*, which is of course an external act.”<sup>13</sup> In this example of family life, sincere inward feeling is largely irrelevant to love. Loving family members are family members who behave lovingly, who create a loving home through the subjunctive performance of their loving actions. One might not feel deep, inward, heartfelt love while doing the dishes or feeding the dog. But to feel love deeply while refusing to scrub pots or letting Fido starve would be meaningless at best, and effectively unloving.

This model (I think rightly) depends upon two assumptions. First, for Seligman et al., ritualized actions take for granted a fragmented, tragic world. To continue using the example above, it is not that a wholly harmonized family life of inwardly felt love and generosity exists under the surface that will ultimately find its outward expression in everyday acts of politeness. On the con-

trary, conflict and impatience are always potentially under the surface, but everyday politeness and common generosity serve to keep these things at bay. Whatever one may be feeling, family life presents challenges; ritual establishes a world in which such challenges can be lovingly managed. Second, Seligman et al. postulate an intersubjectivity that conditions human experience. As they write, “much of what the individual ego experiences as a uniquely individual event (love, desire, hate, envy, frustration, etc.) can become social and shared only through its symbolic representation.”<sup>14</sup> That is, the possibility for experiencing inward emotions or sincere feelings such as love, hate, want, etc., are always already socially conditioned. By “constructing a symbolic universe where our activities with one another can be understood . . . we are also in a sense actually denoting the construction of the illusion as the real nature of our interaction.”<sup>15</sup> By saying please and thank you or folding the laundry, I communicate a love I wish to express in a way that can be understood by my children or my wife. These gestures serve a symbolic function; they communicate a meaning. And in the expressions of that meaningful wish, the symbolic wish finds itself fulfilled.

Seligman and his fellow writers claim they do not intend a complete discounting of the inward or sincere. The sincere, they argue, can be useful wherever there “is no ritual, . . . no shared convention that indexes a possible shared world.”<sup>16</sup> When the rituals we perform fail to build social trust and cohesion because our symbolic meanings happen not to be shared (e.g., I think my wife is making dinner because she hates the way I cook, rather than out of common kindness), then we are forced to depend upon sincerity to stabilize relationships. (“No, believe me, I *really like* your cooking. I’m just trying to be helpful.”) Sincerity on this model would prove an indispensable companion to the subjunctive function of ritual, especially when the tragedy and fragmentation of our world confounds its subjunctive function.<sup>17</sup> In such cases, the “establishment of a stable and unquestionable *as is*, rather than a common *as if*, becomes the projected basis for the intersubjective world.”<sup>18</sup> This can be useful, at times, but not to the exclusion of the ritualized subjunctive. In a viciously sincere circle, sincerity in its extreme form disallows any ritually shared world because it misidentifies and dismisses ritual as merely conventional, inauthentic play-acting. In such situations, our only dependable measure of trust is sincerity, which has its limits. This exclusion of the ritual subjunctive by sincerity is precisely what Seligman et al. regard as dominating Christian Protestantism and troubling the West. If ritual

relies on the social acceptance of authoritative understandings and procedures . . . [then] sincere understandings . . . rely far more on internally generated knowledge and motivation. The Protestant (or Sufi or Hasidic) direct approach of the individual to God is an example of this more sincere approach. Authority in the ritual case lies in the acceptance of social institutions (a Catholic priesthood, or society itself for some Confucians), while for sincerity it lies instead in the individual states.<sup>19</sup>

As noted above, Seligman and his co-authors insist that they do not mean to eliminate the sincere entirely. They just want to circumscribe its limits, and to reassert alongside sincerity the social necessity of a subjunctive function, to re-establish the world of possibility that rituals at once ad-

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mit and realize. And to be fair, these writers are certainly justified in worrying that the Protestant tradition, with its emphasis on inward states of sincerity (authentic faith or true conversion, for example) and with its historical anxiety over both the performance of ritualized actions as well as the truth content of dogmatic propositions, has effected undue influence upon Western thought, particularly in the study of religion. All this I think is largely accurate, and although I believe their account of Protestantism is somewhat simple, the aim of their essay is not an exhaustive history of Protestant Christianity and so neither shall it be the aim of mine. To be sure, much Western thinking, and the Protestant tradition in particular, has historically privileged the inward, authentic, and sincere. Nonetheless, there are also clear and provocative signs within this Protestant tradition that the articulation and affirmation of a subjunctive sense – a sense that reality might be achieved through ritual, that real work might be accomplished in meaningful performance, and that hope might be ritually enacted within a tragic world – can be traced to the deepest foundations of the Reformation, in a sacramental sense, and even in the ritual act of preaching.

### *Sacrament and the Subjunctive*

Recall Seligman et al.'s reference to Augustine's description of the Eucharist as a visible sign of invisible grace, and their interpretation of this description as exemplary of the tendency toward privileging sincerity that has afflicted Christianity – especially Protestant Christianity – for so long. Indeed, on this account the Augustinian sacramental sense not only exemplifies the fixation upon sincerity in Western society, it seems (at least partially) to occasion that fixation as well. Indeed, Augustine was a favorite of the Reformers. Luther was an Augustinian friar, and his theological work is deeply influenced by the African father. Calvin's 1559 edition of the *Institutes* cites Augustine over four hundred times, more than any other Christian thinker. So, if Seligman and his co-authors' reading of Augustine is correct, we might easily trace the genealogy of sincerity from Carthage into Wittenberg and Geneva. However, a closer look at Augustine, especially as he approaches the ritual significance of the sacraments, will reveal a real sympathy for what Seligman et al. call "the subjunctive," and this sympathy is deliberately perpetuated in the Augustinian thought of Martin Luther.

To be sure, Seligman et al.'s description of the Eucharist as a visible sign of invisible grace, attributed here to Augustine, appears exemplary of and foundational to lasting Reformation understandings and to continuing Protestant tendencies to privilege interiority and sincerity. Augustine's original phrase, however, is in fact far subtler, whatever the ways it is eventually appropriated by certain strands of Protestantism. In his instructions to catechists, Augustine writes:

On the subject of the sacraments, which [the catechumen] receives, it is first to be well impressed upon his notice that the signs of divine things are, it is true, things visible, but that invisible things themselves are also honored in them, and that that species, which is then sanctified by the blessing, is therefore not to be regarded merely in the way in which it is regarded in any common use.<sup>20</sup>

For Augustine the primary concern for catechumens is not the identification of some inward, more fully authentic reality behind the visible sign. The relationship between visibility and invisibility for Augustine here is not about the relative reality of the sacramental element against its appearance but about the *behavior of the communicant* with regard to that visible sign. The communicant should regard the visible sign *as if* it were something other than it appears. It cannot be treated in an ordinary manner any longer. One's behavior towards it must be differently – perhaps ritually or subjunctively – framed. And indeed, we find this ritual or subjunctive sense to cohere with much of what Augustine is willing elsewhere to affirm with regard to the sacraments.<sup>21</sup>

In fact, Augustine pays little extended attention to the sacraments in his expansive corpus, some brief references appearing only in various sermons, treatises and, commentaries. But some of the most important of them appear in the *Commentaries upon John*. In the *Commentaries* Augustine calls the acts of Christ as depicted in the narrative accounts of John's gospel "sacraments," or "visible words." As he writes, "the word is added to the elemental substance, and it becomes a sacrament, also itself, as it were, a visible word."<sup>22</sup> The category of visibility is here again invoked, as it is in Seligman and his fellows' paraphrase and in the passage from the catechetical instruction above. But here again the sense points towards a potentially different interpretation than the one Seligman et al. have offered. The notion of visibility in this case is somehow caught up in Augustine's semiotics, as well as his theological hermeneutics of the words and deeds of Christ. Thus for Augustine "those things, both the words and deeds, that our Lord Jesus Christ did should produce astonishment and wonder: the deeds because they were things done, the words because they were signs."<sup>23</sup> The syntax here is labored and the translation slippery, but I read Augustine as asserting that the words of Christ are deeds too; or rather, that the words are deeds and the deeds are signs: that Christ's signs are enacted and that his acts function as signs.<sup>24</sup> Or in Augustine's more straightforward paraphrase, "Christ himself is the Word of God; [so] even a deed of the Word is a word for us."<sup>25</sup> Acts carry meaning, and the acts of the Word can be understood visibly to manifest what that Word means. These acts at once signify and realize the meaning they present. In other words, for Augustine the boundary between the visible and the invisible in sacramental actions is not so easily distinguishable. It is not so simply, as Seligman et al. have claimed, that for Augustine "the 'thing itself' always resides beyond the ritual, and the ritual act is only its instrument."<sup>26</sup> For Augustine, perhaps against certain latter day understandings, these words are not just words, not just signs of a deeper reality. They are also acts that accomplish the reality to which they refer. Christ's words are deeds. One should not simply conclude that the inwardly invisible is the more real or authentic thing, while the outwardly visible sign is only a ritual shade, a symbolic covering. Indeed, *pace* Seligman et al., Augustine's sacramental definition in the *Commentaries* is primarily significant not in reference to the bread and wine of the Eucharist, but with respect to the sacramental actions of baptism. This difference is crucial, because at stake for Augustine is not the deeper reality of the Eucharistic elements that their outward appearances crudely veil, but rather the hidden reality of incorporation that the ritual movement of baptism enacts and effects.

As Ronald Thiemann elaborates, expanding upon Augustine's account,

[I]n the rite of baptism the element, water, is joined with the words, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" to create the ritual act of incorporation of the baptized into the Christian community. Ordinary water takes on a sacramental unction by being joined to the triune name of God, thereby pointing beyond itself to God's saving grace, a grace that it both signals and performs in the rite of baptism. When ordinary words are joined with ordinary water in the baptismal rite, a sacrament is created, a rite that signals the grace by which the baptized is incorporated into the community and at the same time performs, i.e., makes present, the very grace that it signals. Baptism speaks the grace of God visibly, and enacts the grace of God verbally. Thus sacraments are "visible words" that *do* what they *say*.<sup>27</sup>

The sacramental act does not merely refer to some hidden reality. The relationship between *signa* and *res*, between sign and thing, in the sacraments is not merely a referential one for Augustine. Because these words are also deeds, they accomplish what they signify. The Reformation (and Counter Reformation) anxiety over the inward ontology of Eucharistic elements is foreign to Augustine's concern. For Augustine, the incorporation of the baptisand into Christian community is not an inward disposition merely represented by ritual acts and elements. Baptism both signifies and accomplishes this incorporation. In the case of sacramental rites, the ritual action both "signals and performs" the reality it proclaims. As Rowan Williams asserts, when we consider the Christian sacraments and the Augustinian sacramental inheritance, our "primary concern should be for sacramental actions rather than an attempt to focus on 'sacralized' objects . . . the sign that is Christ and the signs of Christ are equally God in act."<sup>28</sup> However else the Reformers' arguments might have misunderstood their Augustinian roots, "the Reformers were right in their insistence that theology and devotion must never treat God as passive, but always respond to him as active."<sup>29</sup> Augustinian sacraments do not thus represent reality in a flatly symbolic or passively static way; they occasion that reality too. For Augustine, the sacraments "thus *represent* the divine reality even as they *re-present* that reality in the ritual act."<sup>30</sup> Or, to use Seligman et al.'s words, we might similarly say that the Augustinian sacraments are "about *doing* more than *saying* something."<sup>31</sup> These enacted signs do what they say. To continue in Seligman's idiom, for Augustine the ritual act of baptism can be understood to create a subjunctively shared world that becomes real for the participants of that action. Baptism, like any other sacrament, signals what it performs and it does what it says.

As I have noted above, Seligman et al. do not intend an exhaustive intellectual history of Western Christianity. They make no firm claim regarding the final or correct interpretation of Augustine. Indeed, they might argue that the lasting commitment to subjunctively ritual acts within the Church of Rome depends upon an interpretation of Augustine such as the one outlined above. What is really remarkable in this account, however, is that Luther also embraces Augustine's ritually sacramental sense for precisely the subjunctive purposes Seligman et al. have accused Protestantism of abandoning. That is, for Luther, the purpose of sacramental action, the performance of

ritual acts, is to recognize the subjunctive as real. Sacramental ritual, for Luther, makes meaning of fragmented human experiences and serves to hold together a tragically broken world.

For Luther, the commitment to Christ's presence at the Eucharist aims to locate the divine not behind or beyond the world, but squarely in it. This is not to say that a deeper meaning resides behind the things of the world. Rather, according to Luther, the Christian recognizes the immanent meaningfulness of the things of the world themselves. Luther himself reasons this dialectic from his theology of the incarnation:

Thus what is true in regard to Christ is also true in regard to the sacrament. It is not necessary for human nature to be transubstantiated before it can be the corporeal habitude of the divine, and before the divine can be contained under the accidents of human nature. Both natures are present there entirely, and one can appropriately say: 'This man is God,' or 'This God is man.'<sup>32</sup>

For Luther, there is not a deeper reality behind the bread and wine that the elements mask, any more than the man Jesus was just a docetic cloak for the Christ. Both are present in full. The bread and wine are simply holy. Or, as Seligman et al. might put it, in behaving *as if* the bread and wine and the gathered community are all holy, the Christian finds them, in fact, to be holy. Luther would likely not embrace this subjunctive idiom, of course, but whatever language one chooses, the crucial concern for much Reformation sacramental theology is that we will not "encounter God in the *displacement* of the world we live in, [in] the suspension of our bodily and historical nature."<sup>33</sup> According to Luther, the eucharist "is neither a supernatural event nor a natural symbolic remembrance . . . one need not *transcend* the natural in order to find the supernatural; rather the divine itself is hidden within the mystery of the incarnate Christ. Christ's presence is mediated through 'sacramental realism.'<sup>34</sup> The presence of Christ, for Luther, is "mediated through simple earthly things," but again, these things do not obscure the truer reality of Christ behind them. They are not ritual signs of a more authentic or sincere meaning. They realize Christ's reality within, rather than in spite of, their own. Indeed, it is because of this unwavering commitment to the subjunctive reality of the bread and wine as the body and blood that Luther takes his stand against what he understands to be the Scholastic position of transubstantiation. For Luther, it's not that the appearance of the bread and wine cover the underlying truth of the body and blood. There is not some more authentic reality behind the insubstantial, only-apparent sacramental sign. When the word is rightly added to the elements, and when we as a community gather around this shared system of meanings – that is, when we behave as if it's true – it is true.

