

Themes in Current Homiletical Theory

The New Homiletic

By Jacob Haag

As Fred Craddock looked out at the American mainline church around 1970, he saw some major problems. People were not listening or attending church. People did not care about an inspired, authoritative Bible or about societal institutions—especially after the countercultural movements in the tumultuous 1960s. All this could not help but affect the American pulpit. This was the time when, according to the homiletical historian Hughes Oliphant Old, the great era of American preaching simply was coming to an end.¹ The American pulpit needed something new. So Craddock helped launch this grand movement away from deductive, authoritative preaching. He was convinced preaching needed to be done in an inductive way much more sensitive to the hearer—as one without authority.

So began the New Homiletic.² As with any movement, it is oversimplistic to credit one person or book with starting everything, but Craddock's *As One Without Authority*—first published in 1971 and now in its fourth edition—was certainly formative. Craddock is critical of the deductive, theme-and-subparts style of preaching that was based on classical rhetoric and had long been part of Christian preaching. He laments that preachers have used this form for too long, “The sermons of our time have, with few exceptions, kept the same form. . . . Either preachers have access to a world that is neat, orderly, and unified, which gives their sermons their form, or they are out of date and out of touch with the way it is. In either case, they do not communicate.”³ Not only does deductive preaching not conform to the messy complexities of our modern world, but it also does not conform to educational theory, which is based on discussion and participation—not lectures.⁴ Expository preaching is “guilty of archaism,” the Scriptures “shackle the minister,” and the sermon still has the traditional view of “clearly discernible authoritarianism.”⁵ However, once preachers abandon the three-point, Aristotelian deductive

method, they will stand “at the threshold of new pulpit power.”⁶ As with many New Homileticians, Craddock often does a good job of identifying problems. His proposed solutions could be questioned. No matter what you make of him, Craddock's influence is indelible. As William Bronsend said when Craddock recently died, he “changed everything about preaching at a time when nothing less would do.”⁷

Basic Features of the New Homiletic

While the New Homiletic is a broad movement with differences within it, here are some basic features:

1. the turn to the hearer
2. the shift from deductive to inductive/narrative
3. the sermon as an existential word event⁸

Now this might seem that all the New Homiletic is trying to accomplish is a better job of application. That is not the case. Much more is at work here. The New Homiletic arose from the New Hermeneutic and twentieth-century existential theology. That means the turn to the hearer is not so much meant to apply the text to the congregation but to allow the congregation to participate in the meaning of the text, as the text is recreated through the church's continual experience and revelation. Craddock justifies this on the important role of the hearer in communication theory, in Luther's theology of the priesthood of all believers, in the church's role in canonizing Scripture, and in his own synergistic theology.⁹ Simply put, Craddock does not believe in forcing preconceived conclusions onto the text but in allowing the hearers to come to their own conclusions.¹⁰

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So certainly, for us who are committed to the inspiration of Scriptures, who emphasize the Spirit's work in creating and strengthening faith through the proclamation of the Word, who believe preaching comes with authority (Jer 23:29), I am by no means giving the New Homiletic a full endorsement. Even Craddock himself wondered later in his life if he moved too far away from textual content.¹¹ So what to make of the New Homiletic? I am not concerned that confessional pastors will not be able to spot these considerable doctrinal differences. I am concerned that confessional pastors will overreact to the New Homiletic, throw the baby out with the bathwater, and miss out on some current homiletical insights that could really aid them in preaching to a culture that distrusts authority.

