

"THE PLAY IS THE THING: NEW FORMS FOR THE SERMON"

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"The play is the thing" These are, of course, words spoken by Hamlet as he describes his strategy "to catch the conscience of the king." Recognizing the need for some way to communicate to the king the fact that his foul deed of murder is perceived, Hamlet decides the best strategy is the use of the form of a play. Form is important, whether in catching the conscience of the king, or in catching the attention of a congregation.

So let us focus upon the form of the sermon. We shall attempt to describe its rather impoverished past, its emergence from obscurity, and finally introduce new approaches being taken today. The intention of this too-brief survey is simply to whet the appetite of the preacher for further study and experimentation.

I

An assumption of a decade ago was that good sermons were simply the result of solid biblical studies and theological reflection. Content was everything. If form was remembered at all, it was just a faint echo from an almost forgotten class in homiletics about structure and outlines. Generations of ministers left seminaries convinced that if they were competent in biblical exegesis, the result would be congregations sitting on the edge of the pews waiting to hear the latest insights from historico-grammatico exegesis. However, the result, as far too many of us know too well, has been either the glazed eyeballs of congregations in hypnotized stupor, or listeners passing the time counting the pipes in the organ or the lights in the chandelier.

There is evidence now, however, of a slow dawning realization that much more is involved in an effective sermon than a handful of study notes. The challenge is to gain the attention of the congregation by placing the message in a form which will capture the interest of the wide variety of listeners before us. Some of these listeners are at the periphery of faith, for whom the biblical language is largely unintelligible; others have heard the message until they seem no longer able to hear. Our challenge is how to get the truth, the gospel, heard among the varieties of listeners before us.

One wonders why there has been in the past so little attention paid to how the message is to be expressed. Fred Craddock is certainly accurate in describing the situation:

Perhaps no word among us has suffered more abuse than "how," not the honorable abuse of attack, but the humiliating abuse of inattention, dis-

regard, slight. "How" has been made to stand out in the hall while "what" was being entertained by the highest minds among us.¹

This disregard of form is in stark contrast to other persons and other disciplines who have recognized the importance of form in which content or ideas are expressed. One recalls, for example, Jean-Paul Sartre turning to the theater and becoming a playwright, recognizing that this medium was the one most likely to make his message heard. Clearly the day is overdue for a rediscovery of the importance of form, to invite it "to come out of the hallway" and to take a more honored place in the creation of the sermon.

II

Fortunately, during the last decade, form has been winning notoriety and respectability. This is due to a variety of reasons. *First, there is the work of biblical scholars in the area of form and literary criticism demonstrating the inseparableness of Gospel and form.* These studies pose the question whether form can be viewed only as a vehicle for content, to be discarded when the idea or concept or teaching has been extracted, or whether form and function are inseparable. They raise the question whether the preacher may be discarding on his or her study desk a basic element in interpretation. For example, to extract from a parable the "idea" or "teaching" and to ignore the characteristic form of the parable in sudden surprise, the shock of the commonplace turned upside down, may diminish radically the power of the material.

Secondly, and closely related to the first, are studies in the language event; how language functions and, most particularly, how language functions in the New Testament. Amos Wilder, in his work *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospel*, recognizes that "the preacher . . . is like a man speaking into a dead microphone," and suggests that ministers, in order to overcome this failure in communication, would do well to ask the basic question: "What modes of discourse are most congenial to the Gospel?" Again, the focus of concern is upon form. Wilder is helpful in identifying the major modes of discourse as dialogue, narrative, the parable, and poetry, but more importantly, he identifies certain characteristics of these forms. These characteristics are: proximity to oral conversation in that the language is immediate, spontaneous and not discursive in style; the speech is related to the everyday concrete life of the community of faith; and the speech places the listener into the scene, to evoke from him or her some response.

The third reason that form has been gaining attention is quite pragmatic. It is that the form of sermons has become predicable, stereotyped, leading to boredom for the listener, and forcing ministers to search for new forms of discourse. This frozen form, so predictable in most pulpits, is the point sermon. This form has its roots deep in Greek rhetoric. A theme or idea is extracted from Scripture, and marshalled in a logical sequence designed to persuade a logical listener. This form is easily recognized, for it is the form of most of our preaching.

Now one must be careful lest this form be caricatured and dismissed as

“an introduction, three points, and a poem.” This form, attempting to present biblical insights in a logical arrangement of ideas in order to persuade a rational listener, when done with expertise, has a clarity and preciseness about it which makes effective preaching. However, difficulties do arise when this one form is the only form utilized by the minister.

It may blunt communication simply because of its predictability. The listener, after some years of sitting under such preaching, knows the way the sermon will unfold. First point followed by second point is always the way, and one can imagine the congregation silently counting the points until the final illustration provides “the clincher.”

A more serious weakness for this form consistently followed is its tendency to force a distortion of biblical material. As Wilder has pointed out, the biblical message comes in a rich variety of forms. These forms may be leveled out, restrained by being forced into a preordained straitjacket of the point system. As we have noted previously, form and content are at times inseparable, and there are times, most notably in parables, when a rigid point system with its logical progressions may violate the content of the passage.

