

"In My End Is My Beginning": The Sermon Conclusion as a Second Beginning

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"In my beginning is my end." With these prophetic words, T. S. Eliot begins "East Coker,"¹ and with these same words—this time inverted—he concludes the poem "In my end is my beginning." The poem speaks, among other things, of the seemingly unbroken physical cycle of birth, life, and death, reminiscent of an earlier poet, the writer of *Ecclesiastes*. Against the background of weariness, deterioration, and despair, though, Eliot points to the possibility of rebirth, to the Christian hope of new life through death.

These verses of poetry also speak to contemporary preaching. When used as a perspective for sermon preparation, they help us to imagine the sermon in a new way. Through Eliot we are given a new vision of what both the goal and the end of the sermon might be.

Traditionally the end of a sermon has been thought of as precisely that—an end. The traditional view goes something like this:

Without wasting words, the sermon must receive a masterly finish and fall with satisfying completeness on the ear and mind of all who have intelligently followed it.

You need these precious final moments for recapitulation, or application, or demonstration, but not for starting their minds off on new tracks.²

The sermon conclusion was intended to summarize the main points of the sermon, to wrap things up neatly, to "tell them what you've told them," to achieve resolution. What followed the words "In conclusion. . ." in many sermons, as a result, seldom led the listeners anywhere but to the closing hymn.

"In my end is my beginning." Building on Eliot's provocative words, we can envision the sermon ending as a new beginning, as a kind of second sermon introduction. Just as the sermon introduction should open up the text or topic, so should the sermon conclusion also open up something new for the hearer. George Sweazey reminds us that "The purpose of the sermon determines the form of the conclusion. . . The form of the conclusion must be varied and unexpected."³ Regardless of the form used, though, the conclusion can serve the purpose of creating a new beginning for the hearer.

Consider some reasons for re-creating the image of the sermon end from a *closed door* to an *open door*:

1. *Biblical*—The open-ended nature of the Biblical text itself suggests the same for preaching. The parables of Jesus are perhaps the best examples. In

the parables the hearer is left with more contradiction than resolution, with more questions than answers. If there is to be an ending to the parables, then it must be one supplied by the hearer.

James Cox gives clear expression to this idea:

In the story of the prodigal son the apparent resolution (the great reception and the festival of rejoicing) becomes the new situation as the story continues. For that new story there is a complication (the elder brother's churlish refusal to attend the party), but there is no resolution! So it is with other parables of Jesus: The resolution or application is left up to the one who hears—no spoon-feeding here!⁴

The First Letter of Peter identifies preaching as the context in which the hearer can be "born anew" (1:23-25). It only follows then that the preached "good news" should aim at opening a new door to the hearer, whereby he or she can enter into and experience the truth, that "the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (II Cor. 5:17). The best test of our faithfulness to the text in preaching may well be found in the degree to which the sermon, paralleling the text, makes possible a new beginning for the hearers.

2. *Theological*—You and I live in the middle, somewhere between Creation and the promised New Creation, between the Incarnation and the Return of Christ. In so far as our preaching is a reflection of this truth, the sermon conclusion will remain open and incomplete. There is, after all, a sense of unreality in a sermon which deals with a text or topic with the goal of achieving finality or resolution in twenty minutes. A sermon end which resists the temptation to make all the loose ends fit together will surely ring truer to the life experience of the person in the pew.

An incomplete ending⁵ also points to God's future, where there will be no more endings, at least in the way in which we experience endings in the world of time and space. An open-ended conclusion can point to the time when "death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away" (Rev. 21:4). We are reminded that God alone is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. Augustine's description of the City of God as "the end without end" provides a vision for the sermon end as well: "For what is our end but to arrive at the kingdom which has no end?"⁶

3. *Communicative*—A sermon end which aims at open-endedness also invites the listener's participation.⁷ After all, the hearer's response to the sermon should be something more than a simple "Amen." Consider, for example, the incomplete ending to Mark's Gospel. Whether intended or not, such an ending has proved to be an excellent literary device. Might the ending—and its many variations—which was subsequently added to Mark, attest to the reader/listener's need for resolution?

"And to make an end is to make a beginning," wrote Eliot. "The end is where we start from."⁸ While emphasizing the importance of transforming the sermon end into a new beginning,⁹ we do not need to abandon altogether the traditional emphasis upon resolution and completion. Indeed, there is a need for the hearer to find some degree of resolution in the sermon.

Most of us have experienced that hard-to-define sense of wholeness or well-being which occurs when a particular writer or preacher comes full-circle and ends where he or she began. A sense of completeness is conveyed to the reader of Matthew's Gospel, for example, when the reader, after making a long journey with the disciples, reaches once more the mountain (Matt. 28) from which they began (Matt. 5). Such a sense of wholeness may even be received by the reader unconsciously.

There is a way, I believe, in which the sermon may also end where it began and yet, paradoxically, in such a way that the hearers find themselves standing on the edge of the new. A sense of wholeness is imparted to the hearer in returning to the beginning point, and yet, because the Word of God has unfolded during the course of the sermon, "Behold, the new has come." Like the disciples in Matthew's Gospel, we arrive at a mountain which is at once our familiar beginning point and a place altogether new to us. A new journey stretches out before us and we hear the command, "Go. . ." (Matt. 28:19). T. S. Eliot says it this way:

And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.¹⁰

The German word for "conclusion" is the word *Schluss*, which is followed in the dictionary by the word *Schlüssel*, meaning "key." The close association between the two words encourages us to see the sermon in general and the sermon conclusion in particular as providing a key to the hearer with which to open a new door.¹¹ What greater gift can the preacher offer to those who have ears to hear?

"In my end is my beginning."

NOTES

¹ In T.S. Eliot, *The Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1944).

² William Sangster, *The Craft of Sermon Construction* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972), pp. 141, 150.

³ George Sweazey, *Preaching the Good News* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1976), p. 102.

⁴ James W. Cox, *Preaching* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 163.

⁵ See also John Killinger, *Fundamentals of Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 99f.

⁶ Augustine, *The City of God*, XXII, 30, excerpted in *Documents in Early Christian Thought*, Maurice Wiles and Mark Santer, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 268.

⁷ Several homiletics scholars have suggested deliberately avoiding closure in the sermon in order to actively involve the hearer. See especially James W. Cox, *Preaching* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985); Fred B. Craddock, *As One without Authority* (Enid, Oklahoma: Phillips University Press, 1974); Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980).

⁸ Eliot, *op. cit.*

⁹ I do not offer a particular "model" for such a sermon ending. Some of the sermons included in *The Twentieth-Century Pulpit*, James W. Cox, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978), however, do seek in varying degrees to forge a new beginning within the sermon ending; see especially David H. C. Read, "The Gospel According to Mary"; Paul Scherer, "Creative Insecurity"; Helmut Thielicke, "Journey without Luggage"; and Claus Westermann, "The Call of Isaiah." We also find

doors being opened and the "New Creation" beckoning to us through many of Frederick Buechner's sermons, see especially his sermons in *A Room Called Remember* (San Francisco Harper & Row, 1984), where the sermon endings often serve as a kind of springboard by which we are propelled forward in order to discover more fully "the high and unimaginable truth" of Christ

¹⁰ Eliot, *op cit*

¹¹ Using Eliot's definition of "right" language in *The Four Quartets*, we can even imagine the entire sermon as a series of potential beginnings and endings where "every phrase/And every sentence is right," then "Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning "