

Ways of Knowing and Forms for Preaching

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My first call to ministry after seminary graduation was to be co-pastor (with my husband) of four small congregations in Virginia. Two of the churches were located in the small town where we lived and were comprised primarily of business and professional people with college educations. The third church was located in a rural dairy farming area, and was mostly made up of farming families and the people who worked for them. The fourth congregation—an old, historic church—was also located in a rural area. Its congregation embraced farmers, blue-collar workers, and a few professionals.

One of the things that perpetually puzzled me during my five-year pastorate among those congregations was that I could take the very same sermon and preach it in each of them, and receive markedly different responses. Over time, I even began noticing patterns regarding which types of sermons appealed to which congregations.

For example, I nearly always received favorable comments from well-educated members of the two town churches when I preached “doctrinal” sermons—sermons that explained, in a logical and orderly manner, some central theological tenet of the faith. The local school superintendent was especially favorable toward those sermons that deepened his theological understanding of the sacraments.

However, I did not sense that those same doctrinal sermons received nearly as favorable a response from several members of the congregation in a dairy farming community. Indeed, I became concerned that Lydia, a homemaker with an eighth grade education and John,¹ a hired laborer on one of the dairy farms, were not altogether able to follow my train of thought in those sermons. The sermons that appealed to them usually contained a great deal more narrative in their structure and a simpler message.

Meanwhile, other members of the dairy farming community seemed to relish sermons that began with a difficult issue or text and wrestled with it in a highly inductive manner. When I offered to preach one summer on biblical texts of their choice, members of this congregation requested that I preach on passages that troubled them (such as the parable of the vineyard workers who received equal pay for unequal work).

As for the fourth (historic) congregation, I was intrigued by the fact that every summer when they could invite a preacher of their choice to lead their week of “special services,” they inevitably chose someone who preached in a verse-by-verse expository manner (a form I tended to avoid). They especially liked preachers who would stand up with nothing but the Bible in their hands, explicating each verse in turn and its meaning for their lives.

The diversity of preferences for sermons and *sermon forms* I encountered in those churches—churches that were all located within a thirty-mile radius of one another—has led me to question the relationship between sermon forms and congregational “modes of knowing.” Are there sermon forms that are more “fitting” and more easily comprehended in one congregational context than in another? Are there clues the pastor can gain, through a closer attending to congregational modes of knowing, that

can assist in the construction of sermons that are more intelligible for a particular community of faith?

Ways of Knowing and Forms of Theologizing

While the field of preaching has not much attended to the relationship between forms and knowing modes, contextual theologians on the global scene have begun exploring such linkages. One such theologian is Robert Schreiter, professor of theology at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.

In his book *Constructing Local Theologies* Schreiter argues that theology is not authentically contextual in nature if it attends only to the appropriateness of its themes for the local culture. Genuine local theology must also attend to the fittingness of theological *form* for the context. The theologian should recognize that the very modes in which humans understand and give expression to their thought are not altogether universal, but are also colored and shaped by the sociocultural contexts out of which they arise.

When Schreiter surveys the world scene he identifies four different forms local theologies have taken through history, and continue to take in the present day.² They are:

1. theology as *variation on sacred text*—in which the theologian takes a portion of a sacred text (such as a passage from scripture) and reinterprets its meaning through the signs and symbols of a new culture. Included within this “catch all” type are: the “commentary” form (giving a verse-by-verse interpretation of a text), the “narrative” form (using a story to extend the text’s meaning into the present), and the “anthology” form (in which various discrete portions of the text are linked together to serve some common theme or purpose).

2. theology as *wisdom*—in which the theologian, who is concerned to integrate all aspects of the seen and unseen world into a unified whole, looks deeply into human experience in order to discover analogues (or types) of God and God’s ordering and sustaining of creation. (This is common form of theologizing in Eastern Christianity and in a variety of monastic and mystical traditions.)

