CHAPTER 5

Scripture As Script: Playing Our Part in the Spirit

"Eat this book" is my metaphor of choice for focusing attention on what is involved in reading our Holy Scriptures formatively, that is, in such a way that the Holy Spirit uses them to form Christ in us. We are not interested in knowing more but in becoming more.

The task is urgent. It is clear that we live in an age in which the authority of Scripture in our lives has been replaced by the authority of the self: we are encouraged on all sides to take charge of our lives and use our own experience as the authoritative text by which to live.

The alarming thing is how extensively this spirit has invaded the church. I more or less expect the unbaptized world to attempt to live autonomously. But not those of us who confess Jesus as Lord and Savior. I am not the only one to notice that we are in the odd and embarrassing position of being a church in which many among us believe ardently in the authority of the Bible but, instead of submitting to it, use it, apply it, take charge of it endlessly, using our own experience as the authority for how and where and when we will use it.

One of the most urgent tasks facing the Christian community today is to counter this self-sovereignty by reasserting what it means to live these Holy Scriptures from the inside out, instead of using them for our sincere and devout but still self-sovereign purposes.

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God speaks. When God speaks things happen. Holy Scripture opens with the words, "God said …" ringing out eight times, and after each sounding we see, piece by piece, one after another, elements of heaven and earth coming into being before our eyes and then climaxing in man and woman formed in the image of God. Psalm 33 compresses Genesis 1 into a sentence: "For he spoke, and it came to be…"(Ps.33:9). That sets the stage for everything that follows in our Bibles, this profuse outpouring of commands and promises, blessings and invitations, rebukes and judgments, directing and comforting that makes up our Holy Scriptures.

My metaphor of choice, Eat this book, is from St. John. We have three sorts of John books in our New Testaments that take particular delight in presenting Jesus as the one who reveals the God-speaking, word-of-God core and origin of everything that is: the Gospel of John, the letters of John, and the Apocalypse

of John. It is by no means certain (although early tradition held it so) that the apostle John authored all these books; what is plain enough, though, is that all of them work out of a common center and emphasis — they are all *Johannine.* Jesus, the Word made flesh, speaks sentences that transform chaos into cosmos (the Gospel), sin into salvation (the letters), and brokenness into holiness (the Apocalypse).

St. John's Gospel opens with this emphatically verbal beginning, repeating "word" three times: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God …" (John 1:1). This Word, we soon find out, is Jesus: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory" (John 1:14). The Gospel story proceeds to present Jesus speaking reality into existence.

The letters of St. John likewise go back to the beginning and give witness to the apostolic experience of being convinced that that "word of life" was Jesus, verified by what they heard, what they saw, and what they touched. Three of our five senses (seeing, hearing, touching) are employed in the verification (1 John 1:1). This Jesus spoke the commands that resulted in a life of salvation from sin expressed in a community of love.

And, finally, the Apocalypse of St. John presents the risen and present Jesus, under the aspect of words, of speech: John gives "witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Rev. 1:2). This risen Jesus Christ then identifies himself to John alphabetically, "I am Alpha and Omega" — he is the alphabet, all the letters from A to Z, that is, the stuff, the vowels and consonants out of which all words are made. Jesus speaks in such ways that the brokenness of the world and our experience develop into a dazzling holiness that evokes worship on a grand scale, involving everything and everyone in heaven and on earth.

Language is the primary way in which God works. In the Scriptures that give witness to these words this language is referred to in very physical ways. We hear the words, of course. But we also see the words ("I turned to see the voice," Rev. 1:12), chew them (Ps. 1:2), taste them (Ps. 19:10), walk and run in them (Ps. 119:32), and, in this final image, we eat them: Eat this book. This word of God that forms us in Christ is very physical.

We are part of a holy community that for three thousand years and more has been formed inside and out by these words of God, words that have been heard, tasted, chewed, seen, walked. Reading Holy Scripture is totally physical. Our bodies are the means of providing our souls access to God in his revelation: eat this book. A friend reports to me that one of the early rabbis selected a different part of our bodies to make the same point; he insisted that the primary body part for taking in the word of God is not the ears but the feet. You learn God, he said, not through your ears but through your feet: follow the Rabbi.

