

Themes in Current Homiletical Theory

Genre-Specific Preaching

By Jacob Haag

When James Muilenburg addressed the Society for Biblical Literature in 1968, he raised issues with the dominant way of analyzing biblical texts in scholarly circles for years. So he pleaded with scholars to move away from form criticism to rhetorical criticism.¹ In layman's terms, treat the Bible as a unified piece of literature. Slicing and dicing the text into numerous strands of redactional theology does not necessarily help us understand the text as we now have it. Muilenburg began a profound shift in reading the Bible that would impact biblical studies for the next fifty years. Any pastor who uses a recently published commentary can note how biblical studies is now keenly interested in treating the Bible in a literary and rhetorical way. This seismic shift in biblical studies has now cascaded into the other disciplines of theology, including homiletics. Preaching is now all about preaching the genres of the Bible in a literary and rhetorical way.

Genre-specific preaching originally began with the New Homiletic. Not only was Fred Craddock critical of authoritarian, deductive, theme-and-subparts preaching that had been the standard in Christian oratory for centuries, but he was also critical of preaching that did not appreciate the diverse genres of the Bible:

The Bible is rich in forms of expression: poetry, saga, historical narrative, proverb, hymn, diary, biography, parable, personal correspondence, drama, myth, dialogue, and gospel, whereas most sermons, which seek to communicate the messages of that treasury of materials, are all in essentially the same form. Why should the multitude of forms and moods within biblical literature and the multitude of needs in the congregation be brought together in one unvarying mold, and that copied from Greek rhetoricians of centuries ago?²

Instead Craddock contends the "forms of preaching should be as varied as the forms of rhetoric in the New Testament."³

Genre-specific preaching is not only the concern of mainline preaching. It is also the concern of confessional preaching, and in fact, there is a solid argument that preachers who believe in inspiration should be very interested in preaching the genres of Scripture. In a very recent book on genre-specific preaching, Doug O'Donnell makes this exact point:

Did God inspire the forms of the Bible, or only the content? Both! God led some biblical authors to write stories, others to write poems, others to write satire and proverbs and epistles. The Holy Spirit superintended the process of composition undertaken by biblical authors and also the resulting products of that composition (see 2 Pet. 1:21). Thus, whenever a biblical author expressed the content of a passage in a literary form, we can safely conclude that he *intended* that the preacher interpret the passage using ordinary literary methods of analysis. Put differently, whenever a biblical author embodies his message in a literary genre and by means of literary techniques, he *intends* that pastors engage in literary analysis.⁴

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In context, O'Donnell is giving seven reasons to convince preachers to preach biblical genres in a literary way:

1. It appreciates the Bible as literature.
2. It helps avoid reductionistic preaching.
3. It recognizes biblical meaning is communicated through literary forms.

4. It helps the congregation relive the text and appreciate the human experience in the text.
5. It appreciates the artistry of God's Word.
6. It opens up the entire Bible for preaching.
7. It adds freshness to preaching and prevents misunderstanding.⁵

O'Donnell has been profoundly influenced by Leland Ryken, the renowned professor emeritus of English at Wheaton. In case Lutheran preachers are suspicious of this approach, both O'Donnell and Ryken quote Luther and his conviction that preachers of the Word need to be students of rhetoric and literature.⁶ In his *Festschrift* in honor of Kent Hughes, Ryken shares Hughes' contention that "all biblical exposition is literary analysis." Ryken goes on to argue for the great promise of literary analysis for expository preaching, "Although good expository preachers intuitively practice an incipient literary criticism, they could enhance their expository sermons significantly if they would add even a modicum of self-conscious literary analysis to their methodology."⁷ His lament is incisive, "Many Bible expositors would assent to all that I have said about the literary nature of the Bible, only to ignore it when they stand in the pulpit."⁸ That means the study of genre does not simply take place in a pastor's office; it also needs to come through when he actually preaches on Sunday.

Basic Features of Genre-Specific Preaching

Traditional homiletics views the preacher's task as distilling the content of the text and then faithfully transmitting that to the congregation. When he has preached what the text is saying, his job is done. Craddock, in particular, has argued that preaching is far more. Preachers need to capture both the "what" and the "how" of the text (and if they don't, they are actually preaching an unbiblical sermon).⁹ I take it a step further. Holistic preaching needs to preach (1) what the text is saying (2) how the text



Abraham and Isaac

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is saying it *and* (3) why the text is saying it. Preachers need to be proficient exegetes, but they also need to be proficient in literary and rhetorical analysis. Genre-specific preaching addresses a deficient view that preaching is only concerned with transmitting biblical content or knowledge.