This is not simply dogmatic theological riddling for Luther. As Thiemann states, in "formulating this theology in which flesh and blood, bread and wine, words and water truly save, Luther believes he has provided a theology that has the pastoral power to reassure, console, and comfort those who long for salvation."<sup>35</sup> This focus upon the promise and potential of the real things of the world manages their ambiguity, it promises a meaningfulness that might be realized in our actions. Although Luther's sacramental realism "does not easily lend itself to theodicies," it likewise re-

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fuses to “turn its face from suffering.”<sup>36</sup> Thiemann puts Luther’s position in decidedly subjunctive terms: “If God can bring life out of death, if God can turn an instrument of political execution into a means of salvation, if God can turn disciples’ sorrow into joy by becoming known ‘in the breaking of the bread,’ then the believer can look into the face of evil and still see the redeeming grace of a merciful God.”<sup>37</sup> If all of this is true (or at least if we can behave as if it were), we might find the strength and sense to face the tragedy all around us in a meaningful way. Because the sacramental sense recognizes goodness and holiness in the real world, it need not wait for the expression of another, more authentic or sincere world to see such good things realized. This sacramental (or subjunctive) sense gives,

to the believer a new sight, a new way of looking at the world, a fresh way of seeing everyday objects and ordinary persons in the light of Christ. What was once simply a workbench now becomes a means of serving the neighbor in need. What was once simply a dirty diaper now becomes an invitation to perform acts of service to one’s child and spouse . . . In Christ, by faith, the Christian sees the world with new eyes as a place where the hidden God dwells within the everyday, ordinary, and commonplace, and especially within those places where the neighbor in need suffers.<sup>38</sup>

Seligman and his co-authors could have written some of these lines. The ritual acts of the sacraments for Luther, at least by Thiemann’s reading, do what they say. They recognize not a deeply authentic meaning hidden behind the world, hidden beneath the rickety workbench, buried amid those soiled diapers. Rather, the sacramental recognizes possibility in and with the world itself, rickety and soiled though it may be. Or, in Seligman et al.’s more theoretical language, the sacramental denotes “the construction of the illusion as the real nature of our interaction.”<sup>39</sup> Indeed, what is perhaps most fascinating in this sacramental logic is how it might illuminate and critique Seligman et al.’s subjunctive/sincere dyad, how the sacramentally sincere might be understood to collapse into the sacramentally subjunctive. There is not a deeper reality behind the bread and wine, behind the workbench or the soiled diaper. Rather, the bread, wine, and personal vocation all fully bear the holy in a real – not merely conditional or prospective – way.

The tradition of Protestant Christianity is diverse and complicated, and Seligman et al.’s paraphrase of its foundational commitments surely does find routine historical expression. But at the very least, there also appears to be a Protestant sacramental sense that seems clearly to encompass Seligman et al.’s subjunctive, a commitment to ritual as the enactment of a possibility that can become real for those who partake of such ritual action. It is a sense deeply rooted in a reading of Augustine that differs from the brief one Seligman et al. have offered, and one that resounds in no less a foundational figure than Martin Luther. But what might this have to do with what Seligman et al. have called the most sincere of Protestant ritual actions, the preached sermon?

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### *The Semantics of the Sermon*

On the account I've given above, the sacraments do what they say. Their primary function is not referential to meaning; it is productive of meaning. Indeed, as I've attempted to convey, this is why Luther rejects what he interprets as the Thomist position of the Roman Catholic church: because what's crucially and sacredly at stake in the sacraments is the (fragmented, ambiguous, tragic) reality just before us, not some deeper, more sincere, more authentic reality behind.<sup>40</sup> What, then, does any of this have to do with Christian preaching? In sum, I want to argue that much of the best and most important modern Protestant thinking on the significance of the sermon has followed this sacramental model – indeed, it has often been given in distinctly sacramental terms. That is, for modern Protestant thought, the sermon *does* more than it *says*. Its semantics are subjunctive. Its meanings lie in its ritual, rather than its discursive, function. Of course, I would not claim that sincerity has in fact actually given way to the subjunctive ritual function of the sermon in most Christian communities, or that Seligman et al.'s critique of this drift toward the sincere in Christian Protestantism is wholly wrong. Indeed, it seems to me their diagnosis is largely accurate. But it also seems to me that the colonization of the homily by Christian sincerity can as easily be seen as a betrayal, rather than the fulfillment, of Protestant preaching – or at least, that the possibility exists for us to make that argument now.<sup>41</sup> In what follows I will outline the sacramental homiletics of two of the most significant Protestant thinkers of the twentieth century, Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to demonstrate how (against conventional theological wisdom) for them the sermon is significant for its ritual and liturgical, rather than its discursive, function.

Neither Barth nor Bonhoeffer ever articulated any extended account of the nature and function of the sermon in their own published works. What little we have of their thinking survives in lecture notes compiled by students of Barth at Bonn in 1932-3 and of Bonhoeffer in Berlin in 1933 and at Finkenwalde between 1935 and 1937. Nonetheless, even these spare notes offer ample evidence that these two incredibly influential Christian pastors and theologians were at least as interested in the ritual significance of the sermon as in its sincerity (though they would not likely have employed or even enjoyed such terms). For Barth and Bonhoeffer, what each spoken sermon subjunctively and ritually accomplishes means far more than what it directly or discursively says.