And so it is the practice of the Christian community to cultivate habits of reading that sharpen our

perceptions and involve us in getting this word of God formatively within us — wanting to do it as well as the best of our ancestors, determined not to leave any of these words in a book on a shelf, like a can of baked beans stored in a cupboard. We want to work up a good appetite, join St. John and eat this book.

Following the introductory matter of Chapters 1 and 2, in Chapter 3, "Scripture As Text: Learning What God Reveals," the emphasis was on the Holy Trinity, that God reveals himself personally and relationally. Language is not primarily informational but revelatory. The Holy Scriptures give witness to a living voice sounding variously as Father, Son, and Spirit, addressing us personally and involving us personally as participants. This text is not words to be studied in the quiet preserves of a library, but a voice to be believed and loved and adored in workplace and playground, on the streets and in the kitchen. Receptivity is required.

In Chapter 4, "Scripture As Form: Following the Way of Jesus," the emphasis was on following Jesus into this wide-ranging but intricately coherent world that we become aware of by means of story. The Holy Scriptures are story-shaped. Reality is story-shaped. The world is story-shaped. Our lives are story-shaped. "I had always," wrote G. K. Chesterton in accounting for his Christian belief, "felt life first as a story: and if there is a story, there is a story-teller."[1] We enter this story, following the story-making, storytelling Jesus, and spend the rest of our lives exploring the amazing and exquisite details, the words and sentences that go into the making of the story of our creation, salvation, and life of blessing. It is a story chock full of invisibles and intricate with connections. Imagination is required.

And now in this chapter, "Scripture As Script: Playing Our Part in the Spirit," my emphasis is on the cultivation of understandings and practices that make us receptive listeners to the living Trinitarian voice that brought these words onto the pages of our text in the first place, but also brings them off the pages into our lives. The emphasis is on the cultivation of understandings and practices that make us better *followers* of Jesus into the story he speaks into being so that we find ourselves at home in it, both now and in eternity. Participation is required.

The Uncongenial Bible

We are delighted to find ourselves in this world of the biblical text. There is so much to explore, so much to learn — and to think that we have a place in this! It is not just about Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob and Esau, Zipporah and Asenath, David and Jonathan, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Priscilla and Aquila, Rhoda and Phoebe, Barnabas and Mark — it is about me, and about you. Our parents and our children, our friends and enemies, our neighborhoods and our governments are all included.

A number of years ago I was in a bookstore. As I was paying for my purchase, I saw a stack of books on the counter. The book had been written by a good friend of mine. His name was prominent on the cover: Alvin ben-Moring. The book was about one of the wise men present at Jesus' birth. *Balthasar: The Black and Shining Prince* was the title. It was a popular Christmas book in the sixties. I hadn't seen Ben for several years, but I knew about this book. We had talked about this book, discussed plot and characters during the years we were together in college and seminary. And now here it was, published! I said to the clerk, "This book was written by a good friend of mine; I didn't know it had been published." She said, "Well, you'd better buy it; you might find yourself in it."

I did buy it, and I did find myself in it. But not in the way I expected. We had been close friends; he had given every indication of liking, even admiring, me. But in the book I was not at all likable, and certainly not admirable. There was no escaping the fact that it was me — unfortunately, though, not the me of my fantasies.

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There is a detail in this story of John eating the book that I have ignored until now, but I can't avoid it any longer. This is the detail: eating the Bible gave John a stomachache.

It tasted good when he put it in his mouth, but when it got to his stomach he got sick on it: "I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it; it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it my stomach was made bitter" (Rev. 10:10).

For most of us, our first experience with the Bible is sweet; we find ourselves in this book, and that is so wonderful. We acquire a taste for the promises and blessings of God, we learn to appreciate the sound counsel and direction for our lives, we memorize a few psalms that we can recite in dark and lonely times and find comfort. There is so much here to delight us. Psalm 119 uses an elaborate and exhaustive scheme, twenty-two stanzas that go through the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, to celebrate the unending delight of God's word, coming to us in so many ways and forms. Each of the twenty-two eight-line stanzas contains eight synonyms for "word" or "God's word," reworking and reconfiguring them to give a sense of the complexity and diversity that radiate from God's speech. (A few variations in the eight synonyms show a certain freedom in composing the lines.) This amazing psalm convincingly conveys the pleasures the Holy Scriptures give us as the truths and promises and blessings sink into our lives word by word in meditation and prayer: "How sweet are thy words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth" (Ps. 119:103). Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that in seminary he had been told that this was the most boring of the psalms;[2] but during his imprisonment by the Nazis he found that this was the richest psalm of all, and relished long meditations on it.[3]

But sooner or later we find that not everything is to our liking in this book. It starts out sweet to our taste; and then we find that it doesn't sit well with us at all; it becomes bitter in our stomachs. Finding ourselves in this book is most pleasant, flattering even; and then we find that the book is not written to flatter us, but to involve us in a reality, God's reality, that doesn't cater to our fantasies of ourselves.