Inductive Preaching

To go back to the historical background of the origin of the New Homiletic, Craddock and others were on to something when they recognized two things: twentieth-century American culture had become resistant to deductive, authoritarian, propositional truth statements, and inductive or narrative communication is uniquely situated to bypass the barriers a tuned-out (or hardened) culture puts up to scriptural proclamation. (To allay the fears of confessional preachers, we will see in this series' next article that narrative and inductive communication is affirmed in Scripture itself.) Many people within America's diverse culture hear classic, deductive preaching and retort, "Who are you to assume that the norm for *your* truth claims is normative for everyone else?" If confessional preachers are not sensitive to this and their thunderous claim, "Thus says the Word of the Lord," becomes perceived not just as an authoritative message but *authoritarianism*, then their audience is tuned out from the very beginning, and any hope they will actually pay attention is lost. Confessional preachers are right-



fully concerned about preaching the text, but at the end of the day, we also want the text to be *heard*. Maybe the issue is not so much the message but the way in which the message is delivered. Here the New Homiletic has much to teach us, especially for those who use deductive preaching so much that we routinely say what we will say (introduction), say it (body), and say what we just said (conclusion). If that's all people hear all the time, they rightfully start to get tired of it—and we preachers need to look in the mirror. To solve this problem, we need to find a way to pair an infallible Bible with the homiletical approaches of Craddock and Lowry.

Fred Craddock's Narrative Preaching

Fred Craddock goes down as the father of narrative preaching. This movement, so central to the New Homiletic, has now taken over the homiletical world. And that is, largely so, a good thing. As Old says, "There is something obviously true about this movement. One of the basic responsibilities of the preacher is to recount the story, the *Heilsgeschichte*, the history of salvation. ... Narrative preaching does not exhaust the preaching vocation ... but storytelling is of the essence of preaching."¹² It is not too much of an exaggeration to say a preacher is as good as his storytelling. Not to mention, the vast majority of Scripture is narrative. In particular, the entire OT is essentially a narrative of God's action from creation up until he was about to send the Savior into the world. On Thanksgiving Eve in 2019, I custom designed the service around five psalms of thanksgiving. I preached on Psalm 136, which is unique in two ways: the antiphonal refrain ("His love endures forever") repeats over and over, and the whole psalm is a narrative recounting Israel's history. So my sermon employed Craddock's concept of *overhearing*¹³ to layer the sermon with multiple communicative aspects:

1. The introduction artfully sketched the scene as the Israelites gather for Passover and sing this psalm antiphonally in the temple (as we sung it in church).
2. The exposition is framed from the perspective of an Israelite head of household, who tells his family the story of God's love over the table.
3. The application is framed from the perspective of an Israelite head of household, who shares what he would say to the people of America today.
4. The conclusion alludes back to the introduction and sketches the scene as my congregation gathers with their families for Thanksgiving and then closes by asking them which stories they will tell.¹⁴

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Now notice exactly what I'm doing. I'm crafting the sermon as if we were all a fly on the wall during the Jewish holiday of Passover thousands of years ago. For the majority of the sermon, I'm acting like I'm not even talking to my own congregation. I'm just talking in first person like an Israelite head of household. *Everyone else is just listening in.* I do not address them until the very end. That's the whole point. I'm purposely inviting them to take their barriers down, but all along, they are indirectly hearing the gospel in story form.

Eugene Lowry's Loop

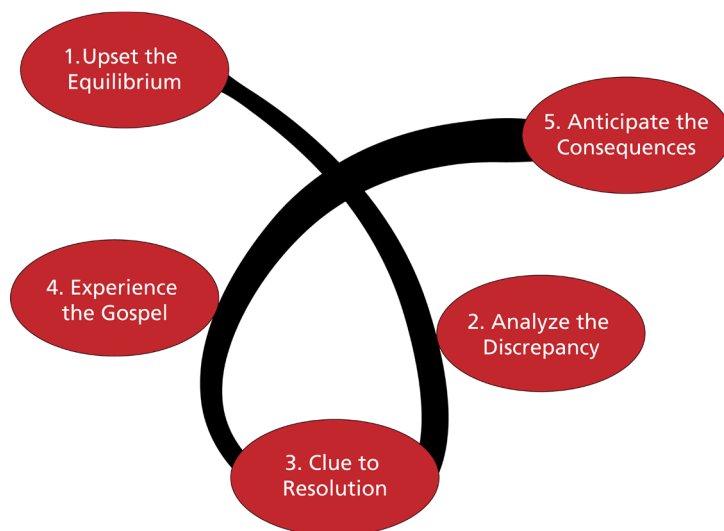
Eugene Lowry studied under Craddock and is another New Homiletician. Since his approach is now part of senior homiletics at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, I will focus on his book. Lowry's approach is a five-part inductive form, often called a "Lowry Loop:"