Finally, this form of sermon does have the weakness of being discursive in style, lacking what Wilder has identified as being the genius of New Testament form: evocative, immediate, spontaneous. Indeed, the sequential, logical point system, identifying a theme and developing it logically, almost requires a discursive style, analytical, objective, primarily designed to give instruction or information, rather than endeavoring to involve the listener into the material and evoking a response.

III

Form has begun to win deserved attention among those of us responsible for preaching the Word. Space will not permit an identification of all of these new forms, but at least several emerging on the horizon should be noted. I have selected three: the inductive form, the narrative form, and a form dependent upon the biblical passage itself.

*First, what is described as the inductive form.*² There are basically two directions in which thought moves: deductively and inductively. Deductive movement is from a particular truth to an affirmation or application, while the inductive form moves from the general to the particular.

The deductive approach is typical of most preaching. From a biblical passage, an idea or concept is extracted. For example, in Ephesians 2 the concept “the unifying power of Christ in destroying hostility” may be selected. Then from this affirmation points and subpoints are made and applied to the particular situation of the hearers. The preacher thus brings to the congregation the results of his or her work; the exegetical tidbit from the study of the text neatly developed and packaged. This deductive, traditional form of the sermon is highly authoritative, with the listener generally passive, willing to accept the truth gleaned from the minister’s study. This approach really assumes as a presupposition the general acceptance on the part of the congregation of the authority of the minister, or the authority of Scripture. The listener is ex-

pected to accept what is being said simply because it is being said in church by the minister. But while the acceptance of authority may have been a reality in some past era, no longer does the figure in the pulpit evoke from the listener a meek acquiescence to the authority of preacher or Word. Rather many listeners, now devoid of any commitment to authority, sit back and wait to hear in preaching a Word which speaks their name, describing their human dilemma and evoking from them a response.

It is in the light of this reality that the inductive method commends itself. Here, rather than starting off with a truth or idea or concept such as the "unifying power of Christ," the sermon begins with experiences of divisiveness in the everyday, or the experience in the Ephesian church, and then leads the listener into the passage for a search for some resolution. This inductive method does, in a sense, turn on its head the usual moves in the form of the sermon. Application to the contemporary comes first, raising in the listener the same search for meaning experienced by the original hearer, and leading the listener into the passage. This approach attempts to enlist the listener as participant, so that pulpit and pew together seek for the Word. The result is a sermon that does not present a prepackaged, predigested set of authoritative propositions, but rather invites the congregation to join in the quest with the preacher and to seek for new insights.

There are two basic strengths of this inductive approach. One is that it takes the listener quite seriously. The sermon begins with the listeners, their experience in the everyday. There is a concreteness, a realism about the sermon which arrests the attention of the listener. Secondly, the sermon, rather than presenting truths discovered by the preacher, enlists and expects the listener to discover the truths of the passage. The sermon, in a sense, encourages the listener to follow the same procedures, to ask the same questions the minister asks in his quest for truth. This approach places a confidence in the congregation, and assumes that the preaching of the Word is determined not just by the skill of the preacher, but by the committed hearing of the congregation.

There are, of course, difficulties with this form. There is the quite obvious one that some listeners want concrete, predigested truths and answers, and are restive with an open-ended search for meaning. But there is the more serious difficulty, and that is the point raised by Karl Barth in general about preaching: that methodologically, a particular reading of the human scene will influence and govern the interpretation of the biblical passage. There is, therefore, a possible danger that the inductive sermon, starting "where the listener is," may skewer and distort the meaning of the passage.

Now it must be pointed out that the use of the inductive form does not presuppose that a wrong interpretive move will be made. It is quite possible that one may start with a biblical passage, be true to its intentionality, sense its application to the contemporary, but in the strategy of forming the sermon, nevertheless start with the human dilemma, the concrete application, and move inductively toward the meaning of the passage.

*A second form of discourse is the narrative or story form.*³ This is a form one would expect if one searches for clues for form in the biblical material, for a great deal of biblical material is, simply by observation, material in the form

of narrative. The biblical writers bore witness to what they believed by telling and interpreting a story of what God has said and done in their history. This story runs from Egypt to Sinai, to kingdom to captivity, to new kingdom to Golgotha, to empty tomb to new Israel. And interwoven in and around this one central narrative, there are stories and vignettes and parables presenting faith in commonplace language.

But the narrative form attracts attention not just from its biblical warranty, but also because the narrative form is one of the most effective forms for communication. Close to the spoken word, a story still has power to hold attention, to convey ideas because of its immediacy. Most preachers know that a way to bring a congregation back from the outer limits of stupefying boredom is by the magic words, "once upon a time," or some other key word signaling the beginning of the narrative form. This story form reaches a significant and dramatic level in the New Testament. For here, as Eric Auerbach has pointed out in *Mimesis*, the birth of a spiritual movement is conveyed through vignettes based upon everyday occurrences in the contemporary lives of the common people; a blind beggar, a tax collector, a fisherman, an ill woman, disloyal disciples.⁴ The force of these scenes is that of any other good story: as we listen, we become engrossed, and suddenly find ourselves "in the story"; the questions and responses ours. We become Peter saying in the courtyard in fear, "Woman, I do not know him." Or, we are the rich man saying in rationalization, "But from my youth up I have kept the commandments." We are there and respond in the silence of our hearts.