There are hard things in this book, hard things to hear, hard things to obey. There are words in this book that are difficult to digest. John got a severe case of indigestion.

But it is not just the hard sayings, it is the *way* the Bible comes to us. There are moments when it strikes us as totally strange, impossible to fit into our scheme of thinking and living. We try our best to domesticate this revelation, to fit it into our version of the way we would like things to be. Far too much of our so-called study of the Bible is an attempt to come up with explanations or programs that fit the Holy Trinity into our Holy Needs, Holy Wants, and Holy Feelings.

Every careful reader of the Bible is struck by how "recurringly odd and unaccommodating"[4] it is to what we are used to and expect. The Bible is "no easy read."[5]

It is far too common among us to develop a problem-solving habit of approach to the Bible, figuring out what doesn't seem to fit and then sanding off the rough edges, so that it slips into our ways of thinking more easily. We want to use it for comfort, and if it doesn't work comfortably we reconfigure it so that it will. One good friend warns his students against becoming expert text-nicians. Text-nicians learn this text, master it inside and out, so that they can repair it when we sense it's a little "off," so that it will run smoothly and get us where we want to go with our needs and wants and feelings.

But nothing in our Bibles is one-dimensional, systematized, or theologized. Everything in the text is intimately and organically linked to lived reality. We can no more diagram and chart the Bible into neatly labeled subjects or developments than we can our gardens. A garden is constantly changing with growth of both flowers and weeds. Or, to take a more complex comparison, think of a county fair crowded with carnival rides and sideshows, children clutching allowance money, farm animals on exhibit and horse races, men and women from every station of life. The place is charged with life, human and animal, good and bad, greedy and generous, indolent and determined. Such things, whether garden or county fair, can only be *entered.*

The Bible is a revelation of such lived reality, with God as the dominant form of life. Truths cannot be extracted from it — every detail must be taken as it comes to us in the text where it is found. "Every *what* is linked to a *how,*" writes Walter Brueggemann; "we cannot generalize or summarize, but must pay attention to the detail"[6]

The most frequent way we have of getting rid of the puzzling or unpleasant difficulties in the Bible is to systematize it, organizing it according to some scheme or other that summarizes "what the Bible teaches." If we know what the Bible teaches, we don't have to read it anymore, don't have to enter the story and immerse ourselves in the odd and unflattering and uncongenial way in which this story develops, including so many people and circumstances that have nothing to do, we think, with us.

We are fond of saying that the Bible has all the answers. And that is certainly correct. The text of the Bible sets us in a reality that is congruent with who we are as created beings in God's image and what we are destined for in the purposes of Christ. But the Bible also has all the questions, many of them that we would just as soon were never asked of us, and some of which we will spend the rest of our lives doing our best to dodge. The Bible is a most comforting book; it is also a most discomfiting book. Eat this book; it will be sweet as honey in your mouth; but it will also be bitter to your stomach. You can't reduce this book to what you can handle; you can't domesticate this book to what you are comfortable with. You can't make it your toy poodle, trained to respond to your commands.

This book makes us participants in the world of God's being and action; but we don't participate on our own terms. We don't get to make up the plot or decide what character we will be. This book has generative power; things happen to us as we let the text call forth, stimulate, rebuke, prune us. We don't end up the same.

Eat this book, but also have a well-stocked cupboard of Alka-Seltzer and Pepto-Bismol at hand.

The Immense World of the Bible

Earlier (in Chapter 1) I referred to Karl Barth's reference to the "strange new world within the Bible." He passionately, relentlessly insisted that this is a book like no other book. Every expectation that we bring to this book is inadequate or mistaken. This is a text that reveals the sovereign God in being and action. It does not flatter us, it does not seek to please us. We enter this text to meet God as he reveals himself, not to look for truth or history or morals that we can use for ourselves. What he insisted upon supremely was that we do not read the Bible in order to find out how to get God into our lives, get him to participate in our lives. That's getting it backward.

As we cultivate a participatory mind-set in relation to our Bibles, we need a complete renovation of our imaginations. We are accustomed to thinking of the biblical world as smaller than the secular world. Tell-tale phrases give us away. We talk of "making the Bible relevant to the world," as if the world is the fundamental reality and the Bible something that is going to help it or fix it. We talk of "fitting the Bible

into our lives" or "making room in our day for the Bible," as if the Bible is something that we can add on to or squeeze into our already full lives.

As we personally participate in the Scripture-revealed world of the emphatically personal God, we not only have to be willing to accept the strangeness of this world — that it doesn't fit our preconceptions or tastes — but also the staggering largeness of it. We find ourselves in a truly expanding universe that exceeds anything we learned in our geography or astronomy books.

Our imaginations have to be revamped to take in this large, immense world of God's revelation in contrast to the small, cramped world of human "figuring out." We learn to live, imagine, believe, love, converse in this immense and richly organic and detailed world to which we are given access by our Old and New Testaments. "Biblical" does not mean cobbling texts together to prove or substantiate some dogma or practice that we have landed on. Rather, it signals an opening up into what "no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, [but] what God … has revealed to us through the spirit" (1 Cor. 2:9-10).

What we must never be encouraged to do, although all of us are guilty of it over and over, is to force Scripture to fit our experience. Our experience is too small; it's like trying to put the ocean into a thimble. What we want is to fit into the world revealed by Scripture, to swim in this vast ocean.

What we are after is first noticing and then participating in the way the large world of the Bible absorbs the much smaller world of our science and economics and politics that provides the so-called worldview in which we are used to working out our daily concerns.

This means we have to abandon all condescending approaches to the Bible. Most of us have been trained in what is sometimes termed a "hermeneutics of suspicion." People lie a lot. And people who write lie more than most. We are taught to bring a healthy suspicion to everything we read, especially when it claims authority over us. And rightly so. We examine and cross-examine the text. What's going on here? What's the hidden agenda? What's behind all of this? The three modern masters of the hermeneutic of suspicion are Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud. They taught us well to take nothing at face value.

Much of this is useful. We don't want to be taken in, manipulated by clever wordsmiths or enticed by skilled publicists and advertisers to buy things we don't want and will never use, involved in some soul-destroying program by a smooth-talking propagandist. In matters that have to do with God, we are doubly on our guard, suspicious of everything and everyone, including the Bible. We've learned to our sorrow that religious people lie more than most others — and lies in the name of God are the worst lies of all.

But as we narrow our eyes in suspicion, the world is correspondingly narrowed down. And when we

take these reading habits to our reading of Holy Scripture, we end up with a small sawdust heap of facts.

Paul Ricoeur has wonderful counsel for people like us. Go ahead, he says, maintain and practice your hermeneutics of suspicion. It is important to do this. Not only important, it is necessary. There are a lot of lies out there; learn to discern the truth and throw out the junk. But then reenter the book, the world, with what he calls "a second naiveté."[7] Look at the world with childlike wonder, ready to be startled into surprised delight by the profuse abundance of truth and beauty and goodness that is spilling out of the skies at every moment. Cultivate a hermeneutics of adoration — see how large, how splendid, how magnificent life is.

And then practice this hermeneutic of adoration in the reading of Holy Scripture. Plan on spending the rest of your lives exploring and enjoying the world both vast and intricate that is revealed by this text.

Obedience

We enter the world of the text, the world in which God is subject, in order to become participants in the text. We have our part to play in this text, a part that is given to us by the Holy Spirit. As we play our part we become *part*-icipants.

We are given this book so that we can imaginatively and believingly enter the world of the text and follow Jesus. John Calvin in his treatment of Holy Scripture is commonly cited in this regard: "all right knowledge of God is born of obedience."[8] There is hardly a Scripture exegete or translator of any standing in the Christian community who hasn't said the same thing.

If we have not entered this text as participants we aren't going to understand what is going on. This text cannot be understood by watching from the bleachers — or even from expensive box seats. We are in on it.

