

Preaching with Variety: How to Recreate the Dynamics of Biblical Genres

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“We get bored with preaching the Bible because we treat the Bible as an assortment of texts from which to build sermons. To actually preach with variety and excitement, we must treat the Scriptures as they are - a library of different types of great literature” (11). So writes Haddon Robinson in the Foreword to Arthur’s book. Robinson is asking us to recognize that scriptural texts provide us with far more than “points” which we must then assemble into sermons of our own creating as if assembling so many interchangeable Legos. Scriptural texts offer so much more than merely the *what* of our sermons; they stand ready to offer us a powerful assist also in *how* to communicate that message.

It is helping us to see that variety of the form of inspired Scripture and to ponder what that means for our sermons, that is the heart of Arthur’s book. Here’s how Arthur defines his purpose in writing:

I believe that a sermon's *content* should explain and apply the Word of God as it is found in a biblical text, and a sermon's *form* should unleash the impact of that text. The second part of that declaration is the special province of this book. We should be biblical in how we preach, not just what we preach. (13)

When asked by an expert in the law to define "neighbor," Jesus told a story (Luke 10:25-37). Why? To accomplish something that would have been difficult to accomplish with another form. He wanted to reframe the discussion, gradually reveal the truth, instruct the lawyer, engage him holistically, lead him to understand his own heart, convince him of his need, convict him of his values, cause him to ponder the truth, and lead him to faith and repentance. The form of Jesus' communication was an indispensable component in achieving those goals. For the Great Communicator, form is not simply the husk surrounding the seed, superfluous and cumbersome; it is more like the architectural design of the Vietnam Memorial, inseparable from meaning and impact.

We know intuitively, of course, that form and content go together. Instead of sending an e-mail, for instance, send a singing telegram, and you'll see a difference in how the receiver responds. Instead of shouting at your kids, whisper. The content may be identical, but the impact will be different. Leaf through your mail. Pick up the glossy brochure for a Hawaiian cruise. It shows happy, toned people in crystal blue oceans. The message is packaged as a shimmering vision. Imagine the same identical content packaged as a one-page business letter, or drawn with crayon. You don't need the artistic sensibilities of a Van Gogh to realize that form and content are a unit. (24-25)

Lest we draw an overly simplistic conclusion from what he writes, Arthurs also warns about what he calls “form fundamentalism.”

Now that I've argued that the form of the biblical text is part of how God, as artist and persuader, expresses himself, and now that I've implied that preachers should pay attention to form, I want to make clear that I'm not a "form fundamentalist." I do not assert that we must slavishly and minutely copy the exact genre of the text. Besides being impossible - for no single person can replicate all the dynamics of a text - it might also be ill advised, because we stand between two worlds. We communicate with a different audience than the original audience, and sermons must take into account the needs of the current listeners. The key to genre sensitive preaching is to replicate the impact of the text, not its exact techniques, although technique is the best place to start. A narrative text naturally lends itself to a narrative sermon; a poetic text structured with parallelism naturally lends itself to restatement. But no law tells us that we must use narrative or restatement. We have freedom. (27-28)

Arthurs should be commended for avoiding another misunderstanding right from the start. As much as Arthurs believes that paying more attention to the form of biblical texts can provide rich variety to our preaching, he understands that this is not the heart of good preaching.

Our Lord says to us, "Watch your life and your doctrine closely, because in doing so you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Tim. 4:16). He does not say, "Watch your sermon forms closely, because in them you find life." An observer asked Charles Spurgeon's brother the basis of the great pulpiteer's success. The brother replied, "I think it lies in the fact that he loves Jesus of Nazareth and Jesus of Nazareth loves him." (15)

At the heart of good preaching is the heart of a preacher that, by the Spirit's power, has been cut and healed by the law and gospel of that text, and that seeks to be God's tool to accomplish the same in his hearers. No attention to the variety of scriptural forms and imitating that in our sermons, can overcome the loss of the beating gospel heart of preaching. Yet, where that heart is in place by the Spirit's grace, then the encouragement of this book can be a rich blessing.

As Arthurs seeks to instruct us in rich variety of scriptural genres, here is how he organizes his book. In his introduction, Arthurs provides, with apologies to Martin Luther, 9.5 Theses on what preaching with variety is and isn't. In chapter 1 ("The Great Communicator"), Arthurs proceeds to make his point for preaching with variety of form by holding before us the variety in Jesus' teaching. In chapter 2 ("Speaking Bantu to Channel Surfers") Arthurs points out how the many different hearers sitting before us make it important that we preach in all the variety Scripture models for us.

The rest of the chapters then hold before us one by one various genres of biblical literature (psalms, narrative, parables, proverbs, epistles, and apocalyptic literature). In each chapter (two chapters for narrative) Arthurs unfolds how each particular genre "work" and how the preacher might seek to incorporate those insights into how he arranges his sermon.