1. Upsetting the Equilibrium
2. Analyzing the Discrepancy
3. Disclosing the Key to Resolution
4. Experiencing the Gospel
5. Anticipating the Consequences¹⁵

At first glance, it might seem Lowry's approach goes like this: problems—PROBLEM—SOLUTION—solutions. Or it might seem it is a classic Lutheran evangelistic presentation—a "God's Great Exchange" of sorts—that goes from sin, to grace, to faith, to fruits of faith. That is an oversimplification of Lowry. Lowry's loop is a highly disciplined, yet highly artful, communicative form that first embraces the hearers' natural objections to the text, leads them to eventually see how their own assumptions will lead to dead ends, then exposes the hearers to something they had never considered before, then leads them to see how this something new is a richer and fuller understanding, and finally explores how all this will impact their lives.

There are two make-or-break parts of a Lowry Loop that are absolutely crucial: the first and the third. The opening is not meant to create interest in the subject matter in the audience, as in traditional forms of oratory. The congregation immediately needs to sense, "Oh, there's a problem here." More specifically, they need to sense, "There's a problem *with the text.*" A Lowry Loop goes much more quickly to the text than traditional preaching, which may not quote the Bible until much later in the exposition/body. For example, here is the opening of my Thanksgiving Eve sermon from 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, preached as a Lowry Loop in 2020 in the height of COVID:

These unbearable words from Scripture seem so trite in their brevity and so offensive in their simplicity. ***Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*** Seriously? Nothing more said than that? No caveats, no nuances, no exceptions? Always thankful? Even in the worst year ever? People are sick and dying, yet again. Hospitals are on the brink, yet again. PPP



is running low, yet again. Students have been sent home, yet again. Churches are going virtual, yet again. A stay-at-home order has been issued, yet again. Restaurants are shuttered, yet again. Twelve million are set to lose unemployment benefits after Christmas unless another relief package somehow gets passed in a lame duck session. People don't know where they'll live, what they'll eat, or how they'll stay sane. Families are torn apart in an emotional back-and-forth between CDC guidelines and precious holiday traditions. ... And God wants us to be thankful in a year like this? The only thing to be thankful for is New Year's Eve, when we can kick the worst year ever to the curb and kiss it goodbye!

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Now notice exactly what I'm doing. I'm embracing the hearer's natural objection to the text and saying (at least for now), "You're right. You're right to be mad about this text. I agree with you, and I'm going to go along with you to see where this takes us." So I find a Lowry Loop particularly useful, not only in preaching NT texts that are obviously inductive in form (like 1 Corinthians 15:12-22), but especially in preaching offensive OT texts that grind against Western sensibilities (like Isaiah 45:18-25).¹⁶ You need to nail a Lowry Loop in the opening few sentences, or else it's doomed from the start.

Another absolutely crucial part of a Lowry Loop is the third part. This is where the entire sermon, rhetorically speaking, turns. After embracing the hearer's natural objections to the text, and then getting deeper and deeper into the mess along with them, this is the grand "aha!" moment. Here is where you say, "If A (your objection) is true, why is not B (what you sense is right) also true? Maybe your assumptions have been flawed from the get-go. Maybe you haven't considered all the options. What about this?"

