



Imitating Scriptural Variety in Our Preaching Styles

Proclaim Grace! Key Issue #10

By Richard Gurgel

"Ten thousand, thousand, are their texts, but all their sermons one" (Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture*, 126). I'd cry out, "Gross overstatement!", but my own sermons would pronounce me a liar!

I was trained in the basic theme and parts, deductive form of preaching (a sound basic method of preaching that fits many texts—especially epistles). The vast majority of my sermons for the first fifteen years of ministry followed that pattern rather slavishly.

Very seldom did I pause to ponder whether the text might have something important to say about how it wanted to be organized and preached. Instead, after having performed a point-ectomy on the text on my exegetical examining table, I assumed the text had served its purpose. I reached into my bag of theme and parts deductive patterns and poured the points into my predetermined form.

From time to time a text would spring back to life and resist—shouting that it had more to offer than I'd seen. But I was usually quite successful in anesthetizing the text long enough to get past Sunday morning without second thoughts. There were a few sermons, some interesting, some ugly in which I tried my hand at different sermonic patterns. Yet for the most part all texts were forced to submit to my predetermined form.

But as the parish gave way to seminary, the ghost of repetitive sermonic patterns past came back to haunt me in hundreds of submitted assignments. Slowly, my encouragements to students began to change to something that, as I look back, was apparent in my last parish years. When preaching on the narratives of Scripture, I was urging students to spend more time enjoying the narrative and letting the narrative plot carry the sermon's structure.

That was the beginning of grasping a much larger point that should have dawned on me much earlier. An inspired text has a right to tell me not only *what* it has to say, but also *how* it would like to say it. Too often, I was in such a hurry to steal points to fill

my template that I ignored the rich suggestions the text had for how it could be preached.

In his book, *Preaching with Variety*, Jeffrey Arthurs lays the challenge before us:

The form of a text is not simply the husk surrounding the seed; it is the way authors manage their relationship with readers. Much of the authors' rhetorical intentions lie in the forms they choose. Poetry embodies and elicits emotion with its images, hyperbole, and self-disclosure. Narrative prompts identification as we walk in the shoes of biblical characters. Proverbs, brief and witty summaries of wisdom, require us to contemplate their meaning. Parables spark meditation by comparing the kingdom of God with the city of man. Epistles carry us along in a flow of logic, but they can also carry us up to the heights of delight with doxology and prayer. Apocalypse parades a dazzling pageant before the mind's eye to remind us that God wins, and it isn't even close.

Expository preachers pay attention to form. We consider not only *what* God has communicated but also *how* he has communicated. And because there is no such thing as *the* sermon form, we have freedom to use various communication methods to unleash the rhetorical force of the text. Just as our Lord and the prophets used rational and affective modes of communication—discourse and narrative, word and image, monologue and dialogue, prose and poetry—so can we. Give it a try! Your hearers may bless you, and your preaching may take on new life. Yield to the ideas and form of the text, and expect God to transform the listeners through the living and enduring Word of God (1 Peter 1:23), which is able to make us wise for salvation (2 Tim. 3:15).

This issue of *Preach the Word* asks us to ponder that variety for preaching just waiting to be discovered in the rich literary variety of inspired Scripture.

May I Ask Another Question?

“Whoever goes to the Bible in search of *what* to preach but does not linger long enough to learn *how* to preach has left its pages much too soon” (Craddock, *Preaching*, 16).



Since not a word—or literary device—dropped by accident from the pen of the Spirit, we have every reason to consider *how* the inspired author organized his message.

But what questions should we ask as we linger long enough to learn not only *what* a text says but *how* the inspired author said it?

Thomas Long, in *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*, offers this a set of questions.

1. **What is the genre of the text?** (25)
2. **What is the rhetorical function of this genre?**
“Once we have identified the genre of a text, the next question becomes, What is this particular genre designed to *do* in the reading process?” (25)
3. **What literary devices does this genre employ to achieve its rhetorical effect?**
“The previous question asked what the text *does* for and to the reader. This question asks, *How* does the text do what it does? What literary features are present in the text which allow it to accomplish its rhetorical work?” (30)
4. **How in particular does the text under consideration, in its own literary setting, embody the characteristics and dynamics described in the previous questions?**
Sometimes the inspired author signals critical elements by using a particular genre’s literary conventions. Some times he signals meaning by breaking those conventions (30-33).
5. **How may the sermon, in a new setting, say and do what the text says and does in its setting?**
What will be the impact of the form and structure of my text on the form and structure of my sermon? Arthurs warns about becoming “form fundamentalists.”

