

***Shaping the Sermon:
Meaning, Engagement and Delight***

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Preachers often struggle with their sermon's shape. Moreover, lack of careful consideration of shape may mean exposition is not as faithful to the biblical text as one would hope. This introductory article is designed to help preachers in this process by considering the dynamic creative spiritual work of moving from text to shape, and by examining a range of shapes so that the shape of the sermon is not only faithful to the text, but also facilitates the communication of meaning, engagement and delight.

Sermons have shapes. That is, their material is arranged or composed in a particular way. The shape of the sermon is crucially important, as shape will affect the communication of meaning, engagement and response. Shapes can even have an intrinsic beauty, and thus help and bring delight to listeners. All aspects of shape should bring glory to God. Sometimes shape is referred to as structure, framework, design or form. In this introductory article I have tended to use these terms interchangeably, although structure and framework can convey to some a more lineal or angular form than necessary. Whole books have been written about shape, so this necessarily limited overview is written to introduce the area, sharpen the thinking and practice of regular preachers and to bring together some of the thinking and practice from a range of homiletical stables.¹

Moving from Aim to Shape

A common problem for preachers is organising their material effectively. Having worked hard at understanding a biblical passage or theme in the context of the whole Bible, having worked hard at discerning its relationship with their congregation, and having worked hard at discerning the purpose or aim for the sermon and expressing this concisely, such as in a single sermonic sentence, they then find it difficult to arrange this material in a helpful and engaging form. Some preachers are paralysed at this point. Some, trusting their “stream of consciousness,” jump in without appropriate planning, only to face difficulties downstream. Others have so much confidence in themselves and the truth and significance of their material that they do not give due care to its effective communication, and wonder why their diligence and commitment is not contagious. To be fair, this stage of moving from aim to shape has all the complexities associated with any creative process. As such, I often refer to it as “the grumpy stage,” given the focus and clarification required, the false starts, and its regular difficulty. For many preachers, moving from aim to shape is one of the hardest hurdles in the preaching task.

In the past, some preaching texts have argued for one basic shape to the sermon, such as three points and a poem, or a story shape.² This approach erroneously limits the preacher, has a

¹ See, for example, O. Wesley Allen, Jr., *Determining the Form* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), an accessible collection and explanation of exemplary styles from an American Methodist perspective; Kenton C. Anderson, *Choosing to Preach: A Comprehensive Introduction to Sermon Options and Structures* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006); Eugene L. Lowry, *The Sermon: Dancing the Edge of Mystery* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997) and Ronald J. Allen, ed., *Patterns of Preaching: A Sermon Sampler* (St Louis: Chalice, 1998), a collection of sermons in an annotated range of forms.

² For an historical example of a classical deductive approach to form, see John A. Broadus, *A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, ed. E. C. Dargan, 27th ed. (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1889), 258–338.

dulling predictability, and is not consonant with the way God himself communicates. In other words, the use of a range of shapes in the preacher's ministry will not only aid communication and engagement, but will help listeners gain a greater appreciation for the variety in the Scriptures and the creativity of our God, its author.

A Creative Spiritual Work

Moving from aim to shape is a dynamic creative spiritual work. As *spiritual* work, it requires the empowerment and guidance of the Holy Spirit. God has promised to equip his servants with the gifts needed for the ministry of his word. This is a daily encouragement and relief. It also puts our ministry in perspective, recognising that we are ambassadors, stewards and servants. Like most spiritual gifts, gifts associated with the word need to be honed, developed and matured. Prayer is essential, if only to remind us that it is God's work, for his glory. He will guide and lead, even in matters of shape. Like any spiritual work, the ministry will need to be tested: by time, by the community of faith, and by its fruit. Sometimes it is hard to discern what is of the Spirit. Great ideas or structures can look embarrassingly lame the next week, even the next day. What was supposedly from the Spirit was in fact a run up a dead end, as we were carried away in our own enthusiasm, self-confidence, immaturity and inexperience. Of course, sometimes the shape falls out neatly without any trouble, almost as if the preacher is carried along by some sort of creative muse. The danger here is to presume this rush of creativity is necessarily of the Spirit, or even the best way forward, as contrarily evidenced on re-examination at a later stage. At other times there are many false starts, and even at the sermon's preaching one often recognises troublesome areas and better ways forward. That too, of course, can be the work of the Spirit.

Yet just as God promises to empower and equip, this work also requires our total commitment as his Spirit works through us. It is 100% God, 100% us: a dynamic creative spiritual work. As a *creative* work there will be wonderful individual differences. Each of us has been gifted differently. Each has developed different skills. Each has had a vast array of different experiences. This means that even when a number of preachers come with the same aim to a text or theme, their sermons will vary considerably, each reflecting the interaction of the text or theme with that particular individual. I have heard 12 sermons on the same text with the same aim in the one class for the same audience and each is remarkably different. Similarly, a good preacher can preach a text in a range of ways, with different shapes. This is because a sermon is a creative work. In other words, the four elements of what is called the homiletical quadrilateral each have a bearing on shape.³ That is, shapes will naturally differ because of the *text*, the *congregation and occasion*, the *preacher*, and that particular *sermon*.

³ For an introductory discussion of this quadrilateral, initially brought to my attention by Eugene Lowry in 1999, but whose original source is unknown, see Adrian Lane, "Training the Trainers of Tomorrow's Preachers: Towards a Transferable Homiletical Pedagogy," *Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society* 9.2 (2009): 16–34, also available at <https://preaching.org.au/2011/03/18/training-the-trainers-of-tomorrows-preachers/>.

Like all creative work, there is not necessarily one right way for the sermon's production. However, this does not mean that some forms are not more effective than others, or that there are not wrong ways forward. Like all good creative work, a certain technical proficiency is required. This proficiency can be developed with teaching, learning, practice and critique. It requires a toolkit of resources. When it comes to the shape of the sermon, the more shapes a preacher is familiar with, the greater the resources at hand.

As a creative work, preaching is more like architecture than writing a serial. It is generally planned with the end in mind. The serial writer creates characters within a context and allows the story to develop with a certain open-endedness. Actors can come and go. Plots are open to change. On the other hand, the architect needs to know the final shape of the building before a foundation is laid, even before excavation begins. The final shape determines the excavation and foundation. Sometimes the work is a little like the poet, who may strike an 'aha' moment as the poem is taking shape and so arranges the poem accordingly. However, the greater the open-endedness for the preacher during the writing stage, the greater the restructuring that may be required later, and the greater the chance of misfiring.

All creativity works with constraints. Sometimes these constraints are related to the medium, sometimes to the creator, and sometimes they are externally imposed. For the preacher, obvious constraints relate to time, language and faithfulness to the text. Humans naturally believe that the fewer constraints, the better will be their work. They are constantly trying to improve their art by throwing off constraints. However, in a counter-intuitive truth, better work is often produced with greater constraint. Constraint is a gift. A black and white photographic exhibition is often more striking and appealing than colour. Similarly, placing a limit on the number of exhibits heightens the overall quality. A 100 minute movie can be far more compelling than one of 180 minutes. Sonnets and haikus are often richer than longer free verse, and an architect with a tight budget often produces sharper work than when given an open-ended brief. The skilled preacher under a time constraint is forced to prune, to clarify exactly what needs to be communicated, to think carefully about the relationships between ideas and to choose illustrations that are succinct and carry substantial freight. This pruning generally leads to clearer, cleaner, crisper, deeper and more effective and engaging communication.

In the creative process, numerous designs will be tried and examined. While working up an aim and a sermonic sentence, preachers will have already surfaced some possible shapes for consideration. However, beware of settling too early on a shape. The work of examining different prospective shapes for the sermon will unearth fresh insights, perspectives, relationships and communication modes.

Time and occasion is needed for this creative spiritual work. The preacher's life itself will need to be pruned and freed from distracting stimulation and clutter. The preacher will need to develop good self-knowledge of what life circumstances enhance this creativity, and what distract or stifle it. Yet more than self-knowledge is required: discipline in nurturing and making good use of creative opportunities is essential. Learn from the creative habits of

others. Most preachers find having a notebook at hand helpful. Many find ideas come during exercise or sleep, or by talking the sermon through with another. For me, leaving the house and finding a space where there are no other calls on my focus is essential. This includes being free from interruptions, especially the phone and the internet. Helping others such as family or parishioners understand the importance of this necessarily task-focussed activity is important. It is focussed for God's glory and the good of the many. It is unusually tiring and draining. The preacher thus also needs to know what will refresh. Most preachers cannot move directly from this creative spiritual work into careful pastoral activity without some break for 'decompression' and refreshment.