3. theology as *sure knowledge*—in which the theologian is concerned to give as exact and critical account of the Christian faith in relation to contemporary reality as possible. (Sure knowledge is the predominant form of theologizing among Western systematic and apologetic theologians.) and

4. theology as *praxis*—which aims to transform false and oppressive social relationships by: naming and critiquing them, strategizing for transformative action, and critically reflecting upon that action. (Praxis modes of theologizing are evidenced among many of the world’s liberation theologies.)

Schreiter not only identifies the forms, however. He also makes connections between the forms and the diverse cultural conditions that seem to foster each of them.

For example, *variation on sacred text* theology tends to flourish in cultures that are primarily oral (as opposed to literate) and in which the sacred text itself has an assumed authority and is relatively protected from outside challenges and threats. *Wisdom* theology arises out of cultures where there is a sense of cosmic unity between human beings and all things seen and unseen, where strong emphasis is placed on personal growth through deepened interiority, where people value wisdom more than learning or wealth, and where the culture itself (being less pluralistic) is more hospitable to a

unified worldview. By contrast, *sure knowledge* theology tends to flourish either in highly specialized and differentiated urban economies, or in cultures where there is a plurality of competing worldviews. And *praxis* theology finds fertile soil in cultures where people are struggling to break free from oppression.

Theological Forms and Preaching Forms

Although Schreiter locates all preaching within the “commentary” genre, I do not think it takes a great deal of imagination to identify sermon forms that are analogous to all four of Schreiter’s theological types. For example, “variation on sacred text” forms are suggestive of homiletical structures as diverse as: the verse-by-verse expository sermon form (paralleling the “commentary” form), various styles of narrative preaching (paralleling the “story” form) and the Billy Graham “anthology” style of preaching (in which discrete Bible verses are linked together around a central theme or topic).

“Sure knowledge” preaching, on the other hand, finds parallels in classic deductive sermon forms (in which the preacher begins with affirmation of a general theological truth and then fleshes out its meaning for life in several points) or in forms which give an ordered and systematic defense or accounting of the faith (such as in “apologetic” or “doctrinal” preaching).

“Wisdom” preaching, by contrast, tends to find its analogues on the inductive side of the form spectrum: in structures that begin with life’s questions or tensions, and then take the hearers on a quest for truth; in sermons that plunge deeply into the interiority of Christian experience in order to find analogues for God and God’s ways with the world; or in sermons that create a sense of unity and wholeness between things that are frequently disconnected.

Finally, “praxis” (or “liberation”) preaching is marked by its critique of the forces of oppression in contemporary life and its movement toward liberating action in the world. Such preaching often moves from analysis of the current social order and its injustices, to the gospel’s liberating message, to a call for a response which engages not only the mind and heart, but also the will and the body.

The more complex question is: Are there linkages (analogous to those Schreiter identifies) that can also be observed between sermon forms and congregational cultures that foster or encourage them? Are there sermon forms which are more likely to arise out of and to flourish within one congregational context than in another? My own hunch (based not on formal research, but on informal observation of preaching and its contexts) is that there may well be.

For example, it was within the two rural (and more isolated) churches that I served that preferences were most often expressed for “variation on sacred text” forms. In the dairy farming community, the expressed desire—especially among less educated members—was for more storytelling in proclamation; in the historic congregation, the preference was for more expository preaching. Yet both congregations exhibited the two cultural conditions Schreiter identifies as being favorable for fostering “variation on sacred text” forms. First, both were contexts in which the Bible itself had a certain assumed authority and was still relatively protected from outside threats. (On the whole, people in these churches did not question the Bible’s authority; they assumed it.) Second, to a certain degree in both communities—but especially in the dairy farming community—I experienced cultures in which orality still held sway over

literacy. Visiting and storytelling were still primary forms of entertainment in this rural area. Further, whenever I asked a direct question in this congregation—regardless of the context—I usually received in reply an indirect response, communicated in story form.

I would also note that this same dairy farming community, which regularly expressed appreciation for my own inductive tendencies in preaching, mirrored many of the sociocultural conditions Schreiter associates with a “wisdom” orientation. In this church the members lived in harmony with the cycles of the seasons and seemed to have a deep sense of their own place within the cosmos. Wisdom was far more highly valued than either wealth or “book learnin’” and great authority was vested in those the community deemed to be sages.