Barth offers an account of the sermon in which echoes of Seligman and his co-authors can clearly be heard, though Barth of course will use more doctrinally assertive language. Barth would resist the as-if idiom of Seligman et al., seeking to replace the category of the subjunctive with the assurance of faith. Nonetheless, we can still see that for Barth, the significance of the sermon is in what the church believes these words to be, rather than in what specific doctrinal or exegetical meanings they communicate. The sermon does more than it says. It is in believing these words to be divine rather than human (Seligman et al. might say, in behaving *as if* they were divine) that the words lend meaningful coherence to the church, that in gathering around the words they become words worthy of gathering around. Notably, the divine doesn't sanctify human sincerity in this

form. It operates above and in spite of it. As Barth states, from “first to last, figuratively speaking, a sermon must have a thrust. But this does not lie in the enthusiasm, faith, earnestness, or conviction of the preacher.”<sup>42</sup> The “thrust” of the sermon depends not at all upon the preacher’s earnestness or conviction, her sincerity or authenticity. According to Barth, it is the circumstance of the sermon as operating within the gathered community, rather than its semantic content as spoken discourse, that grants it meaning. Of course, that meaning on Barth’s account is entirely founded upon Christ. Like “the Christ who has appeared already, the Christ who is still to come must be the center of every sermon.”<sup>43</sup> But in a way that appears surprisingly similar to Seligman, the Christological center of Barth’s homiletics is described in prospective and subjunctive terms. It assumes a shared world of meaning in order to grant coherence to the real and really fragmented, ambiguous experience of the gathered community. The

homiletic art is to speak about the present, about experience, about the new life that has appeared in history, but it may not do so except with a thrust toward tomorrow. We are a people that walk in darkness. But we have seen a great light.<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, for Barth, the words of the sermon have significance only within the context of Christian community. Both “the sacraments and preaching can take place meaningfully only in the church.”<sup>45</sup> This is incredibly significant. The same words, offered by the same person, with the same sincerity and authenticity, will not be meaningful outside of the common ritual action and shared subjunctive world of the community. The liturgical, ritual, and communal framing of the homiletical speech-act lends it meaning. When the “need is seen that preaching must be a *signum*, even a sacramental act . . . then we have good reason to place ourselves where this demand can be met, since it is there that God has promised us this grace. That place is the church.”<sup>46</sup> The community imparts meaning to the very ritual acts and signs by which that community is called into existence. For Barth, the “central key to an understanding of preaching [is] the understanding of it as provisional, as heralding.”<sup>47</sup> Meaningful preaching for Barth always operates in the subjunctive mood, as light in darkness.

Bonhoeffer’s surviving notes are spare but even more provocative. For Bonhoeffer, the sermon has only one final aim, and it is a prospective, subjunctive one.

The finality of the sermon. What do I want? Self-description of congregational piety? . . . Edification? Education? of the question of what the gospel is. It is all that as well: education, instruction, conversion, but all of this only with the one goal *that the church come into being*. The finality of the sermon is the church. *I preach, because the church exists, so that the church may come into being* . . . This one truth, however, should not be understood as a result that I might be offering but as an event. The truth that the church proclaims is the truth that creates its own form of existence in the church. The truth and reality characterizing the sermon depend on the form of existence of the church itself, and that means *on discipleship*.<sup>48</sup>

These remarks are barely edited student recordings, of course, so we might show some caution in reading them too deeply. But even in these terse fragments, Bonhoeffer’s emphasis is clear. The

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purpose of the sermon is to cohere a community. What meanings the sermon communicates are useful only to that end. Education, edification, explanation of the ‘real meaning’ of the gospel may be the form it often takes. But this “sincere” intention is not its final end. The preacher preaches to the already existing church, “so that the church may come into being.” The preacher preaches to the existing church “as if” it already existed, so that it might actually come to exist. The idiom here, of course, is once again far more theological than Seligman et al. might embrace. But clearly Bonhoeffer’s account confounds any too dogmatically sincere interpretation of the sermon. The truth that the preached word proclaims for Bonhoeffer is one “that creates its own form of existence in the church” and depends “on the form of existence of the church itself.” Bonhoeffer is profoundly unconcerned with the semantic (sincere, inward, internal, doctrinal, etc.) content of the sermon itself but remains entirely committed to its “subjunctive” semantic function. The sermon’s final meaning is as a ritual act of the community that both depends upon and creates the existence of that community. The meaning of the preached word is the church. It is the word that gathers the people and the word around which the people gather, and that gathering itself is revealed as its fullest meaning and final purpose. The immediate meanings of the words do not matter because the real purpose of the word is church. It is not the semantic content of the words, but the result of them, that concerns Bonhoeffer.

