

# **STRIKING ALL THE CHORDS OF THE TEXT**

## **Preparing Homiletics Students to Preach Genre-Sensitive Sermons**

**Ken Langley**

**Christ Community Church, Zion, Illinois**

A well-known health and prosperity preacher was once faulted for “reducing the symphony of Scripture to a single note.” His problem, the critic thought, was not so much what he said as the many things he never got around to saying. His feel-good pulpit ministry was theologically lopsided.

Some of us who think we are more balanced theologically may, nevertheless, deserve similar criticism because we’re *homiletically* lopsided. We know that the Bible features a variety of doctrinal themes that need to be preached, but we forget that it does so in a variety of literary forms which need to be respected when we preach. In our preaching, if not in our theology, we reduce the symphony of Scripture to a single note.

### **Learning to play the other notes – a personal story**

Looking back on my first decade or so of pulpit ministry, I have to admit that, with respect to literary form, I pretty much played the same note week after week. I wouldn’t have put it that way at the time, though I did sense that something was wrong with the way I handled certain types of biblical literature – notably the Psalms. This vague

dissatisfaction, this imprecise feeling that a sermon on a psalm ought to sound different from a sermon on Romans, gave birth to a D.Min project on genre-sensitive preaching of the Psalter and a continuing fascination with preaching and the literary forms of the Bible.

In fifteen years of pastoral ministry, I had occasionally preached psalm texts, but seldom with much confidence that I'd done justice to the "poemness" of these poems. I pressed the psalms with the same homiletical cookie cutter I'd learned to use on didactic prose, and out came sermons with points, illustrations, and applications that sounded (surprise!) much like my sermons on epistolary texts.

I think those sermons were doctrinally sound. And I hope they were helpful to the people who heard them. But I now realize they were not as *biblical* as they might have been because they did not take into account the non-cognitive dimensions of their poetic texts. Poetry appeals more directly than prose to listeners' affective, imaginative, and aesthetic faculties. But my homiletical tool box did not equip me to deal with these aspects of the psalms. My method, well-suited for preaching Paul, was not well-suited for preaching poetry. Dwight Stevenson spoke for me: ". . . what minister has not been captured by a psalm, only to be defeated and humiliated in his attempt to turn it into a sermon? Poetry which soars, when treated in our halting words limps and staggers along a dusty trail of prose." (Stevenson, 1967, p.159)

And so, guided by teachers like Donald Wardlaw (*Preaching Biblically*), Thomas Troeger (*Imagining a Sermon*, and other books and articles) and especially Tom Long (*Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*), I began to shape my sermons, in part, by the literary form of my texts. For the purposes of this paper, the important word in that sentence is “began.” Somehow I’d managed to get through Bible college and seminary and hundreds of sermons before even *starting* to take genre seriously as a factor in sermonic shape. And I doubt that my experience is unique. I wonder if more needs to be done in evangelical homiletics education to alert students to the unique demands that Scripture’s varied literary forms make on the preacher.

Here’s my proposal: **Genre-sensitivity in shaping sermons should be part of student preachers’ training early in their homiletics curriculum.** This is a simple but not unproblematic proposal. I look forward to discussing it at the 2003 EHS conference. Before I expand and defend it let me explain further what I mean by genre-sensitive preaching.

### **Genre-sensitive preaching**

“In the past, God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways.” Whatever else the writer meant, this opening sentence of Hebrews aptly describes what we find in the varied literary forms of the Old Testament: chronicle, political diatribe, moral romance, case law, drama, apocalypse, wise sayings, genealogy, biographical sketch, and love poem, not to mention categories disputed by some conservatives like myth, midrash, fable, or etiological tale. In the Psalter alone are sub-

genres like hymn, lament, thanksgiving (individual and communal), torah psalm, wisdom psalm, and narrative or historical psalm. (Vanhoozer, 1986, pp.78, 80; Ryken, 1992, p.16)

Only rarely does Scripture name its own genres; these labels are supplied by modern readers who have noticed recurring features in certain types of biblical literature. Biblical writers may occasionally identify a piece as oracle (Numbers 23:7; Isaiah 13:1), parable (Psalm 78:2), or proverb (Proverbs 1:1, 10:1, etc.), but for the most part, genre identification was not a Semitic idea. Contemporary readers apply these categories in an attempt to make sense of what they're reading.

What they're reading is a rich variety of literary types, each of which "means" differently. Each makes its claim or does its work in its own distinct way. In all these ways God spoke, and still wishes to speak, though sometimes his spokesmen mute his varied accents in their sermons. We reduce the symphony of Scripture to one note – the propositional or didactic. To switch to Fred Craddock's metaphor for propositional preaching, we distill out of these genres an *idea* and preach that: "... the minister boils off all the water and then preaches the stain in the bottom of the cup." (Craddock, 1985, p.123)

Underlying this practice is the mistaken notion that form and content can be separated; that forms – poetry, apocalyptic, proverbial saying or what have you – are shells that can

be left behind once we figure out the nuggets of propositional truth they contain. But this is naïve.

Form and content come to us in a communication package. Distillation loses something precious, part of the total impact God wishes to make on hearers through that package.

Abraham Kuyper put it well: “The rationale for the diverse literary forms in Scripture is that revelation strikes all the chords of the soul, and not just one, e.g., the rational one.

This makes clear that the historical doctrine of revelation is not the barren one that it is often charged with being.” (Vanhoozer, p.78)

If revelation strikes all the chords of the soul, should not our preaching of that revelation attempt to do the same? And might not the form of our text, the form which is at least partially responsible for the “music” in the first place, give us a clue as to how to shape the sermon so that the sermon does what the text does? Genre-sensitive preaching takes the form of the text into account in determining the form of the sermon. It recognizes that part of *how* a text means lies in its form and asks if the sermon might not accomplish the same rhetorical effect if it shapes itself in a similar way.

“Let doxologies be shared doxologically, narratives narratively, polemics polemically, poems poetically, and parables parabolically. In other words, biblical preaching ought to be biblical.” (Craddock, 1981, p.163) Craddock’s oft-quoted counsel has been echoed by many homileticians in recent years, especially those working with narrative literature. Bartlett urges preachers to ask frequently whether the form of their sermons should

mirror the form of their texts (Bartlett, 1993, p.149). Greidanus says it's appropriate, in shaping sermons that do justice to biblical texts, to look to the forms of the texts themselves since most of them reflect the original preaching underlying the Bible (Greidanus, 1988, p. 18). Wardlaw thinks that "The more integral a sermon's form is to its content, the Word in Scripture, the better chance that Word in Scripture has to be heard and felt by today's congregations." (Wardlaw, p.60) Mike Graves reminds us that sermons, like the now inscripturated rhetorical events on which they are based, are *oral* events; they have moods, movements, and a variety of sounds, as well as cognitive contents (Graves, 1997, p11ff).

These authors are not advocating a kind of "formal fundamentalism," in which a sermon on a narrative must take the form of a story, a sermon on a hymn must be sung, or a sermon on a poem must itself be a poem. The sermon doesn't have to *replicate* the form of the text, but it does have to *respect* it.

Tom Long has done as much as anyone else to provoke thinking about "preaching and the literary forms of the Bible."

Preachers who have sought to be open and attentive to biblical texts in their preaching have long sensed that a sermon based on a psalm, for example, ought to somehow be different from one that grows out of a miracle story, not only because of *what* the two texts say, but also because of *how* they say what they say. A psalm is poetry, a miracle story is narrative; and because they are two distinct literary and rhetorical forms, they "come at" the reader in

different ways and create contrasting effects. What is needed, then, is a process of sermon development sufficiently nuanced to recognize and employ these differences in the creation of the sermon itself. (Long, p.11)

Long sketches and illustrates just such a process. His proposal begins with four questions about the literary and rhetorical aspects of biblical texts – questions often ignored in traditional exegesis. He then illustrates how they may be answered with respect to five different biblical genres.

1. “What is the genre of the text?” Until the minister identifies the kind of literature to be preached, an exegetically faithful sermon is impossible.

2. “What is the rhetorical form of this genre?” Here Long is not so much asking about the literary features of the text, but the effects those features are intended to produce in readers – the text’s rhetorical dynamics.

3. “What literary devices does this genre employ to achieve its rhetorical effect?”

4. “How in particular does the text under consideration, in its own literary setting, embody the characteristics and dynamics described in the pervious question?” Here Long applies the first three “generic” questions to a particular text and how it works. Although each preaching text will have

much in common with other cases of its genre, each will be unique. The interpreter may even be surprised by innovations or departures from the genre's conventions.

Thus far, Long's proposal is exegetical in nature. True, his four questions take preachers further than the usual set of historical-grammatical questions learned in seminary; but still, they have to do with *interpreting* texts. To these interpretive questions Long adds a key homiletical question.

5. "How may the sermon, in a new setting, say and do what the text says and does in its setting?" How, that is, can the shape of the text – not just its ideas – be reflected in the shape of the sermon so that less is lost "in translation" than in the typical propositional sermon?

It seems to me that evangelical homileticians, of all people, should be keenly interested in this question. We who hold a high view of Scripture believe that not only what the Bible says but how it says it was superintended by the Spirit of God. It's not by accident but by divine plan that we have between the covers of our Bibles not sixty-six epistles or a systematic theology text but a richly varied literature. Yet, "In spite of the affirmation of Hebrews 1:1, real appreciation of Scripture's literary pluralism has been somewhat overshadowed by the paradigm of God as author." (Vanhoozer, 79)

That paradigm of divine authorship is worth preserving, but it must be construed correctly so as not to negate the literary character of the Bible. “God-breathed” need not imply a prophetic model in which the Lord’s spokesman is acutely aware of being addressed from above and so prefaces his message with “Thus says the Lord.” Plenary inspiration makes room for texts that tease as well as those that thunder. It allows for forms that work by indirection, for genres that appeal more to the imagination than others which rely on closely-reasoned arguments.

The preacher, charged with “correctly handling the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15) receives that word in a multiplicity of literary forms. What is he to make of them? Surely, “correctly handling” should rule out gross negligence in genre-identification. In the words of the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*: “. . . history must be treated as history, poetry as poetry, hyperbole and metaphor as hyperbole and metaphor, generalization and approximation as what they are, and so forth.” (*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25:4, December 1982. 295) The *Chicago Statement*, crafted as it was in the midst of debate about biblical inspiration and authority, refers primarily to *interpreting* Scripture. But shouldn’t its call to respect biblical texts for what they are apply just as pointedly to *preaching* Scripture?

### **Sample strategies for preaching the Psalms**

Answering that question in the affirmative might lead a preacher to experiment with homiletical strategies like these when preaching the Psalms:

1. **Nourish the imagination by speaking in pictures.** Since imagery plays an important role in poetry, it might feature prominently in sermons on biblical poems. The preacher will not so much ask “How can I explain this?” as “How can I image this?” The resulting sermon may be more a series of pictures than points.
2. **Grow the sermon from the Psalm’s dominant image or images.** The text itself may supply the imagery the preacher is to work with. Granted, these images suggest ideas, but in the genre-sensitive sermon the ideas will not take over, with the images treated as decoration or illustration. The ideas will be there as part of a communication package dominated by the imagery.
3. **Follow the “logic” of poetry.** The threads that hold poems together do not look like the typical three point sermon outline; they are liturgical or stylistic or emotive or stream-of-consciousness. Sermons on these texts might follow a similar form.
4. **Use the author’s poetic devices or English substitutes to approximate the poem’s rhetorical effects.** Refrains, chiasms, anaphora, alliteration, and a host of other possibilities can give a sermon a poetic “feel,” and engage listeners with the aesthetic dimension of the text.
5. **Make judicious use of English poetry.**
6. Pay special attention to words. Honing word choice will improve any sermon, but it may be especially important in a sermon on a poem, since poetry works by careful or unusual use of words.
7. **Practice an oral delivery that will help carry the psalm’s message.**

