**ClassNotes #5**

**The Craft of a Sermon**

1. The Sermonic Form

People usually regard the content of the sermon as the most important element of the sermon, and form or style carrying the content of the sermon as a mere container. Yet, this is not true. Both content and form are closely related because the form should be formed based on the focus and function of the sermon. Different forms can alter the content of a sermon and make it function differently. So, it may be true that each sermon must have its own particular form that is inseparable from the content (i.e., its focus and function). As Fred Craddock says in his book, *As One without Authority*, effective preaching calls for “a method consistent with one’s theology because the method is message; form and content are of a piece.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Contemporary homileticians have developed a variety of creative ideas for designing a sermonic form, alternative to the traditional style. One of the major differences regarding the sermonic form between the contemporary approach and the traditional one is that the former is based on the idea that the sermonic form should be listener-oriented rather than speaker-oriented. That is, while the traditional approach was concerned with how to speak what the preacher wanted to say, the contemporary approach is concerned with how the listener listens. So, the primary concern of the contemporary approach to the sermonic form is how to effectively approach the ways in which the listeners can effectively experience the sermon. Consequently, designing the sermonic form is a creative work based on the preacher’s pastoral sensitivity and skills of communication. It requires of the preacher discipline and practice.

If we consider the design of the sermonic form a creative work, it leads us to understand that there is no single proper form for a sermon. Perhaps some of you have listened to the same type of sermon year after year at your church and now think that **that** particular form that you are used to constitutes a “proper” sermon. There is no evidence, however, that the Jewish or Christian communities created an oral form and called it a sermon. Instead, the Bible contains many different literary forms to proclaim the Word of God, such as parables, letters, dialogue, poem, etc. Just as all of these literary forms were used in the Bible for effective communication, so the sermonic form is equally diverse. In the ClssNote#3, I introduced to you diverse practices of spiritual preaching in relation to Bonhoeffer’s spiritual disciplines—preaching as a poem, preaching as singing, preaching as praying, preaching as the invitation to the fellowship table. I encourage you to keep thinking creatively about the forms of preaching for your spiritual preaching: What kind of sermonic form can be the most effective for this specific message that I will preach?

In the fourth chapter of my book, I introduced three insights into the design of the sermon, based on Asian rhetoric: 1) Intuition as the divine communicational channel; 2) consensus-oriented conversation; and 3) space-oriented communication. I hope you can make time to reflect on this chapter. That will give you some insights into developing your own communicational skills.

2. The Sermonic Language

Our next concern for spiritual preaching is the use of language. What kind of language is effective for spiritual preaching? Here, I mean language in a broad sense: Imperative language versus indicative language, prescriptive language versus descriptive language, poetic language versus prosaic language, dialogical (or conversational) versus monological, and exclusively male-centered language versus inclusive language.

What kind of language shall we use for spiritual preaching? This is a matter of theology. For example, if we understand that Christian theology is an invitation to the good news of Jesus Christ, the invitational mood with indicative and descriptive language will be more effective for preaching, rather than the imperative mood with commanding or judgmental language. For those who understand God as gender-specific (masculine), the use of inclusive language would be a challenge for them. For the preachers who understand themselves as the herald of God representing God’s voice with the divine authority, their preaching language might be an authoritative monologue, rather than conversational with the listeners. Indeed, consciously or unconsciously, our theology of preaching controls our use of language for preaching.

Can you remember what language has been used in sermons that you have heard in your church? What language do you think you want to use in your preaching? You need to be intentional when you choose your homiletical language, since it is the medium carrying your theology.

1. Fred Craddock, *As One without Authority* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)