But recognizing the significance and power of this form, how is this translated into a sermon? Clearly what is indicated is not the pulpit filled with ministers simply telling a story in the place of a sermon, or piling illustration upon illustration. What is suggested is rather seeking and retaining the narrative movement within a passage, or placing the passage, if it is, for example, part of a Pauline letter without narrative, against the narrative backdrop which elicited the particular passage. For example, the narrative of the divisiveness of the Corinthian church which is the backdrop of the material on the gifts of ministry, on the Lord's table, on the more excellent way of love, may be lifted up and brought into play as the narrative line for preaching on any of these. Once identifying the narrative, the preacher then identifies a similar vignette in the common, everyday occurrence of congregation and community which allows the biblical story and the contemporary to be seen in juxtaposition.

Edmund Steimle, who has been one of the leading proponents of the recapture of the story, puts it this way, "The primary purpose of the preacher is to interweave the biblical story with my story (your story) so that we can see a bit more clearly (even if we do not want to see) who we are, what is expected of us, and what the future may hold for us."

This mode of discourse does not mean just a piling up of story upon story with no time for reflection or observation. This new approach begins with the biblical story or our story. This forms the structure with reflections and observations along the way. If it is done well, the listener becomes involved at the outset with the story, for she sees it also as her story, and she has a part to play, not as spectator, but as participant.

If one new form of discourse is emerging as the most popular, it is this narrative or story form. As professor of homiletics, I am intrigued by the enthusiasm of the students to use this form, since used correctly it may cut through some of the boredom surrounding a great deal of preaching. But at the same time I am uneasy about its misuse. The difficulty lies not in the use of the narrative form *per se*, but in the attempt to weave my story into the biblical story. Given the perversity of the human animal, it should be evident which story is going to be dominant. Far too many sermons now utilizing this form are beginning to have a bit too much first person singular in them. The answer does not have to be a rejection of this form, but simply an increased level of sensitivity of its dangers. The pulpit by its very nature provides fertile ground in which egotism flourishes and so restraint is perhaps the key word here.

A *third form of discourse* is one being suggested by David Buttrick.⁵ Difficult to title, it is *basically a return to a form or structure or method based upon the intention, the form, the logic, the movement of the passage itself*. The beginning point for Buttrick is the question, "What is the passage trying to do?" The passage stands at the heart of all the minister does in preaching. Not at the center only until the passage yields an idea for the sermon, but at the center in determining the "focus of concern" for the sermon, in determining the logic of movement, in identifying the best form for proclamation.

A significant key emphasis of this approach is that preaching should be "a speaking of Scripture and not about Scripture." The sermon is not to speak of the passage as object to be discussed, from which certain points are to be extracted. Rather, the preacher is to allow the passage in its intention and logic to speak to the human situation of the congregation in its own individuality.

This approach to preaching also emphasizes a narrative style with development of a story line. It is interesting that Buttrick's preconditions for preaching from biblical passages, to wit, that the passage must have a central intention, a logic of movement, rules out certain biblical material as being preachable. If a particular passage does not have movement, narrative line, developmental logic, it does not commend itself as homiletical material. Buttrick does not flinch from simply affirming that some material may not belong in what he calls the "homiletic canon." In this view, material such as Psalms or Proverbs have a function in the community of faith, but their function is not in the preaching of the Word.

One is intrigued by Buttrick's move in exploring this approach to preaching. It is, of all those on the horizon, the one that takes most seriously the biblical passage standing at the heart of the homiletical task. However, it may not commend itself as being the only way to approach a biblical passage, especially if it forecloses such a rich lode of biblical preaching as Psalms and other Wisdom material. As *one* way to preach, it presents a distinct and necessary rediscovered emphasis, but not as *the* only way.

IV

The conclusions of this too-rapid and too-brief survey of new forms of discourse are two-fold. First, that there is a need to break the stereotype of ser-

mon structure now dominant in preaching and to investigate new ways of structuring sermons. Secondly, there is no one way of formulating content. A characteristic of effective preaching may simply be its varieties. Just as the biblical author or compiler was free to express the faith in a rich variety of forms, so the preacher must also sense freedom and creativity in the formation of the sermon.

¹ Fred Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), p. 10.

² This form is described more fully by Fred Craddock in his book *As One Without Authority* (Enid: The Phillips University Press, 1974).

³ The number of those writing on this form is legion. Certainly its chief exponent has been Edmund Steimle. The book recently edited by him, *Preaching the Story* (Philadelphia: The Fortress Press, 1980) may be the best introduction to this form.

⁴ Emil Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: The University Press, 1953). The chapters in this book dealing with the genius of the biblical narrative provide exciting insights in biblical interpretation.

⁵ David G. Buttrick, "Interpretation and Preaching," *Interpretation* XXXV No. 1, January 1981. This article introduces his understanding of preaching with a succinct survey of forms "biblical preaching" has taken in the last decade.