Not a word—or literary device—dropped by accident from the pen of the Spirit.

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)

So, what would be some of the insights that asking such questions might yield in texts from a particular genre of Scripture? That’s page three!



Never Sacrifice Substance for Style

Recognizing that there is no sermonic form that must rule as king in Lutheran pulpits doesn’t mean we’ve arrived at the homiletical period of the judges when each pastor does as he sees fit in (or out of) his pulpit. Living in a sound bite age where style often trumps substance, we must be especially vigilant that we don’t abandon as mere sermonic style what is really unchanging homiletical substance. Even as we seek to capture the variety of form Scripture exemplifies, here’s what would make my short-list of Lutheran preaching non-negotiables:

- The sermon proclaims Christ clearly in a way fitting for each text’s language and imagery as that text takes its unique place in salvation history.
- The sermon proclaims clear law/gospel distinctions as they are naturally drawn (no templates!) implicitly or explicitly from the text/context, always evidencing that the preacher knows himself and his hearers as *simul justus et peccator*.
- The sermon is carefully organized to make one clear textual point (theme) with evident application to hearers’ hearts and lives, whether that point is stated up front (deductive patterns) or is saved to be revealed as the inevitable conclusion (inductive patterns).
- The preacher honors the privilege of speaking for God from thorough text study in the original language through careful preparation of the delivered sermon.
- The preacher trusts that the Spirit is always at work through the Word proclaimed to produce repentance and faith, so he uses his First Article gifts, to proclaim Second Article truths, with Third Article confidence.

Appreciating the Beauty of Your Text's Genre

"But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice" (Philippians 1:18). As Paul languished in chains, his suffering emboldened some to preach the gospel without fear. Others proclaimed the gospel to cause Paul trouble. Either way, Paul smiled as Christ was preached.

Is there a homiletical analogy? In the last three decades there's been an explosion of writing on Scripture's literary beauty. Yes, much comes from those whose view of Scripture is far too low. But even many liberal scholars have grown tired of the historical-critical method savaging Scripture to get "behind the text." Many are shifting to standing "in front of the text" to admire Scripture's beauty. While we wish they'd abandon the dangerous presuppositions of the historical critical method, much of what they've written is extremely useful. "Whether from false motives or true," their insights assist gospel proclamation by highlighting the literary variety of the Spirit's handiwork.

Allow the narrative to provide your hearers that same sense of discovery you had as you wrestled with the text

A brief article can't capture what many books have shared about biblical genres. But here are some hints of what to look for in narrative, the most common scriptural form.

- **Here's your outline!** Once you've grasped the law and gospel at the narrative's heart, use the narrative flow as the flow of the sermon so as to provide your hearers that same sense of discovery you had as you pondered the narrative.
- **It's rude to interrupt!** Narrative leads readers/hearers to identify with someone/something in the narrative. We can frustrate that if we impatiently break in to tell our hearers what it all means for us. Certainly at some point we will say "as then . . . so now; as they . . . so we," but notice how often the Spirit seems to be convinced his chosen literary form can communicate that quite well by itself!
- **He said what???** "Out of the overflow of the mouth the heart speaks" (Matthew 12:34). The narrative's

beating law and gospel heart, stated in doctrinal propositions in epistles, is often revealed by dialog that provides a sounding of the depth of the speaker's heart. While it can be challenging to probe those "deep waters" (Proverbs 18:4), the inspired author is inviting us to discover the heart's motives.

- **The delight is in the details!** Unlike lengthier novels, scriptural narratives typically offer few details. But what is provided is not mere ornament. Often, the inspired author is

helping us understand the significance of the dialog. When we are told that a rich young man (Mark 10) "ran up to [Jesus]" and "fell on his knees before him," the Spirit is preparing us to hear the inner turmoil of a heart that lacks peace with God.