If the emphasis on the subjunctive function were not clear enough here, Bonhoeffer takes the sincere directly to task later on:

The person speaking and the word of God. False: I am the subject of my own speaking. I must first lend intention and purpose to the world, lend it vitality through my own speaking. To which one must respond: every other word apart from the word of a sermon does indeed serve my own intentions, and it is for me to lend vitality to it. The word of God alone possesses its own, inherent purpose, one that we are to serve, one that possesses its own life. This inherent purpose, the inherent life of this word must be made audible when I speak it in my sermon. It must basically be *speaking without any intention*. In the most real sense, God is the subject of this speaking, not we ourselves. In normal speech, everything depends on our identifying with our own words . . . This is why our own speech is ambiguous to us; we cannot hear ourselves, or to the extent we are able to hear ourselves, we are not aware of how our speech stands there!<sup>49</sup>

Seligman and his co-authors would likely note that Bonhoeffer has not recognized the subjunctive content of many of our everyday words: our pleases and thank-yous, our fine-how-are-yous. But they would all, I think, recognize a ritual purpose to preaching on Bonhoeffer’s description. Against the authentic and the sincere, Bonhoeffer insists that the preacher cannot speak of herself. She must rather “lend intention and purpose to the world.” The aim of the sermon is decidedly *not* to express oneself or one’s own feelings, beliefs, or intentions. The preacher “speaks without any intention,” is not the subject of her own speaking. What is at stake here is the absolute ambiguity of human language. But the ritual participants of the sermon – both preacher and hearers alike – behave *as if* these words were not ambiguous, and in so doing, establish a common, “followable” world, the establishment of which has been the final purpose of the sermon all along.<sup>50</sup>

For Bonhoeffer, the meaning of the homily “does not derive from some universal truth or emotional experience. The word of the sermon is the incarnate Christ . . . Christ *as* the word. As the Word, Christ walks through the church-community.”<sup>51</sup> Inward emotion and even doctrinal assertion are largely superfluous. The preacher preaches the word as if it were the Word, and when she does, the Word wanders in. For Bonhoeffer, the word,

takes us [that is, the church] on; it is a word that takes on a body . . . Not doctrine, not stimulating feelings or spurring on the will . . . It is in this way that the word creates community. We become those who are borne by [the] Christ-word and as such are one, members of the body of Christ.<sup>52</sup>

Again, the language here is overtly (and understandably) theological. But it bears repeating that for Bonhoeffer, doctrine, emotion, and even inspiration are beside the point for preachers. The purpose and meaning of preaching is the realization of the Christian community. In behaving as if these broken words could actually bear Christ, Christ comes to bear the community – i.e., the church is formed. And for Bonhoeffer, this is an explicitly sacramental formulation:

This Christ who is the Word in person is present in the word of the church or as the word of the church. His presence is, by nature, his existence as preaching. His presence is not power or the objective spirit of the church community out of which it preaches, but rather *his presence is preaching*. If this were not so, the sermon would not have the exclusive status that the Reformation gives it. The sermon is the poverty and the riches of our church. The sermon is the form of the present Christ to whom we are committed, whom we are to follow. If Christ is not wholly present in the sermon, the church breaks down . . . Christ is in the church as the spoken Word in the form of both sermon and sacrament.<sup>53</sup>

Interestingly, Bonhoeffer interprets the Reformation in exactly the opposite manner that Seligman and his colleagues do. For Bonhoeffer, the Reformation does not privilege the sermon because it so richly and fully expresses the sincerity of preachers’ faithful convictions. Rather, Protestantism privileges the sermon under the same logic that Luther employs to articulate his account of the sacraments. The human words of the sermon, like the world into which they arise, are broken, fallible, and incoherent. They are boring, wrong, and sometimes even abusive. If we then depend upon these broken words themselves for meaning, if we demand of them sincerity, authenticity, and trustworthiness, they will inevitably fail us and they will not call the church into being. In a tragically fragmented world, sincerity has its limits. These impoverished words, however, are the “riches” of the church as well because, for Bonhoeffer, Christ takes up these broken words and bears them anyway. Broken bread and boring sermon: the faith to see such everyday, ambiguous things in a new light and the willingness to approach them as-if, in the subjunctive sense, is what creates the church community. The church casts these feeble, fallible words into a shared world of meaning, a meaning that has been the beginning and end of both sacrament and sermon all along.