What exactly is genre-specific preaching? Peter Adam says it the simplest and best, "If this is the style of Scripture, perhaps it ought also to be the style of our preaching."¹⁰ Genre-specific preaching means that preaching is specific to the genre of the text. It does not mean that a preacher simply *appreciates* the Bible as literature. It does not mean that a preacher merely *comments on* the literary forms of the Bible in his sermon. I cannot emphasize this enough: genre-specific preaching means a preacher *models* the literary forms of the Bible in his sermon. In other words, the preacher actually changes how he writes his sermon, so that his sermon is communicating, as much as possible, in the same way the text is communicating. Current homiletics speaks of narrative preaching, prophetic preaching, epistolary preaching, apocalyptic preaching, and so forth. Each genre of Scripture offers a unique way of preaching.

Narrative Preaching

I will begin with narrative preaching, not only because the majority of the Bible is narrative, but because narrative preaching is now all the rage in homiletics, especially as it applies to preaching in a postmodern world. Unfortunately, narrative preaching is itself a large label, and there are various ways to accomplish it.

To begin with, narrative preaching can be done by simply telling the biblical story in a compelling way. Walter Wangerin is a master of this.¹¹ Narrative preaching emphasizes the holistic nature of a story, and so it is usually not subdivided into parts.¹² As Mark Paustian says, "Let the story be the story."¹³ The preacher needs to place himself (and his hearers) in the text, use the present tense, and belabor the details and emotion of the story. For example, here are selections from my Lent 1B sermon on Genesis 22:1-18, with the theme, "The Greatest Sacrifice of All:"

The emotion builds with each of the four descriptions—your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac. After all, this is the child he never thought he would have, the son he held in his arms, the miracle baby he received in his old age, the only hope for continuing his family line into the future. ... Just imagine looking at these two heading off into the distance. This is just excruciatingly painful at this point! Every step of the journey Abraham has to think about making the greatest sacrifice of all, sacrificing his only son who's walking right next to him. For three days in a row! ... Once Abraham starts to hike up the mountain, Isaac asks where the lamb for the sacrifice is.

I mean, this is just unbearable at this point! We have the wood and the fire, Dad, but where's the sacrifice? Well, Isaac, you're it! You're the one being led like a lamb to the slaughter! This must have felt like five thousand darts fired right into the heart of Abraham. ... Once they arrive at their final destination, everything goes into slow motion, as time seems to stretch out for eternity. First, build an altar. Then put wood on top of it. Then bind Isaac. Then put him on top of the altar. Then reach out your hand. Then grab the knife. I mean, you just got to cover your eyes and turn away. Abraham, are you really going to go through with this? Abraham, are you really going to kill your own son? Abraham, are you really going to offer up the greatest sacrifice of all? No! Don't do it!

To take this a step further, narrative preaching can also be done in a first-person style. In first-person narrative preaching, the preacher speaks in first person throughout the sermon from the perspective of one of the characters in the story. For example, I preached on Transfiguration from the perspective of Peter (Mark 9:2-9), with the theme, "Lord, Teach Me Your True Glory"—beginning with Peter interacting with the crowds in Galilee, then confronting Jesus, then ascending the mountain to see his true glory, then addressing the people of my congregation with what he learned that day, and finally ending with what he told Mark as he began to write his Gospel. For a more complex example of this technique, consider the emotional impact from my Lent 2B sermon on Job 1:13-22, with the theme, "Praise God for Pain." I preached in first-person narrative style, except that I manipulated the "I" to be six people's different perspectives from which I was speaking throughout:

1. The introduction is from Alexander's perspective in the children's book *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*.
2. The body is from Job's perspective as he lives through his terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day (losing his possessions and children).
3. The transition is from the congregation's perspective, as they imagine what it would be like to live through their terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day (house burning down, laid off from work, car stolen, children killed in a car accident).
4. The gospel is from Christ's perspective, as he goes through his terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day (suffering and dying on the cross).
5. The application is from my own perspective, as I recount my own terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day (my mother dying in the hospital while I was deliberating a call right before Holy Week).

Narrative preaching is now all the rage in homiletics.



The suffering of Job

6. The conclusion is from Kristyn Getty's perspective, as she recounts her terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day (her cousin's death and the Nashville school shooting, which inspired the hymn "God of Every Grace"—which our choir sang right before the sermon).

Prophetic, Apocalyptic, and Epistolary Preaching

After narrative preaching, we can briefly explore some more nuanced genres. First, prophetic preaching is not only about direct prophecies that can get easily traced to Christ. The Hebrew prophets like Jeremiah endured profound suffering, and so my sermon on Jeremiah 20:7-13 (Proper 7A), with the theme, "Lord, Why Is It So Hard?" modeled the jeremiads throughout the book. The introduction to my sermon was ten complaints, all of which began with, "Lord, why is it so hard ...?" Notice that I am not only saying what the text is saying; *I am doing what the text is doing*. I am lamenting, just as Jeremiah is lamenting. Second, apocalyptic preaching is not just about the end of the world. It needs to capture the drama of an epic, crushing defeat of the forces of evil, and it also needs to provide profound encouragement for Christians to persevere in their faith until then. That is why I captured the intense drama of apocalyptic literature with my theme, "Christ Crushes the Competition," for Revelation 20:1-6 (Proper 5B) and the exhortatory nature of apocalyptic literature with my theme, "Here's What You Need to Keep Going," for Revelation 7:9-17 (All Saints' Day A). Finally, epistolary preaching is both personal and practical. Epistles were modeled after Greco-Roman features of letter writing, and so my sermon on Romans 1:1-7 (Advent 4A) was framed from the perspective of writing Christmas letters to family and friends.¹⁴ My theme was, "A Christmas Letter Filled with Good News," but I am intrigued with the thought of writing an epistolary sermon as a letter itself.¹⁵ Epistles also include large sections of ethical exhortation, and so one way to structure these sermons is by merging exposition and application together.¹⁶ Much more could be said, but recent homiletical books will have entire chapters on how to preach each of these genres.¹⁷