The Importance and Purpose of Shapes

Some preachers are very much at home with concepts relating to shape. This may be an inherent intuitive gift, or a gift developed in another discipline such as literature or music. Others may need to focus on developing this sensitivity. All preachers will need to give ongoing thought as to how shape interacts with communication.

Primarily, shapes are there to elucidate *meaning*. They help communicate content. In Ephesians 4 and 5, for example, Paul urges his readers to live in accord with their new-found status in Christ. Life in Christ is characterised by light (A), life (A), wisdom (A), sobriety (A) and submission (A), whereas life outside of Christ is characterised by darkness (B), death (B), foolishness (B), drunkenness (B) and lack of obedience (B). This contrast in the content of the passage will be elucidated and heightened by a contrastive shape, such as ABABABABAB or AAAAABBBBB. The passage's meaning is thus made all the more clear. Those filled with the Spirit of Christ must leave one so-called 'lifestyle' for another. There are only two ways to 'live'.

Secondly, shapes are there to assist *engagement*, and thus identification and internalisation. Shapes help the sermon build tension and move to a climax. This movement within the sermon is often referred to as narrative form or plot. Escalation and reversal are key ingredients, which we will examine more closely below. The selling of Joseph into slavery, David's deepening descent into sin in 2 Samuel 11-12, Haman's plot against Mordecai and the journey into despair by the prodigal in Luke 15 all have the listener longing, as the narrative escalates downwards, for an 'aha' moment of reversal. Faithful exposition of these texts thus requires a preacher with a good understanding of narrative form, escalation and reversal.

Helpful shapes work synergistically, with meaning and engagement each enhancing the other to produce communication where the outcome is more than the sum of its components. The progress of the gospel in Acts, for example, from Jerusalem to all Judea, to Samaria and to the ends of the earth cannot help but call for an expansive shape, which climaxes in Acts 28, despite extraordinary opposition at every stage. This tidal yet determinedly expansive shape will not only facilitate the communication of meaning, but will also assist engagement and excitement as the listener is caught up in the fulfilment of the Acts 1:8 prophesy.

Thirdly, shapes are there to assist *response*. Without being manipulative, shapes can help listeners move to a thoughtful response. They can help listeners remember key characters and moves in the story, key points, aphorisms and phrases in the argument, and key images. They can delight and trouble. By carefully shaping the sermon George Whitefield and Billy Graham, for instance, regularly led their audiences to the point where the severity of their condition could only be resolved by the climactic response of repentance and faith.⁴

Finally, of course, shapes are there to assist the *preacher*. They force the preparing preacher to fine-tune the relationships between ideas and their proportionality, to fine-tune the various components in narrative, and to fine-tune the relationships between components of an image. They also assist the preacher in delivery. Many preachers who initially write out their texts in full then take only an outline into the pulpit. The work done on shaping this outline helps the preacher discern, remember and deliver a clear, consistent, proportional, integrated, engaging and purposive message.

Some Common Shapes

Given that preaching is a creative work, the more tools the preacher has at hand for that creative process the better. This will assist the preacher in finding the most appropriate means for communicating God's message. It will also assist variety in presentation, and thereby engagement. This is especially important if the preacher is preaching to the same congregation week by week. A good knowledge of different shapes will also mean that the preacher can use different means for reaching different audiences. The Scriptures themselves communicate using a wonderful variety of shapes. One only has to look at the variety in the four biographies of Jesus. Much of this shaping is lost in translation, such as poetic, acrostic and aural shapes, or obscured by our use of chapters and verses.⁵ Nonetheless, as the preacher works hard at discerning the shapes both in Scripture and in the listeners' worlds, the preacher can develop a quiver of shapes which serves as a resource for crafting and delivery. Preachers already know intuitively a range of shapes. The value in naming some common shapes is that it quickens the ability of preachers to discern an appropriate shape.

