

Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible

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Thomas Long challenges us all to approach our chosen text with an extra set of questions. Instead of merely looking at *what* a text says (its content, its point), Long urges us to pause long enough to notice *how* the text says what it does. He urges us to pay attention to the different forms of literature (the different genres of narrative, parable, psalm, epistle, etc.) utilized on the pages of Scripture and ask whether “the form of the content” might not at times be almost as important as the “point” that is being made.

It is particularly crucial that preachers give attention to biblical literary form and dynamics because these are precisely the aspects of biblical texts commonly washed out in the typical text-to-sermon process. It is ironic that preachers often disregard these dimensions of a text since attention to these “textual poetics” brings us into contact with what resonates most harmoniously with a key ingredient in the homiletical task: deciding how to preach so that the sermon embodies in its language, form, and style the gospel it seeks to proclaim. (12)

Long then goes on to describe the all too familiar pattern of how we often approach texts with little or no thought to the question of *how* the text communicates.

The unfortunate result of overlooking the literary properties of biblical texts is the tendency to view those texts by default as inert containers for biblical concepts. The preacher's tasks then becomes simply throwing the text into an exegetical winepress, squeezing out the ideational matter, and then figuring out homiletical ways to make those ideas attractive to contemporary listeners. The literary and rhetorical shape of the texts matters not at all; it is discarded as ornament. (12)

If Thomas Long, who in this book clearly reveals that his view of Scripture is something less than verbal inerrancy, believes it is important to pause long enough to gain preaching insights from the literary form of the text, what does that say to us who believe that not a single part of the *what* or the *how* came from the writer's own wisdom but flowed directly from the Spirit? If those who only see Scripture as beautiful literature (Long's view of Scripture is not quite that low) pause to marvel at “how” a biblical text makes its point, should we do anything less? Since we believe that everything about Scripture flows from the wisdom of the Spirit of God, why would we draw the conclusion that the form the Spirit used to communicate that message is a matter of little importance?

For those with a high view of Scripture, Long's encouragement should resonate to consider how content and form interact with one another.

The mistake in this, of course, is that the literary dimensions of texts are not merely decorative. Texts are not packages containing ideas; they are means of communication. When we ask ourselves what a text means, we are not searching for the idea of the text. We are trying to discover its total impact upon a reader - and everything about a text works together to create that impact. We may casually speak of the form and the content of the text as if they were two separate realities, but if "content" is used as a synonym for "meaning," the form must be seen as a vital part of the content. Perhaps it would be better to speak of the form of the content. (12-13)

As Long seeks to help us discover and make use of "the form of the content," his book moves through two parts. The first, and much briefer part, comprises the opening two chapters in which he gives us the rationale behind his encouragements as well as adding a whole new set of questions to ask as we work through texts. The questions he offers are these:

- What is the genre of the text?
- What is the rhetorical function of this genre?
- What literary devices does this genre employ to achieve its rhetorical effect?
- How in particular does the text under consideration, in its own literary setting, embody the characteristics and dynamics described in the previous questions?
- How may a sermon, in a new setting, say and do what the text says and does in its setting?

In the second half of the book, Long takes us chapter by chapter through the various genres of biblical literature, helping us see with concrete examples how texts in each of these genres would answer those questions. He has separate chapters on preaching the Psalms, Proverbs, Narratives, the Parables of Jesus, and Epistles. In his final chapter he gives us some additional questions to ponder to help us not to ignore the unique flow and mood of any given text. His goal is to help us avoid pouring the living and breathing Word of God into predetermined homiletical forms.

What was most helpful about this book?

- Long seeks to move us beyond arguing whether inductive, deductive, narrative or other approaches are the best approaches for preaching. Instead, he invites us to journey into the communication world of each text to discover the clues imbedded into the text for how it would like to be preached. Rather than forcing every sermon into a "Lowry Loop" or an inductive pattern given to us by a Fred Craddock, the preacher allows each text to have the decisive vote not only on what the sermon will say but on the way it will say it.
- The chapter on preaching on Proverbs goes a long way toward removing the specific genre confusion that often plagues us as we seek to interpret and preach (if we even try) on texts from Proverbs. Long helps us realize that proverbs – even inspired proverbs – are not promises of what will always happen, but are instead observations of how things typically work in God's world. The proverbs are not trying to give us almost mindless directions on how to act in any and every situation in life. Nor do proverbs predict the outcome of every action. Instead, they give us reliable insights on how things work in God's world. The proverbs turn us back to think

of situations in the past that are illumined by the proverb as well as helping us look ahead to situations in which we can act with greater sanctified wisdom. Long's insight that the entire book of Proverbs assumes a covenantal relationship between the LORD and the reader also helps rescue Proverbs from being treated like a gospel-less wasteland of pious aphorisms (as if too often the fate of this book even among Lutherans).

- The chapter on preaching the narratives of Scripture (chapter 5) and preaching on the epistles (chapter 7) also provide a wealth of very practical homiletical insights that can open our eyes to not-so-hidden beauty in our chosen text.

There are also some troubling aspects to Long's book.

- As mentioned earlier, a fondness for the historical critical method of scriptural interpretation (22) mars several sections of the book. It was especially evident as he drew a sharp line between the parables as we have them in Scripture and the parables as they "actually" came from the mouth of Jesus (94). It was hard to enjoy the insights that can be gained from this chapter (and there were some), with the specter of such scholarly dissection of the parables hovering over the entire chapter.
- Long could also be categorized as a moderate postmodern when it comes to his hermeneutical approach. While rejecting some of the more radical polemics of postmoderns who speak of the death of the author and situate meaning completely in the reader, he seems to confuse meaning and application in such a way as to provide a recreation of meaning whenever a text is preached to a new audience (25-29). The depth and wisdom of inspired Scripture certainly mean that the richness of application of any particular text will never be exhausted, but its meaning still remains firmly fixed by the inspired author.
- Scattered throughout the book are specific exegetical challenges as Long deals with specific passages of Scripture. For instance, in the otherwise excellent chapter on preaching on Proverbs, Long provides sufficient evidence that any understanding of the real presence in the Lord's Supper has eluded him (63-65).
- It would be instructive – and no doubt disappointing - to hear Long provide his definition of the gospel. Long seems to almost delight in the conviction that "almost every congregation includes within it rival and heartfelt understandings of the Gospel" (125).

In the last analysis, while this book requires no small amount of reading with discretion, it is still well worth reading for anyone who would like Scripture's own assistance in breaking out of self-imposed homiletical straightjackets when it comes to outlining and organizing sermons. While the inspired Scriptures are far more than beautiful literature delivered in multi-colored genres, they are not less than that. Pausing to appreciate the beauty of how texts "work" in their rhetorical structure can go a long way to helping us preach in a way that is not only fitting with *what* the text seeks to communicate but also *how* that inspired text gets its point across. If anything, those with a high view of Scripture should be leading this charge!