Here is how my Thanksgiving Eve sermon continued:

Here's the ultimate issue. This year it's easy to create a long list of things we aren't thankful for: death, sickness, unemployment, stress, virtual learning, curtailed freedom. If you take that approach, there's always things you can find to not be thankful for. For argument's sake, let's even envision a normal year. The college graduate, instead of focusing on a diploma from a great university, focuses on how she doesn't have a house. The busy parent, instead of focusing on the blessing of children, focuses on how they can't behave. The successful person, instead of focusing on a very sufficient paycheck, focuses on how he doesn't earn six figures. That's the perpetual problem: focusing on things we don't have, instead of focusing on what we do have. So if we can't be thankful in *difficult* situations, we actually won't be thankful in *any* situation! We'll always find more things we don't have, more things to complain about. You'll be digging yourself a vicious hole that will result in stress, envy, and discontentment in the worst year ever *and* in the best year ever. What's the one thing that can get us out of this hole? What is the one unchanging constant you can be thankful for—no matter what? That would make all the difference!¹⁷

This is the grand “aha!” moment—where the lightbulb goes off and the epiphany occurs. The exclamation point in your manuscript needs to be reflected in some drama and excitement in your delivery. You need to absolutely nail this part of a Lowry Loop, or else the sermon will just fizzle.

Inductive preaching does not give the preacher more freedom. It forces the preacher to be more constrained—to only give away certain things at certain times.

To be clear, inductive preaching is a nuanced facet of current homiletics. *You have to know what you are doing.* Inductive preaching does *not* give the preacher more freedom, as if he can just take the sermon in whatever direction he wants, because he's bringing the hearers along for the ride, and the ride is what counts. Inductive preaching forces the preacher to be *more* constrained—to only give away certain things at certain times. If you are going to attempt a Lowry Loop, you need to follow it precisely and do it the way it is intended. Done poorly, a Lowry Loop becomes an incoherent mess that leaves hearers completely confused. Done well, a Lowry Loop becomes some of the most powerful preaching you will ever hear.

The New Homiletic has profoundly shaped homiletics in the last fifty years. To be conversant with current homiletical theory, one

For Further Study

- For more on Fred Craddock and the theology of the New Homiletic, see my article in *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* (117:3), “A New Look at the New Homiletic: An Evaluation of Fred Craddock's Bibliography”
- For more on alternate sermon styles, consider Prof. Jon Micheel's Summer Quarter course, “Survey of Sermon Structures”

has to be familiar with the New Homiletic.¹⁸ This requires preachers to read widely and get outside the comfortable parameters of theologians who have a commitment to scriptural infallibility. If preachers in our circles can do the hard work of reading with discernment and sift the wheat from the chaff, they will come away with greater flexibility in preaching an authoritative Word in an intriguing, inductive way to a skeptical world.

¹ Hughes Oliphant Old, *Our Own Time*, vol. 7 of *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 1-2.

² The term was coined in 1965 by David Randolph at the first meeting of the Academy of Homiletics.

³ Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 4th ed. (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001), 13.

⁴ Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 15.

⁵ Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 17.

⁶ Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 38.

⁷ William Brosend, “Something Else Is Lacking: Remembering Fred B. Craddock,” *Anglican Theological Review* 101, no. 1 (2019): 129.

⁸ O. Wesley Allen, “Introduction: The Pillars of the New Homiletic,” in *The Renewed Homiletic*, ed. O. Wesley Allen and David Buttrick (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 7-9.

⁹ Fred Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 28, 39, 86; Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 18, 51, 96-97; Fred Craddock, “The Sermon and the Uses of Scripture,” *Theology Today* 42, no. 1 (April 1985): 9.

¹⁰ Craddock, “Inductive Preaching Renewed,” in *The Renewed Homiletic*, 44-45.

¹¹ Craddock, “Inductive Preaching Renewed,” 50.

¹² Old, *Our Own Time*, 30.

¹³ See Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2002).

¹⁴ The entire sermon is available on the Commission on Worship website: worship.welsrc.net/download-worship/preach-the-word-volume-28

¹⁵ Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form*, Expanded ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000).

¹⁶ See my example sermons on the Commission on Worship website, endnote 14.

¹⁷ See my example sermon on the Commission on Worship website, endnote 14. (The two midweek Thanksgiving Eve sermons above are significantly shorter than my normal Sunday sermons.)

¹⁸ Bryan Chapell has a section on the New Homiletic in *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 162-168.