One helpful matrix or framework to use when considering shape is Schlafer's conception that Scripture falls into three "distinctive motifs" or "genres": "images, narratives and arguments."⁶ He states:

Depending, then, upon the thrust of the text and the need of the hour, the preacher will select an image, narrative, or argument as a centering strategy for sermon integration... One of these three—image, story, or argument—is the orchestrating,

⁴ See Adrian Lane, *George Whitefield: Master Homiletician: A Homiletical Analysis of 'The Method of Grace'* (Unpublished manuscript, Leon Morris Library, Ridley College, Melbourne, 1996).

⁵ Poetic shapes make use of poetic devices such as stanzas, refrains, rhyme, meter, acrostics, acronyms and palindromes. Aural shapes indicate arrangement by the sounds communicated, such as alliteration and assonance. In English, aural shapes include headlines beginning with the same sound or adverbs ending with -ly.

⁶ David Schlafer, *Surviving the Sermon* (Cambridge: Cowley, 1992), 63.

integrating principle that shapes the whole sermon. One of the three is chosen as the means best suited for *this* purpose at *this* time with *this* text for *these* people.⁷

These motifs or genres are termed styles. A development of Schlafer's conception recognises that argument-style texts and sermons can be deductive or inductive, that narratives will follow a range of forms and that many texts and sermons are a mixture of images, narratives and arguments. However, using Schlafer's grid both when considering a text and then when considering a shape for a sermon will expand the preacher's insight and possibilities for communication.

Let's examine some common shapes. From the outset we need to recognise that many shapes are a mixture or conglomeration of various shapes. Probably the most familiar shape is *linear*, where a number of ideas, actions or images are presented consecutively. Their relationship may be *parallel* or *serial*. A parallel relationship is found, for instance, in an acrostic psalm of praise, where each new letter of the alphabet begins a free standing verse of praise. The ideas are not so much consequential as cumulative. The Proverbs are also often presented in parallel form, with the repetition of the same idea in a different way bringing a fuller picture. Paul's responses to the Corinthians' questions have a parallel aspect to them. A serial relationship occurs when ideas, actions or images are consequential or sequential. Paul's extended discussion of justification by faith alone for Jew and Gentile in Romans 1-4 is a *consequential* argument. The words 'therefore' or 'thus' in the text are usually an indicator of a consequential shape. A *sequential* linear shape necessarily has a time dimension, such as Kings and Chronicles, the progressive revelation of Jesus' character in Mark, or the progressive expansion of the gospel in Acts already noted. The words 'then' or 'immediately' are obvious indicators.

Some new to preaching find the classic linear shape taught by John Stott a good place to begin.⁸ After the introduction and transition into the main body of the sermon, Stott follows a 5 step cycle for each of his points. Firstly, he *states* the point. Secondly, he *explains* the point. Thirdly, he *illustrates* the point. Fourthly, he *applies* the point. Fifthly, he *summarises* the point. This approach provides a simple framework that will helpfully discipline some preachers and provide a way forward for others who may feel paralysed, or at a loss to know where to start. It is worth noting that Stott's template here is basically an argument style, with story and image generally added at the third and fourth steps, though even when explaining the point, Stott would often use story and image, notably when referencing etymology. He would also often use a story or image in his introduction. However, it should also be quickly noted that such a structure can have significant limitations, especially in evidencing the narrative form and its highlights in narrative texts, and can lose the engagement and memorability of a narrative form with listeners.

⁷ Schlafer, *Surviving the Sermon*, 64-5 (italics original).

⁸ I first heard Stott teach this at a clergy conference at The King's School in Sydney in about 1973, but to date have been unable to find a written record. An adapted version can be found in John Chapman, *Setting Hearts on Fire: A Guide to Giving Evangelistic Talks* (Kingsford: St. Matthias, 1999), 91-104.