By way of contrast, it was among the more “cosmopolitan” members of the town churches—members who had travelled more widely and who were more attuned to the competing worldviews of a pluralistic culture—that the greatest appreciation for “sure knowledge” preaching was expressed.

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Now I do not want to imply, through these observations, that a one-to-one correlation exists between congregational sermon form preferences and ways of knowing. Preaching is far too complicated and mysterious an act to reduce it to such simple formulas.

Nor do I want to imply that congregations are monolithic in their ways of knowing. Within any given congregation on a Sunday morning there are likely to be people present who have a diversity of knowing modes. Factors other than subculture—such as age, gender, or experience with past preachers—can also influence cognitive styles and sermon form preferences within a community of faith.

Finally, I am not suggesting that congregational ways of knowing should be the sole determinative factor in regard to sermon form. Sermon form, like sermon content, considers many factors—including the shape of the biblical text and more universal modes of human understanding.

However, what I do want to suggest is that local ways of knowing are, at the least, a significant factor that should be considered by the preacher when designing sermons. In conclusion then, I would like to suggest four ways in which a more serious consideration of congregational styles of knowing might influence the preacher’s decision making regarding sermon form.

1. When sermons seem to be “missing” local congregations, the preacher may want to ask: is form a part of the problem?

A pastor (we’ll call her Jane) recently told me of her experience of preaching a Christmas Eve Communion meditation in two different congregations that she had served. The sermon is brief and beautifully written, capturing the mystery and wonder of that first holy night in a style that is highly poetic—both in language and in form. It is a work of art.

Jane first prepared and preached this sermon several years ago for a large, well-educated urban congregation in the South which she was then serving as an associate pastor. The congregation—which has a love for the fine arts (and frequently offers organ recitals, art exhibits, or classes on theology and literature in its downtown gothic

edifice)—loved her sermon. “They couldn’t say enough good about it,” she reports.

This past Christmas Eve Jane again preached her poetic meditation—this time in the small northeastern town where she pastors a predominantly blue-collar congregation. The response, she reports, was vastly different. Not only was the immediate congregational response to the sermon underwhelming. Most astonishing was the fact that several members of the worship committee (who had been present for the service) commented at their next meeting that they hoped next year’s Christmas Eve service—as opposed to this year’s—would actually include a sermon!

My suspicion is that form is a part of Jane’s problem. While her poetic sermon design was a natural “fit” for her first congregation and its aesthetic modes of knowing, her structure was more alien for her second congregation and its everyday ways of understanding the world. Indeed, so alien was the structure from the experience of some of her members (including, I would suspect, their prior experience of preaching) that they didn’t even recognize the sermon to be a sermon!

When preachers sense that sermons are “missing” their congregations, one of the questions they might ask is: could it be that the form of the sermon—and its assumed way of knowing—is a part of the problem? Such analysis does not preclude preaching sermon forms that are novel, or that stretch ordinary congregational ways of knowing. However, a first step in preaching such forms more effectively may well lie in knowing that they *are* alien, and in preparing the congregation in appropriate ways for their hearing.

2. Greater awareness of congregational knowing modes can help the preacher avoid the consistent use of sermon forms that deny or devalue the predominant ways in which local people come to understanding.

It is one thing for the creative pastor to occasionally preach a sermon that “misses” a local congregation through its use of a novel form. It is quite another for the pastor to preach consistently in structures that demean or devalue the predominant ways in which a local congregation comes to deeper knowledge in faith. To preach a steady diet of “sure knowledge” sermons in a community more attuned to “narrative” modes of theologizing, or to deliver a steady diet of “wisdom” sermons in a community with a “praxis” orientation not only can evidence insensitivity on the part of the pastor; such sermons can also become, over time, demoralizing for the hearers.