8. **Read the Psalm well.** These last two strategies hold for preaching any text. But with poems, sound matters more than usual. Good oral interpretation is a must if the non-cognitive dimensions of biblical poems is to come through.
9. **Guide the congregation through a close reading of the poem.** A literature teacher might call this an “explication,” in which hearers are exposed to the poetic features as well as the ideas of the poem, gaining an appreciation for the beauty of the text.
10. **Place the sermon in the context of a service designed to maximize experience of the psalm.** Whatever genre of text we preach, some of us try to think of the sermon as part of a worship package in which every song, reading and prayer reinforces every other part from prelude to postlude. It is easy to plan this way when dealing with psalm texts: their images can be projected on screen, their prayers prayed, songs sung right out of the text, calls to worship and benedictions taken from the preaching text.

These strategies can be fleshed out (I hope to do so in a forthcoming book). Here I offer them simply as illustrations of what I mean by genre-sensitive preaching, with respect to one of the Bible’s literary forms.

Convinced that the forms as well as the ideas of Scripture are inspired, I repeat my proposal: **Genre-sensitivity in shaping sermons should be part of student preachers’ training early in their homiletics curriculum.**

## **WHY “EARLY?” ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR OF THE PROPOSAL**

1. Habits formed early on are hard to break. We get better at preaching with experience, (at least this is to be hoped!), but usually what we get better at is preaching the way we learned to preach in the first place. We become more confident, more skilled at the methodology in which we were trained. Few pastors attend EHS conferences or pursue advanced degrees in preaching – exposures which might prod them into new ways of honing their craft. Unless some awareness of literary form and its implications for preaching is part of their college or seminary experience, preachers may grow more and more comfortable with a one-size-fits-all homiletic.

2. Genre-sensitivity is not a homiletical fad or a take-it-or-leave-it matter of personal style. It’s an indispensable part of “correctly handling the word of truth.” No minister of the gospel should have to preach as many years as I did without a clue as to how to preach songs, poems, proverbs, parables, oracles, and so on.

## **WHY NOT EARLY? AN ARGUMENT AGAINST THE PROPOSAL**

Preachers have to learn to crawl before they can walk. You can’t teach a student everything at once. Genre-sensitivity may be one of those skills to be picked up later, after students have learned more fundamental homiletical skills.

I don’t buy this argument. But I do realize homiletics teachers have a lot to cover in a short amount of class time (and that colleagues in other departments might resist an exponential increase in curriculum time allotted to homiletics!). How realistic it is to

include genre considerations – as fundamental – in the earliest stages of a homiletics program is something worth discussing at our conference.

## **WHAT SHOULD BE DONE**

I'm a pastor, not an academician. I don't know as accurately as some of my EHS colleagues what's currently being done in seminary hermeneutics and homiletics classrooms, so the following suggestions may betray ignorance on my part. I hope to learn that more is being done than I suppose, but in any case, I hope to prompt some worthwhile discussion with these proposals.