We have already seen that *contrastive* shapes arrange contrasting ideas, actions or images in such a manner that the contrast is heightened, often predictably, sometimes surprisingly. Whoever would have thought that God was in the gentle whisper of 1 Kings 19:12? *Comparative* shapes, on the other hand, take an idea, action or image and expand it, so that its original or core aspect remains, yet is developed or enhanced. Given the progressive revelatory nature of the Scriptures, an understanding of comparative shapes is crucial for understanding typology and much of the Bible's teaching, especially with regard to the old and new covenants. The core of the old remains, but in the new its seeds have become something so much more. For instance, Jesus is compared to Melchizedek, Moses and David in Hebrews, yet he is so much more. A key aspect of Melchizedek, Moses and David is in Christ, yet this aspect is comparatively developed *par excellence*, to its ultimate expression, in Christ. Jesus regularly uses both contrastive and comparative form through a *a fortiori* (how much more) argument. "If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, *how much more* will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him" (Matthew 7:11). Similarly, if an unjust judge eventually brings justice for somebody who's a nobody in his eyes, what won't (that is, in contrast, and how much more) the judge of judges do for his chosen ones (Luke 18:7). Both contrastive and comparative shapes use shape in such a way that the final sum is greater than the sum of their parts. In other words, the nature of the shape is a significant component in the communication of meaning, and without due care in its communication, the passage will not be faithfully expounded.

A related shape is *telescopic*. A telescopic shape can begin with the big picture and progressively zoom in. Or it can focus first on the smaller picture, then progressively zoom out. Placing a passage in its wider biblical context historically and theologically will often make use of a telescopic shape. For example, a sermon serving as an overview of Acts at the beginning of a series could take Acts 1:8 as its summative text and develop three progressively enlarging scenes: the witnesses in Jerusalem; the witnesses in Judea and Samaria; and the witnesses to the ends of the earth. Similarly, a sermon on God's rest could have five main scenes: beginning with God's rest, blessing and making holy the seventh day after the completion of his creative work in Genesis 2:1-3; then moving to Exodus 16:23-30 and 20:8-11 as God builds on his creative work by instituting a holy sabbath for his people; then moving to Mark 2:23-3:6, where we learn that the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath and glimpse a foretaste of the extraordinary healing that will occur on the Sabbath; then moving to Hebrew 4:1-11, where the writer urges us to enter God's rest through faith and obedience to the gospel; and climaxing with the final picture of Revelation 14:13. Each scene contains the previous scene, but enhances it by adding new material as we look further ahead telescopically.

The Bible frequently makes use of *chiastic* shapes, many of which are lost in translation or unnoticed by Western readers.⁹ In the original language, chiasmic shapes greatly facilitate understanding and memorisation. They are also aesthetically pleasing. In the Old Testament,

⁹ A helpful resource here is Mardy Grothe, *Never Let a Fool Kiss You or a Kiss Fool You: Chiasmus and a World of Quotations That Say What They Mean and Mean What They Say* (New York: Penguin, 1999), though it needs to be noted that this secular book often makes use of rather coarse examples.

the ABCBA shape of a psalm, for instance, helps us understand that its climax is in the centre, not at or near the end, as those familiar with Western literary forms might expect. In the New Testament, the ABBA structure, shaped like the Greek letter *chi*, is often seen in Jesus' teaching. "But many who are first (A) will be last (B), and many who are last (B') will be first (A')" (Matthew 19:30). Paul too makes regular use of chiasmus, such as in 2 Corinthians 5:21: "God made him who had no sin (A) to be sin for us (B), so that in him we (B') might become the righteousness of God (A'). Chiasms depend on and develop reversal. As such, they can plainly illustrate the paradoxical or antinomic nature of the gospel: it is the opposite of what we naturally think or expect. Which of us obedient Pharisees can really believe that it is the tax collector who is justified, rather than ourselves, but "everyone who exalts himself (A) will be humbled (B), and he who humbles himself (B') will be exalted (A')" (Luke 18:14b)? Gaining a proficient and deeply internalised understanding of chiasmus is thus critical for preachers who long for their listeners to gain their lives by losing them.