To be clear, I find the theoretical argument of Seligman, Weller, Puett, and Simon persuasive. If their historical account of Protestantism may be thin, it is sufficiently recognizable and coherent to merit serious attention. Thus my aim here has not been to undermine their project in

any significant way. Seligman and his fellows' articulation of the limits of sincerity, and the corollary necessity of that subjunctive sense which ritual can afford, seem to me largely right. My only concern here is to contribute the perspective of what is at least a provocative counter tradition within Protestant Christianity. Certainly Protestantism in some of its forms has abetted the unhindered spread of sincerity in Western society. I hope it's also clear, however, from what I've argued above, that the story of the Reformation is simply more complicated than this. The subjunctive ritual sense, under the category of the sacramental, has been important to Protestant thought and practice from its earliest beginnings in northern Europe through to the major Protestant thinkers of the twentieth century. And I hope it's also clear that, for some of the Reformed tradition, in its beginnings and beyond, the sermon is understood on precisely these sacramental terms. Thus, though we might caricature the Christian sermon as ruefully emblematic of that singularly and sincerely Protestant valorization of the inwardly authentic, in fact we will find that the sermon's real Reformation value (at least within certain important strands of the tradition) lies in its subjunctive, ritual utility, in its function as the fallible human word made sure for and by and in the gathered church. In Bonhoeffer's words, the sermon depends upon but also creates the church.

I have drawn out these alternate, subjunctive, ritual strands in the Protestant tradition not to take Seligman et al.'s historical sketch to task but to make their theoretical work practically available to Protestant preachers. Although there is surely some truth to their historical account, I worry that the picture Seligman et al. have drawn might inadvertently confirm the opposition they suspect, an opposition under which those of us Protestants who are called to preach on Sundays too often suffer. Recall the two examples with which I began this essay and the limits of sincerity in each case. In the first, a senior pastor cautions against acknowledging from the pulpit the difficulty and opacity of scriptural texts. If the preacher lacks conviction in her meaning, it is said, that meaning will be understood somehow to fail. But this assumes that meaning is a thing lying somewhere behind the text or within the preacher, to be offered by the preacher and received by the people. What's lost in this case is the possibility that these dense, difficult, often opaque texts – precisely in being offered from the pulpit as dense and difficult things – might admit some meaning in and among the community that faithfully receives them. The meaning of the preached word wouldn't, in this case, wait behind the scriptural text to be uncovered by the preacher. Rather, it would be realized in the active preaching and active reception of the word in the Christian community. In the second case, a preacher forces himself to hide his discomfort and concern for fear of appearing to lack some essential, inward conviction. Here one might even regard the awkward dance of our worried preacher as an essentially subjunctive, ritual maneuver: he behaves *as if* his awful news were actually good when of course it really isn't. But this, too, assumes meaningful faith to be an inward, almost emotional disposition that hides behind the unpredictability and difficulty of our actual lives. What's lost here – and what Augustine and Luther help us recover – is the possibility that one might speak meaningfully about the tragic, fragmented world itself without denying its real tragedy. The sound and stable meaning of the preached word doesn't hide behind the fleeting tragedies of a trying world; it engages them frankly and makes meaning of and into

them. We preach not because we have uncovered a hidden wholeness behind our of all our obvious brokenness, but because we believe that speaking our collective brokenness to one another in church might somehow make us whole. There is no room for ambiguity in either of these situations; the preached word in each case is meant only to testify to a prior sense, a hidden wholeness, or a sincere conviction, rather than to lend some manageable and meaningful coherence to our unquestionably fragmented lives.

If Seligman et al. are right and we Protestants only have recourse to sincerity in our pulpits, then what options will remain for those of us who preach? If Seligman et al. are right, then so is that old retired professor who chided my rector for betraying a bit of doubt, and so is that shaky pulpit that could not bear the doubts and fears of my poor mentor priest. If all we Christians have to count on is the depth and sincerity of one another's convictions, then we preachers can never let them see us sweat. If all we have to count on is the perceived sincerity of one another's words, what room is left (Augustine and Barth might ask) for the work of the Word of God? If we accept without qualification Seligman et al.'s account of our tradition, then we will have no other option than to cover our concerns with words and express only our sincerest convictions. There would be nothing else upon which to build our common lives. But who would dare climb the stairs of the pulpit under the weight of such a burden? Indeed, if we were forever barred from questions and consigned solely to convictions, some Sunday mornings there might be nothing left to say at all.

But if instead we read Seligman et al. as describing a crucial (if possibly obscured) tradition within Protestant theology and liturgy; if instead we look to Augustine, Luther, Barth, and Bonhoeffer, among others, then we burdened Protestant preachers might quickly discover that our preaching need not suffer under all this weight. The theorists and theologians in question all here helpfully reveal to us how the rhetorical concern of our sermons can serve a ritual – a subjunctive, constructive, and hopeful – rather than merely referential function. All the preacher's customary anxieties – that we must say something true, that we must show authentic conviction, that the effectiveness of our message depends somehow upon the scope of our own sincerity or the accuracy of our message – fall gracefully away. The sermon is ritual. Its truth is prospective, not propositional. It is the collective expression of a gathered Christian community, not the sincere confession of a single Christian authority. It is an exercise in behaving *as if* these confusing words were somehow true, *as if* this struggling community were somehow graced, *as if* the fractured world around us somehow gave us cause for hope. Preaching, as Barth and Bonhoeffer insist, is finally an exercise not of edification, education, or exegesis, but of hope. At the last, preaching is not about digging up some deep or hidden meaning from within these controversial, convoluted, and complicated ancient texts. Likewise, preaching is not about blinding ourselves (and our congregations) to ambiguity for the sake of our own conviction. It is rather about using the difficult idioms, shifting symbols, and uncertain traditions of these demanding old writings in order to call some real attention to the everyday significance of our common, often tragic, somehow sacred little lives. And in proclaiming that difficult call, it is about trusting that these words will have been made in some sense true.