One of the reasons Schreiter believes it is critical for theologians to attend to culture in the matter of form is that without such attention, the theologian may be in danger of promoting “false consciousness”—implicitly teaching people that their own ways of coming to knowledge and of expressing faith are inadequate or inappropriate. My own sense of the relative inaccessibility of my “sure knowledge” (doctrinal) sermons to Lydia and John and other members of my first parish convinces me that his point is worthy of the preacher’s consideration. To preach consistently in a manner that denies the ways local people come to knowledge—especially a poorer or less well-educated people—is not only an affront to them; it is also an affront to the Gospel of Christ with its bias toward “the least of these.”

3. Greater awareness of congregational knowing modes can encourage experimentation in sermon form.

Just as there are a diversity of legitimate forms that local theologizing can take on

the global scene, so there are a diversity of legitimate forms that preaching can take within congregational settings. There is no “one right way” for biblical world and congregational world to meet in sermonic form. Indeed, the very meeting of the two worlds creates new and exciting possibilities for the preacher’s craft.

The contextual preacher opens himself/herself to the imaginative possibilities such an encounter can afford. Rather than taking a tried and true sermon form and using it—like a mold—to give shape and form to proclamation, the wise local pastor allows form itself to emerge out of the unique meeting of text and context. There is “play” in the process, as the preacher seeks to craft a form that is both fitting and transformative for its hearers.

At times the biblical text itself will suggest a form for preaching. The story of Jacob’s wrestling at the Jabbok, for example, provides a structure through which the congregation can reflect upon its own times of wrestling with God, receiving a blessing, and leaving the encounter with a limp.

Yet at other times, the sermon may take more of its formal cues from congregational context. A sermon, preached on the occasion of the infant baptism of a fourth-generation church member in a historical congregation, takes the form of a letter that is to be read to the infant some years hence. A sermon, preached on Palm Sunday in a small country church full of children waving palm branches, becomes a narrative account of that first happy/sad palm parade, as told from the vantage of a child. While yet another sermon, preached on Christmas Eve in a highly literate congregation, strives through poetry to express the unfathomable mystery of the Word become flesh.

In contextual proclamation experimentation in form is not undertaken for the sake of novelty or even for the sake of keeping closer to the structural intent of the biblical text. Rather, it is undertaken toward the end of crafting sermons, the form of whose content is also “fitting” for a local community of faith.

4. Contextual preachers recognize that form itself can be a vehicle for expanding the horizons of congregational understanding.

In contextual proclamation, fittingness in form (as in content) never simply means giving people what they want. It also involves the transformation and expansion of congregational horizons. Thus, the wise pastor will recognize that sermon form itself has the potential to stretch and transform congregational modes of knowing.

Consider, for example, the women Mary Field Belenky and her colleagues identified as being “received” knowers in their study of women’s cognition.³ These women—usually poor and poorly educated—tend to have little trust in their own cognitive powers and depend largely upon outside authorities to instruct them in the ways of truth. Consequently, they may actually express preference for sermons (and sermon forms) that tell them deductively and definitively what to believe. However, it is also conceivable that a steady diet of such preaching could actually do them more harm than good—discouraging them even further from making their own discoveries of faith, or from trusting her own theological voices. By contrast, inductive sermons that begin with questions (not answers) and leave the hearer some decision-making freedom, may become vehicles of transformative power.

Or consider a congregation that loves verse-by-verse expository preaching, but that also has tendencies toward bibliolatry. To give this community of faith regularly what it desires in sermon form may not actually be in its best theological interest. By

contrast, the intentional use of other (equally accessible) sermon structures can open new vistas for congregational understanding of the Bible itself, and of the diverse ways its gospel can be interpreted in proclamation.

Preaching has potential not only to influence *what* people think, but also *how* they think. Greater attention to congregational modes of knowing can assist the preacher in shaping sermons that are not only more intelligible for a local community of faith, but that are also more transformative of the ways in which people come to know and express their own faith.

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Notes

¹ Lydia and John are not their real names.

² Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), 75-94.

³ Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (USA: Basic Books, Inc., 1986), 35-51.