Story Shapes: Stories follow a range of shapes. These are generally referred to as narrative forms. In the Western tradition, two classic narrative forms are tragedy and comedy. In tragedy, the story moves 'downward', so that there is little that is redemptive by the end, though there may be a moral 'lesson'. Shakespeare's tragedies, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *King Lear* and *Julius Caesar* are examples. Comedy, though beginning with an 'oops' and subsequently descending through complication, or 'yuk,' nonetheless reaches a redemptive 'aha,' a reversal, followed by a 'wow' of celebration, to use Lowry's folksy terms.¹⁰ Given that the gospel means good news, sermons using a narrative form will almost always follow a redemptive narrative form, such as comedy. It is important to note that each of Schlafer's styles can follow a narrative form. An argument style sermon, for instance, can start with a question or problem, that is, an 'oops,' which is developed through complication. A reversal or 'aha' can be experienced through a new insight or fact which resolves the original problem, leading to celebration. Similarly, comic strips such as *Peanuts* also often follow a narrative form using images, and an image style sermon in narrative form parallels this.

In *How to Preach a Parable: Designs for Narrative Sermons*¹¹ Lowry describes four options for the placement of story in the sermon. The first option is simply *Running the Story*, allowing the story to stand alone and evoke and communicate through its power. The second option is *Delaying the Story*. Here the story is postponed until after some context is given, or question is raised. A third option is *Suspending the Story*. Here, the story is begun, but then suspended as some biblical, doctrinal or applicatory material is explored, for instance, before returning to the story. A fourth option is *Alternating the Story* with another story or stories. The parable of the sower and the soils, for example, can be told, as Jesus did, as a single story with four components (ABCD), repeated later with its meaning explained (A'B'C'D')

¹⁰ See Eugene Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot*, expanded ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 28–9. See also Adrian Lane, "'Please! No more boring sermons!' An Introduction to the Application of Narrative to Homiletics" in *Please! No More Boring Sermons' Preaching for Australians: Contemporary Insights and Practical Aspects*, ed. Keith Weller (Brunswick East: Acorn, 2007), 79–92, also available at <https://preaching.org.au/2011/03/17/please-no-more-boring-sermons/>.

¹¹ Eugene Lowry, *How to Preach a Parable: Designs for Narrative Sermons* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989).

4:3-20). On the other hand, it could be alternated (AA'BB'CC'DD'). A third story (A''), related to application in the listener could also be added, either after the initial story and its explanation (ABCD A'B'C'D' A''B''C''D''), or within them (AA'A''BB'B''CC'C''DD'D'').

I have coined the term *galactic* for non-linear shapes where the key themes are all related, influencing one another more or less, like solar systems in a galaxy. This is my understanding of James. Applying linear or narrative shape to James as a whole is necessarily forced. Rather, sermons will focus on a theme and bring out its relatedness to other themes. Galactic shapes thus emphasise the holistic nature and inter-relatedness of our lives in Christ, and God's own variety-in-unity. However, they are more than holistic, as the term galactic emphasises that the components are dynamic, continually effecting each other to a greater or lesser degree, changing with time. A sermon on James 1:1-18, for instance, will focus on trials and temptations, but cannot help but mention the themes of joy, perseverance, maturity, wisdom, prayer, faith, doubt, poor and rich, sin, judgement, creation and re-creation, at the very least! The sermons on James 2:1-13 and 4:13-5:6 will focus on the rich, but will also pick up on the themes of faith, judgement and sin. The rich should also be addressed in the sermons on 1:19-27 (verse 27), 2:14-26 (verses 14-17) and 4:1-12 (verses 3-4). In other words, to deal with James' theme of rich and poor in just one or two sermons would not be doing justice to its interwoven presence throughout the letter, effecting, as it does, every other theme, such as humility, judgement and where we place our faith. Similarly, to only speak of the tongue in the sermon on James 3:1-12 would be to do James' treatment a severe disservice, given that references to speaking are replete throughout the epistle. Reducing James to a sermon series on discrete passages or its major themes, without bringing out their dynamic inter-relationships, does not therefore bring out the full meaning and impact of the text.

Collage forms are similarly holistic. The importance is the overall effect, rather than the components. The components may be valuable and significant, but not relatively so. The relationships between components may not even be spelt out, and may in fact be unimportant. Some of the psalms of praise and much apocalyptic literature fall naturally into this form. Preachers therefore need to focus on the overall, rather than the details or components. Preaching on John's wonderful vision of the new Jerusalem in Revelation 21 will focus on the beauty of the bride, the end of suffering, the judgement of the immoral and the glory of the Lamb, rather than the nature of the precious stones, for instance.

