Class Notes #5

**The Craft of a Sermon**

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1. The Sermonic Form

Preachers usually think that the content of the sermon is the most important aspect of the preparation for preaching, and that the sermon’s form or style is just the container. Yet, this is not true: when crafting a sermon, the substance and the form are inseparable. Different forms can alter the content of a sermon and make it function differently. As Fred Craddock says in *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 been concerned with developing a variety of sermonic forms as alternatives to the traditional point-making style. One of the major differences between contemporary and traditional approaches is that the former is designed to be listener-oriented, and the latter speaker-oriented. In other words, while the traditional approach is concerned with how to deliver what the preacher wants to say, the contemporary approach is concerned with how the listener listens. The primary concern of contemporary approaches to the sermonic form is thus how to effectively communicate with listeners in order that they might “experience” the sermon. Consequently, the design of sermonic form is a creative task based on the preacher’s pastoral sensitivity and communication skills. It requires from the preacher discipline and practice.

If we consider the design of sermonic form creative work, that means there is no single proper form for the sermon. Perhaps, some of you have heard sermons that take the same form year after year at your church. As a consequence, you may think **that** particular form is standard for the sermon. There is, however, no evidence that the Jewish or Christian communities followed a particular sermonic form. Instead, the Bible adopts many different literary forms to proclaim the Word of God, such as parables, letters, prophetic oracles, dialogues, poems, etc. Just as all of these literary forms were used in the Bible for effective communication, so too are sermonic forms diverse. I encourage you to keep thinking creatively about the kind of sermonic forms that can be used effectively for your particular messages. During the Gathering Days class, we will discuss further how to design a sermon, based on the hand-out, “Styles of Preaching” (available in Canvas).

2. Sermonic Language

Our next concern with crafting a sermon is the use of language. What kind of language is effective for preaching? By language, I mean categories such as imperative language versus indicative language, prescriptive versus descriptive language, poetic versus prosaic language, dialogical (or conversational) language versus monological language, and exclusive versus inclusive language.

What kinds of language shall we use for preaching? The answer to this question is directly related to our theology of preaching. More precisely, if we understand that Christian preaching is an invitation to the good news of Jesus Christ, the invitational mood will be created through indicative and descriptive language, rather than imperative and prescriptive language. For those who understand God as gender-specific (masculine), the use of inclusive language will be a challenge. Moreover, if preachers understand themselves as the mouthpiece of God, they will regard preaching as an authoritative monologue delivered to the congregation from above, rather than a dialogue with listeners on equal terms. Indeed, consciously or unconsciously, our theology of preaching controls our use of language for preaching.

What kinds of language have you used in your preaching? What kinds of language are you familiar with looking back at the sermons you have heard? We need to be intentional when we choose our homiletical language, since it is the medium carrying on our theology.

1. Fred Craddock, *As One without Authority*, 3rd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)