- **Stand too close (or close enough) for comfort!** Craddock advises:

Once a text is selected, a decision needs to be made as to where one stands in the text. . . . It makes a whale of a difference in content and mood and delivery. If the text deals with a dispute between Jesus and the Pharisees, does the minister assume the role of Jesus and lay it on the Pharisees (the congregation), or stand with the Pharisees and listen to Jesus? Unless the decision is made, it is likely that by natural gravitation the minister will be Paul, or Jesus, or the father in the story of the prodigal, or the master talking to his servants, or some other favored character in the biblical scripts. If the minister discovers that he has in his sermons assumed all the favored roles, always the speaker and not the listener, it would be healthy to stand elsewhere now and then . . . Be the older brother in the story of the prodigal and listen with his ears to the music and dancing. Are you really in favor of parties for prodigals? . . . Understand, this is not a game, a device for some new sermons on old texts. This issue has to do with one's approach to any text. Does one preach on a text or get into it, and share what is heard? The issue is whether or not we who preach have heard the Word. Anyone who has been thrilled, frightened, moved, paralyzed, honored, humbled, and inescapably addressed by his simple call, "Follow me," has the basic raw material for a sermon. (As *One Without Authority*, 110-111)

With all this waiting to be explored in *one* scriptural genre, imagine the beauty the Spirit has waiting for us in *all* its literary forms!





Rhetorical Wisdom from Our Fathers

Two church fathers confirm that using rhetorical beauty in proclaiming the gospel is no 21st century novelty. Here's John Meyer's testimony about how rhetorical beauty serves the gospel.

From the early centuries of the Christian Church down to the present time the question has been debated whether oratorical art is applicable to the proclaiming of the Gospel. While it must be admitted that Jesus sent his disciples, not with the instruction to be his orators, but his witnesses, yet for this reason rhetorical embellishments need not necessarily be barred from the presentation of the Gospel truths. A witness must tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. But the Gospel, being the truth of God's infinite love and mercy, is of such a nature that it will thrill men's hearts and stir their emotions. It is hardly capable of being presented in the cold fashion becoming a mathematical deduction. Any attempt to eliminate the emotions robs the Gospel of its principal characteristic. Be it presented in ever so simple sentences, the language will radiate with warmth.

Whenever truth stirs the heart and moves men to present it for the ear or for the eye, art is the result. Thus every thing that may rightfully be called art, art in all its aspects, is not incompatible with the Gospel, rather it should be a ready instrument in its promulgation. This includes the art of oratory. As the poet is moved by the thrilling truth of the Gospel to strain his phantasy in order to present this lofty theme in lofty language, so the orator will employ all the resources of his art, all the rhetorical figures of speech, to present the Gospel truth in the strongest and most convincing form of which human language is capable. Even the hyperbole need not necessarily have to be excepted.

All rhetoric however, although adeptness in its employment may have been attained by diligent and persistent exercise, must be spontaneous in character.

The Gospel must stir the rhetoric, not vice versa. Rhetoric must be content to serve. When it is made to be an end in itself it becomes hollow and untrue; when its figures are such that they cannot bear closer inspection they become a mere jingle, subversive of their own object . . .

We who have been called to be public witnesses of the Gospel will do well to study the art of oratory. The powerful truth of God is worthy of the most powerful instrument of conveyance. But above all, let us be imbued with the truth itself that we may experience its thrill in every fiber of our heart. Then our rhetoric will be dignified and sanctified by the cause which it serves. (*Theologische Quartalschrift*, April 1921, 144-145)

We finish with Augustine's testimony on the rhetorical beauty of Scripture.

Nor was [Scripture] composed by man's art and care, but it flowed forth in wisdom and eloquence from the divine mind; wisdom not aiming at eloquence, yet eloquence not shrinking from wisdom. For if, as certain very eloquent and acute men have perceived and said, the rules which are laid down in the art of oratory could not have been observed, and noted, and reduced to system, if they had not first had their birth in the genius of orators, is it wonderful that they should be found in the messengers of him who is the author of all genius? Therefore let us acknowledge that the canonical writers are not only wise but eloquent also, with an eloquence suited to a character and position like theirs. (*On Christian Doctrine*, Book IV, Chap. 8, Par. 21)



As we come to a close of the ten key issues in this series, please note the many preaching resources (articles, book excerpts, reviews, study guides, sermons in text/audio/video) remain available on the *Grow in Grace* web site to match each issue.

For this final key issue the online resources are:

- A discussion guide.
- Audio and text files of two sermons that capture well how a text can shape both the *what* and the *how* of the sermon.
- Three reviews of books that treat more in depth preaching on different genres of Scripture:
 - *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* by Thomas Long
 - *Preaching with Variety: How to Re-create the Dynamics of Biblical Genres* by Jeffrey Arthurs
 - *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form* by Eugene Lowry.