*Notes*

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**1** Seligman, Adam B. et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7.

**2** Ibid.

**3** Ibid., 4.

**4** See Tomoko Masuzwa, *The Invention of World Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), and Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

**5** Ibid., 9.

**6** Ibid., 104.

**7** Ibid., 4.

**8** Ibid.

**9** Ibid., original emphasis.

**10** Ibid., 7.

**11** Ibid., 20.

**12** Ibid., 25. Original emphasis.

**13** Ibid., 24.

**14** Ibid., 23.

**15** Ibid., 22.

**16** Ibid., 103.

**17** Of course, a plea or an apology of this form would need to follow a conventional pattern in order to be regarded as ‘sincere.’ The gestures, tone of voice, and words which frame this action would need to be meaningfully recognized, and so even this retreat into sincerity would depend upon some ritual framing. Indeed, I think that these categories in *Ritual and Its Consequences* might be understood in some sense to collapse into one another, but an extended elaboration of how this happens will exceed the scope of this essay. Note below, however, how my reading of the sacramental similarly articulates this collapse.

**18** Ibid., 105. Original emphasis.

**19** Ibid., 116.

**20** Augustine of Hippo, “On the Catechizing of the Uninstructed,” *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. III: Augustin: On the Holy Trinity, Doctrinal Treatises, Moral Treatises*, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publisher, 1994), 312.

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**21** It is true that the relationship between visibility and invisibility in the sacramental signs has an ontological import for Augustine, but not for reasons of privileging the category of the inward over and against the outward. Rather, for Augustine, visibility is an attribute of passibility. “There is nothing that is visible that is not also changeable . . . wherefore the substance of, or, if it is better to say, the essence of God . . . since it is in no way changeable, can in no way proper to itself be visible.” “On the Holy Trinity,” *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. III: Augustin: On the Holy Trinity, Doctrinal Treatises, Moral Treatises*, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publisher, 1994), 65. This mystery in Augustine’s “On the Trinity” leads to an extended reflection upon the nature of the Word of God and its manifestation in Jesus, a dense theological account which exceeds the scope of this paper but which can be glossed by the other references to sacrament elucidated above.

**22** Augustine of Hippo, *Tractates on the Gospel of John 55-111* (Washington D.C.: Catholic U of America Press, 1994), 117.

**23** Augustine of Hippo, *Tractates on the Gospel of John 28-54* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 175.

**24** Note, for example, Robert Jenson’s alternative translation in his *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. II: “The things our Lord did are simultaneously works and words, works because they happened, words because they are signs” (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1994), 300.

**25** Augustine of Hippo, *Tractates on the Gospel of John 55-111* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 117.

**26** Seligman et al., 4.

**27** Ronald Thiemann, *The Humble Sublime* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2013), 35.

**28** Rowan Williams, “The Nature of a Sacrament,” *On Christian Theology* (Oxford, UK & Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 206.

**29** Ibid.

**30** Thiemann., 36.

**31** Seligman, et al., 4.

**32** Martin Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church” in *Luther’s Works Vol. 36: Word and Sacrament II*, eds. Helmut T. Lehmann and Abdel Ross Wentz, trans. Frederick C. Ahrens (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1959), 35.

**33** Williams, 207.

**34** Thiemann, 29.

**35** Ibid., 31.

**36** Ibid., 37.

**37** Ibid., 37-8.

38 Ibid., 33-4.

39 Seligman, 22.

40 For a useful description of how Luther and other early Reformers probably misread Thomist transubstantiation, see Williams, “The Nature of a Sacrament” in *On Christian Theology*, 197-208.

41 Though of course, that this diversity exists within Protestant Christianity, and that a corollary emphasis on sincerity arises in certain Roman Catholic accounts of transubstantiation (as elsewhere indicated in this paper and notably maligned by Luther), might indicate to us that the privileging of the sincere in western thought is an intellectual inheritance that certainly involves, but does not simply indict or uniquely implicate, religion.

42 Karl Barth, *Homiletics* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 52.

43 Ibid., 54.

44 Ibid., 55.

45 Ibid., 58.

46 Ibid., 58-9.

47 Ibid., 74.

48 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Works, Volume 14: Theological Education at Finkenwalde, 1935-1937* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 491. Original emphasis.

49 Ibid., 504. My emphasis.

50 For more on the notion of a “followable” world, see Ronald Thiemann’s *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991).

51 Ibid., 509-10.

52 Ibid., 511.

53 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Works, Volume 12: Berlin 1932-1933* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 317-8. My emphasis.