**1. Evangelical homileticians should be writing books that show and tell preachers how to handle different genres of biblical literature.** Sidney Greidanus (1988) and Walter Kaiser (2003) discuss genre-sensitive preaching, but do so in works with broader interests and without demonstrating the art. Tom Long (1989) and Mike Graves (1997) have given us well-written, stimulating volumes on preaching and the literary forms of the Bible, but we need three or four full length books for each genre to which they devote a single chapter. In the past few years I've benefited from books on preaching Job (Holbert, 1999), Proverbs (McKenzie, 1996), wisdom literature (McKenzie 2002), prophecy (Ward and Ward, 1995), and apocalyptic (Jones and Sumney, 1999). But in each case, the value of these works is, for me, limited by the authors' critical assumptions. Why shouldn't evangelicals lead the way in doing for the preaching of psalms, prophets, legal material, proverbs, parables, wisdom, and the last book of the Bible what Stephen Mathewson has done for preaching narrative (Mathewson, 2002)?

**2. Professors of preaching should model genre-sensitive preaching.** Chances are, homiletics students have observed plenty of didactic sermons on epistolary texts; they've seen this skill demonstrated by their own pastors for years. But who will show them how to preach a psalm with genuine sensitivity to its affective, imaginative, and aesthetic dimensions? Or an apocalyptic text in a way that echoes the startling visionary impact of the passage? In class or in chapel, their teachers can show the way.

**3. Students should be alerted to the challenges posed by different genres and urged to shape sermons accordingly before they establish habits of ignoring them.** This is another way of stating my main proposal. In-class instruction should include homiletical strategies tailored to different genres; sermon critiques should acknowledge success or failure to respect the form of the text; assigned reading should include some of the works mentioned above and those yet to be written. (I know every teacher has his or her favorite texts, but personally, I'd make *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* required reading by, at latest, a second course in homiletics.)

## **Conclusion**

“. . . we must convince ourselves that the literary genres of the Bible do not constitute a rhetorical façade which it would be possible to pull down in order to reveal some thought content that is indifferent to its literary vehicle.” (Ricoeur, 91.) Ricoeur is speaking as a hermeneut, not a homiletician. But what he says applies to preaching as well as interpretation. To return to the metaphor with which I began, “We must convince ourselves that the symphony of Scripture is not rhetorical artistry which it would be

possible to mute in order to reveal some thought content indifferent to the music.” Let’s not teach students to sing the Bible’s many texts to the same tune every Sunday.

## SOURCES

- Bartlett, David L. (1993) “Texts Shaping Sermons,” in *Listening to the Word*, ed. Gail O’Day and Thomas Long. Nashville: Abingdon.
- Cradock, Fred. (1981) *As One Without Authority*. Nashville: Abingdon.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1985) *Preaching*. Nashville: Abingdon.
- Graves, Mike. (1997) *The Sermon as Symphony*. Valley Forge: Judson.
- Greidanus, Sidney. (1988) *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Holbert, John C. (1999) *Preaching Job*. St. Louis: Chalice Press.
- Jones, Larry Paul, and Jerry L. Sumney. (1999) *Preaching Apocalyptic Texts*. St. Louis: Chalice Press.
- Kaiser, Walter C., Jr. (2003) *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Baker.
- Long, Thomas G. (1989) *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*. Philadelphia: Fortress.
- Mathewson, Stephen D. (2002) *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*. Grand Rapids: Baker.
- McKenzie, Alyce. (1996) *Preaching Proverbs*. Nashville: Abingdon.
- McKenzie, Alyce. (2002) *Preaching Biblical Wisdom in a Self-Help Society*. Nashville: Abingdon.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1980) *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*. Philadelphia: Fortress.
- Ryken, Leland. (1992) *Words of Delight A Literary Introduction to the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Baker.
- Stevenson, Dwight. (1967) *In the Biblical Preacher’s Workshop*. Nashville: Abingdon.

Troeger, Thomas. (1990) *Imagining a Sermon*. Nashville: Abingdon.

Vanhoozer, Kevin. (1986) "The Semantics of Biblical Literature: Truth and Scripture's Diverse Literary Forms," in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, ed. D.A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Ward, James, and Christine Ward. (1995) *Preaching from the Prophets*. Nashville: Abingdon.

Wardlaw, Donald. (1983) *Preaching Biblically*. Philadelphia: Westminster.