Episodic shapes for sermons are increasingly common, especially where preachers and listeners are familiar with contemporary Western film, such as murder mysteries. Here the sermon is divided into a number of episodes or scenes which are normally chronologically or logically linked. They may be preached in this form. However, they may also be disjointed so that in the sermon they are not necessarily sequential or consequential. Episodes may also be repeated. The end of the argument or story may be presented first, or the argument or story regularly interrupted by a flashback to the original 'oops.' Images may be scattered throughout, in apparently random locations. Linkages or transitions between episodes may not be given. Listeners are engaged by anticipation and the discerning of relationships

between ideas, actions and images.¹² Much of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Revelation is arguably episodic in form. John's miraculous signs are episodic. Attempts to make tight sequential or consequential links may be unnecessarily pushing the text into a certain cultural genre, and may even be misleading or detrimental to understanding. Stephen's speech in Acts 7 has an episodic nature to it, as he recounts in vignettes God's dealings with his people, and in particular, his dwelling place and messengers. A sermon on Acts 7 could thus be made up of each episode, and have as its climax the picture of the stoned messenger Stephen praying to the risen Jesus, the Son of Man, standing at God's right hand (verses 55-56 and 59-60).

Shapes and the Sermon: Preparatory Work with the Text

Before preachers try out some different shapes for the sermon, a few preparatory practices will save time, lower anxiety, raise quality and, most importantly, lead to better communication and faithful exposition of the text. As one immerses oneself in the text, keep notes pertinent to shape and any ideas relating to the possible shape of the sermon, but resist the temptation to settle on or presume a final shape for the sermon at this stage.

Initially, identify the passage's *natural shape*, and be slow to move away from this. Is the passage a poem, such as Genesis 1; a narrative, such as the account of the flood; or an argument, such as James' discussion of works in the context of faith (2:14-26)? Is it a particular type of poem, such as the lament in 2 Samuel 1:17-27, or a particular type of argument, such as a debate between two or three contrasting voices, such as we find in the James passage, and also in Job? Perhaps the passage is a set of instructions or commands, or perhaps it paints a picture, such as Revelation 21. Discerning the natural shape of a text is often a theological task, as one discerns the relationships between ideas and events. Are they, for instance, parallel or serial, consequential or just sequential?

Look too for the relationship between the passage and *narrative form*. What aspects of Lowry's loop are found in the passage and its surrounding passages? The crucifixion and resurrection event, for example, is both the 'aha' of each of the gospels and the Bible as a whole. As always, be especially alert to reversal and escalation. That a tax collector is saved, that Jesus heals on the Sabbath and that a widow with a small coin puts more in the temple treasury than anybody else are all examples of reversal that need to be reflected in the sermon's shape, if the sermon is to be faithful to the text. Similarly, the parables of the soils and the minas are examples of escalation that need to be reflected in the sermon's shape. Reversal and escalation are crucial to understanding, proclamation, engagement and response.

Consider the *style* of the text. Is it argument, story, image, or a mix of styles? Generally, the style of the text will determine the style of the sermon. However, it is often a good exercise to imagine preaching the passage in another style. This exercise can unearth helpful insights and

¹² John Sweetman helpfully suggests the use of an episodic form, especially for those beginning preaching, in "Towards a Foundational, Flexible, Sermon Structure," *Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society* 8.2 (2008): 32-49.

perspectives. Genesis 3, for instance, is story style. Most preachers would probably tell the story within, or followed by, some pertinent points in argument style, so that the sermon was ultimately in a mixed style. Consideration by the preparing preacher of how the chapter could be taught in image style will, however, surface some powerful images or illustrations. Similarly, Jesus' water-into-wine miracle at Cana is a powerful story, and is generally preached as a combination of story then argument style. However, a consideration of this text as an image, particularly when considered in the light of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, will help listeners, like the first disciples, behold his glory (John 2:1-11).