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The participatory quality of spiritual reading struck me forcibly when I was thirty-five years old. I had taken up running again. I had run in college and seminary and enjoyed it immensely, but when I left school, I left running. It never occurred to me that running was something an adult might do just for the fun of it. Besides, I was a pastor now and I wasn't sure how my parishioners would take to seeing their pastor running thinly clad along the back roads of our community. But I was noticing other people, doctors and lawyers and executives whom I knew, running in unexpected places without apparent loss of dignity, men and women my age and older, and realized that I could probably get by with it too. I went out and bought running shoes — Adidas, they were — and discovered the revolution in footwear that had taken place since my student days. I began having fun, enjoying again the smooth rhythms of long-distance running, the quietness, the solitude, the heightened

senses, the muscular freedom, the texture of the ground under my feet, the robust embracing immediacy of the weather — wind, sun, rain, snow … whatever. Soon I was competing in 10K races every month or so, and then a marathon once a year. Running developed from a physical act to a ritual that gathered meditation, reflection, and prayer into the running. By this time I was subscribing to three running magazines and regularly getting books from the library on runners and running. I never tired of reading about running — diet, stretching, training methods, care of injuries, resting heart rate, endorphins, carbohydrate loading, electrolyte replacements — if it was about running I read it. How much is there to write about running? There aren't an infinite number of ways you can go about it — mostly it is just putting one foot before the other. None of the writing, with few exceptions, was written very well. But it didn't matter that I had read nearly the same thing twenty times before; it didn't matter if the prose was patched together with clichés; I was a runner and I read it all.

And then I pulled a muscle and couldn't run for a couple of months as I waited for my thigh to heal. It took me about two weeks to notice that since my injury I hadn't picked up a running book or opened a running magazine. I didn't *decide* not to read them; they were still all over the house, but I wasn't reading them. I wasn't reading because I wasn't running. The moment I began running again I started reading again.

That is when I caught the significance of the modifier "spiritual" in "spiritual reading." It meant participatory reading. It meant that I read every word on the page as an extension or deepening or correction or affirmation of something that I was a part of. I was reading about running not primarily to find out something, not to learn something, but for companionship and validation and confirmation of the experience of running. Yes, I did learn a few things along the way, but mostly it was to extend and deepen and populate the world of running that I loved so much. But if I wasn't running, there was nothing to deepen.

The parallel with reading Scripture seems to me almost exact: if I am not participating in the reality — the God reality, the creation/salvation/holiness reality — revealed in the Bible, not involved in the obedience Calvin wrote of, I am probably not going to be much interested in reading about it — at least not for long.

Obedience is the thing, living in active response to the living God. The most important question we ask of this text is not, "What does this mean?" but "What can I obey?" A simple act of obedience will open up our lives to this text far more quickly than any number of Bible studies and dictionaries and concordances.

Not that the study is not important. A Jewish rabbi I once studied with would often say, "For us Jews studying the Bible is more important than obeying it, because if you don't understand it rightly you will

obey it wrongly and your obedience will be disobedience."

This also is true.

* * *

Anthony Plakados was a thirty-five-year-old truck driver in my congregation. Anthony grew up in a Greek home, conventionally Catholic, but none of it rubbed off. He left school after the eighth grade. He told me that he had never read a book. And then he became a Christian, got himself an old King James Bible with small print, and read it three times in that first year of his conversion. Anthony was off and running. Mary, his wife, was interested but also a bit bewildered by all this and asked a lot of questions. Mary had grown up a proper Presbyterian, gone to Sunday School all her growing up years, and was used to a religion of definitions and explanations. When Mary's questions got too difficult for Anthony, he would invite me to their trailer-house home, papered with Elvis Presley posters, to help him out. One evening the subject was the parables — Mary wasn't getting it. I was trying to tell her how to read them, how to make sense out of them. I wasn't getting on very well, and Anthony interrupted, "Mary, you got to live 'em, then you'll understand 'em; you can't figger 'em out from the outside, you got to git inside 'em — or let them git inside you."

And Anthony hadn't read so much as a word of John Calvin.

Reading Scripture Liturgically

I want to introduce a term now that may take some getting used to in this context: liturgy. As we eat this book, reading and responding and following, obeying and praying, as we take this all in and become participants in the text, we need help. We need the help of everyone and everything around us, for this is no private performance that we are engaged in, and we certainly are not the star of the show. "Liturgical" is the term I want to use to name the help we require. The Bible must be read liturgically.