Here are samples of insights Arthurs shares:

- In regard to the Psalms he writes: "I also recommend listening to the text because poets wrote for the ear. Read the text aloud or listen to a professional recording. Robert Frost said, 'The ear

is the only true writer and the only true reader. I have known people who could read without hearing the sentence sounds and they were the fastest readers. Eye readers we call them. They can get the meaning by glances. But they are bad readers because they miss the best part of what a good writer puts into his work.' It is a happy circumstance that part of the aural quality of Hebrew poetry comes through even in translation because parallelism is one of the few poetic devices that transfers from one language to another. The psalmist wrote in balanced, pulsing, coordinate phrases, and we hear them that way even in English"(50).

- In regard to narrative he writes: "Gifted preachers can even imply, rather than expound, the big idea. Stories often carry their assertions and imperatives through the back door of the listener's mind. Why not try it yourself? Homiletician Sidney Greidanus states that preaching from narrative should be more by 'suggestion than by assertion.' Robinson agrees: 'Narratives are most effective when the audience hears the story and arrives at the speaker's ideas without the ideas being stated directly.' By prompting the listeners to infer your main idea, you may find your sermons to be more, not less, persuasive because physics and persuasion share a common axiom: 'For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.' The 'action' of argument causes people to push back. The 'action' of story causes people to lean in" (87).
- Here are two brief insights he shares about Proverbs:
 - "Since proverbs distill general categories of human experience, we must remember that they are not promises. The biblical sage has observed that the fear of the Lord adds years to life (9:11), but presumably the same sage would agree that holy men and women have, indeed, been martyred" (136).
 - "As you study your text, remember that proverbs are general observations. That is the nature of the genre. To be sure, they are inspired general observations, but they are not promises. God has arranged the world so that cause-effect and action-consequence are normal patterns, but as we all know, those patterns have plenty of exceptions. Proverbs summarize the normal patterns, and the books of Ecclesiastes and Job handle the exceptions" (141).
- Here are two samples of his encouragement in the Epistles (both of which should make gospel-predominating Lutheran preachers smile):
 - "This theological worldview [of the epistles] provides the rationale for behavior by grounding the imperative in the indicative. That is, the epistles command, rebuke, and exhort, but they do so on the basis of the character and work of God. Because God loves us (indicative), we should love each other (imperative) (1 John). Because Jesus will come again, we should not grieve like those who have no hope (1 Thess. 4). Because Jesus became poor for us, we should give generously (2 Cor. 8). In the epistles, action is motivated by the facts of theology" (155-156).
 - "As already seen, this how the epistles argue. Their behavioral standards are extremely high, yet they always provide the motive and power to reach those standards. The motive is the love of Christ, which compels us (2 Cor. 5:14), and the grace of God, which teaches us to say no to ungodliness (Titus 2:12). The power is the resurrection of Christ, ours by virtue of union with him (Eph. 1:19-20; Phil. 3:10-11).

So challenge your people to lay aside every weight that hinders and every sin that entangles. Urge them to pray without ceasing and to obey the governing authorities. Charge them to stop complaining and to start thanking. But in your urging, move them by the deep, deep love of Jesus - vast, unmeasured, boundless, and free" (174)"

- Finally, here is a sample of his encouragement when preaching on apocalyptic visions: "Preaching this genre may feel like handling snakes, but let's remember that God has given it a major place in the canon. There is, in fact, more of this genre than two of the other genres we've looked at - proverb and parable. That alone is sufficient reason to preach it. I hope that after reading this current chapter, though, you'll be motivated to preach it not only from a sense of duty but also with a sense of joy and confidence, because the central message of apocalyptic graphically encapsulates the faith: the Devil hates us, but he loses; God loves us, and he wins; it isn't even close; it is permanent. That will preach!" (179).

As much as this reader enjoyed and benefitted in his preaching from reading this book, it does have its weaknesses. The most obvious was that, despite some beautiful statements of Christocentric purposes in preaching scattered in the book, when Arthurs states the basic purpose of preaching he stays true to a "sovereignty of God" approach of much of Christendom influenced by John Calvin. "To use John Piper's phrase, the goal of our preaching must be the 'supremacy of God'" (15).

The next problem floated throughout the book, not so much in what was said, but what was often, strangely, unsaid. Compared to Thomas Long (see the review of his book), Arthurs has a very high view of Scripture. Yet Arthurs too often left unstated, as he urged imitating Scripture's rhetorical skill, that only the power of the Holy Spirit can enlighten hearts and give understanding. The impression could often easily be gained that it is the rhetorical skill of the preacher by which the light is turned on for our hearers. For example, on page 93, after mentioning how a preacher might incorporate a particular rhetorical element in preaching, Arthurs adds, "Your sermon will likely be highly effective." Again and again what was missing was an explicit statement that it is the supernatural working of the Spirit who is at work along with the more "psychological" element, and without the former that latter will be empty human effort.

It might also be added that Thomas Long's theoretical explanation of the use of biblical genres, far surpassed Arthur's in depth, although Arthur's practical insights in how to make use of elements of rhetorical form may be more helpful than Long's.

All in all, Arthur's book is well worth the time invested in reading it. The multitude of insights can help us all see more clearly the rich variety of the rhetorical beauty of Scripture and can help us make use of those insights in our preaching.