Two Cautions: Many preachers quickly reduce the Bible's stories and images to argument, without letting their power as stories and images linger and transform. Obviously, God has revealed himself in a range of ways, and one cannot help wonder sometimes whether these attempts to reduce the Scriptures to argument is a fearfulness of the power of story and image, and/or an attempt to somehow reduce, contain or circumscribe God to a set of statements or a theological system.¹³ On the other hand, some preachers never communicate the clear argument in Scripture. They limit themselves to telling stories and painting pictures. They may even marginalise, distance or obfuscate the Bible's clear teaching in argument style. Faithfulness in communicating God's word will mean communicating it in ways that bring out its full meaning and glory in all its wonderful styles.

Shapes and the Sermon: Moving from Text to Sermon

Getting the fit right

As one considers an appropriate shape for the sermon, try out a range that will implement your aim and sermonic sentence. Naturally, shapes must fit the material well and not intrude, distract from or even distort the material. How often have preachers misleadingly pushed their material to form a favourite shape or anagram, for instance! Shapes are a little like accompanists at a musical recital. They are there to carry and communicate the material most effectively, while not drawing attention to themselves. They are also a little like skeletons. If the body of the sermon fits them well, audiences will not be distracted by a poor fitting. In the same way, shapes must not be so malleable that no structure is provided, with a flabby and indiscernible result.

Proportionality

In considering shape, determine the *relative weight* of your points or components, and their relationship. Is this reflected in the shape? Many preachers spend too much time on context and irrelevantly interesting peripheral issues, rather than on the freight of the sermon. Similarly, many preachers overweight their first point and progressively underweight

¹³ This is not to dissuade us from carefully naming and thinking through theological concepts and building a clarifying systematic theology, but an encouragement to sit with story and image, allowing their power to transform. What does it mean, for example, that Jesus is the light, the bread, the wine, the way, the resurrection and the life?

subsequent points as they see a time or word limit pressing upon them. Sadly, this is often true for the climactic point or episode, which is obviously the most important, needing the most careful treatment. Likewise, a common danger for good story-tellers is to so fill the sermon with stories that listeners always enjoy the sermon, but may not have heard the word of God.

Tension

As one considers different shapes, see if you can build *tension* into the sermon. This will assist engagement. More importantly, it will help listeners understand the experience of grace, as tension is relieved through the proclamation of the good news. Some helpful questions to ask as one considers structure and the building of tension include: Is there a problem or question in the text: that is, an ‘oops’? What are the obvious problems or questions raised for my listeners by the text? Where is the conflict? The escalation? The reversal? What is the ‘itch’ you will scratch, to use Lowry’s terms?¹⁴ Or, to use Bryan Chapell’s terms, what is the ‘Fallen Condition Focus’? That is, what aspect of our fallen existence is addressed by the text?¹⁵

Planning

As suggested above, settle on the shape of the sermon *before* writing. Obviously there will be times when shapes need to be revised, even discarded. However, careful thought regarding shape before embarking on the sermon will often save much time and reduce the preacher’s anxiety. Once you have settled on a shape, arrange your shape clearly. If using numeration, do not confuse yourself by numbering an introduction or conclusion, or by using numeration within points. You may want to show your outline to a trusted critic. Is it ultimately clear and logical, or is it too complex and cluttered? Complex shapes usually reveal a lack of understanding of the text and its implications for listeners. Simpler shapes may seem simple, but are often the precipitation of much prayer and thoughtfulness. Their effectiveness in conveying meaning, assisting engagement and bringing delight lies in their ability to make accessible that which may at first appear quite complex.

Conclusion

Careful consideration of a passage’s structure, both within its book, and the wider context of the whole Bible, and the consequent careful consideration of the structure of the sermon is absolutely essential for the preacher. It is indispensable to the faithful communication of the text’s meaning, will assist engagement and transformation in the listener and will delightfully show forth, albeit in limited form, God’s own wonderful creativity, unity and variety. May

¹⁴ See Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot*, 19.

¹⁵ See Bryan Chapell, *Christ-centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 48–57.

preachers wholeheartedly embrace this aspect of their sermon giving, so that God would be more faithfully praised and honoured in his inexpressible glory.

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