To ward off confusion let me first say what I don't mean: by liturgy I don't mean what goes on in the chancel of a high Anglican church; I don't mean an order of worship; I don't mean robes and candles and incense and genuflections before the altar. Liturgy is properly used in all those settings, but I am after something else, I am after something deeper and higher and wider.

What I want to do is recontextualize our reading of Scripture, our eating of this book, into a huge holy community of others who are also reading it. There is a millennia-deep and globe-encircling community of others who are also at the table eating this book. Each time this book is assimilated formationally, the entire community — it is no exaggeration to say, the entire world — is involved and affected. The biblical story pulls the holy community — not just you, not just me — into the story in a participating way.

Liturgy is the means that the church uses to keep baptized Christians in living touch with the entire living holy community as it participates formationally in Holy Scripture. I want to use the word "liturgy" to refer to this intent and practice of the church insofar as it pulls everything in and out of the sanctuary into a life of worship, situates everything past and present coherently as participation in the revelation written for us in Scripture. Instead of limiting liturgy to the ordering of the community in discrete acts of worship, I want to use it in this large and comprehensive way, the centuries-deep and continents-wide community, spread out in space and time, as Christians participate in actions initiated and formed by the words in this book — our entire existence understood liturgically, that is, connectedly, in the context of the three-personal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and furnished with the text of Holy Scripture.

The task of liturgy is to order the life of the holy community following the text of Holy Scripture. It consists of two movements. First it gets us into the sanctuary, the place of adoration and attention, listening and receiving and believing before God. There is a lot involved, all the parts of our lives ordered to all aspects of the revelation of God in Jesus.

Then it gets us out of the sanctuary into the world into places of obeying and loving, ordering our lives as living sacrifices in the world to the glory of God. There is a lot involved, all the parts of our lives out on the street participating in the work of salvation.

This is the kind of thing that St. John does so impressively in the Apocalypse: presents us with everything there is, the world and our experience in it, Christ and all his angels, the Devil and all his angels, heaven and hell, salvation and damnation, congregations and empires, war and peace — everything visible and invisible — and makes an act of worship out of it. He then shows how everything in that world of worship spills into the world. There are no nonparticipants. No one is standing around watching.

What St. John does so masterfully in the Apocalypse, we continue to do liturgically in the holy community under the shaping of the Holy Spirit as it is given textuality in Holy Scripture.

Liturgy preserves and presents the Holy Scriptures in the context of the worshipping and obeying community of Christians who are at the center of everything God has done, is doing, and will do. The liturgy won't let us go off alone with our Bibles, or self-select a few friends for Bible study and let it go at that.

The liturgical practice of the church presents us with the Holy Scriptures read and listened to and believed in the context of everything that is:

Architecture is part of it — the use of stone and timber and glass.

Color — purples and greens, reds and whites — is part of it.

Song is part of it — our hymns and anthems, our organs and guitars, our clarinets and drums.

Ancestors are part of it — the saints and scholars who enrich our preaching and prayers.

Prayer is part of it — prayers individual and corporate, voicing our deeply personal response to God and the call of God to praise and witness and mission.

Neighbors are part of it — these men and women and children with such different tastes and temperaments from us, many of whom we don't like very much.

And time. Liturgy gathers the holy community as it reads the Holy Scriptures into the sweeping tidal rhythms of the church year in which the story of Jesus and the Christian makes its rounds century after century, the large and easy interior rhythms of a year that moves from birth, life, death, resurrection, on to spirit, obedience, faith, and blessing. Without liturgy we lose the rhythms and end up tangled in the jerky, ill-timed, and insensitive interruptions of public-relations campaigns, school openings and closings, sales days, tax deadlines, inventories, and elections. Advent is buried under "shopping days before Christmas." The joyful disciplines of Lent are exchanged for the anxious penitentials of filling out income tax forms. Liturgy keeps us in touch with the story as it defines and shapes our beginnings and ends, our living and dying, our rebirths and blessing in this Holy Spirit, text-formed community, visible and invisible.

When Holy Scripture is embraced liturgically, we become aware that a lot is going on all at once, a lot of different people are doing a lot of different things. The community is on its feet, at work for God, listening and responding to the Holy Scriptures. The holy community, in the process of being formed by the Holy Scriptures, is watching/listening to God's revelation taking shape before and in them as they follow Jesus, each person playing his or her part in the Spirit.