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trigue. It moves us beyond our comfort zones and helps us model diverse ways of preaching biblical genres. When we do so, no one will be able to complain that our sermons are boring.

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A Closing Encouragement

As I talk to pastors around our synod, sometimes I hear comments like, “I don’t preach two-part sermons anymore. That was the way we had to do it at the seminary.” Or “I don’t develop parts at all.” Then I read *Sermon Studies* or listen to the *Preacher Podcast* or hear pastors who seem to always use two parts. All this has led me to conclude that many preach in the same way—whether that’s the way you’ve always done it since the seminary, or it’s a new way you’ve developed yourself. To which I usually think, “Well, what is the text doing? Does the text have two parts? Three parts? One part? Is it a narrative? Parable? Prophecy? Epistle? That should inform how you outline, structure, and write your sermon.”

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My simple test for preachers is this. Look at your sermon theme and parts over the past year. If your sermons are all the same form, go back and look at the genre and literary features of the text again. The Bible is not all the same form, and neither should your preaching be. I have preached deductive sermons with one part, two parts, three parts, four parts, and even five parts. I have preached inductive sermons with numerous narrative components. I have utilized the New Homiletic. I have preached apocalyptic sermons with drama, prophetic sermons with laments, and epistolary sermons with warmth and practicality. There’s no one way I preach, because there’s no one way the Bible communicates. Genre-specific preaching, well done, employs diversity and in-

¹ James Muilenburg, “Form Criticism and Beyond,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88, no. 1 (March 1969): 1-18. It should be noted, however, that Muilenburg is not rejecting form criticism; he is saying it needs to be supplemented.

² Fred Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 4th ed. (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001), 113.

³ Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 45.

⁴ Douglas Sean O’Donnell and Leland Ryken, *The Beauty and Power of Biblical Exposition: Preaching the Literary Artistry and Genres of the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 19, ft. 10.

⁵ O’Donnell and Ryken, *The Beauty and Power of Biblical Exposition*, 15-22.

⁶ Luther wrote, “I am persuaded that without knowledge of literature pure theology cannot at all endure ... Certainly it is my desire that there shall be as many poets and rhetoricians as possible, because I see that by these studies, as by no other means, people are wonderfully fitted for the grasping of sacred truth and for handling it skillfully and happily.” Quoted in O’Donnell and Ryken, *The Beauty and Power of Biblical Exposition*, 15-16; Leland Ryken, “The Bible as Literature and Expository Preaching,” in *Preach the Word: Essays on Preaching: In Honor of R. Kent Hughes*, ed. Leland Ryken and Todd Wilson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway: 2007), 38. On pages 45-46, Ryken goes on to provide further reasons to defend a literary approach to confessional pastors who question it as modernistic or theologically precarious.

⁷ Ryken, “The Bible as Literature and Expository Preaching,” 39.

⁸ Ryken, “The Bible as Literature and Expository Preaching,” 44.

⁹ Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 5, 44; Fred Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 28, 122-123, 178.

¹⁰ Peter Adam, *Speaking God’s Words: A Practical Theology of Preaching* (Vancouver, B.C.: Regent College Publishing, 2004), 94.

¹¹ Walter Wangerin, Jr., *The Book of God: The Bible as a Novel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996).

¹² If you do, one way is to divide the story based on the characters in the story.

¹³ Mark Paustian, “Joy and Confidence from the Basics—Part 3,” *Preach the Word* 24, no. 3 (January/February 2021), 3. Or as he says elsewhere about Hebrew narrative, “The story will not be rushed.” Mark Paustian, “The Beauty with the Veil: Validating the Strategies of Kierkegaardian Indirect Communication Through a Close Christological Reading of the Hebrew Old Testament” (PhD diss., Regent University, 2016), 3.

¹⁴ The sermons mentioned above are available on the Commission on Worship website: <https://worship.welsrc.net/download-worship/preach-the-word-volume-28/>.

¹⁵ Those of my generation will fondly remember Pres. Mark Zaring’s “letters from home” chapel sermons that employed this approach.

¹⁶ For more on preaching sanctification in line with NT epistles, see my first article in this series.

¹⁷ I’d suggest starting with O’Donnell and Ryken’s book cited above. Then move on to *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* by Sidney Greidanus or *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* by Thomas Long.