It is useful to reflect that the word "liturgy" did not originate in church or worship settings. In the Greek world it referred to public service, what a citizen did for the community. As the church used the word in relation to worship, it kept this "public service" quality — working for the community on behalf of or following orders from God. As we worship God, revealed personally as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in our Holy Scriptures, we are not doing something apart from or away from the non-Scripture-reading world; we do it *for* the world — bringing all creation and all history before God, presenting our bodies and all the beauties and needs of humankind before God in praise and intercession, penetrating and serving the world for whom Christ died in the strong name of the Trinity.

Liturgy puts us to work along with all the others who have been and are being put to work in the world by and with Jesus, following our spirituality-forming text. Liturgy keeps us in touch with all the action that has been and is being generated by the Spirit as given witness in the biblical text. Liturgy prevents the narrative form of Scripture from being reduced to private, individualized consumption.

Understood this way "liturgical" has little to do with choreography in the chancel or an aesthetics of the sublime. It is obedient, participatory listening to Holy Scripture in the company of the holy community through time (our two thousand years of responding to this text) and in space (our friends in Christ all over the world). High-church Anglicans, revivalistic Baptists, hands-in-the-air praising charismatics, and Quakers sitting in a bare room in silence are all required to read and live this text liturgically, participating in the holy community's reading of Holy Scripture. There is nothing "churchy" or elitist about it; it is a vast and dramatic "story-ing," making sure that we are taking our place in the story and letting everyone else have their parts in the story also, making sure that we don't leave anything or anyone out of the story. Without sufficient liturgical support and structure we are very apt to edit the story down to fit our individual tastes and predispositions.

Virtuoso Spirituality

Frances Young uses the extended analogy of music and its performance to provide a way of understanding the interrelated complexities of reading and living the Holy Scriptures, what John experienced as eating the book. Her book *Virtuoso Theology* searches out what she names as "the complex challenges involved in seeking authenticity in performance."[9] It is of the very nature of music that it is to be performed. Can music that is not performed be called "music"? Performance, though, does not consist in accurately reproducing the notes in the score as written by the composer, although it includes this. Everyone recognizes the difference between an accurate but wooden performance of, say, Mozart's Violin Concerto No. 1, and a virtuoso performance by Yitzak Perlman. Perlman's performance is not distinguished merely by his technical skill in reproducing what Mozart composed; he wondrously enters into and conveys the spirit and energy — the "life" — of the score. Significantly, he adds nothing to the score, neither "jot nor tittle." Even though he might reasonably claim that, with access to the interrelated psychologies of music and sexuality, he understands Mozart much better than Mozart understood himself, he restrains himself; he does not interpolate.

One of the continuous surprises of musical and dramatic performance is the sense of fresh spontaneity that comes in the performance: faithful attention to the text does not result in slavish effacement of personality; rather, it releases what is inherent in the text itself as the artist performs; "music has to be 'realized' through performance and interpretation."[10]

Likewise Holy Scripture. The two analogies, performing the music and eating the book, work admirably together. The complexity of the performance analogy supplements the earthiness of the eating analogy (and vice versa) in directing the holy com-

munity to enter the world of Holy Scripture formationally.

But if we are "unscripted," Alasdair MacIntyre's word in this context,[11] we spend our lives as anxious stutterers in both our words and actions. But when we do this rightly — performing the score, eating the book, embracing the holy community that internalizes this text — we are released into freedom: "I will run in the way of thy commandments when thou enlargest my understanding" (Ps. 119:32).

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1. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Image, 1959), p. 61.

2. Artur Weiser's comment is typical: "a many-coloured mosaic of thoughts which are often repeated in a wearisome fashion." *The Psalms* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), p. 739.

3. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Meditating on the Word,* ed. David McI. Grace (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley, 1986), pp. 13-14.

4. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), p. 3.

5. Mark Coleridge, "Life in the Crypt or Why Bother with Biblical Studies," *Biblical Interpretation* 2 (July 1994): 148.

6. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament,* p. 55.

7. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon, 1967), p. 351.

8. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), vol. 1, chap. 6, section 2.

9. Frances Young, *Virtuoso Theology* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1993), p. 21.

10. Young, *Virtuoso Theology,* p. 22. The "performance" analogy has also been used effectively by Nicholas Lash, "Performing the Scriptures," in *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM, 1986); and Brian Jenner, "Music to the Sinner's Ear?" *Epworth Review* 16 (1989): 35-38.

11. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 216.